CHAPTER 14

Japanese American Progressives
A Case Study in Identity Formation

Mari Matