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Hoops, History, and Crossing Over:

Boundary Making and Community Building in Japanese American Youth Basketball Leagues

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Christina B. Chin

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Hoops, History, and Crossing Over:  
Boundary Making and Community Building in Japanese American Youth Basketball Leagues

by

Christina B. Chin

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Min Zhou, Chair

My dissertation research examines how cultural organizations, particularly ethnic sports leagues, shape racial/ethnic and gender identity and community building among later-generation Japanese Americans. I focus my study on community-organized youth basketball leagues - a cultural outlet that spans several generations and continues to have a lasting influence within the Japanese American community. Using data from participant observation and in-depth interviews collected over two years, I investigate how Japanese American youth basketball leagues are active sites for the individual, collective, and institutional negotiations of racial, ethnic, and gendered categories within this group. Offering a critique of traditional assimilation theorists who argue the decline of racial and ethnic distinctiveness as a group assimilates, my findings demonstrate how race and ethnic meanings continue to shape the lives of later-generation Japanese American, particularly in sporting worlds. I also explain why assimilated Japanese

Americans continue to seek co-ethnic social spaces and maintain strict racial boundaries that keep out non-Asian players. Because Asians are both raced and gendered simultaneously, I examine how sports participation differs along gendered lines and how members collaboratively “do gender” that both reinforce and challenge traditional hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. Although basketball is generally considered a male-dominated sport, I also offer several possible factors to explain the surprising trend of “successful” female Japanese American basketball players. Finally, my research examines the role that basketball leagues play in providing outlets and opportunities through social networking and civic engagement to create and strengthen ethnic cohesion and membership.

Findings from this case study offer larger theoretical implications for the study of race, ethnicity, immigration, and sports. Recognizing that assimilation pathways for incorporation are not often a continuous and irreversible “straight-line,” this study uses youth culture-centered approach to map the different incorporation outcomes and pathways among later-generation Asian American youth. Adding to existing models of how racial and ethnic identities are forged and can shift over time, my dissertation highlights the strategies among later-generation Japanese Americans use to maintain and redefine boundary lines. Moreover, findings demonstrate how in the absence of a traditional ethnic enclave or a continuous flow of recent immigration, some Japanese Americans have turned to basketball leagues as a moving, shifting, and evolving source for ethnic community building. Finally, my dissertation expands the discourse of sports analysis by going beyond the white-black, male dominated discussions to explore how generations of male and female Japanese Americans have carved out their own ethnic and cultural space through basketball.

The dissertation of Christina B. Chin is approved.

Mignon Moore

Mark Sawyer

Stefan Timmermans

Min Zhou, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

*For my Mom who always believed in me.*

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I am especially grateful for the invaluable mentorship and guidance I have received at UCLA. There are several faculty members from the Department of Sociology who have inspired and shaped my graduate career, including David Halle, Bob Emerson, Jack Katz, and Bill Roy. Wendy Fujinami, Mary Jo Johnson, and Marlies Dietrich were always willing to answer my questions and help me navigate through the program. My committee members have provided endless guidance and support through every stage of my research process. Stefan Timmermans offered invaluable feedback about my research, inspiring me to become a better ethnographer. I am thankful for Mignon Moore for her professional mentorship, often sharing her knowledge and experience with me and other female students of color. I thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with Mark Sawyer about race, sports, and politics; I always walked out of his office feeling reenergized about my work. Finally, I am especially grateful to Min Zhou who has been my advisor since the beginning of my graduate education. Even with her hectic schedule, Min was always generous with her time, constructive feedback, and extensive knowledge. I feel blessed

and fortunate to have her endless support and I owe much of my progress and scholarly success due to her guidance.

I also feel thankful that I could be part of several organizations on campus where I served as both a teacher and mentor to so many motivated, talented, and critically-minded students. At the Center for Community Learning, Kathy O’Byrne and Jamila Leaks Chaney made it possible for me to help students become more civically engaged and conduct hands-on research as ethnographers. Jeff Decker, Vilma Ortiz, and Brenda Stevenson created a safe space for collaborative teaching. I would like to especially acknowledge the Graduate Mentor Programs Office, especially the McNair Scholars Program, for providing me an outlet to pursue avenues of social justice and help “transform the academy.” As mentors, leaders, and friends, LaTonya Reese Miles, Orlando Luna, and Alice Ho made GMP a second home for me on campus. Other GMP mentors and staff – Anna Alvez, Ana Soltero Lopez, Pedro Nava, Aresha Martinez, Mark Bautista, Antonio Martinez, and Jelani Lindsey – filled the office with much needed support and of course, laughter.

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One of the highlights of my graduate experience has been meeting so many dear friends in academia. As fellow scholars, educators, and activist, they have provided me strength,

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## Vita

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Race/Ethnicity; Immigration; Asian American Communities; Sociology of Sports; Qualitative Research Methods

## PUBLICATIONS

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Chin, Christina, Noriko Milman, Meera E. Deo, Jenny J. Lee, and Nancy Wang Yuen. 2007. "Without a Trace: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Prime Time Television." Pp. 449-462 in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, edited by Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood. New York: New York University Press.

Deo, Meera, Jenny J. Lee, Christina Chin, Noriko Milman, and Nancy Yuen. 2008. "Missing in Action: 'Framing' Race on Prime Time Television." *Social Justice* 35 (2): 145-162.

### *Policy Reports*

Chin, Christina, Meera Deo, Jenny Lee, Noriko Milman and Nancy Wang Yuen. 2006. "Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Setting the Stage." Washington, D.C.: Asian American Justice Center. [http://www.advancingequality.org/files/aaajc\\_tv\\_06.pdf](http://www.advancingequality.org/files/aaajc_tv_06.pdf)

Yuen, Nancy Wang, Christina Chin, Meera Deo, Jenny Lee, and Noriko Milman. 2005. "Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Lights, Camera, and Little Action." Washington D.C.: National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium. [http://www.advancingequality.org/files/NAPALC\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.advancingequality.org/files/NAPALC_report_final.pdf)

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## **INVITED TALKS**

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“Team Spirit: Social networking and community building within Japanese American youth basketball leagues.” Invited Panelist. UCLA’s Asian American Studies Center – Japanese America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Announcing the George and Sakaye Aratani UCLA-Community Advancement Research Endowment (CARE). Los Angeles, CA, May 2010.

“Shooting, Scoring, and Spam Musubi: Food Culture, Ethnic Identity, Community Building within Japanese American Youth Basketball Leagues.” Invited Panelist. UCLA Asia Institute - Asia in LA 2010: Creating and Consuming Asian Cuisines. Los Angeles, CA, May 2010.

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

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“Who’s got Team Spirit?: Building Ethnic Community through Youth Sports.” American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Denver, CO, August 2012. (Forthcoming)

“Dribbling, Passing, and (Bento) Boxing Out: Ethnic identity and community building through food within Japanese American youth basketball leagues.” Association for Asian American Studies Annual Meeting. New Orleans, LA, May 2011.

“Hooping it up ‘JA style’: Racial, ethnic, and gender boundary making in Japanese American youth basketball leagues.” American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Atlanta, GA, August 2010.

“Aren’t you a little short to play basketball?: Gender roles and dynamics within youth Japanese American basketball leagues.” Association for Asian American Studies Annual Meeting. Austin, TX, April 2010.

“Asian boys can jump’: Gender dynamics in Japanese American Basketball Leagues.” American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. San Francisco, CA, August 2009.

“Hoops, History, and Crossing Over: A study of Japanese American youth basketball leagues,” Association for Asian American Studies Annual Meeting. Honolulu, HI, April 2009.

“Creating Authenticity – An Ethnographic Study of Youth and Rave Culture,” Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Hollywood, CA, April 2006.

“The Asian Pacific Islander American Prime Time Television Report: The Fall 2005 Season,” Association for Asian American Studies Annual Meeting. Atlanta, GA, March 2006.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Theoretical Frameworks and Studying Japanese American Youth Sports

#### Leagues

“While over time the role of sport has changed, it has always mirrored the issues confronting the Japanese American community as a whole, and it is possible to trace the social history of Japanese Americans through the lens of sport” (Niiya 2000, 14).

In September 2008, after 14 years of struggle, the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously to approve a memorandum of understanding with Little Tokyo Service Center to develop a recreation center for Little Tokyo. The 38,000-square-foot center, called *Budokan* of Los Angeles, would feature a gymnasium and a recreational space for basketball, martial arts and volleyball. A rooftop park will also include a Japanese garden, jogging and walking track, playground, reading grove, and a performing arts space (Watanabe 2008). It was estimated that more than 100,000 people would use the gym each year (Kang 1999). In particular, the four-court gymnasium would help provide much needed facilities for the growing number of Japanese American basketball leagues in the area. Moreover, it was hoped that by attracting youth back into the area, the gym would help preserve Little Tokyo’s cultural identity and economic vitality (Muranaka 2008; Watanabe 2008). Many agreed that Little Tokyo needed a community gym to maintain ties with fourth-and fifth-generation Japanese American youth who were dispersed in distant suburbs (Kang 1999).

The enormous grassroots efforts of later-generation Japanese Americans to find the social, political, and financial support to build this gymnasium raised several intriguing questions for me. First, what meaning and purpose did community-organized sports leagues play within this ethnic community? In particular, what role did youth basketball play within this group? Secondly, how do basketball leagues shape racial or ethnic identity? In other words, how could

playing basketball, one of America's most popular sporting pastimes, bring later-generation Japanese American players closer to their ethnic roots? Finally, how does participation in these leagues strengthen ethnic community, particularly for Japanese Americans who have moved away from urban centers and reside in predominately white, suburban neighborhoods?

My dissertation uses ethnographic data to examine these questions to investigate the experience of later-generation Japanese Americans through the "lens" of community-organized Japanese American (JA) youth basketball leagues. My central argument in this study is as follows: Race, ethnicity, and gender identities and meanings continue to shape the lives of later-generation Japanese American groups, particularly in sports worlds. Drawing from ethnographic data, my dissertation demonstrates how Japanese American youth basketball leagues are active sites for the individual, collective, and institutional negations of racial, ethnic, and gender categories within this group. Moreover, I demonstrate how sport leagues can foster social ties for ethnic community building among Japanese Americans living in suburban neighborhoods.

In this introductory chapter, I will first provide an overview of theoretical frameworks that my dissertation draws from and informs, including theories of assimilation and construction of racial, ethnic, and gender categories. Second, I explain why Japanese Americans and community youth basketball leagues offer a compelling case study to examine boundary making among later-generation ethnic groups. Following this, I introduce my central research questions, research site, and an overview of my methodology. I conclude with an outline of the following dissertation chapters.

### **Theories of Assimilation: Classical, Segmented, and Neo-classical**

Researchers have long studied how immigrant groups have settled and integrated themselves into their host countries. In this section, I provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks of classical, segmented, and neo-classical assimilation theorists to explain incorporation patterns of immigrant groups. I will then outline the limitations of these perspectives in explaining the incorporation of later-generation Asian Americans.

### *Classical Perspectives on Immigrant Assimilation*

Between 1880 and 1930, the United States witnessed a huge wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe with 24 million immigrants, mostly Italians, Poles, Russians, and Jews, being absorbed into American life (Steinberg, 2001, 35). Responding to the social, cultural, and economic changes and problems associated with this mass immigration, scholars (Park 1950; Park and Burgess [1921] 1969; Gordon 1964) began theorizing about the process of immigrant adaptation and assimilation in American life. In his notion of a “race-relations cycle,” of “contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation,” Park (1950) argued that assimilation was a “progressive and irreversible” process where ethnic differences would eventually diminish in each succeeding immigrant generation (138). Warner and Srole (1945) further developed this “straight-line assimilation” theory, asserting that once assimilation started, it would be a continuous and irreversible process. Gordon (1964) proposed various assimilation sub-processes, including the acculturation of cultural patterns to those of the dominant host society and structural assimilation into social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society. These stages were the keystone of assimilation, resulting to the “disappearance of the ethnic group as a separate entity and the evaporation of its distinctive values” (Gordon 1964, 81).

While the classical theories seem applicable in explaining the early European immigrant paths of incorporation, they pose several key flaws and limitations when applied to the contemporary immigrant experience. First, the classical theories assume that assimilation is inevitable and a necessary condition for success in the U.S. with the assumption that all groups move in a unidirectional assimilation pattern toward one normative “mainstream” – that being middle class, white, Protestant. This ethnocentric homogeneity elevates this group as the normative standard which all other groups must aspire and achieve, but can never change.

The “mainstream” is no longer a clear WASP group, but rather, the mainstream culture “changes as elements of the cultures of the newer groups are incorporated into it” resulting in a multiethnic mosaic (Alba and Nee 2003, 13; Gans 1982; Waldinger 1996). As such, the path toward assimilation is not as much of a “straight-line” as classic theorist proposed; immigrant outcomes and starting points are more varied and situational than once presumed (Gans 1982; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). Finally, the older theories of assimilation leave little room for alternative paths for success that involve maintaining roots to an ethnic identity or community as a positive role for immigrants - some ethnic niches have been a better source for socioeconomic opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs (Alba and Nee 2003; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1992; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Beyond the critiques of the classical assumptions about immigrant incorporation, there are numerous differences between the patterns and characteristics of the contemporary wave that differ from the previous waves. One notable difference has been the rate and flow of immigration between the two waves. While the first wave experienced halts in immigration from Europe and Asia due to legal restrictions, post-1965 immigration demonstrates more

continuity with a steady flow of groups entering the U.S from mostly Asia, Latin America, and countries of the Caribbean, making it possible for ethnic groups to maintain an active link to the culture and language of their home country, particularly in ethnic enclaves (Foner 2000; Jimenez 2010; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996; Zhou 1992).

Another characteristic that distinguishes waves of contemporary immigrants is their persistent status as a racialized group, particularly due to their phenotypic features. While earlier Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants have racially converged into one racial category of “white”, skin color and other racialized signifiers still continue to differentiate and shape the immigrant experience (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Foner 2000; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Tuan 1998; Waters 1990; Waters 1999; Wu 2002).

Finally, contemporary immigrant groups faced drastically different economic circumstances than the industrial boom that previous European immigrants experienced. Contemporary immigrants face an “hourglass economy” which leaves an increase in upper-level and lower-level jobs with a decrease in middle level jobs essential for upward mobility (Foner 2000; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Steinberg 2001; Waldinger, 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). This economic structure creates difficulties for newer immigrants and second-generation immigrants to climb the ladder of social mobility utilized by previous immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Given the problematic assumptions imbedded in the classical theories, along with the individual, social and economic differences between the past and present immigrant waves and between European and non-European immigrant groups, newer theories of the assimilation process better address the socio-historical specificities of the contemporary immigrant experience. One such alternative theory is the segmented assimilation framework.

### *Segmented Assimilation*

In contrast the classical theories which predict an inevitable, straight-line trend of incorporation, the theory of segmented assimilation posits that the host society into which immigrants assimilate is stratified by class and race and that the process is subject to many contingencies and variables leading to segmented rather than uniform outcomes (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Considering both structural and socio-cultural factors, the segmented explains how and why different groups necessarily assimilate into different segments of that society. The “segment” of society in which immigrants assimilate “...depends on what characteristics they bring with them into their new homeland, on what opportunities and restrictions they find in their immediate environment once they arrive, and on how their own characteristics interact with the social structures of the host country” (Zhou and Bankston 1998, 236).

Scholars of the segmented assimilation contend that some immigrant groups have a smoother transition towards upward mobility, especially those with high levels of human and financial capital (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 45).<sup>1</sup> Conversely, some immigrant groups are at risk of a “downward assimilation” into the urban, black “underclass,” particularly those with less human and financial capital and who tend to settle in poor, inner-city neighborhoods (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Faced with a lack of resources – economic, educational, neighborhood, and institutional - children of immigrants are at particular risk of “drawing on the lessons of adversarial culture absorbed on the streets and in schools” (Zhou

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<sup>1</sup> For example, for Cubans arriving to the U.S. in the 1960’s and current Indian, Chinese, and Korean arrivals, having higher levels of education, professional skills and financial capital than other immigrant groups has made a huge difference in how these groups fare as they enter the social and economic world (Foner 2000, 74; Perez 2001, 95; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Although not representative of the entire group, some segments of immigrant groups who have experienced this

2001, 280). On this downward path, some immigrant youth find themselves participating in “oppositional culture” including dropping out of school, joining youth gangs or participating in drug subculture, contributing to “a new rainbow underclass” (Kasinitz et al. 2001, 271; Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2000, 45; Steinberg, 2001; Wilson 1987; Wilson 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Unlike classical theories which argue that a successful path toward assimilation involves the abandonment of any roots to an ethnic identity or community, segmented assimilation theory asserts that “selective acculturation” can play a positive role by deterring downward trajectories (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Support and constraints from a close-knit ethnic community and a strong family network can effectively reinforce traditional values and aspirations for upward mobility, guiding youth away from an “oppositional culture” that rejects middle class values including education (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Some communities which have demonstrated successful adjustment by assimilating selectively - retaining some of their traditional values and ethnic networks while adapting to American life.<sup>3</sup>

### *Neoclassical Assimilation*

In attempt to merge the classical assimilation model with the new alternative models, Alba and Nee (2003) offer a new model, the “neoclassical assimilation” model, claiming that a “powerful element of continuity” connects the first and second waves together (Alba and Nee 2003, xi; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997). Alba and Nee (2003) define assimilation as “the

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<sup>2</sup> Although not representative of the entire group, some segments of immigrant groups who have experienced this downward assimilation trend include the Vietnamese (Zhou and Bankston 1998), Haitians (Portes and Zhou 1993), West Indians (Waters 1999), and Mexicans (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001).

<sup>3</sup> These groups include the Vietnamese (Zhou and Bankston 1998), Punjabi Indians (Gibson 1988), and Cubans (Portes and Bach 1985; Portes and Zhou 1993).

decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social difference. ‘Decline’ means in this context that a distinction attenuates in salience, that the occurrences for which it is relevant diminish in number and contract to fewer and fewer domains of social life” (11).

Individuals’ ethnic origins become less relevant in relation to members of another ethnic group, and groups mutually perceive themselves with less frequency in terms of their ethnic categories and increasingly under specific circumstances (Alba and Nee 2003, 11).

Recognizing that no single causal mechanism explains immigrant adaptation, Alba and Nee outline several mechanisms of assimilation, distinguishing between “proximate causes” which operate at an individual and social network level, and “distal causes” which are much deeper and imbedded in larger structures and institutions (38). These causes operate at different levels and vary across ethnic and racial groups, thereby producing different individual and group outcomes.

In contrast to the older normative and egocentric models, this re-definition of assimilation contends that as minority individuals and groups are assimilating through a process of boundary crossing, blurring, and shifting. As such, the mainstream changes in the process to form a “composite American culture” which reflects the “mixed, hybrid character of the ensemble of cultural practices and beliefs that has evolved in the United States since the colonial period” (Alba and Nee 2003, 10).

Alba and Nee contend that some descendants of the post-1965 immigrants are assimilating in similar ways as previous waves, particularly East Asian groups. As evidence of their assimilation, Alba and Nee (2003) examine several key factors including language assimilation, socioeconomic position, residential change, and intermarriage (216). Regarding language, they found a sharp rise in the exclusive use of English at home – “in all the Asian



groups but the Vietnamese, more than half appear to maintain a monolingual English-speaking home” (224). The rise of English at the home and the decline of native languages skills demonstrate a rapid linguist acculturation among East Asian groups (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003). Further more, descendants of East Asian immigrants, especially those who arrived with high levels of human and financial capital, have experienced higher rates of horizontal and/or upward mobility. Second generation East Asians have more years of schooling and have found higher-end positions in the job market than their parents (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003). Related to this trend, levels of residential segregation were the lowest for Asians compared to other racial groups, with a high and growing percentage of Asians living in the suburbs (Alba and Nee 2003; Charles 2001; Farley and Frey 1994; Massey and Denton 1993). Finally, they cite the high rates of intermarriage for Asian groups, noting that these rates were “almost exclusively with whites” (Alba and Nee 2003, 265). Collectively, Alba and Nee demonstrate with these findings how second and later generations of East Asians immigrants are successfully incorporating into American society.

### *Expanding Assimilation Frameworks*

While segmented and neo-classical assimilation theories have addressed some of the limitations of previous approaches to capture the contemporary immigrant experience, several critiques remain. My dissertation attempts to address these limitations and expands these frameworks to include alternative pathways for incorporation and racial/ethnic identity formation among later-generation Asian groups.

One limitation of segmented assimilation theory is that it places too much emphasis on the role of class-related factors for low income immigrant groups, offering little discussion on

the assimilation pathways for immigrant groups who are already middle or upper class (Lacy 2007). In other words, what happens to ethnic identity for those who have already achieved structural assimilation? My study examines how and why ethnic groups who do not need to turn to ethnic communities for socioeconomic support continue to seek out and maintain strong ethnic ties.

Moreover, segmented assimilation theorists only provide three limited pathways of assimilation – advancing upward into the white, middle class, incorporating into co-ethnic enclaves, or falling downward into the urban “underclass.” Where do immigrant groups assimilate into in the absence of an urban context or an ethnic enclave? My dissertation explores how later-generation assimilated Asian groups form and maintain ethnic boundaries and communities without a thriving ethnic enclave or urban underclass.

Despite its attempts to revamp the classical model to include contemporary immigrant experiences, the neoclassical model has also been met with some criticisms. For instance, while the model acknowledges how Civil rights legislation and the decline of overt racism have helped to “open the way for assimilation of ethnic minorities by providing predictability in the chances of success for those who try,” others argue that it downplays the persistent and pervasive significance of race in the everyday lives and life chances of all nonwhites (Alba and Nee 2003, 59; Almaguer 1994, Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Hunter 2005; Lieberman and Waters 1998; Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tuan, 1998; Waters 1999; Wu, 2002). My study will examine how race continues to shape young, later-generation Japanese American athletes who have successfully incorporated themselves into the mainstream.

Secondly, the revival of the classical model fails to capture recent movements toward an ethnic invention and (re)assertion (Conzen et al. 1992; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Nagel 1994;

Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Yancey et al. 1976). Scholars have noted how many second-generation immigrants have adopted a hyphenated ethnicity or have a stronger identification with a national origin identity (Bourgois 1995; Espiritu and Wolf 2001; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998). For example, Waters (1999) found that many West Indian immigrants and their children will strategically “perform” and “manage” their presentation of an ethnic self by invoking an accent, using it to distinguish themselves from Black Americans (78). My study extends this critique by examining the role that ethnic sports leagues play in reviving or maintaining the racial and ethnic livelihood of third and fourth-generation Japanese Americans.

Finally, while both segmented and neo-classical theories take into consideration how class shapes different paths of assimilation, they do not offer a discussion about how gender can impact immigrant incorporation. By examining the experiences of both men and women in sports leagues, I offer insight to how gender can shape access and integration into social and leisure spaces.

### **Theories on Racial and Ethnic Formations**

Race and ethnicity have both been used as a basis for social identification and are products of the boundary-making process resulting from the interaction between diverse populations (Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Omi and Winant 1994). In this section, I will review existing theories that contribute to the formation of racial and ethnic boundaries. First, I differentiate how racial and ethnic assignment differs. Second, I highlight the ability for these categories to shift and change. Following this discussion, I highlight how my dissertation contributes to these theoretical frameworks to better understand how later-generation ethnic communities construct and enforce racial and ethnic boundaries.

### *Racialization and negotiation of ethnicity*

How racial and ethnic groups are categorized and identified may influence how a group establishes and negotiates identity. Both race and ethnicity can be defined by a combination of self-identification and social assignment, but there are subtle differences in the process of assignment and the individual agency exercised (Barth 1969; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Nagel 1996). Racial categories are often imposed and constructed by others (Banton 1998; Cornell and Hartman 1998). The process of “racialization,” by which certain phenotypic features or assumed biological characteristics are systematically used to mark individuals or groups for differential status or treatment, “has been first and foremost a way of describing ‘others,’ of making clear that ‘they’ are not ‘us’” (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 27; Omi and Winant 1994). Historically, racialized categories were largely imposed via cultural and legal means upon non-white groups and impacted the social and economic well-being, as well as citizenship status of various groups (Almaguer 1994; Glenn 2002; Takaki 2000). By and large, those deemed “white” have benefited from economic and social privileges withheld from those deemed “non-white.” (Almaguer 1994; Foley 1997; Glenn 2002; Lieberson 1980; Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Rodriguez 2000; Wilson 1978).

Like race, ethnicity may be an assigned identity, but it can also be adopted and asserted by group members themselves (Alba 1990; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Nagel 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Waters 1990). Whereas racial categories operate on an involuntary notion of “us vs. them,” meant to exclude others from privilege, ethnic groups usually form on the basis of shared origin, and are therefore inclusive (Banton 1998, 199). The making of an ethnic group, or the ethnicization process, involves a group of people coming together to see itself as a distinct

group linked by bonds of kinship, a shared history, and by cultural symbols that represent a “peoplehood” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). While racial groups are initially formed by exclusion from the dominant group, ethnic groups consist of insiders who define themselves positively.

As such, there can be advantages for encouraging the formation of an ethnic group. For example, ethnicity has been used as a resource, motivated by socioeconomic interests (Patterson 1975; Waldinger 2001) emotional support (Waters 1990; Zhou and Bankston 1998), and political agendas (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). Moreover, support and constraints from a close-knit ethnic community and a strong family network can effectively reinforce traditional values and aspirations for upward mobility, guiding youth away from an “oppositional culture” that rejects middle class values including education (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

#### *Integrative models – the intersection of race and gender*

Recognizing how racial categories intersect with gender (as well as class and sexuality), several feminists of color created theories to better address the multiplicity of these categories in shaping identities and experiences (Collins 1990; Glenn 1999). These theories conceptualize race and gender as social constructions that are interconnected and relational concepts that can shift into different permeations and consequences depend on the situation (Collins 1990; Espiritu 1997; Glenn 1999; Hill Collins 2000; hooks 1984; St. Jean and Feagin 1998).

Analysis of “controlling images” that denigrate and objectify women of color-thereby justifying their racial and gender subordination- are primary examples that illustrate the intersection of race and gender (Hill Collins 2000). Hill Collin’s (2000) study of controlling

images found that society often uses the image of African American matriarch to objectify African American women as overly aggressive, domineering, and unfeminine (151). This imagery has been used to blame African American women for the emasculation of African American men, low marriage rates, and even poverty (Hill Collins 2000). Similarly controlling images of Asian women are often associated with hyper-feminine characteristics: passive, weak, quiet, excessively submissive, dutiful, sexually exotic, and available for white men (Espiritu 1997).

### *Changing and shifting boundaries*

Historical and social forces have shaped and altered the definitions, meanings and consequences of racial and ethnic terms over time and space (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, Omi and Winant 1994; Nagel 1994; Holt 2000). Consider the enumerated census categories that have varied widely from decade to decade (Omi and Winant 1994; Rodriguez 2000). While the boundaries between race and ethnicity can blur, shift, and change, the degree of strength and fluidity of these boundaries differs between the two (Banton 1979; Cornell and Hartman 1998; Foner 2000; Gans 1992; Ignatiev 1995; Lieberman 1980; Roediger 1991; Steinberg 2001; Waters 1990). Arguably, racial boundaries have proven to be far more rigid and impervious to change, as evidenced by the difficulty associated with concealing or changing one's racial status. Historically, the U.S. has largely classified humans into racial categories according to an "either-or-logic," such that individuals could only occupy one category at a time (Omi and Winant 1994, 54).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The 2000 Census has changed this to some degree by creating a multiracial option that allows respondents to select more than one race. However, the ideological concern for neatly categorizing people remains (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2002; Harris and Sim 2002; Rodriguez 2000).

Given that racial identities are often involuntarily imposed by others, once placed in a racial category, it can be extremely difficult for individuals to move into another. This is especially true for those who do not have the “appropriate” physical characteristics associated with that racial group (Banton 1979). Phenotypic racial signifiers, such as skin color, hair, and eye shape, make it difficult for individuals in some “stigmatized” racial groups to “pass” as white (Goffman 1959, 73).<sup>5</sup> Particularly for Blacks, claiming a different racial category than one is assigned can pose considerable difficulties. This is evidenced in the enforcement of the “one-drop rule,” a rule that “requires Americans to believe that anyone who is known to have had a Negro ancestor is a Negro” (Harris [1964] 1974, 56). While no longer legally upheld, *de facto* enforcement of this rule still exists and continues to shape the experiences and life chances of those labeled “Black” (Winant 2000; Myrdal 2000).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the rigid boundaries of racial categories, ethnic boundaries are more fluid and easily hidden or changed (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). Unlike the phenotypic markers that are used to draw racialized boundaries, ethnic markers such as surnames, cultural traditions, language, and other signifiers can be easier to mask, alter, or erase if need be. This is particularly true among white groups who encounter fewer barriers for ethnic changes than non-white groups (Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Foner 2000; Gans 1992; Ignatiev 1995; Lieberman 1980; Roediger 1991; Steinberg 2001; Waters 1990). The ability to “pass” proved to be beneficial for early Irish, Italian, Jewish and other European immigrants who were initially thought of as “racially distinct in physiognomy, mental abilities, and character” and were

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<sup>5</sup> However, cosmetic surgery and other physical alterations can make it easier to mask or change phenotypic racial markers.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, in some places in Latin America and the Caribbean, racial identity, as well as social and economic mobility, for people in the mixed racial categories largely depends on a combination of class status, skin color, and other factors (Telles 2002; Harris [1964]1974; Van den Berghe 1967; Davis 1991; Duany 2002:241; Hoetink 1985; Sunshine 1985).

considered an inferior “mongrel” race (Alba 1985; Brodtkin 1998; Foner 2000; Gans 1992; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991; Waters 1990).

Over several generations, the ethnic distinctions that were once so salient in shaping and defining first generation experiences of southern and eastern European immigrants, have given way to a general “white” racial category (Brodtkin 1998; Gans 1979; Steinberg 2001; Waters 1990). For this reason, whites, more than any other group, have the ability to exercise “ethnic options” (Alba 1990; Waters 1990); the option of identifying as ethnic exists for all white Americans, and the choice of which ethnicity to choose is available to some of them (Waters 1990, 19). Many later-generation whites of mixed European ancestry have adopted a “symbolic ethnicity” (i.e. eating special foods, celebrating particular holidays or other specialized practices) (Waters 1990, 7; Gans 1979). Unlike the salience of racial identities, symbolic ethnicity makes few and intermittent demands on everyday life, holds little structural or material consequences, and is usually expressed in the private domain and during leisure activities (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1999).

Other theorists have argued that ethnic identities can also be situational, constantly being renegotiated, revised, and redefined depending on different social contexts and at different levels of social organization (Okamura 1981:452; Nagel 1994; Yancey et. al 1976). As Yancey et al. (1976) argue, ethnicities can be emergent – due to the convergence of particular circumstances and structural situations, ethnic groups can change their boundaries and criteria for membership (Yancey et. al 1976, 392). Ethnicities can emerge under conditions of residential stability and segregation, common occupational positions, and dependence on local institutions and services (Yancey et. al 1976, 392).



### *Expanding Racial and Ethnic Constructionist Frameworks*

As these theories explain, racial and ethnic categories are core to how people understand themselves and construct meaning yet they do not occur in a vacuum. In this dissertation, I examine the construction of race and ethnicity among later-generation Asian immigrant groups from both outside and inside the community – how do members define racial and ethnic identity and how does that compare to how outsiders draw boundary lines? I expand these frameworks to explain how later generation Japanese Americans apply both biological (race) and cultural (ethnic) reasons to justify racial and ethnic boundaries that are inclusive to some while excluding others.

My dissertation also contributes to existing frameworks to demonstrate how race and ethnic categories continue to be highly contested, fluid, and in a state of negotiation, particularly within a later generation ethnic communities undergoing rapid demographic changes. Previous research suggests that third-and later-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans are increasingly practicing forms of symbolic ethnicity, yet prevailing acts of racism and discrimination are reminders that others continue to see and treat them as perpetual foreigners (Alba and Nee 2003, 95; Tuan 1998). If these groups are not “becoming white” (Zhou 2004) what racial and ethnic boundaries are later-generation groups drawing and what do they look like? My study examines how racial boundaries remain salient while ethnic lines are shifting to include more ethnic Asian groups to create a panethnic identity.

Moreover, other scholars argue that the strength of and attachment of ethnic identity is largely rooted in the availability of ethnically linked resource, or “ethnic raw materials,” for the construction and stimulation of that identity (Alba 1990, 121). In his study of later-generation Mexican Americans, Jimenez (2010) found that interactions and access to space with recent

immigrants was essential in creating a “replenished ethnicity” for older, assimilated generation Mexican Americans. My dissertation examines what has happened to ethnic identity for Japanese Americans who, as a group, are not experiencing ongoing immigration to replenish ethnic culture.

Finally, my work adds to the scholarship that examines the interplay of race and gender particularly in shaping the experience of youth of color. Specifically, I explore how gendered stereotypes associated with Asian American youth differentially impact young men and women’s opportunity and experience on the basketball court. Frequently seen as studious, weak, and “model minorities,” I examine how youth Asian American men and women negotiate and contest these stereotypes with their athletic identities.

### **Studying Japanese Americans- A Community in Transition**

Given their status among scholars as one of the most acculturated and established ethnic groups, Japanese Americans offer an interesting case study of racial change and ethnic boundary making, particularly among later-generation ethnic groups. Over several generations, scholars have noted several ways in which Japanese Americans have achieved high levels of structural assimilation, noting key factors including their socioeconomic success, residential patterns, and high intermarriage rates (Alba and Nee 2003; Zhou and Gatewood 2007).

Compared to other groups, Asian Americans exhibit higher rates of horizontal and/or upward mobility. In addition, many second and later generations of Asian Americans have more years of schooling and have found higher-end positions in the job market than their parents (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003). In 2009, more than 40 percent of Chinese, Korean and Japanese Americans (aged twenty-five or older) reported having attained a bachelor’s degree or

higher (compared to the 28 percent of average Americans) (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Moreover, Japanese Americans reported a median family income off more than \$85,000 (compared to the national average of \$61,000) (U.S. Census Bureau 2011).<sup>7</sup>

Related to this trend, Japanese Americans have experienced low level of residential segregation with a high and growing percentage of members living in wealthier suburban communities (Alba and Nee 2003; Charles 2001; Farley and Frey 1994; Massey and Denton 1993). Unlike Korean groups who have established immigrant enclaves in urban communities or Chinese immigrants who have settled in new “satellite” cities (Zhou 1992, Zhou and Lee 2004), Japanese Americans lack a thriving ethnic center. Once former hubs for Japanese Americans, the Japantown in San Francisco and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles are now mostly centers for commerce and are no longer residential communities; more Japanese Americans live in wealthier suburban communities than urban centers (Alba and Nee 2003; Zhou and Gatewood 2007).<sup>8</sup> Because few studies have examined how middle or upper class ethnic groups maintain ethnic community, Japanese Americans provide an opportunity to examine how structurally assimilated groups draw racial and ethnic boundaries in predominantly white suburban neighborhoods.

Moreover, due to the high rates of intermarriage between whites and nonwhite within this community, Japanese Americans claim a higher rate of multiracial identification compared to other groups – in 2010, 41% reported as being one or more other races or other Asian groups, making Japanese Americans one of the highest mixed-race groups among other Asian groups (Hoeffel et al. 2012). Studying Japanese Americans as this community transitions with a

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that not all groups of Asian Americans have achieved the same rate of socioeconomic and social integration as others. Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Hmong have lower levels of education, occupation, and income compared to other Asian American groups (Zhou and Gatewood 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The most densely Japanese American cities are Honolulu, HI, Long Beach, CA, and New York, NY (Zhou and Gatewood 2007, 124).

significant number of mixed-raced may shed light on the larger process of racial and ethnic group formation (King-O'Riain 2006).

Finally, unlike other Asian American groups, the Japanese Americans have fewer new immigrants coming into the U.S. to replenish their shrinking population; there has been a slow decline among Japanese Americans, which numbered 852,237 in 2000 and 841,824 in 2010 (Hoeffel et al. 2012). Furthermore, as one of the first and oldest Asian groups to immigrate to the U.S., Japanese Americans are the only Asian-origin group whose U.S.-born population is larger than the number of foreign born (Zhou 2004). Over 55 percent of the Japanese population is reportedly third generation or older while only 22 percent are considered foreign born or second generation (Li and Skop 2007, 225). As such, Japanese Americans are one of the few Asian groups to have a fourth generation and many U.S.-born elderly in the same population (Zhou 2004, 31). Studying how Japanese American define and shift ethnic boundaries and communities in the absence of continuous immigration may provide a model for how other racial and ethnic groups may fair in similar situation.

### **Studying Community Youth Basketball Leagues**

Sports have played a large part in the fabric of Japanese American history, shaping the lives and experiences of players, their families, as well as the ethnic community as a whole (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya 2000). In this regard, basketball leagues have held a particularly long and influential history which offers a unique window into the Japanese American community (Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000). Today, Japanese American basketball leagues are thriving cultural and athletic organizations involving over 10,000 youth and adults participating in year-round leagues and tournaments (Niiya 2000). The popularity and size of these leagues shows no signs

of slowing down; there seems to be steady interest within the Japanese American community and the larger Asian community as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to their long legacy and growing popularity of organized youth sports, JA leagues are ideal “racial projects” in action where collective membership is being defined, enforced, and legitimated. Omi and Winant (1994) theorized that racial projects “connect what *race means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning” (56). Because Japanese American youth basketball leagues organize membership using informal eligibility rules based on race and ethnicity, these are ideal examples of racial projects where “an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial line” happens (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). Community sports leagues are suitable sites to study the racial and ethnic boundaries of the community, pointing out can and who can not be a member and therefore creating a hierarchy of authenticities.”<sup>10</sup> For example, in King’s (2002) study of racial eligibility rules in both Japanese American basketball leagues and beauty pageants, she found a shift over time from a completely “race”-based definition to a more “ethnicity”-based one (121). But as more leagues begin to remove these eligibility rules, opening up their doors to more players of mixed or non-Japanese ancestry, my study examines how new racial and ethnic meanings and boundaries are created within this racial project.

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<sup>9</sup> I recognize that not all Japanese Americans actively participate in basketball leagues or other ethnic sports leagues, and as such, my study cannot be considered generalizable to the entire ethnic community. While my findings are specific to a self-selected group who have chosen to participate in ethnic sports leagues, this case study can still offer models for how some later-generation Asian groups use community organized spaces to actively shape racial and ethnic boundaries and communities.

<sup>10</sup> King-O’Riain (2006) offers a similar argument for the study of Japanese American beauty pageants, noting how pageants are 1) symbolic of the ethnic community, 2) they are open, public, performative events, 3) they function as racial projects, and 4) they involve a particularly explicit intersection of gendering and racialization (17).

Finally, sporting worlds can offer a rich site to explore the intricate dynamics between race, ethnicity, and gender. For example, scholars have demonstrated how several groups use sports as an outlet to forge, maintain, and strengthen their racial and ethnic identities (Allison 1979; Bazzano 1994; Cronin and Mayall 1998; Jarvie 1991; MacClancy 1996). Moreover, sports can also be an active site for the reinforcement of ethnic or racial stereotypes (Erkut et al. 1996; Shropshire 1996; Smith 2007). Research has also demonstrated how sports can reproduce broader gender systems of inequality (Hanson 2005; MacClancy 1996; Yep 2009) and reinforce hegemonic and heteronormative gender expectations (Lovell 1991; Messner 2002).

Yet, sports can also be understood as a “contested terrain”, a social and cultural site where racial and gendered “images, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed, transformed, and constantly struggled over” (Hartmann 2000, 230; Messner 1988). My dissertation will demonstrate that Japanese American sports leagues provide a contested terrain where individual, collective, and institutional negotiations over racial, ethnic, and gender meanings occur. In understanding these contested negotiations, scholars can begin to unpack how these boundaries are changing and shifting within this ethnic group.

### **Central Research Questions**

My dissertation draws from ethnographic data to examine how later-generation Japanese Americans have carved out their own ethnic and cultural space through community youth basketball leagues. Several key research questions are addressed in this dissertation:

- How have historical and social contexts shaped ethnic sports leagues over several generations of Japanese American athletes?

- Why do ethnic sports leagues continue to exist within “assimilated” later-generation Japanese Americans?
- How do members produce, transform and affirm racial and ethnic identities and meanings? How do they negotiate and maintain racial and ethnic boundaries within ethnic sports leagues?
- How are ethnic sports league a site for gender (re)construction? How does the experience of playing in ethnic leagues for Japanese American females differ from their male counterparts?
- What role do ethnic sports leagues play in creating and affirming ethnic community?

## **Research Setting and Methodology**

### *Research site*

As one of the oldest and largest Japanese American sports leagues in southern California, the Pacific Coast Youth (PCY) basketball league is the center of my ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>11</sup> PCY is connected to a larger organization, the Southern California Sports Association (SCSA), which is an athletic youth organization that oversees eight other Japanese American and Asian American youth sports leagues, including PCY. Under the provisions and guidelines of SCSA, the PCY sports league was started in the 1960’s as a purely volunteer-based organization which is run by a committee of elected members. Starting with a handful of baseball teams, the league quickly grew to included basketball teams as well. Today, the popularity of basketball has well eclipsed the number of baseball teams hosted by the organization.

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<sup>11</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants and the organizations involved.

Today, the PCY league sponsors over 32 male and female basketball teams with players ranging from seven to eighteen-years old. They also sponsor a summer basketball camp for children between five to seven-years of age to help develop participants' coordination, skills, sportsmanship and sense of teamwork. Moreover, the organization hosts an annual basketball tournament which is one of the largest in this region, drawing up to 400 teams in and around the southern California and Orange County areas who participate. The PCY league is also closely connected to a Japanese American veterans organization and the PCY Youth Group, an active volunteer organization comprised of youth basketball players from PCY and other SCSA teams.

Unlike other Japanese American leagues in this area, PCY members do not have to be affiliated with local churches. Rather, membership into the league is largely determined by the approval from SCSA, PCY league organizers, and coaches. Although the PCY league does not hold or enforce any formal rules of racial or ethnic eligibility or quotas, the league is overwhelmingly Asian American with over half of its participants having full or partial Japanese American heritage.<sup>12</sup>

### *Methodology*

#### Participant observation

To capture the lived experiences and members' meanings within these ethnic leagues, data was collected through participation observation with several different teams of varying age groups within the PCY basketball league. From December 2007 through June 2008, I followed eight different teams - a male and female team in the third, sixth, ninth, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade for one season. By observing teams at varying ages, I was able to capture "snapshots" of players at

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<sup>12</sup> This percentage was largely determined by examination of names and photographs of players in tournament handbook and team yearbook for that season.



different stages in the “career life” of a league basketball player. Players and families who had just started out in these leagues would most likely have a different experience than those who were “lifers” – players who join a team as young children and continued to play throughout high school.

To better understand the interactions, experiences, and activities from the perspectives of the players, coaches, family, and fans as they naturally occurred, I regularly attended weekend practices, games, and tournaments for both the junior season (second thru seventh-grade) and the senior season (eight thru 12th-grade). Splitting my time between two different gyms, on average, I attended three to four practices on Saturdays, each lasting an hour and a half long. Sundays, or “Game Day” as members often referred to it, were a particular challenge as I would try to attend up to four, one-hour games at various gyms in the Southern California area.

At these venues, I could usually be found on the sidelines with parents and fans while watching the team at practice or competing in a game. Fortunately, I had the privilege of sitting on the players’ bench during some games to observe the interactions and dynamics from the players’ and coach’s perspective. I made a point to spend time milling around with parents and players outside of the gym before games and especially afterwards when snacks would be distributed. I also attended additional social league events including holiday and end-of-the season parties, the annual league tournament, and the summer basketball camp. In addition, I also accepted the occasional invitation to eat with teams after games or tournaments. My continual presence as a researcher and “fan” helped me to forge closer and more trusting relationships with the teams.

Finally, to observe the organizational and political aspects of the league, I attended monthly PCY commissioner meetings held at the local Japanese American Veterans’ Post.

These meetings gave me insider knowledge of the internal and structural decisions that go into managing and organizing teams.

### Interviews

While participant observation captured the interactional experiences as they occurred in real time, I also conducted 64 open-ended, in-depth interviews with former and current league members to examine the lived experiences and opinions as they were told through the words and expressions of the participants themselves. To record the early history of the PCY league, I also interviewed two league founders; their responses opened a window into the past to highlight the beginnings and initial goals of the organization. Interviews with current and former players, coaches, and family members captured how members experienced and constructed their sense of self—especially in relation to race, ethnicity, and gender—through participation in these leagues. Moreover, I interviewed participants who are also actively involved in non-ethnic basketball leagues, including high school and city sponsored teams. These interviews offered a comparison between participation in an ethnic youth sports league and those that were racially and ethnically diverse. Lastly, league organizers were interviewed to gain a better sense of the bureaucratic, organizational and political aspects of the league.

Collection of interviews began in December 2008 and concluded in August 2009. Interviewees were selected first from the original eight teams I had followed. I requested interviews through email, as well as in person requests. To widen the scope of informants, I also relied on “snowball sampling” to find interviewees outside the original teams I followed. Interview lengths ranged from 30-60 minutes with younger players and 60-90 minutes with adults. I conducted interviews outside of gyms, libraries, cafes, and at private homes. Interview

topics centered on several themes including racial and ethnic identity, gendered experiences, and their connection to the Japanese community. More generally, I also asked interviewees why they had joined the league, the purpose it served in their lives, and questions regarding their experience playing in an ethnic sport leagues.

### *Analytic schema*

While conducting my fieldwork and interviews, I addressed several main concepts to explore my research questions. First, to uncover the historical context of leagues, I interviewed league founders to capture the origins of the league, particularly the social and cultural circumstance in which PCY was created. During these interviews, I asked founders what motivated them to start the JA league, their initial goals, and what barriers they encountered in starting the league. Their responses helped to contextualized how historical discrimination and exclusion influenced their hopes to continue creating sporting spaces for future generations of Japanese American players

To explore how racial and ethnic meanings and identities were formed, I made observations during league events to capture the distinctive ways in which cultural meanings were created and reinforced through day-to-day interactions. For example, to examine how these leagues infused Japanese American culture and influence with sports, I was particularly mindful to note occurrences of ethnic markers and activities that took place during league events. During interviews, I also asked participants to describe what made this league a “Japanese American” league, how participation had shaped their ethnic or racial identity, and how connected they felt to their ethnic roots as a member of PCY. Moreover, interviews with parents and players who played on both PCY and the local city league helped tease out the racial, cultural, and structural

differences between an ethnic league and a “mainstream” sports organization. To investigate how members negotiated and constructed racial and ethnic boundaries, I asked members questions regarding membership and eligibility. Specifically, I inquired about guidelines and policies, and procedures regarding who could join and how new members were recruited. This line of inquiry made it clear as to who members considered an “insider” and who they thought of as an “outsiders” to the community.

My decision to observe both male and female teams allowed me to investigate how basketball differed along gendered lines. To examine the gender dynamics within the organization, I paid particular attention to interactional differences during games as well as coaching styles during practice on both boys’ and girls’ teams. Moreover, I also asked informants what differences or similarities they drew regarding how men and women played, their experiences as athletes, and what barriers they encountered. This data helped to compare and contrast the sporting experience, both in PCY and beyond, along gendered lines.

Finally, to investigate the role that ethnic sports leagues played in building and maintaining ethnic community, I made observations regarding the types and extent of social networks created among members. For example, during the senior season, I met with the ninth-grade boys’ team in San Jose, CA during a tournament to make observations of parents and youth interacting with leagues in Northern California. To measure the extent of these social networks, I asked interviewees questions regarding how connected they felt to their ethnic community, what opportunities they had to interact with other Japanese Americans, and how participation in basketball league shaped their ethnic ties. Their response helped inform me to patterns of social networks, ethnic ties, and selective assimilation that members engaged in within their suburban neighborhoods.

### *Methodological reflections*

My own social status shaped my inclusion and exclusion into certain spaces “in the field.” One of the largest barriers I faced in studying youth sports league was the lack of experience I had with playing basketball. During my initial interactions with league members, I was consistently asked if I had grown up playing in JA leagues. When I informed them that I was terrible at basketball and had no hand-eye coordination whatsoever, people’s reactions ranged from surprise to curiosity. As one parent prodded, “If you don’t know anything about [playing] basketball, how can you write about it?” My inexperience with the game may have raised suspicions and doubt for some members about my intention and purpose in studying on basketball leagues and my qualifications to make an accurate assessment of this sports culture.

Moreover, because I did not know how to play basketball, my interaction with league members was relegated to the sidelines, literally. During a particularly brave moment on my part, I asked the coaches from the third-grade girls’ team if I could participate in their practice. They generously obliged and even gave me a basketball to use during drills. After several failed attempts to dribble the ball down the court with my left hand without looking at the ball, I decided my attempt to be more “participatory” was less than successful. Given that I was nearly twice the size of the girls and coaches had to give me more assistance than the rest of the team, my participation made me stand out more than my intended hope to “blend in” with the rest of the team. If I had been a more skilled basketball player, I may have been able to engage and interact with players on their athletic level to build closer relationships.

While my knowledge about jump shots, double-teaming, or zone-defense was severely lacking, my ignorance proved to be helpful at times. Because I had not played in ethnic leagues

(or any youth sports league for that matter) growing up, I was less inclined to take information for granted and relied on my informants to share with me the “in’s and out’s” of JA leagues.

Yet, in spite of not having any “game” on the court, after spending several hours with PCY members in the stands, during practices, and at other league events, I had somehow managed to become an “insider” to many of the teams I followed. Coach Randy, the sixth-grade boys’ coach, affectionately joked, “It’s like you’re our team’s unofficial mascot.” Because my time was split between several teams across different gyms, I could not attend every game and occasionally, my absence was noticeable on some teams. One parent on the third-grade girls’ team called me their “lucky charm,” noting that every time I missed games, the girls always seemed to lose – “They play harder when you’re around because they know they’re being watched and you take notes about them.” I was also fortunate to be invited to join team lunches after tournament games or family dinners, giving me more opportunities to observe team interactions and have casual interviews with families.

In addition to becoming a “familiar face,” my inclusion in these spaces was likely aided by status as an Asian American. While I was not ethnically Japanese - I identify as Chinese- members still considered me part of the Asian American community. This racial status afforded me a greater degree of trust and inclusiveness. Often, when members spoke about being Asian or Asian culture, many assumed that I also knew first-hand what they were referring to. For example, during a conversation with Kathy, the league secretary, about Asian families, she casually commented, “You know how we are – you’re Asian, you grew up with Asian parents.” During a different interview, another player also made a similar reference to our shared racial “we-ness” when she remarked, “Well, look at you and me, we aren’t very tall.”

My racial similarity and inclusion also made it possible for members to feel more comfortable to talk about more controversial issues, particularly discussions about member eligibility. The topic of who could join the organization was a sensitive and polarized issue for some interviewees. On one hand, some members were hesitant to share the organization's unspoken membership preference. One coach even asked me to turn off the digital recorder before discussing "off the record" which players were allowed to join the league. This was understandable given members' fear and potential risk that the organization face accusations of discrimination. No one could recall anyone filing a discriminatory lawsuit against the league, or any other JA league for that matter, but the possible threat still rested in the back of some member's minds. Conversely, there were other members who were very open and passionate about discussing who should be able to join PCY. Had I been non-Asian, I suspect members would have felt more reluctant to discuss their racial or ethnic preference regarding membership.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

Using ethnographic methods, my dissertation research explores the rich history, roles, and meanings within Japanese American youth basketball sports leagues in Southern California. Specifically, I examine how later-generation Japanese Americans have carved out their own ethnic and cultural space through basketball leagues.

In my second chapter, "A Court of Their Own: Historical Roots and the Tale of Two Founding Fathers," I contextualize the long legacy of U.S. sporting traditions within the Japanese American community. This overview begins with the sporting teams of the first generation Japanese immigrants and spans to present day sports league organizations. Using historical

research, as well as the lived experience of two PCY founders, I highlight how various historical and social contexts have shaped Japanese American's access and participation into sports.

In Chapter 3, "Hooping it Up 'JA' Style: Constructing Racial and Ethnic Identities and Boundaries," I outline how leagues are active sites for the construction and (re)negotiation of racial and ethnic categories and boundaries. Specifically, I demonstrate how race and ethnicity continue to shape young Asian American players' access and experience in basketball. First, I demonstrate how outsiders from the league frequently racialized Asian American youth regarding their athletic ability and participation in basketball. I also explain *why* assimilated later-generation Japanese Americans continue to maintain strict racial boundaries to keep out non-Asian players. Paying particular attention to structural policies and cultural practices within the league, I highlight the league's strategies to both racialize and negotiate ethnicity boundaries.

Chapter 4, entitled "Asian boys can jump- and so can the girls!": Gender Dynamics and the Curious Case of the JA female "Baller," I explore how these leagues serve as "contested terrains" for the construction and negotiation of complex gender roles and identities. Because Asians are both raced and gendered simultaneously, I examine how young members were confronted with different stereotypes associated with Asian men and women. Focusing on interactions and practices, I highlight how members collaboratively "do gender" that both reinforces and challenges traditional hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. Although basketball is generally considered a male-dominated sport, in this chapter, I offer several possible factors to explain the surprising trend of "successful" female Asian basketball players in spaces outside the PCY league.

In Chapter 5, "We've Got Team Spirit: Social Networking and Ethnic Community Building," I investigate the role youth sports leagues played in creating and affirming ethnic



community among later-generation Japanese Americans. Given their socioeconomic achievements, residential patterns, and high rates of intermarriage over several generations, many scholars argue that Japanese Americans have successfully assimilated and predict less desire of ethnic group cohesion (Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2007). Offering a critique to these predictions, I demonstrate how some Japanese Americans continue to seek social spaces with other co-ethnics, finding a sense of ethnic “connectedness” within JA basketball leagues. In addition, I will map out how members create various social networks with other co-ethnics, including local, organizational, and global ties.

I conclude with a summary of my key findings and address how my findings have expanded scholarship in the field of assimilation, race and ethnicity, and the sociology of sports. I also offer some brief recommendations for the future research in these fields.

## Chapter 2

### **A Court of Their Own: Historical Roots and the Tale of Two Founders Fathers**

“I compare [the PCY league] to the internment camps. If it weren’t for the interment camp, half of the kids that are here today wouldn’t be here because we wouldn’t have known each other. The interment camp got the whole Japanese community from all over the west coast together with one common bond. And that’s the fact that they were put in a camp and they met all kinds of people. And those friendships still remain today. And I think that’s what’s happened today in SCSA – the parents in SCSA have become friends with not only their own team and the parents of their own team, but many of the kids and family have become friends with other teams and parents and children.”

- Bruce, founder of SCSA and PCY

Japanese and Japanese Americans have had an especially long and successful sports legacy in the U.S. – a history that is not commonly known by those outside the ethnic community. This chapter examines the rich and historical origins of sports activity which, in the face of exclusion and internment, overcame tremendous barriers to become a thriving cultural and athletic community that has shaped several generations of Japanese Americans. Drawing from previous historical studies, I will provide a brief overview of Japanese involvement in sports that begins with the first Japanese immigrants and spans to present day youth sports leagues.

In addition to historical research, I will also draw from the lived history of two PCY founders, Bruce and Naoki, who’s leadership and organizing efforts laid the groundwork in establishing a network of JA sports leagues in Southern California. As Bruce’s quote above suggests, previous historical context and circumstances continue to have a lasting impact, shaping the meaning of contemporary sporting spaces for this ethnic community. Their involvement in Japanese American sports – which included their interment experience during WWII and post relocation efforts – spanned over 65 years.

## **The Early Beginnings: 1900-1940**

Starting from the first immigrant arrivals, the *Issei* generation set in motion the first of many roots into the sports community. Sumo and baseball were the most popular and practiced sports for the *Issei* generation. As the tradition of baseball continued to grow in Hawaii and the mainland, it quickly became a favorite pastime among the *Issei* generation and their children, the *Nisei* generation (Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000). As historian Nakagawa (2001) notes, “Playing baseball in these plantation camps gave the workers an opportunity to relieve their tedium and, for a few precious hours, forget their hardships and the harsh physical labor of the cane fields” (6). Along with sumo and baseball, the *Nisei* generation was also actively involved in other sports such as wrestling, fishing bowling, and basketball. As early as 1920, several basketball leagues and organizations were beginning to cropping up in Hawaii and in major cities in California, including Los Angeles and San Francisco (Niiya 2000).

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, several historians have noted how discriminatory practices prevented some non-white groups from participation in professional or mainstream sporting spaces (Burgos 2007; Gems 2004). This was the case for Japanese athletes, many of who were barred from joining professional sports leagues (Niiya 2000). Japanese American exclusion and segregation from sports and recreation existed at the community level as well. As a young *Nisei* Japanese American boy growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood in the 1930’s, Bruce was no stranger to the discrimination and prejudice directed against Japanese and other minority groups. Racial segregation was common in everyday life, including sports and recreational activities. As Bruce revealed,

I didn't like being Japanese being in an all-white town. So it was difficult being raised like that in a place where there was a lot of prejudice. We couldn't even go to the swimming pool because we had to wait till Monday for minorities – that's the only day we could go swimming.

As a minority, access to recreational spaces like the community pool was limited to just one day of the week. Being treated as “less than” and having fewer privileges and rights than white, Bruce recognized the difficulty of being Japanese in his predominantly white community.

Yet even in the face of exclusion, marginalized groups created their own racial and ethnic leagues. Similar to the humble beginnings of Negro leagues (Tygiel 2004; Wiggins 1994), Japanese Americans started their own parallel sports institutions. By the 1920’s, several Japanese associations and churches on the west coast began organizing athletic activities. For example, unable to participate in white sports organizations, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and the Buddhist church in Oregon sponsored their own basketball tournaments (Regalado 2002, 77). *Nisei* players also started San Francisco’s Japanese Amateur Athletic Union (JAAU) in 1929 followed by Los Angeles’ Japanese Athletic Union (JAU) which was formed in 1932 (Niiya 2000, 18). Both of these organizations were instrumental in developing and expanding their athletic programs within their respective ethnic community.

Unique to other ethnic sports leagues at the time, there was a strong relationship between Japanese Americans sports leagues and athletes from their homeland, Japan. Several historians have noted how baseball teams, sumo wrestlers, judo fighters and other star athletes from Japan were invited to play against teams living in the US while successful Japanese American players were also sent to challenge teams in Japan (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000). This international rivalry helped to maintain diplomatic and cultural ties to the homeland, especially with the *Nisei* generation.

## **Sporting Life During World War II**

If sports were an outlet for entertainment, acceptance, and community organizing for the *Issei* and *Nisei* generation, sports activities offered a similar purpose during World War II when the Japanese American community faced their most challenging times. Under President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, the US government effectively paved the way for the mass eviction and interment of all Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. Within a few months, some 110,000 Japanese men, women, and children, two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth, were systematically uprooted from their homes and transplanted to temporary "assembly centers" located at fairgrounds and horse-racing tracks. By the fall of 1942, these groups were moved to ten more permanent "relocation centers" located in desolate and remote regions of the U.S.

During these years of interment, Japanese Americans did their best to cope with the complete removal and disruption of their former lives. Leisure time activities within the camp provided an especially important way to keep alive some aspects of Japanese cultural life (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya 2000; Pearce 2005; Wrynn 1994). Wasting no time, Japanese Americans were quick to set up sporting activities and teams within the confines of their barbed wire communities. Even in the prison camps, interned Japanese Americans found themselves playing sports (Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000). Naoki, who was interned at Heart Mountain, Wyoming when he was 11 years old, recalled the diversity of sporting activities offered in the interment camp as a youth:

In camp, we had all kinds of sports we played. The older groups had teams - baseball teams, basketball teams. ... They had judo, kendo, and things like that. ... But us younger ones, I don't remember having any organized teams - it was just all pick up games.

The diversity of sports activity made it possible for just about everyone to participate in some sort of recreational activity. While older players were organized into baseball and basketball

teams, younger players like Naoki could play in informal pick-up games in the yard. Moreover, they also had the option of playing both traditional Japanese sports (i.e. judo and kendo) as well as American sports. Recreational activities were often divided by generation with the *Issei* generation preferring traditional Japanese sports while the younger generation gravitated toward American-style recreation (Wrynn 1994). It should be noted that men were not the only participants in these camps – *Issei* and *Nisei* Japanese women also set up their own parallel sports teams as well.

The types and availability of sporting activities often depended on the local conditions, camp population, resources, and leniency of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) in each center (Niiya 2000). For example, the basketball program at the Amache camp in Colorado was a success due to their access to the nearby Granda High School gym while baseball dominated at Gila River thanks to the efforts of *Issei* Fresno All-Stars Kenichi Zenimaura who built his own “field of dreams” out scrap lumber (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya, 2000).

Sports within the camps offered internees “approaches for finding, articulation, and preserving meaning in a senseless situation” (Nakagawa 2001). Sports teams and activities served several important roles for not only the participants but for the fans who watched. Sports was often a form of entertainment – an enjoyable way to pass the time, break up the boredom within the desolate confines of the camp, and at times, had a calming effect on an agitated population (Pearce 2005). Sports played a pivotal role in creating a degree of continuity and normalcy to maintain at least one aspect of their former lives outside the camp. Bruce, spoke with me about his interment experience in Poston, Arizona and the role that sports played during his three and a half years at the camp:

Well, I can tell you what we did to keep ourselves occupied. I went in when I was 12 and I came out when I was 15, a sophomore in high school. Things were pretty much barren,

pretty much nothing. You didn't know anybody. You didn't know how long you were going to be there. It was a frightening experience. You did not know what was going to happen to you and why you were there. ... But they had a recreation department and you could go there and if you wanted to buy a baseball glove, you could order it there. If you wanted sports equipment there - a basketball, baseball, football - you could check it out and you took it to your block. Like I said, we found ways to keep ourselves occupied.

In this disruptive and often frightening experience, many interned youth like Bruce turned to sports as a social outlet to keep themselves grounded and stay “occupied.” The various sporting activities established by recreation departments helped alleviate the monotony and boredom within the camp.

Moreover, sports played a particularly crucial role in maintaining community in the camps. While some prewar teams were moved into one camp, keeping their players intact, other teams were disbanded and relocated to different camps. As such, baseball and basketball leagues offered opportunities to forge new alliances and a sense of pride for their teams (Nakagawa 2001). Even the condition of a camp’s sports facility was a potential source of community pride. For example, Bruce and his older brother took great pride in maintaining one of the camp’s sports ground:

The camps were broken up into block with about 14 barracks. ... And they had about 14 barracks in a block. There was about 4 blocks in what they call a quad. Next to the quad there was a big firebreak so fires wouldn't spread in the camp. And that's where we built baseball diamonds and basketball courts on the ground. We had a baseball backstop that was just broken down pieces of wood barely hanging on there. We fixed the ground up real nice. We had the best field, baseball and basketball in the camp because the fire station was right there. And my brother was a captain for the fire department so he would let us take the truck outside and water the field to keep the ground packed down.

With few outlets for work, Bruce and his friends focused their energy toward creating a functional and highly revered sports facility within the camp. Their competitive and industrial spirit, along with convenient access to the fire truck, made it possible for his quad to boast that they had “the best field” in Poston.

Even within the camp, some Japanese American players were able to achieve a small degree of fame and notoriety within the sport community. Teams like the Gila River Eagles and Heart Mountain Zebra Ayes quickly grew a large fan following (Pearce 2005). During our interview, Bruce recounted how some athletes were idolized in his camp:

They had different age groups [for players]. They had the older guys who were really good players and they had a league and they would have competitions. As younger kids, we would go out and watch them play and they would be our idols. I don't know if you know of a guy up there in Northern California named Danny Fukushima. ... In San Jose, they named a big gym after him. He was in our camp and played. He went on to play basketball in the army and all these other places. He was working in the school districts up there - I think he was a superintendent. So he was quite a basketball player and he played in our camp. We used to watch those kind of guys and really admire them. They were kind of our idols.

Within the camp, sports athletes like Danny Fukushima soon rose to fame and became idols, especially for young Japanese Americans who would follow their success at each game. As the popularity of players and baseball teams grew, some temporary liberated internees were allowed to travel to different camps to compete in tournaments and other competitions.

During this difficult chapter of Japanese American history, the growing network of sports teams and the rising athletic stars that emerged made an indelible mark in the community. With few freedoms and liberties during internment, Japanese and Japanese American internees were able to manage, coach, train, and field their own teams. Similar to the Negro Leagues that developed in the 1920's before integration, these sports activities gave the community a growing sense of pride, unity, and empowerment even under oppressive confinement in the camps.

### **Postwar Sports Activity**

By January 1945, at the end of WWII, internees were free to leave the intern camps for voluntary "resettlement." During this time the Japanese Americans struggled to plant new roots,



often in cities and towns where anti-Japanese sentiments were still high. Once again, sports proved to be instrumental in this transition for both resettlers and returning veterans, often providing an outlet for Japanese Americans to rebuild community and normalcy. Just as sports was a unifying force in the internment camp, Japanese Americans turned again to the baseball fields and basketball courts to bring together a disbanded ethnic community (Pearce 2005). As Japanese Americans resettled into new communities, some coming back to the west while others cropped up in the Midwest and East, new sports teams sprang up as well. Recalling his resettlement in Brigham City, Utah, Naoki recounted how the Japanese community continued to be active in organized sports teams,

You know even after we came out of relocation camp, and we settled in Utah - we had basketball leagues, baseball leagues, bowling leagues, consisting of all Japanese. It's like [sports] never ended after we came out.

For some Japanese Americans, participation in sport was a means to affirm their loyalty to the country. Sport in the postwar era reflected a rise in participation in more traditionally “American” sporting teams such as baseball, basketball, golf, and bowling. If Japanese Americans were pouring their hearts, interests and efforts in these “American” sports, there was an invariable decline in participation and popularity on more traditional “Japanese” sports (i.e. sumo, kendo, judo) (Niiya 2000, 34-35). On these playing grounds, Japanese Americans could both validate their identity as Americans and prove themselves loyal to the country (Niiya 2000, 37; Sullivan 2000).

By the 1960's and 1970's, in the midst of the civil rights era, Japanese Americans still faced discrimination and barriers into sports activities. The Japanese community had grown to include a third generation, the *Sansei* generation, who were seeking their own sporting outlets.

Bruce's motivation to start a Japanese American youth sports league was in part a response to persistent discrimination and prejudice:

SCSA officially started back in 1963 when we formed the league and we incorporated teams to become an organization. But we started back then in '63 with the intention of giving the kids an opportunity to play sports against kids their own age especially for the Japanese kids at that time because we were still in a prejudice atmosphere and we understood that in high school, the kids were not given the same opportunities to participate. So we figured, let's give them a place to play amongst kids against their own size, ability and who share mutual interests.

Echoing the exclusion they had faced before internment and after relocation, SCSA founders, Bruce and Naoki, firmly believed that *Sansei* children were not getting the same opportunities to play in sports teams in high school or in their larger communities. By creating their own youth sports leagues, Japanese Americans did not have to worry about exclusion or racist taunts.

Rather, they could compete among youth who looked like them and shared a similar history.

Some of the current PCY players were aware of the discriminatory barriers previous generations faced. For example, when asked why JA leagues were formed, Chuck, a player on the ninth-grade boys' team, explained:

It was during the time when the war was going on. When [Japanese Americans] got back, they weren't treated equally. So, they formed [JA leagues] for the people that wanted to play basketball, because it was sort of like how African-Americans were treated unequally. The Japanese Americans didn't have the same rights. People didn't deem them as normal. They didn't think [Japanese Americans] were the same thing as them. So that's my understanding of why they formed [JA leagues]. So everybody could play. Nobody was different and they don't have to worry about like racial slurs or anything. And it's just for fun.

Chuck's reflection highlights several historical barriers Japanese American's faced in sporting communities post World War II, including exclusion from joining teams, denial of rights, and racial slurs. Such forms of discrimination played a strong motivating factor in the creation of an all-Japanese American league. By creating a recreational space for their own children to play,

JA league founders made it possible for “everyone to play,” especially Japanese American athletes who also wanted opportunities to play baseball and basketball.

### **Contemporary Leagues: 1980’s to Present Day**

By the 1980’s and 1990’s, the *Sansei* (third) and *Yonsei* (fourth) generation Japanese American began to move away from their inner city niches into wealthier suburban communities, further cementing their structural assimilation into mainstream society. As a result, Japanese Americans were frequently lauded as “model minorities” who had risen above discrimination and the devastation of interment to achieve socioeconomic success and social mobility (Peterson 1966; Osajima 2005).

As more Japanese Americans dispersed into suburban neighborhoods, new sports leagues and organizations were formed to meet their athletic and social needs. For example, in Southern California alone, when there was once only the Nisei Athletic Union (NAU), “by the end of the 1980s there existed an alphabet soup of athletic organizations: JAO, FOR, CYC, CBO, SEYO, etc.” (Niiya 2000, 63).

Moreover, while baseball seemed to be a mainstay for both the *Issei* and *Nisei* generation, by the late 1970’s basketball eventually eclipsed baseball with regard to popularity within the *Sansei* and *Yonsei* generation (Komai 2000). Offering an explanation to the shift in popularity of youth sports, Bruce commented,

In the late 60’s, everything at the time was for baseball [for the boys] and softball for the girls – there was no basketball. We didn’t start [basketball] till about 5 or 10 years later. ... But back then, before basketball, baseball and softball was the big thing. I can picture coaches carrying big bags of bats and balls to practices, playing, and yelling with parents cheering. As they slowly started getting into basketball, then all of the sudden, basketball became a big thing and baseball and softball became secondary. I think one of the reasons was because baseball was played during the summer in the daytime - it was awfully hot for parents and kids so that wasn’t convenient. Whereas basketball was more

of a winter sport and back then. It was easier to get gyms - there were no other basketball programs like ours.

As the popularity of basketball began to grow on a national level, so did its popularity in JA youth leagues. Especially given the long games in the summer sun, limited field space, and necessity for more equipment, interest in baseball began to wane and it soon took a backseat to the growing number of basketball teams being formed within the leagues.

Today, Japanese American basketball leagues are thriving cultural and athletic organizations involving over 10,000 youth and adults participating in year-round leagues and tournaments (Niiya 2000). The popularity and size of these leagues shows no signs of slowing down; there seems to be steady interest within the Japanese American community and the larger Asian community as a whole. This is evidenced by the approval by the Los Angeles City Council with Little Tokyo Service Center to develop a 38,000-square-foot recreation center for Little Tokyo (Watanabe 2008). This four-court gymnasium will help provide much needed facilities for the growing number of Japanese American basketball leagues in the area.

## **Conclusion**

The legacy of sports activity is a lengthy and important one within the Japanese American community. From the first immigrants to the current generation of players, sport has been a common thread to unify this ethnic group. Denied access into white leagues, the first generation of Japanese immigrants rallied together to start their own ethnic leagues as a space for socializing and reprieve from the long days of labor. Particularly during their interment during World War II, sports leagues were important outlets for community building and escape from the boredom and monotony of confinement. In the aftermath of relocation and resettlement when Japanese Americans began the process of returning to their former lives, many turned to sports

again to rebuild social ties with other co-ethnics. Sports leagues, particularly basketball, continue to play a significant social outlet for many later-generation Japanese American youth and their families, especially for those who have dispersed into suburban neighborhoods.

Through the lived experience and memories of two founding members, it becomes clear how previous acts of exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice shaped their own access and experience in sports activity. The first generation Japanese sports leagues were an ethnic institution that initially rose due to legal exclusion. While legal barriers were eventually lifted, Japanese Americans still faced social discrimination and prejudice, creating barriers in gaining access into mainstream sports. Arguably, this provided some athletes like Bruce and Naoki the motivation and desire to carve out their own cultural space where the Japanese community could continue their sporting traditions.

While several historians have well documented the sporting legacy of earlier Japanese American leagues (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000), my research adds a new chapter by examining the sporting experiences within later-generation Japanese American groups. While racial discrimination and exclusion shaped previous generations of Japanese American athletes, in a sport that is typically dominated by Black and white players, what barriers or obstacles do later-generation Japanese and Asian American youth face on the court? In other words, what role do race and ethnic identity and meaning play in JA leagues among third, fourth, or even fifth-generation basketball players (Chapter 3)? With more Asian American females joining JA leagues than previous generations, how is their growing participation different from the experience of young male athletes (Chapter 4)? Finally, what role do contemporary leagues play in fostering and maintain ethnic community among later-

generation Japanese Americans (Chapter 5)? These are questions that I will examine in the following chapters.

### Chapter 3

#### **Hooping it Up “JA” Style: Constructing Racial and Ethnic Identities and Boundaries**

Over several generations, scholars consider Japanese Americans as one of the most acculturated and established ethnic groups, noting key factors including their socioeconomic success, residential patterns, and high intermarriage rates over several generations (Alba and Nee 2003, Zhou and Gatewood 2007). Compared to other racial groups, some Japanese Americans exhibit higher rates of horizontal and/or upward mobility. Related to this trend, levels of residential segregation were the lowest for Asians compared to other racial groups, with a high and growing percentage of Japanese Americans living in the suburbs (Alba and Nee 2003; Charles 2001; Farley and Frey 1994; Massey and Denton 1993; Zhou and Gatewood 2007).

In addition to the structural and socioeconomic achievements as indicators of assimilation, Japanese Americans claim a higher rate of multiracial identification compared to other groups. In 2010, 41% of Japanese Americans reported as being one or more other races or other Asian groups, making them the highest mixed-race group among other Asian groups (Hoeffel et al. 2012). This substantial growth in Japanese and Asian multiracial population is likely due to the high rates of intermarriage between whites and nonwhites that have risen sharply within this community (Lee and Bean 2007; Zhou 2004). For example, nearly 51 percent of U.S.-born Japanese American women and 46 percent of U.S.-born Japanese American men were intermarried in 2010 (Le 2012). Alba and Nee (2003) argue that “pan-Asian intermarriage among U.S.-born Asians can be viewed as part of the larger process of assimilation in which social barriers created by ethnic boundaries attenuate as social relations expand across ethnic groups” (263-264).

Moreover, unlike other Asian American groups, the Japanese Americans have fewer new immigrants coming into the U.S. to replenish their shrinking population; while populations of other Asian groups have steadily grown over time, there has been a slow decline among Japanese Americans, which numbered 796,700 852,237 in 2000 and 841,824 in 2010 (Hoeffel et al. 2012). Furthermore, as one of the first and oldest Asian groups to immigrate to the U.S., Japanese Americans are the only Asian-origin group whose U.S.-born population is larger than the number of foreign born (Zhou 2007, 30). Over 55 percent of the Japanese population is reportedly third generation or older while only 22 percent are considered foreign born or second generation (Li and Skop 2007, 225). As such, Japanese Americans are one of the few Asian groups to have a fourth generation and many U.S.-born elderly in the same population (Zhou 2007, 30).

As Japanese Americans continue to achieve high rates of integration through socioeconomic standing, residential integration, high rates of intermarriage, and a decline in new immigrants, some scholars argue that these assimilation patterns will result in a “loss of community and identity as ethnic boundaries continue to erode” (Alba and Nee 2003; Mass 1992). For example, individuals’ ethnic origins become less relevant in relation to members of other ethnic groups. Additionally, groups mutually perceive themselves with less frequency in terms of their ethnic categories and increasingly under specific circumstances (Alba and Nee 2003, 11). Postracial scholars also contend that once a group has successfully assimilated, Japanese Americans would place a decreased importance on race.

Contrary to these predictions, I argue in this chapter that within JA sports leagues, race and ethnicity continue to shape the sporting experiences of young Japanese and Asian American youth. Specifically, I will demonstrate how outsiders from the community continued to racialize Asian American youth as “forever foreign,” particularly in the sport of basketball. I also explain



why, within such a highly assimilated group, ethnic outlets in the form of sports leagues continue to maintain strict boundaries that prioritize Japanese ancestry. Finally, I map out how members implement specific structural policies and cultural practices to maintain and reinforce racial and ethnic boundaries within the league.

### **Color Commentary: Outsider's Racialization of Asian Athletes**

In the previous chapter, I described how earlier generations of Japanese athletes were subjected to various forms of discrimination and prejudice based on race. The process of “racialization,” by which certain phenotypic features or assumed biological characteristics are systematically used to mark individuals or groups for differential status or treatment, “has been first and foremost a way of describing ‘others,’ of making clear that ‘they’ are not ‘us’” (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 27; Omi and Winant 1994). Historically, Asians as a racial group have been labeled as passive, geeky, physically weak, exotic, heathens, “forever foreign” and unable to assimilate into the mainstream, the “Yellow Peril”, and more recently, “model minorities.” (Takaki 1979, 2002).

As my interview responses reveal, Asian youth continue to be subjected to similar racialized stereotypes. Specifically, outsiders from the PCY community frequently racialized Asian youth regarding their athletic ability and participation in basketball. In this section, I highlight how outsiders drew from three overlapping assumptions that underestimated or “othered” Asian athletes, including not looking the part, being mistaken for playing another sport, or being too focused on academics.

*“You don’t look like a basketball player.”*

Members outside the PCY community rarely associated PCY youth as basketball players because they did not “look like a typical basketball player.” As Janice, a former PCY player, explained,

I get a lot of time, ‘Oh, you play?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah.’ And once they see me play, it’s like, ‘Oh wow, we didn’t expect that!’ I think it basically goes back to being Asian or being short or just a perception of what a basketball player should look like. I have a friend that’s a tall, white guy who’s 6’5” and everybody assumes that he plays basketball or volleyball. But he doesn’t play. [laughs] ... But I think you get used to [the surprise] over time because you just have to. You don’t want to, but it’s just one of those things that you have to prove people wrong and you show them how you can play.

PCY players like Janice were often told that they do not “look” the part of what a “typical” basketball player should look like – tall, white, or Black. Given that the average size of a NBA male player in 2007-2008 was 6’6.98” and a WNBA player in 2004 was 6’0.25”, this is not necessarily an inaccurate assumption (NBA 2007; WBNA 2004). Arguably, most youth across racial groups would struggle to fit those height expectancies. Yet, to outsiders, Asians in particular were seen as atypical body types to play basketball – they “just didn’t seem like the type” to play basketball (Willms 2010, 206). Often, it was not until Asian players like Janice proved their basketball talent and ability on the court that doubters began to see how they had wrongly judged PCY youth by their “non-athletic” body types. I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4 how PCY youth have responded to both racialized and gendered stereotypes.

*“Are you a black belt?”*

Moreover, if outsiders did label PCY youth as athletes, it was assumed they played sports that did not include basketball. When asked why people were often surprised to learn that he played basketball, Chuck, a player on the ninth-grade boys’ team, exclaimed,

Because I’m Asian! Because they think most Asians should play tennis or golf or something or just be studying. They don’t expect a guy like me to take it to the hole, or

drive hard, or pass it, or double team them, or pass without looking - they don't expect that.

Outsiders frequently slotted athletes like Chuck into particular sports that are popular among Asian American youth, such as golf, volleyball, tennis, or badminton. They are also associated with sports associated with Asian culture such as martial arts. For example, one female player lamented, “Someone asked me once if I was a black belt. I was like, ‘I did karate for like one year - are you joking me!?’” Examples like these demonstrate how outsiders associated Asian American youth with a limited range of sports activities that generally excluded them from basketball. In other words, an Asian American athlete was more likely to swing a golf club or do karate, but they were rarely thought to be able to “take it to the hole.”

*“You should be hitting the books, not the courts”*

Finally, outsiders often perceived Asian Americans as being book smart rather than athletically talented. Mirroring the “model minority” narrative, players were assumed to be only focused on their academic pursuits, leaving little room or desire to be athletes. As Chuck explained, “Cause you know a lot of people think ‘oh, well [Asians] should be smart, they should be hitting the books, they should be doctors and all these other professions.” Janet, a former PCY player, had a similar experience:

So [teachers and students] were surprised because they assumed I'm just a little nice Asian girl. Because that's how I was in the classroom - very studious, really nice to people. And then on the court, that's my passion so I'd be really aggressive and people were like ‘Wow, it's so different but it's so cool.’ I was like, ‘See I told you. You've got to come once to a game, don't just assume.’ So I think it showed people that – I know it's really corny - but don't judge a book by its cover.

The assumption that academics and professional success should take precedent over all other activities leaves Asian Americans outside sporting spaces. Youth like Chuck and Janet were

only expected to be “very studious” in the classroom while not having any interest in activities outside academics. As “model minorities,” Asian youth could be “the model worker, the overachiever, the math maniac, or the science/computer nerd,” but they could not be “jocks” or have the physical aggression needed and expected from basketball players (Lee and Zhou 2004, 10).

Because Asian American youth were not racialized to fit the profile of a “typical” basketball player, people’s reaction to their basketball ability ranged from surprise to disbelief to curiosity. Laura, who played on the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls’ team and her high school basketball team, summarized a typical reaction from others upon finding out her status as a basketball player.

We would have to wear our sweats, our warm-ups, to show everybody at school that we were a team and it was game day. So it would just be like random students who would come up to me and ask what team on was on. And I would tell them the basketball team and they wouldn’t believe me! ... And even teachers, when they’d come to watch [basketball games], they’d be all shocked that this little girl can shoot some threes.”

In addition to reactions of shock and surprise, sometimes their identity as a basketball player was perceived as unusual. Janice, a former PCY player and a current softball player for her college team, commented about people’s reaction to her playing basketball,

A lot of people look at you, they’re just kind of like ‘Oh well this is different - there’s an Asian playing. You don’t see that very often.’ When they see me out in the field or out on the court, they’re like, ‘Well this is different, you don’t really see this, I wonder what’s going to happen.’”

Outsiders’ assumptions and surprised reaction to their presence on the basketball court served as a marker of their perceived “foreignness” in the game. For some fans in the stands, this may have been their first time watching an Asian American player on the court, driving hard, shooting three-point shots, and posting up against taller players. Moreover, research has shown that Asian American professional athletes have been subjected to the reinforcement and perpetuation of racialized stereotypes in sports media (King 2006; Mayeda 2007). For example,

in the 1998 Winter Olympics held in Nagano, Japan, shortly after Tara Lipinski won the gold medal in women's figure skating, MSNBC news erroneously ran the headline, "American Beats out Kwan," suggesting that Michele Kwan, a third generation Chinese American, was not American (Lee 1998).

In a sport that is typically dominated by Black and white players, Asian American ball players were frequently deemed the "other" on the courts – an anomaly and token on teams outside the community. In 2007, there were only a handful of Asian and Asian American who had been professional basketball players. Yao Ming, who played for the Houston Rockets from 2002-2011, had received notable media coverage and a large fan base in both the United States and over seas in China. Those who came from the Japanese American community included Wataru "Wat" Misaka, who joined the New York Knicks in 1947, and Rex Walters, a half-Japanese player in the NBA from 1993-2000. With so few cultural icons to shape public opinion about Asian Americans' ability to play basketball, it was no surprise that the outsiders rarely assumed Asians as active basketball players.<sup>13</sup>

Despite a high degree of social integration by other measures – intermarriage, residential integration, language acquisition – the basketball court was still a space where Japanese American, and Asians more generally, were "forever foreigners." Public's perception about their athletic size and ability were generally underestimated as being too short and small. Simply put, later-generations of Asian Americans continued to be racialized and treated as physically distinct (Kibria 2002; Min 2002; Tuan 1998). Examination of the public's reaction to Jeremy Lin's recent success as a point guard for the New York Knicks has brought to surface similar assumptions. By most media accounts, Jeremy Lin's breakthrough performance has largely been

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<sup>13</sup> I should note that my research was conducted before Jeremy Lin's rise to fame in both the sport world and more generally, in popular culture.

considered as a “surprise,” “unexpected,” and certainly an “underdog story.” As Kurashige (2012) states,

“When Lin proves wrong the scouts and coaches who thought he lacked the ‘speed,’ ‘strength,’ or ‘explosiveness’ needed for success, his feats resonate symbolically with Asian Americans who have not only endured similar slights in sports but have also found their career options and advancement stunted by stereotypes connoting weakness, passivity, and a lack of charisma” (CNN.com).

Whether Asian American players are on the NBA or simply playing on their community courts, they were frequently underestimated, doubted, or relatively invisible in the game of basketball. As such, these racialized assumptions served as subtle micro-aggressions that created barriers for Asian American youth attempting to enter into these sporting spaces.

### **“Our kids need their own leagues”: Leveling the playing field**

As I outlined in Chapter 2, Japanese Americans have historically faced several barriers of discrimination, prejudice, and, as I discussed in the section above, they continue to be racialized in the game of basketball sport. As a result, members from this community have been active in creating and sustaining their own ethnic sports leagues. In this section, I highlight why later-generation Japanese Americans continue to defend the need for exclusively Asian sports leagues. Specifically, I outline how players drew from essentialist ideology regarding athletic ability to justify why Japanese Americans, and more broadly, Asian Americans still needed their own basketball leagues. In addition to biological reasoning, I will also address how league members made cultural distinctions to reinforce racial boundaries that set Asian Americans apart from other races.

*“We’re a lot shorter than other kids.” – Biological distinctions*

If members outside the community racialized Asian youth and their bodies as short, small, and weak, this reification of physical and biological stereotypes was also adopted and asserted by the group members themselves, particularly as a justification to maintain strict racial boundaries for membership. In other words, PCY members constructed racial boundaries based on essentialist notions to fortify distinctions between racial groups. In doing this type of “boundary work,” Japanese Americans defined who they were by erecting and defending boundaries between themselves and outsiders to the league (Barth 1969, Lamont 2000, Sanders 2002).

Similar to outsiders’ beliefs about race and physiology, many PCY parents expressed similar notions about the perceived shortcomings in the size and stature of Asian bodies, commenting on how they wanted their kids to compete on a “level playing field” with other players on the court. For example, Bruce, one of the founding members of PCY, argued,

One of the major goals that I saw was that the *nihon jin*, the Japanese kids, were a lot shorter and smaller and they weren’t as tall as the Caucasians. So the main purpose of the program was to allow these kids a chance to play basketball, especially those who couldn’t participate in varsity or junior varsity teams.

Eric, a father with two kids playing in the league echoed these sentiments when he explained,

Asian kids need their own league since they’re a lot shorter than other kids – this way they’re all about the same size. ... And at least in the JA league, my son actually gets playing time, whereas he’s not big enough or tall enough to play at the high school level.

Coach Daniel, who coached the 12-grade girl’s team, added,

SCSA’s really meant for Asian kids in general that don’t have the advantage of being tall. I mean you might have a few kids that are Asian who might be 6’5 or 6’6. You get a few now and then. And it just so happens that they are Japanese, Chinese, Korean. ... You might get a freak of nature, but in these leagues, you get the average boy who’s going to be well under 6’0 and an average girl who’s going to be 5’6 and under.

Implicit in these comments were essentialist beliefs that Asians were physically shorter, weaker, and too small to compete with non-Asian players, particularly in settings outside the PCY

community such as high school teams. Moreover, for Asian players who were over 6'5" tall, members considered those players a rarity – a “freak of nature” - within the league. These notions served to perpetuate biological or “natural” racial stereotypes associated with Asians, overemphasizing the “shortcomings” of some Asian athletes who are deemed “a lot shorter and smaller.”

If members described Asian athletes as shorter and smaller than other racial groups, Blacks and whites were racialized as having a superior physical advantage. Kathy, the PCY league secretary and a mother with two kids playing in the league, explained these differences when she commented,

SCSA was formed so that the Asians could play the sport, because they're not going to be able to play high school sports because of their size. If you're playing against a six-foot [tall] 6<sup>th</sup> grader that's black, [Asian] kids aren't up to their waist yet and it's not fair. ... All the Asians are about the same size, so it's not going to make a difference if [Asians] play in their own league.

Kathy’s example of a six-foot tall, Black sixth-grader was probably more an exception rather than the rule, but her exaggerated generalization of the physical attributes of Black players served as a rationalization that Asian leagues were necessary. In these leagues, Asians’ less than average height would not “make a difference” or give anyone a particular height advantage – everyone had an equal chance of playing and succeeding. But if non-Asian youth, particularly Black players, joined the team, it would no longer be a level playing field for competition. For example, Randal, a father of two PCY players, recounted how he had heard of a teams within SCSA who were bringing in “ringers” – a player with a clear advantage - on the team because they “wanted to win at all cost.” When I asked him to describe these “ringers,” Randal shared, “Let’s face it, in basketball, they will bring in their African-American kid even though they were going to win championship every year.”



Discussion of players who were multi-racial provided more examples of members associating innate ability with race. For example, regarding hapa players, some league members ascribed a perceived advantage in height or talent associated to their non-Asian genes. As Coach Daniel commented,

If you got some boy that's 6'4"- 6'5" who's half Japanese and half white or half Black, whatever it is - you know, I'm just picking out those [hapas] because they tend to be taller - man they're good! Those boys can be very good because you can't teach height.

Bruce added,

What's happening is that with interracial marriage, there are a lot of kids playing sports with Japanese names. They are big and good, but they don't look Japanese. They look black, they look white, they look Spanish because the father might be Japanese but mother is non-Japanese. And the kid gets the genes of the non-Japanese parents and they become big and good players.

According to Coach Daniel and Bruce, hapa players who have partial Asian heritage tended to be taller, bigger, and better players; it was their half-white, half-Black, or half-Latino genes that gave them a physical edge over players who are full Asian. Height, or lack thereof, was associated with race; because "you can't teach height," players who were racially mixed had an added genetic advantage that occasionally blessed with greater height. Moreover, if mixed-raced players were "big and good" because of their genes, they did not "look" Japanese.

Assumptions based on biology and race often shape how athletes are perceived regarding their participation, ability, and success in sports (Azzarito and Harrison 2008; Hunter 1998). As these examples demonstrate, many PCY members held strong essentialist beliefs regarding the relationship between race, biology and physical attributes. These ideas categorized non-Asian athletes, particularly Black and white youth, as holding superior size over Asian bodies. The perceived biological differences fortified racial boundaries as members used them to justify the need for "their own league." Because Asian youth were thought to lack an innate physical

advantage, members firmly believed that a predominately Asian league would create a “level playing field” in basketball.

*“We’re not like those other city leagues.” - Cultural distancing*

In addition to reinforcing biological distinctions among racial groups, PCY members argued that a cultural difference distinguished JA leagues from other sporting communities. In particular, some members drew on beliefs that Asian families had similar values and a cultural upbringing that set them apart from non-Asian groups. Highlighting distinctly “Asian” cultural characteristics, Kathy summarized,

Kathy: We Asians are raised the same. If you notice, [Asians] have similar backgrounds no matter where you're from or whatever. The parents have more of the same values, and that's really important. ... Asians, no matter what, they are similar in a lot of ways. ... The parents all want the same thing for their child.

Christina: What kind of values are these?

Kathy: A good home. Family is very important. Education is important - that you have to have a balance between sports and academics.

In characterizing Asian values with a good home life, the importance of family, and education, Kathy’s conflates these values to all Asian groups regardless of background, circumstance, or status. Ethnic distinctions among Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Thai, and other Asian ethnic groups gave way to a larger, unifying panethnic identity.

To reinforce racial boundaries, members often commented on cultural differences between Asian basketball leagues that distinguished them from non-Asian leagues. Coach Daniel highlighted these perceived differences between Asian leagues versus club teams when he commented,

Asian culture, whether it is Chinese, Japanese, it doesn’t matter. ... For the most part, it’s friendly. You get some agitated parents but you go to a club tournament and you sit in

the stands and it's a whole different ball game then going to a SCSA game. ... You still get the irritated parents and stuff in SCSA but they don't say the stuff that the club parents do. It's really harsh. Harsh, harsh, harsh. Even high school games are better then club games.

Coach Daniel's description of club games includes a sharp distinction between fan behavior among Asian families and other racial groups. He characterized all Asian fans – “whether it is Chinese, Japanese, it doesn't matter” - as friendly and respectful, while club tournament parents were considered more hostile and competitive with their harsh taunts and jeers from the stands. Differences in social behaviors such as these served to create cultural divisions between the two leagues.

Interestingly, the most notable example of cultural “othering” from non-Asians happened after a physical altercation occurred between two parents from opposing teams. Generally considered rare, the physical fight revealed member's attitudes and beliefs regarding Asian values and ways of behaving. Shortly after the fight, I overheard Coach Brian, the head coach for the third-grade girls' team, talking with Brandon in hushed voices about “the incident.” Coach Brian adamantly asserted that that sort of thing doesn't happen in “our leagues.” Their general surprise was imbedded in the belief that Asians conducted themselves differently than other racial groups, particularly during sporting events. Many members prided themselves and the organization for their emphasis on “self discipline and a lot of respect.”

In addition to claims that Asian youth were physically different than non-Asians, members drew a cultural distinction between Asian basketball organizations and racially integrated leagues, citing differences among player and parent's attitudes, interactions and displays of good sportsmanship. The rowdiness, overly competitive, and aggressive behavior that happened at club games were noticeably absent at PCY events. As Helen, a mother with two children playing in PCY, described, “There's some kind of emotional discipline that I think

is more closely linked to the Asian culture than the loud obnoxious Caucasian culture.”

Examples like these illustrate “how the ‘margins’ imagine and construct the ‘mainstream’ in order to assert superiority over it” (Espiritu 2001, 416). In this case, some members from the marginal Asian leagues have constructed an identity of cultural and moral superiority over the mainstream city leagues. In doing this type of boundary work (Barth 1969, Lamont 2000), they distance themselves from non-Asian leagues to locate themselves above the dominant group, demonizing others in the process.

### **“Who’s In and Who’s Out”: Racial hierarchies and boundary making practices**

Featured in the PCY league 2007-2008 season yearbook are the smiling faces and individual player names of more than 30 basketball teams with players ranging between the ages of 7 and 18. Examination of these team photos and player surnames reveal that the league is overwhelmingly Asian American with nearly two-thirds of participants having full or partial Japanese American ancestry. Unlike other JA leagues in California, the PCY basketball league, as told to me by several board members, did not enforce any formal racial or ethnic eligibility rules that barred non-Japanese Americans from participating (i.e. players have to be of 50 percent Japanese ancestry to join a team).<sup>14</sup> Given the loosening of guidelines for membership from previous generations of JA leagues, how does this community organization continue to maintain such a high degree of Japanese American participation over several generations?

In this section, I will outline how league members constructed and maintained racial and ethnic boundaries within JA leagues, demonstrating the fluidity of these categories. First, I highlight the organization’s racial and ethnic hierarchy of members, which prioritized Japanese

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<sup>14</sup> This “open” membership policy was similar to other sports leagues that were affiliated with community church organizations or Optimists Clubs. Membership into these leagues was only contingent on being a member of the church or club, regardless of race.

ancestry but continued to shift to reflect racial changes within in the larger community. Second, I will highlight the structural practices that directly impacted how racial and ethnic boundaries were drawn and the cultural practices that shaped how ethnicity was experienced within sports leagues.

*“They should be Japanese – or at least Asian”- hierarchy of racial and ethnic boundaries*

While there were no official rules in the league’s bylaws barring non-Japanese youths’ entry into the organization, organizing members expressed a strong desire to maintain a particular racial and ethnic boundary that gave preference to youth of Japanese ancestry. As Kathy, the PCY league secretary and third generation Japanese American, explained to me,

Well, there aren’t any official rules about which kids from which race can join – it’s more unwritten and unspoken. The committee tries to keep the tradition of the organization the same as when it started, which used to be all Japanese kids. We don’t like to exclude others but our kids need a place so they can play basketball too. So we mostly accept teams with lots of Japanese kids - or at least Asian kids – who join.

Lydia, one of the coordinators for the league’s Summer Basketball Camp, further explained the organization’s ethnic and racial preference:

Yes, most of the kids who come out to the [Camp] are Asian or mixed [with partial Asian heritage]. We’d like to see more Japanese kids joining, but we get a lot of Chinese and Korean who come out which is fine, but we don’t want a lot of white or Black kids joining. ... Because as [white and Black players] get older, they aren’t going to want to keep playing in our league – they’ll be too tall.

In both Kathy and Lydia’s remarks is an emphasis regarding the league’s implicit expectation that team rosters should be filled with predominately Japanese players over other racial or ethnic groups. Given the historical practice of exclusion of Japanese Americans into white sporting spaces, for members like Kathy, the preservation of “tradition” – to create a space so Japanese American youth could actively participate in basketball - was a top priority. While there was a

general preference that players have either full or partial Japanese ancestry, players should be, as Kathy stated, “at least Asian.” This hierarchical structure suggests that while members still prioritized Japanese ancestry and preferred a tradition of mono-ethnic (only Japanese American) players, the league was moving their membership boundaries toward a pan-ethnic identity that lumped Asian Americans into one group. In other words, ethnic lines had blurred and given way to include other East Asian groups (i.e. Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Thai Americans, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Yet racial boundaries were still fairly rigid and informally excluded other non-Asian groups, particularly Blacks and whites. Rationalizing that these players would “be too tall” and lose interest in playing a predominantly Asian league, league organizers felt that some exclusion was necessary.

The discussion of hapa, or mixed-race players, further illustrates the shifting nature of membership and racial authenticity. Because the organization did not ask for proof of ethnic or racial background in the form of birth certificates, members relied heavily on a player’s surname and physical appearance to assess eligibility. As Mike, the ninth-grade boys’ coach explained, “For the most part, [the board] tries to put it out there to all the coaches and families to make sure you try not to recruit people that are questionable – ask the board first, then ask the parents if they want to join.” The “questionable” players in this case were those who did not have an Asian surname or “a kid who does not even look Asian.”

Given that players had to “look Asian,” mixed-raced players were scrutinized the most, particularly in highly competitive settings such as tournaments, when the stakes for winning were higher. Rachel, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade player, recounted to me the difficulty experienced by two mixed-raced players who used to play on her team:

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, according to some JA members, Samoans, Filipinos, and Southeast Asians were “not included” in the Asian category because they were “bigger and stronger.”

We had two Black girls on our old team and they're like a quarter Japanese but we got so many complaints, especially during tournaments. ... Sometimes parents [from opposing teams] were really rude to them. They are Asian, but they don't look full Asian so [parents] would just give them dirty looks. ... I feel like if you don't look full Asian or like somewhat Asian, you don't feel as welcomed.

While partial Japanese or Asian heritage in players was acceptable, a hapa player must also “look the part” to be truly accepted and invited to participate. Members scrutinized potential players’ bodies for signifiers of ethnic and racial membership and authenticity, often relying on “common knowledge” about phenotype in order to determine and the construct “Asianness” (King-O’Riain 2006, 80). In the case of Rachel’s team, opposing teams judged hapa players who “looked” less Asian and more Black with greater scrutiny and suspicion. Yet players who were half Japanese and half Chinese rarely received questions or doubt regarding their membership into the league. Significant here was use of essentialist phenotypic criteria to determine who could “pass” as “Asian.”

*“It’ll be a little more diluted but it’ll still be there.”: Shifting boundaries for the future*

When asked about the future of the organization, some members predicted a greater number of hapas and mixed-raced children from both Japanese and other Asian groups who would join. Commenting on this possible trend, Jeff, an assistant coach for the third-grade boys’ team, predicted,

I think [PCY] will still be there. I think it may be a little more diluted but it’ll still be there. ... I just don’t know if you’ll have that core of the culture to keep it going. It’ll start to dilute a little bit where you may have more teams that are hapa mixed like [my son].

Others recognized how the high rates of intermarriage within the Japanese community would continue to shape and potentially change future membership. As Bruce hypothesized,

Well, in my opinion, I think there are two options and possibilities. One is that [SCSA] will go on as they are and will continue on for many years. However, with the way

things are changing so rapidly, I would think that the second possibility is that someday, SCSA will not be SCSA. It will be a non-Japanese organization because of the rapid social change of interracial marriages. And I think as interracial marriages continue to increase and the population of the pure Japanese American decreases, I think the ability for the JA youth organization to continue to survive and operate diminishes over time. I don't think you can avoid that. If we were still having a lot of straight JA marrying - third, fourth, fifth-generation kids still marrying other Japanese - then I would say the chances are good.

Reflected in Jeff and Bruce's comments was the likely trend that membership would "dilute" to include more mix-raced youth. Especially as intermarriage continues to rise and the population of "pure" Japanese Americans declines, members frequently predicted that future generations of PCY players would likely include more hapa children. As Lydia pointed out, "But in a few years, how many purebred Japanese people are there going to be? ... You're going to have more hapas [joining] now." Implicit in these predictions was the notion that racial boundaries were once again defined by biology (race) rather than culture (ethnicity). For members like Bruce, the dilution in the league and shifting of membership boundaries comes from a mixing of blood rather than cultural assimilation. Moreover, reflective of the demographic changes in the larger Japanese American community, predictions have included more mixed-raced Asian players but continue to exclude mono-racial groups that are non-Asian (i.e. Black, Latino, and white).

Counter to postracial argument that suggests Japanese Americans would place a decreasing importance on race, PCY members prioritized a racial preference that placed Japanese and Asian Americans on top while maintaining strict racial boundaries to exclude non-Asian groups from joining their league. In the case of sports leagues, Japanese Americans were not "becoming white," or "distancing oneself from 'people of color' or disowning one's ethnicity" (Zhou 2004, 29). Rather, racial and ethnic lines were still salient, particularly in shaping and determining membership and access into the organization. In the following section, I outline the specific ways in which PCY members maintained salient racial boundaries.



### *Gatekeeping: Boundary making through structural policies*

To enforce the preferred racial and ethnic hierarchy, league members created informal structural policies that served to filter participants who did not fit the racial “criteria.” Such gatekeeping measures included selective word of mouth recruitment, enforcing informal guidelines, and restricting access into the organization’s membership pipeline.

#### Selective “word of mouth” recruitment

To preserve the organization’s preferred ethnic and racial hierarchy, league members resorted to informal policing of membership. This was especially evident in who was invited and recruited to join the JA league. When asked how someone learns about the leagues, Coach Randy, the head coach for the sixth-grade boys’ team explained, “It’s all word of mouth with these things – you have to know someone to really join the league.” Given Randy’s active involvement in coaching youth and his father’s legacy in starting SCSA, parents interested in exposing their kids to basketball routinely asked Randy how their kids could join a PCY team. When asked if these parents who came to him with inquires were Japanese American, Randy explained, “Not all but if they are, I just tell them to contact PCY and tell them ‘Randy sent you’, and if they aren’t at least part Asian, I tell them to contact someone from NJB [the city league] because it will be easier to join.”

Knowledge of the leagues spreads from existing members of the league to prospective members – one has to know someone in the league to gain information and access into the organization. This “word of mouth” recruitment and vouching system work to reinforce racial and ethnic homogeneity within the organization, especially when members such as Randy refer Japanese American players to the PCY youth basketball league while redirecting players who are

on the further down on the preferred racial hierarchy to city leagues. In other words, players who join the organization are rarely “walk-ons” – they must first learn about the leagues, usually by an existing member who can vouch for their ethnic and racial eligibility.

#### Enforcing membership guidelines

League board members largely determined and enforced membership guidelines, which then trickled down to coaches and parents. As Brandon explained,

There's a grey area. You know they tell us at the meetings, the child has to have some kind of Asian connection. And so we've had situations where a parent or a family would say, 'Hey. I found this child and he's interested - he wants to play.' And my first response back is, 'Is he Asian or any part of Asian? Oh, he's not?' And then I would say, 'It's not my rule, you know, it's just that I'm sort of following the guidelines that were set for us. ... I don't think it's a written rule. It was a spoken thing at our meetings.

As a team manager for the sixth-grade boys' team, Brandon was responsible for adhering and enforcing PCY “guidelines” regarding racial eligibility. In this leadership capacity, members like Brandon, discretely turned away interested players who were not Asian or part Asian, and therefore, did not have the “Asian connection.”

#### Restricted pipeline

Beyond “word-of-mouth” techniques and implicit guidelines from board members, another gatekeeping practice was rooted in the organization’s selective recruitment of new players, especially within the Youth Summer Basketball Camp. During the summer months, the league would host a six-week training camp for children between five to seven-years old to introduce young people to the game of basketball and develop participants’ basic dribbling, shooting, and coordination skills. Camp volunteers, who were older youth from the PCY league, also taught lessons about good sportsmanship and teamwork.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Since its humble beginnings in 1998, the number of youth who participated in the camp has consistently grown each year, with over a hundred participants signed up for that summer, the highest enrollment in the camp’s history.

Due to its organizational structure, the Summer Camp was the primary source for the formation of new teams. The goals of the camp were two-fold: introduce youth to the game of basketball and form new teams that would sustain the continued growth of the organization. Because the Youth Summer Camp served as a pipeline for the formation of new teams, the recruitment practices, which specifically targeted Japanese or Asian American youth, served to shape the racial and ethnic composition of teams by privileging access to some members while excluding others, particularly Black, Latino, and white youth.

Collectively, these three structural policies served to actively recruit Japanese and Asian American youth into the organization while keeping non-Asian groups out. Black, Latino, or white families are often turned away implicitly when members described the organization as being an “Asian basketball league.” Moreover, the league made no efforts to actively recruit or open their spaces to non-Asian families, noting that teams who did bring in non-Asian players were more heavily scrutinized and could be turned away from the organization. These unofficial gatekeeping practices contributed to maintaining a predominately mono-racial boundary that privileged Asian membership. In this case, social capital, in the form of knowledge about the league, maintained social boundaries - those who were considered racially and ethnically “desirable” members were given information and contacts about how to join the league. Conversely, those who were deemed racial “outsiders” were kept in the dark about these networks.<sup>17</sup>

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At the end of the summer, camp organizers, along with PCY board members, created a new third-grade team comprised of families who wanted to join the PCY league the following fall season.

<sup>17</sup> The number of interested players who were turned away from the organization because of race or ethnic origin was unknown. My interviews seemed to suggest that these instances of discrimination were generally rare, particularly because few non-Asian families expressed much interest in joining a predominantly Asian youth sport league. More often than not, interested players were denied membership for reasons that had nothing to do with race. For example, depending on a player’s birth date, he or she might be too young or old to join a team. In other instances, players must have played in previous seasons before being able to transfer into a new team in the organization. This rule was implemented to prevent teams from bringing in possible “ringers” or stacking of teams.

### *Boundary making through ethnic cultural practices and meaning*

Members' participation in both traditional Japanese and "American" cultural practices via basketball further shaped ethnic identity and meaning. For some members, playing basketball was an as integral way to participate in Japanese American culture. In particular, members infused Japanese American culture and heritage through the subtle presence of ethnic food and cultural activities. These cultural practices served to strengthen ethnic boundaries that made these leagues distinctly Japanese American.

#### Playing basketball to participate in JA culture

For some members, participation in these leagues was a way to pass down cultural knowledge. Stephen, a third-generation Japanese American father with two children playing in the league, explained the relationship between sports leagues and culture:

Sports became that vehicle of teaching them or reinforcing to them what we've grown up with - our values. And we're just trying to instill that cultural tie. I mean that is really important to me and I'm sure with [my wife] too. ... That culture tie - it carries over from her parents and my parents to reinforce that culture and heritage to us. Now it's our turn to do that with [my kids]. And we do that through sports.

His wife Lisa added, "It's getting harder and harder to keep that culture within the family because there's so much outside influence now and it's a different world. ... Having them [play in] PCY keeps them connected with their Japanese culture and values." Particularly in predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods, families like Stephen and Lisa struggle to find social outlets to provide a "cultural tie." But through JA sports leagues, they have been able to find a cultural connection.

Similarly, Theo, a white man who married a third-generation Japanese woman, believed basketball was a pathway to foster Japanese culture and identity:

The other part for me was I saw it as a cultural phenomenon, or a way for them to

understand their Japanese heritage or Asian heritage. I kind of grew up very sheltered. [My son] obviously is going to get a broader experience. ... I completely lost all my culture. I don't have any Dutch. I don't have any French. I don't even have any of the food, per se. But looking at [my wife's] family, I thought it was important for him to maintain some of his Asian identity, if that makes sense.

Having assimilated into a general "whiteness," Theo was concerned that his son would also "lose" his Japanese identity. Theo's hope was that the league would serve as an important social and cultural outlet to maintain his Japanese heritage. Joseph, an assistant coach to his son's team, also enjoyed what he perceived as a cultural benefit that his son played on a PCY team.

Being third generation [Japanese], my family was not real traditional, hard-core Japanese. My parents and a lot of Japanese families were put into internment camps, relocated and there was a strong move to assimilate. So from a cultural standpoint, I think to a lesser scale, there's a little bit of that cultural connection when you play in PCY. ... So those are two benefits from playing in SCSA. The natural benefits from competition and team interaction and socialization and things like that. Also, you have something different than just playing Pop Warner or Little League or [club ball] or anything that's just open to the community. [PCY] is just a little bit more culturally motivated.

While Joseph's son, Jasper, was learning teamwork, honing his social skills, and participating in some good-natured competition, he was also making a cultural connection with his Japanese roots. This was especially important to Jonathan who felt that his family had been pushed to assimilate to fit into "mainstream" American after their internment and ultimately lost their "traditional, hard-core" Japanese roots. For parents like Theo and Jonathan, rather than encouraging their racially-mixed children to assimilate into "mainstream" culture, they joined the PCY league in the hopes to salvage a cultural connection with their Japanese roots.

Other members felt that playing JA basketball was synonymous with "being Japanese American." Jennifer, a third-generation Japanese American mother with a racially mixed daughter, shared, "Since she's hapa, I wanted her to do something that was Japanese." While basketball is not commonly considered a traditional Japanese sport, in Jennifer's eyes, her daughter's involvement in the PCY league was still, to a degree, a participation in "something"

Japanese. Although outsiders from the community may not have made the association between Japanese Americans and basketball, some members like Jennifer infused and intertwined ethnic identity with sports participation.

Although considered a “leisure activity,” JA basketball leagues offered players and their families a cultural outlet to stay connected with their ethnic roots. While traditional Japanese festivals happened once or twice a year, JA ball could be an all-consuming commitment; with weekly practices, year round tournaments, and summer training camps, families and teams could easily dedicate a substantial amount of their leisure time to league events. As such, the practice of Japanese culture became synonymous with the playing of basketball and to be part of a JA league was to participate in ethnic culture. I will now highlight two examples – ethnic foods and cultural events – to demonstrate how PCY leagues introduced and infused Japanese culture into an “American” tradition.

#### Snack time rules: Ethnic Japanese and Hawaiian foods

During league events, one of the most popular and memorable ways to participate in Japanese culture was through the enjoyment of ethnic food. While dribbling, shooting, and rebounding were some of the fundamentals on the basketball court, food played an equally important role *off* the court within these leagues. When asked what his favorite part of being a member of PCY, seven-year old Ryan quickly exclaimed, “The snacks, of course!” Certainly for hungry and thirsty players, food and drinks provide much needed sustenance after a long and tiring game. While kids and parents consumed their fair share of “American” snacks after games such as chips, candy, gummy snacks, cookies, juice boxes, and Gatorade drinks, there was also a strong presence of ethnic Japanese and Hawaiian food. For example, during my fieldwork, I was

fortunate to enjoy eating sushi, chicken *katsu* bowls, Spam *musubi*, *mochi*, *somen* noodles, and *gyoza*. Food played a much deeper and meaningful role within these leagues than just filling hungry bellies. Specifically, I found that league members used food at league events to expose participants to ethnic foods and traditions, especially Japanese and Hawaiian cuisine.<sup>18</sup>

For some of the younger kids, this was their first time eating certain ethnic Japanese and Hawaiian foods. After tournament, I helped Charlene, the third-grade girls' Team Mom, pass out Spam *musubis*, a traditional Hawaiian snack, to the players at the end of the game.

*I placed the still warm spam musubi into Beverly's open hands. She looked up at me hesitantly, poking at the Saran wrapped treat with her small fingers. She turned around quickly to find her mom and asked tentatively, "What is this?" Beverly's mom explained that it was just Spam, rice, and seaweed wrapped together and that she should try it because she'd like it. After fumbling clumsily to get the musubi out of the plastic wrapper, she took a bite and chewed. With her mouth full, she turned to her mother and smiled, revealing a wall of seaweed bits stuck to the front of her teeth. Beverly seemed to enjoy this new snack and even came back to me asking if she could have another.*

For 10-year old Beverly, this was her first exposure to eating a Spam *musubi* but given how much she enjoyed it, I suspect this will not be her last time eating one if the opportunity presents itself. Nadia, a third-generation Japanese American mother, reflected about the influence cultural foods at league events have had on her children's eating habits and commented,

I think it's good being around the other families that are full Japanese. Before we joined [the PCY], the kids weren't exposed as much to all the food and different things. I think that opened their eyes to more of the culture. ... They gain an appreciation. Like before, with sushi, they would like, 'No, I don't want that – it's gross.' Now they see their friends eating it and they really like this kind of food.

Snack time, post-tournament dinners, and "end of the season" parties provided several opportunities for players to try, explore, and enjoy different Japanese foods. Particularly for younger players like Beverly, the league created an outlet to expose later-generation Japanese

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<sup>18</sup> Due to the high number of Japanese immigrants who settled in Hawaii, Hawaiian cuisine was heavily influenced by traditional Japanese food to create a fusion of culinary foods and cooking that is still embraced by Japanese Americans on the mainland.

American youth to traditional ethnic foods. And while Nadia's kids may have been hesitant or disinterested before in trying Japanese foods, watching their fellow teammates enjoying sushi inspired them to be more adventurous to explore different cultural foods.

Players were not the only ones who enjoyed all of the delicious food culture – parents were also active participants, largely because they were usually the ones who prepared the food. For example, Charlene, a mother with two children playing in the leagues, explained,

You know, my mom used to make Spam *musubi* for me when I was playing in these leagues - I used to eat them all the time after my games. And now I'm making them for my daughter and her teammates. I guess making Spam *musubi* runs in the family.

Through the preparation of snacks at the end of games, Charlene participated in a tradition of cooking and preparing ethnic foods that was passed down from one generation to the next. She even had hopes that one day her daughter would make them for her kids after their basketball games.

As these examples illustrate, the leagues offered members a unique space for both young Japanese American youth and their parents to connect with their ethnic and cultural roots by regularly enjoying homemade Japanese and Hawaiian food. While young children are learning the fundamentals of basketball on the court, they are also being exposed to aspects of their ethnic heritage through food - an enjoyable experience that many players continued to remember long after they have left the league. Within JA leagues, food symbolized a cultural heritage, one that was often passed down from one generation to the next. Significant here were the active efforts by parents to infuse typical American snacks with traditional ethnic foods. There were few other sporting events where players and parents could expect (and appreciate) the opportunity to eat Japanese-style snacks at the end of their basketball games. As one parent critiqued, "If I tried to serve Spam at my kid's soccer league, they'd just look at me funny and ask what it was." But



within the league, parents did not need to worry about scrutiny or negative judgment about bringing in Japanese or Hawaiian ethnic snacks.

### Participation in cultural events

In addition to the presence of ethnic foods, the league also made active efforts to provide opportunities for teams to participate in Japanese cultural events and activities within the community. These were largely coordinated by the Youth Volunteer Group (YVG) – a community service program closely connected to the basketball league which organized local and global volunteer projects. One cultural volunteer project organized by the YVG included making decorations for the upcoming *Tanabata* Festival during *Nisei* Week in Los Angeles.<sup>19</sup> The *Tanabata* Festival, or the “Star Festival,” is a traditional Japanese festival that celebrates the meeting of two star-crossed folklore characters who fell in love but were destined to only reunite one day of the year in August. Large ornamental balls with brightly colored paper and long, flowing streamers are created to commemorate the event. As a YVG sponsored volunteer project, several of the PCY youth signed up to help create traditional *Tanabata* ornamental balls that would be proudly displayed at this year’s *Nisei* festival.

*With at least four basketball teams, including several parents, the tiny room was fairly crowded with everyone huddled together around folding tables and chairs to lend a hand in creating these massive decorations. Each team was assigned to create at least one ornamental ball and required several intricate steps to complete. As we all worked vigorously at cutting, arranging, or tying the “flowers” which were comprised of colored pieces of tissue paper onto the plastic orbs, I overheard one of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade girls asking another, “Do you even know what these things are for?” Her teammate, concentrating on counting out the correct number of tissues she needed, shrugged and mumbled, “I have no clue – something about the Nisei festival.” They both buried their heads back into the laborious task ahead and seemed resolved to let the question go unanswered.*

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<sup>19</sup> *Nisei* Week is an annual festival celebrating Japanese American culture and history in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles.

The only introduction parents gave to the volunteers regarding this service project included detailed directions on how to construct an ornamental ball, but what remained missing was any discussion about the cultural significance behind the activity. As such, volunteers at this event had a limited understanding to the cultural meaning behind this service project. Their commitment to the task at hand was clearly visible – many teams labored several hours working on the “art” project. Yet their knowledge of the *Tanabata* Festival or its significance to Japanese culture went no further than the creation of these ornamental balls which had “something” to do with the *Nisei* festival.

Reflecting on the service project, Betty, a mother on the boys’ ninth-grade team, revealed her frustration,

They got together yesterday and made all those things for the *Tanabata* Festival. I think it would have really been nice if you have the kids come together to do it, but tell them what they're doing. So as far as [my son] is concerned, he got together and fluffed up flowers and put them on those plastic things and he made these decorations. But he has no idea what the connection was. And it's just like they were asked to do it. ... The intention is there - that's it's good for PCY to show what they do in the Japanese-American community. But I think we need to teach these kids a little bit too by just saying ‘Hey, you know we're making these things. Do you know WHY we're doing it?’”

Betty illustrates how the Youth Volunteer Group made an effort to expose third and fourth-generation Japanese American youth to the larger ethnic community, but her son had no understanding about the “connection” the activity had with Japanese culture. As such, young people’s participation in cultural events such as these was largely symbolic and superficial with little understanding of the true “meaning” of those cultural practices. Unlike the salience of racial identities, symbolic ethnicity makes few and intermittent demands on everyday life, holds little structural or material consequences, and is usually expressed in the private domain and during leisure activities (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1999). Many later-generation whites of mixed European ancestry have adopted a “symbolic ethnicity” such as eating special foods,

celebrating particular holidays or other specialized practices (Waters 1990, 7; Gans 1979). Similarly, member's participation in traditional Japanese culture within these sporting spaces was largely symbolic and superficial. Eating ethnic foods and volunteering to assist during Japanese cultural festivals were generally considered novel and associated with leisure activities; they bore little impact on their day-to-day lives. Yet, as I will discuss in more depth in Chapter 5, the social networks created within these leagues would lead to a stronger cultural connection than these symbolic forms of ethnicity.

## **Conclusion**

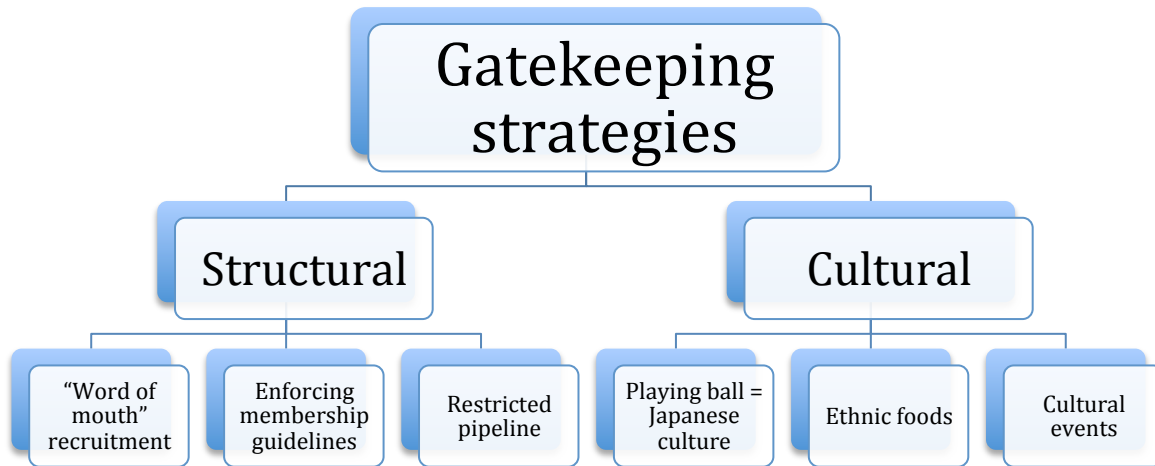
To summarize, my findings reveal that the PCY basketball league were an active site for the construction, maintenance, and renegotiation of racial and ethnic boundaries and meanings. Contrary to popular belief that sports is a colorblind domain (Andrews 2001), race was a salient factor in shaping youth Asian American's access, participation, and experience within basketball. Particularly from outsiders of the league, continued racialization and assumptions regarding size and athletic ability rendered many Asian American youth as "foreigners" and underdogs on the court. Moreover, these youth were frequently seen as model minorities who should be more focused on academic pursuits than athletic ones. Frequently underestimated and overlooked, these racialized stereotypes and microaggressions painted Asian American youth as "foreign" and invisible in the sport of basketball. So while some Asian groups have been able to achieve relatively high levels of social and economic integration in mainstream society, basketball remains a space where Asian Americans still struggle to find acceptance or success.

Claiming both physical and cultural differences, the PCY league justified both the need and desire to sustain a league of their own. By self-segregating, many Asian American players

and their families found a comfortable home within JA basketball leagues where they did not have to confront racial microaggressions that marked their “otherness” within the sport. Within their own spaces, members were no longer “boxed out” by Black and white players whom they perceived as being taller and stronger than Asian. Moreover, PCY members distinguished a cultural superiority associated with a monolithic Asian culture, placing themselves above rowdy and hyper-competitive “mainstream” city leagues. Essentialist and cultural distancing drew a boundary to delineate the racial and ethnic differences between “our” league and “non-Asian” leagues.

Contrary to assimilation theories which argue for a decline in ethnic distinctiveness among later-generations of ethnic minorities, PCY members took great efforts to maintain and sustain ethnic livelihood. To preserve a tradition of ethnic or racial homogeneity within JA leagues, members enforced informal gatekeeping policies to restrict and limit membership and recruitment to specific groups. Table 3.1 below maps the structural and cultural gatekeeping strategies members employed. In doing so, league members created a hierarchy that prioritized Japanese ancestry while maintaining strict and rigid boundaries for non-Asian groups. PCY members were not identifying or aligning themselves with Black or white groups, but rather, they preferred to move membership boundaries toward a panethnic identity to include other Asian ethnic groups.

Table 3.1: Structural and Cultural Gatekeeping Strategies



Moreover, in the absence of traditional cultural outlets such as ethnic schools, churches, and neighborhood enclaves, PCY members believed basketball leagues could serve as an active space to keep later-generation Japanese American youth connected to their cultural roots. While ethnic cultural practices such as traditional Japanese and Hawaiian foods and occasional involvement in cultural events were largely symbolic forms of ethnicity, players’ active participation in basketball became synonymous with “being Japanese.” This demonstrates a shift in ethnic identity in sports to include an “emergent culture of hybridity” – one that negotiates between “American” and “Japanese” traits to mix elements of both worlds (Lee and Zhou 2004, 22).

## Chapter 4

### **“Asian boys can jump – and so can the girls!”: Gender Dynamics and the Curious Case of the JA Female “Baller”**

*I walk into the stuffy high school gym to see a 6<sup>th</sup> grade boys’ basketball game already in progress. I take a seat on the bleachers next to a group of lively parents who are shouting words of encouragement and clapping their hands in excitement. With only a 4-point difference on the scoreboard, the two teams are battling it out fiercely on the court, neither side willing to give up a single rebound or loose ball. One of the boys shoots a basket from the three-point line. It falls short and ricochets off the rim, dropping into the crowd of players below. I cringe after two boys collide into one another as they leap into the air to grab the loose ball. Both come crashing down to the gym floor but both boys seem unfazed and quickly regain their balance to lunge after the ball before it bounces out of bounds. As I breathe a sigh of relief that no one is hurt, one of the mothers leans toward me and says, “That was nothing! You should watch the girls play – they’re way more aggressive and physical!”*

*Fieldnote observation*

“If the organization was smart, we would be pushing our girls to do better – they probably have a better chance of making it to the pros than our boys do.”

Coach Daniel, coach for 12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls’ team

Previous studies have documented how sports have been a common arena for the construction of gender identities and meanings (Messner 2002, 2007, 2009). Often, they are cultural sites for the reproduction of gender inequality, particularly regarding access and participation (Lovell 1991; Messner 2002; Yep 2009). Although the passing of Title IX has undoubtedly increased the number of female athletes and improved gender inequality, studies have shown that women, especially women of color, continue to experience more barriers in their access to sports than their male counterparts (Hanson 2005; MacClancy 1996). For example, females still participate at a lower rate than men in both high school and college levels and have fewer sporting opportunities, scholarships, and funding (Brake 2000/2001; Duncan 2006; McDonagh and Pappano 2008).

Other studies have shown how traditional hegemonic gendered expectations are reinforced and create barriers in sports activity. Often, males and females are pressured to maintain appearances of “hegemonic masculinity,” in which men appear to be well-muscled, strong, unemotional, and hyper-competitive (Connell 1987). Women, on the other hand, should appear uninterested in sports but if they do engage in sports, they are discouraged from exhibiting so-called masculine traits of independence, assertiveness, competitiveness, and must emphasize their femininity (Connell 1987; Hanson 2005; King 2002, 121; Lee 2005; Lovell 1991; McDonagh and Pappano 2008).

These hegemonic gender inequalities and expectations have the potential to replicate themselves within youth sports leagues. As Thorne (1994) found in her study of elementary school kids, children were rewarded by their peers for performing and engaging in expected masculine and feminine forms of play (i.e. playing team sports versus playing house). Fine (1987) found similar hegemonic masculinities in his study of little league baseball players. In his study of the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO), Messer (2009) illustrates how youth soccer remains a highly sex-segregated activity that can reinforce traditional gender roles for both youth and the parents involved.

Yet, sport can often be a “contested terrain,” in which gender is being constructed in complex, fluid, and occasionally contradictory ways (Hartmann 2000; Messner 1988). I argue in this chapter that JA leagues provided a “contested social terrain” for members to both reinforce and subvert hegemonic notions of race and gender. First, I illustrate how race and gender categories intersect by examining how outsiders simultaneously racialized and gendered PCY athletes. I then highlight how PCY members both reinforce and challenge hegemonic gender ideals through interactions and organizational policies. Finally, I offer several possible factors to

explain the surprising trend of “successful” Asian female basketball players that have emerged from within the league to become “ballers” and role models for their ethnic community.

### **Intersection of Race and Gender**

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, outsiders from the organization frequently racialized Asian players as smaller, shorter, too “model minority, and foreigners on the basketball court. Yet, because men and women of color are often racialized and gendered simultaneously, we must also consider the processes through which race and gender are mutually constituted (Glenn 1999; Hill Collins 2000). For example, societal images frequently characterize Asian men as emasculated, asexual, geeky, nonathletic and weak. Conversely, Asian women are typically rendered as passive, quiet, excessively submissive, hyper-feminine, and sexually exotic (Espiritu 1997). These racialized and gendered stereotypic images differed among male and female PCY players.

King’s (2006) study of sports media found that sports and media commentators effaced and defaced Asian and Asian American male athletes by using humor to reinforce dominant notions about weakness and emasculate their athletic performance (342). Similarly, outsiders of the league often labeled Asian male athletes as weaker and less aggressive than white or Black players. As Russell, a fourth-generation Japanese American player from the 12th-grade team highlighted, “From what I have experienced, Asian guys are usually thought of as just short but fast. People are not going to see [Asians] be the most athletic or strongest like you would a Black guy on the court.” When asked if this stereotype applied for Asian men who were tall, he replied, “It doesn’t matter. Look at me, I’m like 6’0” which is considered tall in PCY, but because I’m kind of skinny, other people think I can’t defend or play aggressively.” Russell’s



tall, but lanky, physical build was often read as non-threatening. According to Russell, even if players have the physical advantage of height, Asian male basketball players were still frequently underestimated and considered less aggressive than other non-Asian players.

In addition, outsiders frequently incorporated an interplay of both race and gender stereotypes when judging Asian female players. As Janet, a former PCY player, lamented,

A lot of people underestimate Asian players. ... Because you look at them, and especially women, they're shorter, skinny - a lot of people don't really think they could muscle up on anyone.

Females players like Janet were frequently judged as being exceptionally small, fragile and weak. Racialized and gendered stereotypes such as these have the potential to negatively impact women's participation in sports. For example, Vertinsky (1998) found that stereotypes about Asian American women that assume frailty and passivity were found to result in low levels of physical activity among this group. Research also finds that some women of color are often funneled into specific sports over others. In Lee's (2005) study of Korean American female athletes, women "negotiated and compromised in order to be involved in sports when faced with strict gender role expectations that limited their access to sports" (493). While African Americans are encouraged to join the basketball or track and field team, there is less support for them to go into swimming or field hockey (Acosta 1993). Eitzen and Furst (1988) found that collegiate Asian American women were especially encouraged to participate in volleyball.

For both players and parents, participation in JA leagues offered members an outlet to rebuff negative gendered stereotypes targeting Asians. For example, Chuck explained how he enjoyed surprising people on this high school team with his "super aggressive" defense and quick style of play – "It shows them that not all good players are Black or white. It shows that there are really some good players that are Japanese."

Particularly for female players, league participation had been a collective space to challenge stereotypes of passivity, weakness, and submissiveness. Janice, a current freshman at a private college in Southern California, took great pride in challenging some of these Asian female stereotypes. With a hint of cockiness in her voice, Janice recounted the following story to me:

Sometimes my friend and I will go to the park near my house and we'll walk around and if there's a game going, we'll be like 'Hey, can we jump in?' It's great when it's guys playing, cause they're just like 'Umm, ok, yeah, whatever.' And they expect less from us because we're girls – Asian girls. Especially because a lot of the guys who play out there are tall, white guys and they're like 'Oh whatever, just let them play - they're not going to do anything.' So it's fun when we go out there and we're dribbling around them and scoring all the time.

“Underdog” stories like Janet’s were common among other female players. Lanie, a 12<sup>th</sup>-grader who played on a predominately Asian American high school team provided another example:

At our first high school conference game, we were playing an all-Black team and it was intimidating for us. But we just kind of walked out there like we were going to win. And then we ended up beating them because I think when you go out there, it's kind of like having confidence that you can hold your own. And [the opposing team] didn't think they really had to try - like they thought they already had it before we even played and they even laughed at us when they walked in the gym. ... No one ever expects anything from Asian girls, basketball wise. They always think we're just book smart. But we ended up winning the whole championship that year.

Interactions like these demonstrate how playing in the PCY league gave females in particular an opportunity to develop and showcase their physical strength and skills, challenging assumptions that Asians were weak, nonathletic, and only excelled in academics. Whether during pick-up games at the park or at their high school games, victories outside the league gave female players an enormous amount of pride, confidence, and sense of accomplishment. As Janice confessed, “I don't care that I'm only 5 feet tall. I love to play! I love going against the post! I love trying to block them out or keep them from posting up – that's my favorite part of the game.” Much of the fun for players like Janice was playing the “underdog role” and coming out on top.

## **Constructing Gender in JA Leagues**

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that in people's everyday interaction, gender is a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment (126). Often, part of "doing gender" requires a scripted dramatization of society's idealization of feminine and masculine natures (Goffman 1976). In this section, I will examine how mutually constructed interactions and practices within JA leagues both reinscribed and challenged traditional hegemonic notions of gender by examining several mutually intertwined aspects—uniforms, coaching, segregated teams, and playing styles.

### *Looking the part: Differences in uniforms*

Within JA leagues, members engaged in the performative aspect of gender, especially with the youngest players. In a male-dominated sport such as basketball, maintaining feminine ideals for female players can present a particular challenge. One strategy has been to achieve a delicate balance of looking like an athlete (which often embodies masculine characteristics), but still maintaining and emphasizing elements of femininity. Examination of the subtle difference in male and female uniforms suggests that the PCY league engaged in various gender performances while in and off the court.

Every player who joined the PCY league received a standard basketball jersey and a pair of basketball shorts. However, the girls were given an additional component to their uniform – a red and white ribbon hair clip. This accessory, which was not distributed to any of the boys' teams, added a touch of femininity and "cuteness" to their ensemble. The prominence of these hair ribbons was especially evident during team photo day.

*I watched moms as they readjusted the girls' ponytails so there were no stray hairs and affixed red and white ribbon ties in their hair. One of parents had forgotten to bring her hair ribbon and their daughter was visibly upset, complaining that she didn't want to look different from her best friend on the team. Meanwhile, the other girls were anxious to start practice but the moms were insistent that they do not dribble or run around too much, thereby messing up their freshly preened hair. I overheard one mother telling her daughter, "Stop running around – you're going to look all sweaty for your photo. Don't you want to look pretty?" In contrast, the boys took advantage of the now open court and were taking practice shots from the free throw line. None of the parents seemed too concerned that they might mess up their uniforms or hair. When it was the boys' turn to take individual and team photos, some of the mothers made a feeble attempt to tame their now matted and sweaty hair. Daren's mother gave up, threw up her hands, and exclaimed, "Well, at least you'll look like you play hard in your photo."*

Unlike tennis or volleyball, which have distinctly tighter, shorter, and more revealing uniforms for female players than male players, basketball uniforms are generally considered unisex. As such, uniforms can be interchangeable across the sexes with no difference. Yet in adorning the girls with a "girly" hair accessory, their gender was visually marked and made distinct from boys. Moreover, by instructing young girls to "look pretty," coaches and parents communicated subtle messages that athleticism should not come at the cost or sacrifice of a feminine appearance.

But this "fashion" trend did not last long; while the elementary school-aged girls seemed to take great pleasure in affixing their hair accouterments before the start of practice, by middle school, nearly all the female players had abandoned the ribbons opting for a more functional headband to keep their hair out of their eyes as they played. As one female player quipped, "It doesn't matter how you look on the court, but how you play. That's how you're going to be judged." The expectation, and perhaps the preoccupation, of looking feminine was less visible as girls got older.

*"I don't want to be that coach": Differential treatment by coaches*

Adult figures in youth sports can often shape gender expectations by reinforcing or challenging hegemonic gender norms (Messner 2009). For example, my interviews with coaches revealed that some reinforced the perception of frailty and weakness among female players, particularly when coaches were matched with players of the opposite sex. For example, when asked to compare his coaching style with a girls' team, Brandon revealed,

When I was coaching the girls' team, it was a lot harder on me because I was always afraid to push them, especially in front of their parents. Because these are little girls and I don't want to be *that* coach that makes them cry. So I wasn't as hard on them as I am with the boys because you can push them and yell and it's like ok with them, but not with the girls.

Fearing that parents would label him as "*that*" coach – who brings players to tears – Brandon found that he didn't "push" his female players as hard on the court or demand as much from them as his male players. Brandon's concern about how to discipline young girls was one of the reasons why he stepped down for coaching – "It just got too hard and I knew I wasn't pushing them as much as another coach could." Kristen, a player on the sixth-grade girls' team, had a similar opinion about men's coaching styles:

I'm more intimidated by a woman coach than a man coach. I just feel like if there's a woman coaching a girls' team, they're just not really going put up with a lot of the whining that some of the girls do and stuff. And then [with] guy coaches, I feel like they don't know how to deal with little girls and are like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't yell at them. I can't punish them.'

As these examples illustrate, men were more likely to approach coaching with hegemonic gendered expectations which constructed female players as more sensitive, less competitive, and easier to break emotionally and physically than their male counterparts. Brandon's differential coaching style with his two teams reinforced traditional gender roles by perpetuating the idea that girls were emotionally fragile and more inclined to cry during practices or games. On the other hand, according to Kristen, female coaches did not prescribe to the same ideas of the frailty

of the female spirit; they were thought to demand more from female players physically during practice and enforce harsher discipline.

*“His” and “Her” courts: Segregated spaces*

It is argued that sex-segregation in sports reflects the assumption that men have physical superiority and that women are physically weaker and will get hurt if they “play with the boys.” (McDonagh and Pappano 2008). The PCY league enforced sex-segregated teams, dividing players by sex; each school grade had at least one male and one female team who would only compete against other same-sex teams. The only opportunity players had to participate in co-ed teams occurred during the Summer Boot Camp. Within the camp, organizers formed teams with ten to fifteen young boys and girls per team between the ages of five and seven. When asked why teams were co-ed, Lydia, one the camp organizers explained,

I think at the lower, younger kids, there’s no difference. You know [with] third, fourth graders, I don’t think there’s much difference there. And at that age, the boys are not faster than the girls. Lot of times the girls are faster than the boys. ... From eighth and ninth-grade, you start to see those differences start to happen. There’s a big difference on how the game is played later - through high school, the game really changes – the boys get much bigger and stronger. ... The girls can’t play against [boys] at that age – although they think they can.

Similar to Messner’s (2009) findings in youth soccer leagues, PCY adults’ belief in the need for sex segregation in basketball was “grounded in a mutually agreed-upon notion of boys’ and girls’ ‘separate worlds,’ perhaps based in ideologies of natural sex difference” (773). Members like Lydia rationalized that five to seven-year old children had little physical difference at that age. This integration was short lived – boys and girls were separated into sex-segregated teams by the third-grade. It was assumed that as players got older, the boys would become “bigger and stronger” such that female players would not be able to compete on a level playing field.

Opportunities for co-ed teams were available through adult leagues run by other JA basketball organizations. Some of the players I interviewed discussed the benefit of playing on co-ed teams, particularly for the women. For example, Janet, a former PCY player, joined an adult co-ed team shortly after she graduated high school. She recounted her experience competing with male players:

It's still really fun because when you play with guys you have to compete with them. [Guys are] not going to go easy on you, so it makes you a better player. And that's what I tell my high school girls - you can't always play with the same people because you're not going to learn anything. So I like to play co-ed because it makes you stronger. If [guys] bump you, you'll fly on the ground, but you got to pick yourself up. It's just the way it is. ... Co-ed is more fun but it still has that higher level of competing which is good. But I mean you need to do that. And you may get hurt, you may get banged up a little bit more because the guys are more aggressive, but that's what you sort of sign up for.

For female players like Janet, playing on a co-ed team could help improve one's basketball skills and make them a "better player." Female players might "get banged up a little more" due to the higher levels of aggressiveness from male players, but ultimately, it would make her stronger.

Another female player explained that by practicing with her brother's PCY team, she learned how to defend taller players and how to handle being pushed around on the court – "Playing with [boys] forced me to set up my game on the court."

### *Game play differences*

In addition to the physical differences between men and women, members also perceived a distinction between how these two groups played the game of basketball. When asked if men and women played differently, several players and coaches believed that the two sexes did have distinctive styles of play. Some of these opinions reflected hegemonic masculine and feminine dichotomies. Men were generally thought to play a more physical game with flashier moves and stronger displays of athleticism including fast breaks and dunking. Females, on the other hand,

were described as having a stronger fundamental game, exhibited more teamwork, and played a “smarter” game. Commenting on these gendered differences, Chuck, a player on the ninth-grade boys’ team, explained,

I think guys play more physical, that’s for sure. They tend to show off a little bit more. They do a little bit more flashy moves. And girls, they are not as flashy. They don’t need to show off or anything. They just play. ... In guys, it’s more like you just want to score yourself. But in girls, they work together and run plays themselves.

Moreover, some players like Ellie, a player on the sixth-grade team, thought boys had “natural” athleticism whereas girls had to work harder for learn basketball – “Boys have that natural athletic ability versus girls. [Girls] have to be taught everything, fundamentals.” Similarly, Coach Daniel remarked,

For example, boys’ ninth-graders versus girls’ ninth-graders, the [boys’] game is way faster. Way faster, way more athletic, way higher in terms of competitiveness. ... Girls are more structured. I guess [that] is a good way to put it. [Girls] are more deliberate. Because there’s no way the girls can get up and down the court at the boys’ speed. So, if you want to watch a great basketball game, you watch a well-coached, women’s college team player. And then you’ll really understand how to play basketball. But if you want to watch athleticism, then boys. Oh, [boys] get up! They’ll make this court look tiny.

Comments such as these highlight how members like Coach Daniel constructed gender with essentialist notions; men and women played differently due to natural difference that set them apart. Because men were faster, more athletic, and more competitive by nature, female players could not “get up and down the court” the same way men could.

Lastly, girls were thought to have a stronger emotional connection to the game. This was reflected in member’s comments that female players showed greater displays of emotion including crying due to injury or losing a game, holding grudges, and getting “catty” with other players. Janet, who was also an assistant coach for a fourth-grade girls’ team, observed,

For the girls - it's an emotional game for them. They miss the layups - you see the disappointment on their face. Guys - it's more physical, it's more, 'It's okay I missed it. I'll get it back on defense.' Girls - it's a lot more tears, a lot more emotional and all that kind of stuff. Versus with guys, it's about the game. Yeah, so it's very different.



Commenting on the “drama” that could be associated with female teams, Laura, a player on the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade girls’ team, remarked,

I just feel like no matter what, guys are always out to compete but then girls on the court can be really catty. And then off the court, [girls] are still catty with each other. But then guys can be all out and knock someone over. And then off the court, they’ll be with each other and be “Okay I’m fine, alright.”

Because basketball was thought to be more “social” and less competitive for female players, the emotional aspect of a game often lingered, shaping the relationships they shared on the sidelines; female players remembered dirty fouls or “cheap shots” that happened on the court and would remember the next time they competed with the same team. Conversely, male players were described as more emotionally detached. Hard fouls or aggressive physical contact were sometimes part of the game. Male players did not seem to internalize or personalize this style of play the same way as their female counterparts did.

The examples above demonstrate how members constructed gender using essentialist notions, often replicating hegemonic expectations and rules regarding how players should look, who they could play with, and how they should play the game of basketball. Members frequently associated male players with inborn aggressiveness, competitiveness, quickness and physical muscularity. Female players, on the other hand, were more structured, smarter, and emotional players; they might not have as many “flashy” individual moves, but they worked together as a team. In cases like these, feminine and masculine ideas constructed female and male as oppositional on the court (Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994).

### **Creation of a Female “Baller”– The Curious Case of Successful Female Players**

Basketball is generally considered a male-dominated sport in terms of its popularity, success and consumer interest. This is evidenced by the persistent undervalued status of the

WNBA franchise and its female players compared to the NBA. Yet, within the PCY league, basketball was not considered a predominately male sport with female teams playing on periphery courts.<sup>20</sup> Rather, equal resources, attention, and participation were given to both the boys' and girls' division. Moreover, my research revealed a surprising trend that found PCY female players having more active participation and successful basketball careers on teams outside the PCY leagues than their male counterparts. As one coach observed, "JA leagues are known to produce some real good female "ballers" – they will just smoke other girls on the court." Willms (2010) found a similar trend in her study of Japanese American leagues, noting how female players rose to iconic "cultural symbols" who often served as a source of pride and community building within the ethnic community (186). In this section, I propose several factors that may explain why there were more successful PCY female "ballers" than men. First, I argue that PCY leagues function as a contested space, allowing female players to adopt traditionally masculine styles of play for greater success on the court. Second, female players encountered less height discrimination in athletic spaces outside the league than Asian males. Finally, the greater availability of Asian female athletic role models also provided more inspiration for young female players to achieve similar success.

### *JA leagues as a contested space*

While some participants felt that men and women's style of play reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, I also interviewed players who offered a counter narrative and rejected hegemonic notions of gender. Some players, like Janice acknowledged that while male and females may have different styles of play, it was not necessarily better:

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the league also hosted a boys' baseball team for but did not have an alternative baseball or softball team for females to join.

Christina: Do you think boys and girls play basketball differently?

Janice: Umm, you know what? I don't. I think that the guy's game is a little bit faster but I think that's just because guys are obviously built differently and they are stronger. But watching them play, I don't think so. I think girls can be just as physical as guys. I think that [girls] can go out there and they can shove people around, they can set killer screens, they can box people out. And guys don't think like that. Because they think just because they're bigger and because they look more muscular, they're stronger than girls – like they play a much rough game. But I don't think so. I think that girls are a little bit different than guys - [girls] are more willing to sacrifice their bodies. They're the ones you'll see diving on the floor for balls. And they're the ones you see chasing after the target. And guys, everything is about how high can you jump, how many shots can you block. But I don't know, girls, there might be a little more strategy - there might be because we don't think "Oh we're just going out muscle them."

Janice, who was heavily involved in her own team and coached during the Summer Boot Camp, noted the subtle differences in size and speed between a boys' game compared to a girls' game. But she was also quick to point out the girls' ability to play could be equally aggressive, competitive and physical. While female players may not be able to out-jump boys, they could beat them strategically on the court. This "brain versus brawn" narrative positioned women to see themselves as skilled athletes who have a different, yet equally talented skillset to play basketball. Counter narratives such as these confirm how JA leagues provided contested spaces to reconstruct notions of gender that reflected greater fluidity and flexibility. Within this contested terrain, females in particular were able to rise to greater success and fame than male PCY players.

Moreover, some parents encouraged their daughters to challenge hegemonic gender expectations. For example, Nadia, a third generation Japanese American mother, preferred that her daughter, Wanda, play basketball rather than continue her hula lessons. She explained, "I want her to be scrappy – not just a pretty dancer." Nadia rationalized that Wanda would benefit in the long run from the greater physical activity and competitive in basketball than she would in her hula group. Brandon had a similar wish for his daughter who played in the league:

When they were growing up, that's one of the things that I constantly worried about. Stuff like getting bullied or them getting influenced by other kids with a stronger personality. I didn't want her to be a follower - I wanted her to be independent and think and just hold her own at school. And I feel like that's where I think basketball is usually helpful - you learn how to think for yourself and be aggressive - not get pushed around.

Parents and coaches recognized the benefit of team sports like basketball in shaping their children's personal character including teamwork, applying themselves, and leadership skills. For parents like Nadia and Brandon, basketball was seen as an active space for their daughters to pick up traditionally masculine attributes, including being "scrappy," aggressive, physically active, and assertive. Significant in these examples is how parents did not consider their daughters as "tom-boys" who might eventually grow out of the sport and engage in more acceptable feminine displays of athleticism. According to Thorne (1994), adolescents experience less tolerance of gender flexibility - "tomboy" and other male-identified behaviors become less acceptable for adolescent girls. Yet, in JA leagues, parents were largely encouraging and supportive of their daughters to join teams and continuing playing aggressively and competitively.

Arguably, this was related to the fact that many parents were former players themselves. Having experienced the social and cultural benefits of playing in an ethnic league, some parents, particularly mothers, had aspirations to pass that along to their own children. As Melissa pointed out to me once, "Because my mom used to play, she got me playing basketball. And then I got my kids to play. But I think my girls love basketball way more than I ever did - and they are much better than I ever was when I was their age." Because the legacy of basketball was prevalent among both Japanese American men and women, parents were just as likely to pass along their athletic torch to their sons as they were to their daughters. This social support by

parents, the organization, and arguably, the larger ethnic community, likely gave young girls the motivation and confidence to continue their success outside the organization.

As a counter-space for the development and expression of non-conformist gender ideologies, the PCY league made it possible for female players to adopt and actively engage in highly competitive, aggressive, and masculine forms of play on the court. Their successes in PCY shaped their confidence and improved their athletic ability in spaces outside the safety of their ethnic leagues; female players regularly took great pride in challenging both racial and gendered stereotypes. Moreover, parents also turned to JA leagues to offer their daughters an alternative space, allowing greater gender flexibility for young girls to be “scrappy” and assertive.

### *Rising above the “glass ceiling”*

If the female PCY players were dominating in spaces outside the league, male players faced more social and structural barriers preventing them from taking a similar path to success. Similar to Willms’ (2010) study, a key difference between male and female success outside the league was an issue of height and its importance in the game. League participants, players and parents alike, presumed that a boy’s height played a stronger factor in shaping and determining a his success and performance in basketball than it was for a girl. Generally male players who were less than 6’0” were thought to be “too short” and had fewer opportunities to play competitively in spaces outside the league. Coach Daniel, the ninth-grade girls’ coach, highlights a “glass ceiling” that seemed to negatively impact male players:

A whole chunk of PCY kids will play high school ball – frosh/soph, JV for sure. But by the time you get to varsity basketball, it drops quite a bit. And then there’s an even smaller percentage that will go onto to play college ball. But you won’t see as many [PCY] boys playing varsity. ... The girls can get by being short

because they have the skills, the fundamentals. Whereas with the boys, you just can't teach height and you need that if you're going to play [boys'] varsity. Players were also aware of the height discrimination boys faced, particularly in high

school. Laura, a former PCY player, lamented about the struggle for PCY boys to get noticed by high school coaches or scouts,

Even if you are small and really, really good – you could be better than the tallest guy out there – but a coach would still want someone that's taller... I know this one friend, he's a really good basketball player but because of his height, he can't play at certain places. ... He's 5'8" but if he were like 6'1", he'd be able to go wherever he wanted.

At only 5'8" and considered a successful player on his PCY team, Laura's friend struggled to make it onto his high school team. Moreover, Laura's boyfriend, who was 5'10", was hoping to earn a scholarship at UCSD through basketball but that did not seem too likely – "I think the chances of him getting a good scholarship are not ideal because someone can have the same set of skills, but they'd be a little bit taller."

Examples such as these demonstrate how height, or lack thereof in this case, created a glass ceiling effect preventing some PCY boys from gaining access onto basketball teams outside the PCY league. They often fell short, literally, to the height standards placed on most high school teams and lacked the physical body type that college scouts were looking for. As such, many of these players who had been pushed out or denied access into other courts came to view the PCY league as their main outlet of play competitive basketball. As one male player explained, "Since I got cut from my [high school] basketball team, the Asian league kind of gives me a sense that I can still play."

Interestingly, being "short" was not necessarily a deal breaker for the girls' experience outside the league. As Janice explained,

In high school, I know for the boys' side, [height] matters a lot. But for the girls' side, it matters to some point but then [coaches] also go based upon the skill and speed and that kind of thing. So it's really different. You could get cut on the boys program because

you're not tall enough. You can have the skills but you're just not tall enough. ... I know for my high school, we've always had a lot of Asian girls on the girls program. But for the boys, the lower levels had a lot of SCSA people, but come varsity, it was a lot tougher. [Boys] would start trickling out or the coach didn't think that they had the ability.

If the PCY boys were tricking out of more competitive athletic spaces, the PCY girls were flooding their Varsity and Junior Varsity (JV) high school teams. Less fixated on height, high school coaches were more likely to consider other aspects of a female player's ability, such as ball-handling skill and speed. Coach Daniel remarked that local Southern California coaches often picked players who were members of JA leagues "because [these coaches] know these girls have the fundamentals and they are damn good players!"

Because male players faced greater barriers in gaining access into athletic spaces outside the league, many viewed the PCY league as their main outlet for basketball. Especially for some of the older players who had been pushed out of their high school teams after their sophomore year or were largely bench players on their Varsity teams, the PCY league provided a welcomed and much needed space to continue playing competitive, organized basketball. Conversely, the females players were able to rise above the "glass ceiling" to find greater access and opportunities outside the league. This gave the girls a larger public platform to be noticed in mainstream sports worlds. For example, PCY girls who were start athletes on their high school Varsity team were more likely to be noticed by college recruiters or news media.

#### *Looking up to other Asian female role models*

Another factor in explaining the higher portion of successful PCY female players was rooted in the greater availability of Asian American female role models who could serve as inspirations for younger generations of players. When asked who their sports role models were,

many members named prominent basketball players such as Kobe Bryan and LeBron James. Few offered any Asian or Asian Americans as athletes that they actively followed. The dearth of Asian professional players did not go unnoticed by league members.<sup>21</sup> When asked about how she felt about Asian athletes in the NBA, Janet, a freshman at college commented:

Yeah there's Yao Ming - he's biggest Asian person in the NBA. And there's the Chinese 'Magic Johnson' [Sun Yue] who plays on the Lakers, but he didn't even step on the court this year. You saw him sitting there in his suit, but I think he played in a game once and everyone was cheering. But he hasn't even done anything. I kind of wish we had someone there that was a true Asian American just there. I wish that we were more well-represented.

Janet's words express her frustration for the lack of Asian American representation in professional sports. While Yao Ming was frequently mentioned in interviews as an example of Asians in the NBA, his presence was largely tokenized and distinctly different from a "true Asian American" athlete. The same distinction was made for Japanese baseball players like Seattle Mariner, Ichiro Suzuki – his status as Asian-born made it difficult for young players to relate to or identify with. As Whang (2005) argues, "Foreign athletes often have language barriers to be an active influence on the fans, and the admiration stops at the talent and skills. On the other hand, Asian American athletes grew up here, went through the same school system, and represent the U.S. in international competitions. It means fans can relate to Asian American athletes in a more personal level, and this close relationship has a more effective influence on the society" (47). The recent overwhelming support from the Asian American community for New York Knicks player Jeremy Lin is likely reflective of this group's thirst and eagerness to rally behind a prominent Asian American basketball player.

Given the lack of famous or accessible Asian or Asian American basketball players available, some PCY members had chosen former JA league players as athletic role models.

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<sup>21</sup> Because I conducted my study before Jeremy Lin's rise to fame as a point guard for the New York Knicks, the impact of "Linsanity" as a possible source of inspiration or adoration was not captured in my interview responses.



Most notable were Natalie Nakase, a former point guard for UCLA (1999-2003), Jamie Hagiya, a former a point guard for UCS (2003-2007), and Lauren Kamiyama, a former point guard for Chapman University (2005-2009). PCY members frequently mentioned one or all of these three star athletes when discussing the success of the program to produce skilled basketball players. For example, Naoki, one of the league founders, explained with great pride, “You know, Natalie Nakase, she grew up in a SCSA program and got a scholarship to UCLA. She did real well as a point guard there. And she came out of our leagues!” Conversely, when asked if any of the PCY boys had “made it big” outside the league, few could think of any players who had had a successful college or professional career.

The fame of Nakase, Hagiya, and Kamiyama was largely due to the spotlight that was placed on them by the ethnic community particularly through game and event appearances, media coverage, and general word of mouth (Willms 2010). For example, as Willms (2010) found in her study of media coverage on JA players, *Rafu Shimpō*, a Southern California newspaper serving the Japanese American community, featured more media coverage of female than male players. She argues,

“Because Japanese Americans are active in the production and consumption of the narratives and images in the *Rafu Shimpō*, they influence the content and express ideas about sport that are meaningful to them. As girls and women have become markers of mainstream success in the community’s favorite sport of basketball, coverage of these women in the community newspaper has become a way to valorize the leagues as symbols of the community, praise the accomplishments of individuals facing challenges in mainstream contexts, and put forth a model of an ideal Japanese-American community member” (Willms 2010, 157).

With a brighter spotlight placed on their athletic success, female JA players rose to greater fame and iconic status than their male counterparts. In this public capacity, younger female players had role models whom they could aspire to be. These were not “untouchable” players whom were only assessable through major media outlets. Rather, they were

“homegrown” athletes who had played on some of the same courts, knew some of the same families, and more importantly, looked like them. For example, when asked to name some of her basketball role models, Janice quickly responded,

Lauren Kamiyama! She is just one of the best players you’ll see! She can shoot, she can drive, she’s a great defender, and you know, a lot of people are like, ‘Oh well if she were a guy, she would have the height and all that stuff.’ But she doesn’t need to be. She’s already proven herself – she’s broken records at her Chapman. And she’s the same height as I am! She’s great!

For members like Janice, local players like Kamiyama were a source of inspiration. At only 5’1” tall, Kamiyama broke Chapman’s all-time assists record with 424 assists and 174 three-pointers, breaking both school records ([www.chapmanathletics.com](http://www.chapmanathletics.com)). Having already “proven” how successful Kamiyama could be, Janice found inspiration that someone who was the same height as she was could be breaking college records.

With so few professional Asian or Asian American athletes in professional basketball, some PCY players turned their sights inward to their own ethnic league to find role models. In having female Asian American role models – athletes whom players could identify with both culturally and physically - PCY female players were inspired to achieve similar athletic success outside their community courts.

The league’s successful JA female players could also be a reflection of the larger trend of Asian American players in NCAA Division I basketball teams. For example, in the 2006-07 Season, Asian American female players comprised 1.2 percent of all players while Asian American males comprised only 0.4 percent (National Collegiate Athletic Association 2008). I should note here that these youth leagues are not pipelines into the NBA or WNBA, but they can be spaces to help improve players’ skills to open more doors to join teams outside the league. Several players, especially female athletes, who I interviewed for this study did go on to continue

very successful and competitive careers in high school. This trend of successful female players, some who have made national news, has helped to spawn a new sporting identity within the ethnic community – the female JA “baller.”

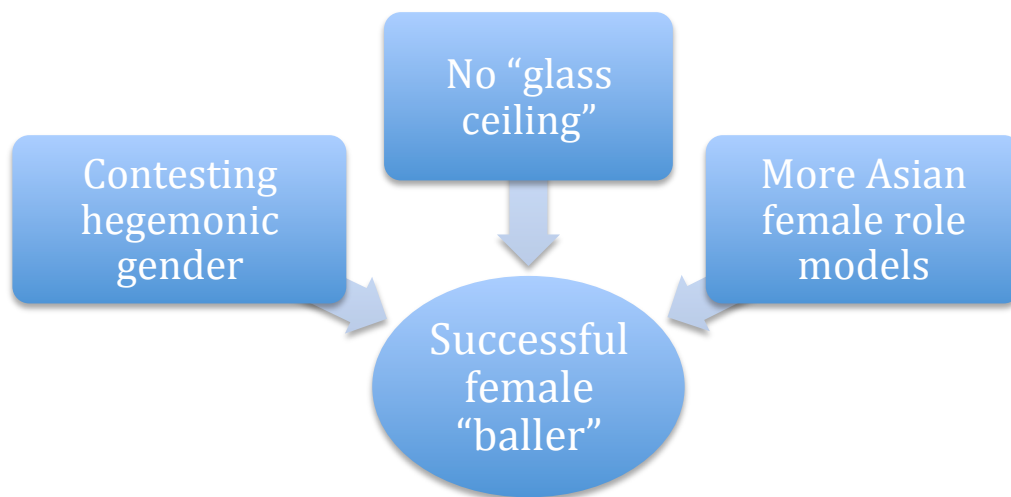
## **Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Japanese American basketball leagues were active sites for the construction, negotiation, and at times, rejection of traditional hegemonic gender identities and meanings. Because gender and racial categories often intersect, I found that outsiders had different assumptions targeting Asian men and women. For example, Asian male players were frequently emasculated and characterized as nonathletic, geeky, and weak. On the other hand, Asian female players are presumed to be hyper-feminine, fragile, and passive. Within a sports context, this often created barriers for Asian players who were frequently underestimated and confronted greater obstacles in spaces outside Asian ethnic leagues. Yet, I found a trend of female athletes who took every opportunity they could to challenge those negative assumptions. Women of color often have the most to gain through participation in sports. In a study that compared sports participation across different racial and ethnic groups, Erku et al (1996) found that Asian American girls from families with high socioeconomic status in urban areas reported the most positive feelings about athletic activity because it gave them a sense of mastery and enjoyment. As perpetual underdogs, PCY female players gained the most from their unlikely successes on the court by developing a greater sense of confidence and enjoyment in proving doubters wrong.

Messner (2007) argues that “reproductive and resistant agencies are simultaneously evident in contemporary sport” (3). I found that JA youth sports leagues offered players a

“contested terrain” to both reproduce and challenge gender norms (Hartmann 2000; Messner 1988). In this chapter, I demonstrated how league members worked collaboratively to enforce hegemonic notions of gender that controlled and reinforced male and female expectations. Specifically, through uniforms, coaching, sex-segregated teams, and differentiating styles of play, members shaped the “doing of gender” that cast female athletes as less aggressive on the court, emotionally weaker, and showed a greater interest in “hanging out with their friends” and “looking cute” than their male counterparts. Conversely, male players were differentiated by their superior and natural physical dominance, aggressive style of play, and “flashy” moves.

Table 4.1: Contributing Factors for Greater Female Success Outside the League



Finally, I also provided several possible factors to explain the growing success of Asian female players in spaces outside ethnic leagues. These factors are summarized in Table 4.1 above. As a contested space, female players were able engage in more flexible displays of gender, taking on “masculine” characteristics on the court that gave them the skills and confidence in spaces outside the league. Unlike their male counterparts, Asian female players faced fewer barriers due their height, or lack there of in this case. They were able to rise above the “glass ceiling” to find more opportunities and access on high school or city-sponsored

leagues. Lastly, with former Japanese American players like Nakase, Hagiya, and Kamiyama as sources of inspiration, young female PCY players had more relatable role models whom they could aspire to be. Collectively, this intersection of race and gender allowed for more females to find greater success on courts outside the PCY organization.

## Chapter 5

### **“We’ve got Team Spirit!”: Social Networking and Ethnic Community Building**

“I feel we started [SCSA] to create an atmosphere for the kids to meet other Japanese American kids and my idea was, ‘Let’s give our children the opportunity to meet other Japanese American kids, boys and girls.’ ... We thought that if we could have a youth group playing sports that they would meet other Japanese Americans. We gave them the opportunity to meet them. If they didn’t use it, then that was ok with us. We didn’t feel that it was mandatory – we wanted to offer that opportunity for community.”

Bruce, PCY founder

As ethnic groups become more assimilated or acculturated, as is the case with later-generation Japanese Americans, it is assumed by some scholars that ethnic communities will dwindle in both size and importance (Alba and Nee 2003). Yet, this limited view often denies the importance of the changing dynamics regarding the nature and strategies assimilated groups employ to maintain a sense of community. The case of Japanese Americans living in suburban neighborhoods offers scholars a compelling case study to explore emergent ethnic communities outside traditional urban models (Conzen et al. 1992; Yancey et al. 1976).

While ethnic enclaves are often considered a source for ethnic livelihood, socialization, and community building, the legacy, role and use of traditional Japanese American enclaves has changed over time. No longer residential hubs for Japanese Americans, the Japantown in San Francisco and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles are now mostly symbolic centers for commerce and cultural symbolism and are no longer residential communities (Alba and Nee 2003; Zhou and Gatewood 2007). Especially as more Japanese Americans move into predominantly white suburban communities, locating a thriving ethnic community presents a particular challenge for this group. Scholars like Fugita and O’Brien (1991) argue that in spite of the rate of assimilation and demographic changes to the community, “it is still likely there will continue to exist a Japanese American community which can rely on the contribution of its members to collective

goals” (Fugita and O’Brien 1991: 126). Yet they offer few examples to explain *how* ethnic community will continue to exist.

When Bruce started the PCY league, he had hoped it would provide the next generation of Japanese American youth with the “opportunity” to meet other co-ethnics and maintain ethnic community. In this chapter, I investigate if Bruce’s goals of keeping the ethnic community connected were accomplished. Specifically, I examine the role that sport leagues played in creating and affirming ethnic community among later-generation Japanese Americans in suburban neighborhoods. I first demonstrate the group’s desire to actively find and participate in social spaces with other co-ethnics; community basketball league have become the bridge to connect this dispersed ethnic community together. I will also illustrate the social and structural strategies members used to build different types of social networks, including local, organizational, and global communities.

### **“Basketball keeps us all together” – Searching for an Ethnic Community**

While Japanese Americans have exhibited a high degree of structural assimilation, as evidenced by their residential integration into predominantly white suburban neighborhoods (Alba and Nee 2003; Zhou and Gatewood 2007), PCY members still actively sought out spaces to connect with other Japanese Americans. Members considered basketball leagues as important sites for the construction of both ethnic identity and community building. When asked what the purpose of PCY league was, Reiko, a player on the ninth-grade girls’ team responded,

I think it's just to get the Japanese community together. I think it's there for the kids especially so they know their ancestors or grandparents. That’s why they put the league together - so we can all still get to know each other and know other people that are similar to us. So we could still have that connection towards each other. And I think they did a great job. I mean, I turned out fine and so did my friends!

Players like Reiko recognized the desire of league organizers to give the next generation a “connection” to the larger ethnic community including ancestors, grandparents, and other “similar” youth. It was not just all fun and games, but being part of the league also meant keeping the Japanese community intact. As one of the youngest players on the third-grade boys’ team reflected, “Basketball keeps us all together so we can all be friends.”

Particularly for families who lived in predominantly white suburban neighborhoods, the importance of building social networks with other Japanese and Asian Americans was especially salient. These members in particular expressed a sense of fear or concern that their children would lose their ethnic identity. One parent observed, “You know, there’s not a whole lot of Japanese Americans around these days.” Betty, a third-generation Japanese American parent, conveyed a similar concern during her interview:

Betty: I like the community involvement that [PCY] gives Thomas. I'm hoping it teaches [my son] something. I just like him being a part of an Asian organization. That's important to me.

Christina: Why does it have to be Asian?

Betty: Because he's Asian. No, seriously! [Laughs] For no other reason than he's Asian! The school he goes to - he's probably the only Japanese. [Pauses] No, I know of two others, but they're hapa [mixed race]. But I think he's the only full-blooded Japanese at [his high school], and I don't want him to lose where he came from, or not know where he came from, or what he is. ... And so [the PCY league] was our opportunity, seeing that we're not real active in church, to get him to have other Japanese friends. ... I just think it's important that he knows who he is.

Betty and her husband, Mike, considered themselves an “old-fashion kind of Japanese couple”; they still wanted their son, Thomas, to be connected to a Japanese community and to understand “where he came from.” Thomas, who attended a private school in Orange County with mostly white students, had few opportunities to socialize with other Asian youth in his community. And although the Buddhist church could be an active social space for many Japanese Americans to



congregate, Betty's family did not regularly attend. As such, she turned to the PCY league as an alternative community space for Thomas to find "other Japanese friends." In these racially exclusive spaces, Thomas wouldn't be as "whitewashed" as Betty feared he was becoming.

Similarly, Coach Gavin expressed his own hope that by joining PCY, his two daughters would still maintain their connection to the Japanese American community. Growing up, Coach Gavin's parents were heavily involved with serving the Japanese community. His father was particularly active on various boards on Japanese language schools and a Buddhist church while his mother was involved in organizing health fairs in Little Tokyo. After moving to a predominantly white suburb in Orange County, Coach Gavin wanted his daughters to have a similar social connection to their ethnic community:

I think I was a little bit selfish because for [my daughters] growing up in Orange County, it's pretty diverse. When I was growing up in L.A., I went to an all-Japanese grammar school. So everything I did was always around Japanese community and Japanese community-related activities. We moved to Orange County and it's so diverse that even in grammar school, [Asians] might be 10 percent of the population of the school. And I really don't want her to lose any of that community. ... So I wanted to expose them to other Japanese kids through basketball.

Coach Gavin's "selfish" motives to join a JA sports league was influenced his concern that his daughters would lose their sense of ethnic community. Having grown up heavily immersed and involved with the Japanese American community, relocating to Orange County, which had a small Japanese and Asian American population, posed a challenge for Coach Gavin to keep his daughters "exposed" to other Japanese youth. To resolve this concern, he enrolled his daughters into PCY to serve as an ethnic outlet.

Examples such as these reveal a strong desire among later-generation Japanese Americans to not only seek out, but also maintain future ethnic community ties among their children's generation. PCY members found a degree of "connectiveness" through their ethnic

sports leagues that served to bring co-ethnics together. As Lacy (2007) notes in her study on Black middle class living in predominantly white suburban neighborhoods, “Few assimilation theorists have considered the possibility that there is something inherently pleasurable about being black and maintain a connection to other blacks”(152). Similarly, my findings contradict assimilationist predictions about the declining need for ethnic community, demonstrating that PCY members actively sought out and deeply enjoyed their associations and networks with other Japanese Americans.

### **Building Local Communities: Networks with Friendship, Family and Dating Partners**

With weekly practices and games, monthly meetings, annual tournaments, and other league commitments, PCY members were constantly connecting, reconnecting, and socializing with one another. Especially for families with more than one child on a team, PCY basketball consumed much of the free time families had on a weekend during the season. As Flora, a mother with three young boys playing on three different PCY teams explained, “Once the PCY season begins, our family doesn’t have time for much of anything else. [My husband] and I are running around, shuttling one kid off at practice and then turning around to picking up another one. ... It’s almost like a full time job when you join these leagues!” Because participation in the league required such a large commitment of time and frequent interactions, parents and players were often inundated with opportunities to socialize with other JA league members throughout the season. The outcome of all this social interaction often produced close networks of friendship, extended family, and even romantic relationships with other Japanese Americans.

#### *Fostering friendship*

Youth sports often foster friendships among players and families (Fine 1987; Messner 2009). JA leagues were no different in that regard. The success of these spaces to produce meaningful and lasting friendships along co-ethnic and racial lines was especially evident during my interviews with current and former players; the majority of them reported that “hanging out with friends” was one of their favorite aspects of playing in these leagues.

The close bond between teammates was especially evident when compared to friendships with players on other non-ethnic basketball teams. In addition to playing on the PCY league, approximately one third of the players I followed played on another basketball team such as their high school team or the National Junior Basketball (NJB) team, a more competitive city-sponsored basketball league. This was the case for Todd, a talented player on both the 6<sup>th</sup> grade PCY boys’ team and a local NJB team. Although he was one of the smallest players on the team, parents and teammates alike considered Todd as the most talented player who was known for his quick breaks, impressive ball handling skills, and accurate shooting. Two years ago, it was feared that Todd’s parents would quit the PCY league, choosing instead to focus their son’s time and energy with his NJB team. But Todd’s father, Dustin, decided to keep his son playing on both teams, explaining that his family valued the social relationships shared among members – “we still come back to this team because of the friendships.”

Friendships among parents were also noticeably different on PCY teams and NJB teams. Naoki, one of the league founders, who frequently attended his daughter’s PCY and NJB games made the following comparison:

We don’t mingle with the parents [from NJB] as much as with the SCSA league. All the [SCSA] parents know us and we know them. It’s more of a family where as NJB, I don’t even know any of the other parents. I might say “Hi” to them but I don’t know whose parents are with which player. Whereas in SCSA, you generally have an idea of who’s kids they are and who’s grandkids they are. That’s the only difference I see. I think

there's more "being *nihongen*" – being Japanese. There seems to be more camaraderie amongst the families.

While it was common to see PCY parents hugging, laughing, and sharing personal stories with one another, their interactions with NJB families were noticeably more superficial, distant and detached. As discussed in Chapter 3, some members attributed this interactional difference as a cultural one – "being *nihongen*" meant that PCY families were more friendly, polite, and respectful than non-Asian families. As such, PCY teams shared more camaraderie with one another to build a closer team "family."

The closeness fostered among teammates and parents was largely due to the organizational structure of teams. Unlike other youth sports leagues where players on a team typically changed from one year to the next, PCY teams often maintained the same roster for many consecutive years. As Coach Gavin, who was also one of the league tournament organizers explained,

We tend to keep our teams together. So if you started when you were small, you might be with the same team your whole time in PCY—same kids, same town for the most part. And most of these other leagues, you're with a different group of kids every season. So, yeah, you make some friends and you probably meet a lot of people you wouldn't but I don't think you get to the point of being as close-knit as you would when the team stays together like PCY teams do.

This type of organizational structure was extremely effective in building close-knit teams. A player who joined a team in the third-grade could potentially stay with the same team, continuing to grow both athletically and socially with his or her teammates till they reached the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> While most players usually stayed on the same team for several years, there were instances where team rosters would change. For example, if a player decided to quit or leave a team, the organization would have to find a new player to fill the gap. Although generally rare, there were also occasions where entire teams disbanded due to conflicts. Such was the case with the sixth-grade girls' team who splintered into two teams shortly after I completed my fieldwork. Parents were divided over disagreements about coaching styles and expectations regarding the level of competitiveness the team should adopt. Those who wanted a more competitive agenda could petition to leave

The social networks built among youth often lasted well into adulthood. Coach Randy, a 40-year old, third-generation Japanese American, grew up playing in the leagues as a child and remained active in the organization as the head coach for the sixth-grade boys' team. During our interview, Coach Randy fondly shared how he was still good friends with former teammates he used play with when he was ten-years old – “I’ve made friends for life. Right now, I can tell you one person from high school that I still keep in touch with. But I can tell you dozens of names that I grew up with in SCSA that are my friends now.” For Coach Randy and other former players, participation in these leagues had solidified lasting friendships that spanned several decades to create an extended network for companionship with other Japanese Americans.

Occasionally, these leagues also served as an extended “family” offering support during times of crisis. This communal support system was especially evident when a player in the league was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. The PCY league, along with the parent organization SCYA, organized a fundraiser to help raise money for the Kubo family during the end-of-the-year holiday party. Each team made and sold red ribbons during game events and collected donations to help contribute to some of Jessica Kubo’s medical costs.

*When I enter the gym, I notice two players from one of the girls’ teams manning a donation booth to help support the Kubo family. On the table is a picture of Jessica smiling and wearing her PCY uniform. There is also a ceramic piggy bank where donations could be made and dozens of red ribbons which could be purchased for a dollar each. I say hello to the volunteers and add my own contribution to the bank. One of the girls quickly hands me a red ribbon cheerfully adding, ‘Thanks for your contribution!’ I pin the ribbon to my shirt and walk around the gym which had been converted into a makeshift dining hall with dozens of tables and chairs set up. As I scan the crowd, I am moved to see how many players and parents also proudly displayed their own red ribbons.*

In an organization as large as PCY, most of the families did not personally know Jessica or the Kubo family. Yet their outpour of support, both symbolically and financially, was far reaching.

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PCY and join another league in the same parent organization. Once former teammates, the two groups would eventually compete against one another during the regular season and in tournaments.

At the end of the party, Jessica's teammates handed Mr. Kubo a stack of handmade cards written by several players in the organization. He expressed his sincerest gratitude with a tearful speech thanking PCY for their support and love.

The close relationships forged among PCY members often stretched far beyond practices, games, and gyms; members frequently used this social network for support and advice that had little to do with basketball. As Coach Randy explained,

So these are not only friends, but connections that open up avenues for work or even my auto mechanic. Everyone knows someone so that if you need someone, it's like, 'Yeah, I have a friend who can help you out.' ... It's nice to know that if I ever had a problem or something happened to my family, I know there is a support structure there that I wouldn't have to worry about anything. And that's all because of the people I have met through these leagues growing up.

Significant in these examples is how this group shared social and cultural capital within this network for friends. I frequently overheard conversations among parents trading stories and discussing tips regarding academic matters including which middle school had a stronger academic record, suggestions for SAT prep courses, or tips about college applications. These networks were also used to assist with other mundane matters such as finding a trusted mechanic, real estate agent, or a cheap place for catered desserts. Similar to immigrant networks in previous generations (Nee and Sanders 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998), later-generation Japanese Americans continue to use social networks with co-ethnic to share various forms of capital to help provide financial, educational, and emotional support to one another.

### *Bridging generations of family*

In addition to creating opportunities for lifelong friendships, participation in these leagues served to strengthen family ties, particularly bridging generations of families together. For example, Melissa, a third generation Japanese American mother, proudly stated that her two

daughters, Linda and Lori, are the third generation of basketball players in their family to play in the JA leagues – Melissa and her mother used to be former JA league players. She exclaimed, “Basketball runs in our family! We give you a basketball as your first toy growing up.” It was common to see Melissa escorting her 70-year old mother into the gym stands where she was one of the loudest fans cheering for her granddaughters on the sidelines.

In an effort to bring fathers and sons closer together, the sixth-grade boys’ team had a yearly tradition of playing in a “Battle of Generations” where the boys would play a game against their fathers. A few days before the face-off, Coach Randy expressed concern that this would be the first year that the boys might actually beat them – “They’ve really grown and developed a lot this year. We might have done too good of a job [coaching them] - we might get beat this year!” It was a close game with the fathers barely securing a win over the boys to secure bragging rights until the next year’s battle, when they would likely be the underdog team.

In these cases, membership in JA leagues created a family tradition that served to strengthen familial networks – grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are all welcome to support other family members in the league – even if they play on opposite teams. Moreover, it was not uncommon for members to find out about the league through other family members – many joined because they were referred by an extended family member (Willms 2010). In the absence of ethnic enclaves, which commonly feature multigenerational family continuity, later-generations Japanese Americans have found familial cohesion through basketball league.

#### *Potential dating opportunities*

Along with fostering close friendships with other co-ethnic youth, these leagues also provided potential opportunities for members to find dating partners. Japanese Americans have

one of the highest outmarriage rates among Asian groups (Alba and Nee 2003; Le 2012). In 2010, nearly 51 percent of U.S.-born Japanese American women and 46 percent of U.S.-born Japanese American men had married someone outside their ethnic group (Le 2012).

Recognizing how difficult it can be for JA youth to meet other co-ethnics, some parents embraced the leagues as a potential social site for their teenage children to find other Japanese Americans as dating partners. Bruce, one of the league founders, expressed his desire that these leagues could help facilitate possible matchmaking within the JA community:

For me, the main reason why I started the league was to give them a social environment for meeting other Japanese and give them the opportunity to eventually someday marry if they want to. Or if they want to interracially marry, that's fine. . . . We gave them the opportunity to meet other Japanese and if they don't like other Japanese, that's their prerogative. We weren't trying to say you have to marry Japanese, like some parents. I just wanted to expose them – that's the best word - expose them to other Japanese.

By providing a social environment that would “expose them to other Japanese” youth, Bruce was hopeful that relationships built within this space might lead to marriage. Other parents also seemed to welcome the possibility of players finding romance within the league. Regarding the PCY tournament dance, I overheard Betty prodding to her teenage son, Thomas, “So are you going to the dance tonight to meet a nice Japanese girl?” Thomas, embarrassed by his mother’s comment in front of his teammates, quickly shot back, “Yes, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Laughing, Betty quickly responded, “Yes, your dad and I would love that!” Building friendships was certainly encouraged and if players happened to strike up a romance, that seemed to be an added benefit for parents who wanted their children to have close ties with their ethnic roots and community. While most Japanese American parents did not express any explicit expectation that their children would date or marry other Japanese Americans, parents like Betty did acknowledge the challenges for co-ethnic partnerships in their community.



While it may have been wishful thinking on Bruce's part that the PCY league would serve as a ripe "dating pool" for Japanese Americans, there were some "success" stories. This was especially true among senior players (ninth-12<sup>th</sup> graders) where a few romantic relationships did form within PCY as well as across teams in SCSA. Like school, church, and other social spaces, the PCY league created additional networking opportunities for youth to meet and date other Japanese Americans. Often PCY boys and girls teams would attend each other's games to support one another and would co-mingle after the games. Moreover, tournament dances also brought opportunities for socializing and flirting. This was similar to Matsumoto's (2004) study which found that cultural outlets such as dances were an important arena of socializing and romance for second-generation courtship and romance (97).

One such coupling included Janet, a fourth-generation Japanese American, and her boyfriend who had been dating for about a year. Janet reminisced with me how she met her current partner, Rick, through JA basketball:

I met my boyfriend through SCSA – he plays for a team on FOR. We met at a tournament dance because his friends go to the same high school with a lot of girls from my team. ... It's just easier because Rick knows all about the JA leagues - he's played his whole life too. ... We're always showing up to each other's games to support one another.

At times, the common experience of playing on JA leagues "made it easier"; couples like Janet and Rick could bond over the cultural familiarity of playing in JA leagues and support one another on and off the court. In Kim's (2006) study of Korean American Evangelical campus ministries, she found that second generation Korean American Evangelical youth were "more comfortable" in separate ethnic ministries than white or mixed-race ministries because they wanted to associate with those who are *most* likely to share similar social and cultural experiences (109). Echoing these sentiments, for some PCY youth such as Janet, the shared

experience of playing JA basketball served as a cultural bond unique to this ethnic community, making it more comfortable for them to connect and find common ground.

### **Building Organizational Communities: Networking with Larger Japanese American Community and other JA Sports Leagues**

Beyond the intimate social relationships shared among teammates, families and dating partners, the league also provided opportunities for members to network with the larger Japanese community. Through a variety of civic engagement projects, league members stayed closely connected with the local Japanese American community, particularly with an organization of Japanese American war veterans. Moreover, year-round basketball tournaments throughout the state of California were ideal in connecting dozens of other Japanese American sports organizations with one another.

#### *Serving your community - Connecting with the local Japanese American community*

Through frequent basketball functions, PCY players and families built a tightknit community amongst themselves. Yet, the organization also had goals for youth to branch out beyond the gyms and basketball courts to be actively engaged with their local community. As Andrew, the PCY league president emphasized, “It shouldn’t be all just basketball - but kids should also give back to the community.” This was largely accomplished through the PCY Youth Volunteers Group – a volunteer organization comprised of members from the PCY basketball league and other SCSA youth.<sup>23</sup> Volunteer projects served to keep youth connected

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<sup>23</sup> Started in 2006, the Youth Volunteer Group (YVG) participated in a variety of community service projects within their local neighborhood. Some volunteer projects included collaborating with organization such as Habitat for Humanity, the Ronald McDonald House, and the Special Olympics. Other civic engagement efforts included collecting toiletry supplies for the Veteran’s Hospital, organizing food drives for the homeless, and participating in

with the broader community outside of basketball while also giving participants the opportunity to take on leadership positions in coordinating and planning such projects.

In addition to serving local organization, the YVG also reached out to assist the larger Japanese American community. Quoting Sabrina, the parent leader for the YVG, “I think it’s good if we do [volunteer] projects in the Asian community.” As I highlighted in Chapter 3, some youth volunteered their time to assist local Japanese cultural festivals as well as organized outings to visit the Japanese American National Museum. The league also had a strong connection with a local Veterans of Foreign War Post comprised of Japanese Americans who served during the Korean and Vietnam War. During my field research, the YVG organized several projects to help support the Veterans’ Post. For example, one project gathered volunteers to clean and re-paint the Post building – a weathered, retired firehouse that had suffered years of neglect and was in desperate need of maintenance. Several youth from different teams showed up to clear out old furniture and debris, paint the exterior, and trim back the weeds growing in the yard. Moreover, to encourage community building with older Japanese Americans, the PCY league would also invited Post members to social functions such as the Holiday Party.<sup>24</sup>

PCY members consistently made efforts to bridge networks between youth and veterans. For example, during a committee meeting, Gwen, a mother from the sixth-grade girls’ team, encouraged the idea that each basketball team should visit the Veterans’ Post at least once during the season. She posed to the group, “How hard is it for the teams to come see the Post members

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events such as “Light the Night Walk” against Leukemia and Lymphoma. Some volunteer projects had a global reach. For example, one ambitious player organized a collection drive asking members to donate old eyeglasses which would then be delivered to an organization in Africa. After the 2011 earthquake in Japan and the devastating tsunami that followed, the organization hosted a Japan Relief basketball tournament to raise donations for disaster relief and recovery efforts.

<sup>24</sup> Every year, the Post members would sit at one of the tables amidst all the rowdy tables of basketball teams. Volunteers from the YVG would help the veterans to their table, serve them food and beverage, and clear their plates. The PCY president would also make an announcement during the evening’s festivities to introduce the veterans who were acknowledge with a warm round of applause.

at least once a season? I think it would be a really nice gesture and I know the Post would like that.” Other parents also encouraged the organization to educate players on the contributions of Japanese American veterans. Betty argued,

Should our kids know who the [Veterans’] Post is? Absolutely. We’re part of it, we have their name. ... They’re veterans, they’re Japanese and Asian, and they fought for our country, so that we could be here. Do [the players] know that? No. So I think the connection needs to be made.

For parents like Betty, they saw the league as a ripe opportunity to pass on a shared ethnic history that connected Japanese Americans as an ethnic group. As Andrew reflected, “With all the generations of [Japanese Americans] that are still involved in the league, these kids could learn a lot – about the internment, about the wars they fought in. ... Those [veterans] aren’t going to be around much longer.” In this capacity, members like Betty and Andrew hoped that network ties to older generations of Japanese Americans could provide rich historical knowledge regarding the internment experience and their military service.

When I interviewed youth about their relationship with the veterans, many of the senior players reflected on the knowledge they gained from meeting older-generation Japanese Americans. During our interview, Janice described her interactions with the veterans and how that shaped her feelings about playing for PCY:

I went to the senior scholarship banquet last year and I thought that was really interesting because they had all the veterans there and we got to meet people there who fought in the wars and who have been serving the country. And that was really interesting, especially talking with them. I got to talk to some of them and even asked, ‘Oh, what was the war like?’ And hearing their perspective from someone who was there as opposed to something that you read or from a documentary or something, it’s completely different. So I think that putting on that jersey and knowing that I’m representing [the veterans], that’s kind of big. Because you’re representing a group of people who went out there and fought for the country. And you know, especially during WWII when Japanese Americans were shunned and people were like ‘They’re probably enemies and we shouldn’t trust them.’ And so being part of that, and knowing that that’s what happened in our history and look at where we are now - we are part of the American culture. ...

That's pretty cool knowing that you represent that and knowing that you're here as an organization because these people fought for that. That's really interesting.

Janice's remark demonstrates how social connections that extend across generational lines could pique interest about their shared history, particularly during times of discrimination and internment. In bridging this gap, later-generation Japanese Americans turned to second-generation elders to learn about the lived experience of their ethnic history. For players like Janice, who had been deeply moved to hear about their service and sacrifice for the country, they considered PCY's connection with the veterans' war post a source of pride.

### *Building bridges through tournaments*

With dozens of basketball organizations across California, each sponsoring their own network of teams, it is estimated that there are close to 10,000 participants who play on Asian basketball leagues (Watanabe 2008). As Joseph, the assistant coach for the third-grade boys team, observed, "It's not just SCSA. If you think about the Zebras, the Ninjas, Tigers and everybody else, there's this huge network of these complementary leagues." Moreover, with year-round tournaments happening up and down the state of California and Las Vegas, teams from all over the state have several opportunities to compete and connect with one another.

Commenting on the tournament circuit, Ben, a father on the ninth-grade boys' team explained,

People from different organizations, different regions -Northern Cal people, San Jose, San Francisco - you meet all the other teams and you meet their parents. As a commissioner, you really get to meet the teams, all the coaches, parents reps, everybody. ... It feels good, and you get to know these people, and you talk to other people, and you're not isolated to just working every day.

Attending tournaments was the primary way members were able to network with other Japanese American leagues within California. One could map out tournament locations that extended as far north as Sacramento and as far south as Orange County. The Hollywood Dodgers Las Vegas

Invitational Basketball Tournament was by far the most talked about tournament among players and parents – it was a highlight of the year for many teams and drew hundreds of Japanese American teams from the state of California. As one parent fondly described, “The Vegas Tournament is like mecca for JA ballers – every team comes out in droves to attend. And it only seems to be getting bigger!” This particular tournament gave teams another opportunity to network and compete with teams outside of their usual regional and local teams.

This expansive network of JA leagues was a revelation for some players. Recounting his experience traveling to different cities in California to participate in tournament, Chuck reflected that when he was younger, he “didn't think there were a lot of Japanese Americans” in the US. Having grown up in mostly white neighborhoods, playing in tournaments allowed Chuck to see how many Japanese Americans were living –and playing basketball – in California. This knowledge served to open Chuck's and other youths' eyes to a much larger ethnic community that extended beyond their local sports leagues.

Occasionally, the social networks established through tournament play carried over into the personal lives of players that extended beyond basketball. For example, when Nori, a high school senior was accepted into the University of California, Davis, her first thought was to email her friend, Denise, who played for the Sacramento Barons, another JA league in Northern California. Nori and Denise had met through the San Jose Ninja's tournament and became close friends over the years, despite their team's fierce competition during the tournament. Nori had hoped that they could be future roommates in the dorms and possibly even form an intermural college basketball team together.

Without a specific geographical location such as a traditional ethnic enclave to bring Japanese American groups together, PCY members built an ethnic community through a network

of traveling sports teams. Willms (2010) argues that Japanese Americans are moving from a more traditional ethnic community to a “community of practice” where “the enterprise of basketball unites many in the community to share in the projects and goals of basketball-related activities, and many more to participate in the fruits of the volunteers’ labor” (72). Through year-round tournaments, youth and their families are linked to one another across gyms scattered across California and Las Vegas for one common activity – basketball. In building an ethnic community based on an activity, these new forms of ethnic communities were characterized by their fluid, shifting and migrant nature.

### **Building Global Communities: Networks with Sporting Communities in Japan**

The league’s efforts to create social and cultural ties went beyond the local ethnic community, even extending its boundaries on a global level - a relationship made possible through the Yonsei Basketball Association (YBA) – a highly selective and competitive traveling basketball team who compete against other youth teams in Japan. Established in 1993, YBA’s objective was to provide fourth-generation Japanese American youth the opportunity to experience their Japanese heritage firsthand – “the vision of the Association is to provide our American youth with a glimpse of their rich heritage through immersion in the Japanese culture by staying with a local Japanese family and participating in their daily lives” ([www.yonseibasketball.org](http://www.yonseibasketball.org)). The league was comprised of a male and female basketball team with players between the ages of 13 and 14-years old. Selected players participated in a goodwill exchange of ideas and cultures by traveling and living with local Japanese families, competing in basketball games against their Japanese counterparts, and visiting prominent cities in Japan for one week. As one of the few JA sports leagues that participate in international travel

and competition, this organization embodied the growing transnational and global influence within sports cultures.

Not all PCY members are fortunate enough to play on the YBA team – only a small number, two or three players, are selected to join the team. The rest of the Yonsei players were selected from other JA leagues in Southern California. Yet, for the privileged few who were selected, participation had a deeply meaningful role in shaping their ethnic identity and strengthened their connectedness to their Japanese roots. Reflecting on the significant cultural impact of her experience after playing on the Yonsei team, Laura, a high school senior, commented,

It was the very first time I went to Japan and I was really, really excited. I didn't know what to expect and to go there and play basketball was a treat for me. I got to go to Japan and see the motherland, and then I got to play basketball on top of it! It was cool because usually when you go to Japan, you don't get to homestay and so I thought that was the best part. ... I got to experience living there, eating what they eat and taking showers and going to the bathroom where they do, so it was really cool.

I also spoke with Stephen and Lisa, two parents who had two children who were picked to play on a Yonsei team. They fondly remembered going with their kids to Japan and competing with local teams in the area. When I asked what impact their visit made on their children's lives, Lisa reflected,

There's the culture part of it. Because these kids are so Americanized, you know. But culturally speaking, that was the cultural impact because that's where they really see a whole different lifestyle. I mean, I don't know—to me, most of [the] kids that play Asian league were probably all in the same socioeconomic class or pretty close. ... So with these kids, their life is all malls and shopping and movies. ... But then they go to Japan and they see this whole different life—some of these [Japanese] kids go to school from sunup to sundown. They ride their bike up everywhere. They don't go to the movies every weekend. So that to me was probably more impactful. ... I think Japan taught them a lot, that they're Japanese but these kids don't go to the movies every weekend, they don't go out eat. They go home, they take the subway to school, they don't have their own car. So I mean, to me, that was a better lesson than if you want to learn about culture and stuff; that was to me, I think, much more impactful.



Reflected in these comments is the cultural awareness that Yonsei players gained through international competition. Trips to “the motherland” and homestays with their host teams offered players an opportunity to participate in everyday Japanese culture while also learning about their cultural roots. In broadening their social circles to go beyond their usual privileged, “Americanized” lifestyle, players were able to appreciate cultural diversity and differences with Japanese youth. In the absence of replenished ethnicity in the form of continuous immigration (Jimenez 2010), some later-generation Japanese Americans are turning to transnational friendships created through sports communities to pique interest in cultural heritage.

Moreover, Yonsei players were able to return the favor a few months later when they hosted players from Japan for a tournament in the US. This athletic exchange program successfully created a transnational network among Japanese and Japanese American youth, many of whom still remained friends with their homestay families through email or Facebook. One Yonsei team even went back after three years to have a “rematch” with their Japanese counterparts. As Janet fondly reminisced, “It was like some big, international family reunion.” Basketball, in this case, was the medium through which the gap between Japanese American and Japanese communities were bridged.

## **Conclusion**

Especially within an ethnic group that has undergone rapid community transformation and retained few institutionalized cultural hubs, the thriving and diverse social networks created within JA leagues was a strong indicator of an existing desire and need among later-generation Japanese Americans to seek out an ethnic community. This was especially important for members who were concerned that their children would have no exposure or access to other

Japanese or Asian friends in their other social circles. As other scholars have noted, ethnic churches (Kim 2006), language schools (Zhou and Kim 2006), and ethnic neighborhoods (Zhou and Kim 2003) have provided second and third-generation immigrant youth outlets for social networking and ethnic community building. These ethnic spaces were not readily available for later-generation Japanese Americans who had moved into predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods. Rather, JA basketball leagues became a popular and viable outlet to “stay connected” to other co-ethnics while still “assimilating” into their predominately, white suburban neighborhoods. Their decision to self-segregate into JA leagues demonstrates how the “team spirit” within the Japanese American community was very much alive and thriving through sports.

Table 5.1: Summary of Social Networks within Japanese American Leagues

Type of Community	Example of network	Central Activity	Impact on Ethnic Community
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Dating partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly games/practices</li> <li>• League parties</li> <li>• Dances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying connected to other co-ethnics</li> <li>• Sharing of social and cultural capital</li> <li>• Creating multigenerational familial ties</li> <li>• Opportunity for co-ethnic dating</li> </ul>
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger JA community</li> <li>• JA leagues in Northern California</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YVG volunteer projects</li> <li>• Tournaments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering civic engagement with ethnic community</li> <li>• Sharing cultural history</li> </ul>
Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basketball teams in Japan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yonsei traveling team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadening cultural awareness</li> <li>• Connecting with cultural roots</li> </ul>

Youth who participated in these leagues certainly learned the basic fundamentals of basketball along with gaining broader life lessons such as teamwork, perseverance, commitment, and hard work. But, as I have mapped out in this chapter, members also fostered closer ties to

co-ethnics across different social networks, bridging a diversity of Japanese American communities together. Table 5.1 above provides a brief summary of the types of social networks, central activities that unified different Japanese American groups together, and the impact these networks had in shaping the ethnic community. Through weekly practices, games, and other league functions, players and their families experienced greater exposure to co-ethnics to forge friendships, maintain closer relationships with extended family, and, for some, find potential dating partners. Through these intimate relationships, members were able to find a “connectedness” with other co-ethnics where they could share knowledge and resources to provide financial, educational, and emotional support to one another. Civic engagement projects and year-round tournaments wove a larger, intricate network of Japanese communities together, particularly with Japanese American veterans and other JA leagues within the state. Finally, to broaden their cultural awareness and explore their cultural roots, some PCY members fostered transnational ties with players in Japan through international traveling teams.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Summary and Theoretic Contributions

In this dissertation, I have explored several research questions to investigate the meaning, roles, and purpose of community youth basketball leagues among later-generation Japanese Americans. Given the legacy of organized sports leagues within this community, how have historical and social contexts shaped these leagues? Why do ethnic sports leagues continue to exist and, in the case of basketball leagues, thrive within assimilated ethnic groups like later-generation Japanese Americans? How do members construct, transform, and affirm racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, meanings, and boundaries? What role do ethnic sports leagues play in creating and maintaining ethnic community?

Drawing from ethnographic data of JA basketball leagues, my dissertation demonstrates that individual, collective, and institutional negotiations of race and ethnicity among later-generation Japanese Americans do not support a “post racial” world where racial and ethnic boundaries cease to exist and impact the individual or collective experience. Rather, race, ethnicity, and gender remain salient in shaping the lives of later-generation Asian American groups, particularly in sports worlds. My findings examine how the construction and (re)negotiation of these social categories continue to influence community boundaries and ties.

### Dissertation Summary

Chapter 2 provides the historical context of Japanese sports leagues within the U.S. spanning from the first generation Japanese immigrants and concluding with present day sports organizations. In this chapter, I also incorporated the lived experience of two PCY members who were instrumental in creating the PCY league. Their tales of discrimination and exclusion

from sporting spaces, particularly before and during WWII, deeply influenced their motivation to create their own sports leagues for a new generation of Japanese American athletes. Because the meaning and purpose of ethnic sports leagues continues to evolve due to historical and social contexts, I argue that contemporary leagues are an ideal site to explore the intricate relationship between race, ethnicity, gender, and community building among later-generation Japanese Americans.

Contrary to classical assimilation theorists, I demonstrate in Chapter 3 that individual, collective, and institutional negotiations of race and ethnicity among later-generation Japanese Americans do not support a “post racial” world where racial and ethnic boundaries cease to exist and impact the individual or collective experience. Rather, race in particular continues to negatively impact Asian American players’ experience and access into basketball teams outside the community; frequently overlooked and underestimated in their size and athletic ability, many players found refuge from these microaggression in ethnic leagues.

Moreover, race and ethnicity remain central to the organization of the league by defining membership and eligibility rules. My findings suggest that the league enforced a hierarchical preference that still prioritized Japanese ancestry and culture but was moving their membership boundaries toward a pan-ethnic identity, lumping several Asian ethnic groups together. In other words, ethnic lines had blurred to include other Asian groups (i.e. Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Thai Americans, etc.), but racial lines were still salient to informally exclude other non-Asian groups (i.e. African Americans, Latinos, and whites). In the case of sports league, later-generation Japanese Americans were not “becoming white” or actively distancing themselves from other co-ethnics. Rather, they were engaging in racial “boundary work” to maintain and preserve ethnic and racial livelihood.

Chapter 4 argues how JA leagues were a contested terrain in which notions and meanings of gender were constructed in complex, fluid and occasionally contradictory ways. Adding to the discussion of how outsiders racialized Asian youth in the previous chapter, I highlight how Asian men and women faced different gendered stereotypes that continued to negatively impact their access and experience in courts outside of the organization. While outsiders characterized young Asian men as non-athletic and less aggressive than Black or white players, Asian females were frequently labeled as submissive and fragile. My analysis also identifies how through co-constructed interactions and practices, including differences in uniforms, coaching attitudes, segregation of teams, and playing styles, members engaged in the “performance of gender” that both reifies and rejects traditional hegemonic notions of gender. Findings suggest that within this contested space, female players were able to achieve greater success than their male counterparts. Empowered by their ability and success playing in ethnic leagues and drawing inspiration from other female role models, Japanese American female players were breaking the “glass ceiling” to emerge as successful “ballers” outside their ethnic communities.

Offering a critique to predictions of a decline in ethnic group cohesion and community building among assimilated ethnic groups, Chapter 5 demonstrates the strong desire among later-generation Japanese Americans to both find and stay connected to other co-ethnics. JA sports leagues play an important role in creating and affirming ethnic community. In this chapter, I also map out how various social interactions and structural policies create both local, organizational, and global social networks, effectively bridging a diversity of Japanese American communities together.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

Findings from this case study can offer larger theoretical implications for the study of race, ethnicity, immigration, and sports. In this section, I specify three specific fields in which my study offers major theoretical insights.

### *Assimilation Frameworks*

My dissertation addresses several limitations from previous assimilation models by examining alternative pathways of incorporation among later-generation Asian groups. Segmented assimilation is critiqued for overlooking the assimilation pathway for groups who have already achieved structural assimilation (Lacy 2007). For example, while the theory accounts for class-related factors that shape pathways of assimilation for low-income immigrant groups, it says little about what happens to ethnic identity for groups after they have achieved middle or upper class status. By studying assimilated, later-generation Japanese Americans, my study picks up where segmented assimilation theory ends. My findings demonstrate that ethnic community continued to remain salient in this group. While Japanese Americans are not at risk of “downward” assimilation or dependent on ethnic communities for socioeconomic support, this group actively sought and created – through youth sports leagues – spaces to for ethnic “connectedness.”

Moreover, segmented assimilation theorists examine pathways of assimilation in the context of an urban context leaving little discussion about ethnic groups who have resettled in communities that do not have a thriving co-ethnic enclave or an urban “underclass.” My dissertation suggests that for later-generation, middle class Japanese Americans, incorporation into mainstream society is patterned in a “strategic assimilation” (Lacy 2004, 2007) where this group consciously retains their connections to the Japanese community through individual and

collective interactions in ethnic sports leagues. Particularly in predominantly white, suburban social spaces, membership in JA leagues offers later-generation Japanese Americans a construction site for players and families to shape and affirm racial, ethnic, and gendered identities.

Finally, my findings offer a critique to neoclassic assimilation theorists who argue the decline of an ethnic distinction and salience of racial categories among assimilate groups. Given the continued racialization of Asian American youth as model minority, weak, and passive, my findings argue that race continues to shape the lived experience of later-generation Japanese Americans. Specifically, this group continues to face barriers that negatively shape their access and experience into mainstream athletic spaces such as basketball. Because their incorporation into these spaces remains conditional and contested, some Japanese American have turned to co-ethnic leagues as an alternative and safe space where they can escape racial microaggressions and level the so called playing field.

### *Race and Ethnicity Frameworks*

My study expands the literature on race and ethnicity by adding to existing models of how racial and ethnic identities and meanings are forged and can shift over time. First, my findings demonstrate how race continues to shape the lives and experience of later-generation Asian groups, particularly in sporting worlds. While many Japanese Americans have structurally and socially incorporated themselves into mainstream society, they still face racialized barriers that limited their access and opportunity in sports teams outside the community. Moreover, in spite of the high rates of intermarriage and mixed-raced population within this group, racial and ethnic boundaries continue to be drawn and remained salient in determining in-group and out-



group membership. While ethnic boundaries had blurred to move toward a panethnic Asian group, members engaged in various “boundary work” to maintain ridged racial lines that excluded non-Asian groups.

My dissertation also adds to theories regarding how ethnicity is emergent and reinvented in host countries. Many scholars have explored how ethnicity takes shape in urban ethnic communities under structural constraints including occupation, residence, and institutional affiliation (Conzen et al. 1992; Yancey et al. 1976). Yet few scholars have explored how and why ethnicity is transformed and remains salient outside the context of an urban ghetto. My dissertation argues that Japanese Americans in predominantly white, suburban communities have created an “emergent culture of hybridity” to preserve ethnic culture (Zhou and Lee 2004, 22). By blending both Japanese cultural elements (i.e. ethnic food and celebration of cultural festivals) and American basketball, JA sports leagues were an active site for the preservation of ethnic culture and its transformation. In this emergent culture of hybridity, later-generation Asian American youth shared a Durkheimian collective consciousness and collective sense of belonging.

My study also expands theories regarding ethnic identity and community for later-generation groups in the absence of what Jimenez (2010) calls a “replenished ethnicity.” Unlike other Asian groups, where consistent immigration has preserved traditional urban ethnic enclaves or spawned suburban “satellite” communities (Zhou 1992; Zhou and Kim 2003), Japanese Americans have fewer new immigrants to replenish their shrinking population. My findings suggest that later-generation Japanese Americans rely on local, organizational, and global networks to share and pass down cultural knowledge; basketball leagues have become a moving, shifting, and ever evolving hub for ethnic replenishment.

*Sociology of Sports*

My dissertation expands the field of sociology of sports by going beyond the white-black, male dominated discussions. This is particularly the case regarding research on basketball; academia rarely acknowledges Asian American experiences and participation within this sport. By casting a spotlight over Japanese American basketball leagues, my study recognizes the diversity and complexity of Asian American youth, many of whom are active members in basketball niches. Moreover, my dissertation takes a closer examination of the racialized and gendered experience of Asian Americans in sports. As Smith (1992) argues, “To fully understand and appreciate the experiences of women of color in sport, more scholarship is need on and from ethnic women with different cultural backgrounds” (246).

While previous scholars have well documented the efforts of earlier generations of Japanese Americans in establishing organized sports leagues (Nakagawa 2001; Niiya 2000; Regalado 2000), few have examined the contributions of later-generation Japanese Americans. My dissertation adds to this historical research by capturing the efforts of third, fourth, and even fifth-generation Japanese American groups who continue to be active in creating sports organizations. In doing so, I capture how the motives and purpose of these leagues have changed or remained constant over time, paying close attention to the social and historical process through which intergenerational differences and tension arise and where continuities take place.

Lastly, adding to previous ethnographic works on sports and youth culture – including Fine’s (1987) study of white Little League baseball players, Thorne’s (1994) investigation of the everyday social worlds of kids in elementary school, and Messner’s (2009) analysis of youth soccer leagues - my dissertation gives voice to the sporting experiences of young Japanese

American basketball players, offering academics and general audiences a rich and detailed examination of the racialized and gendered social worlds of these young players.

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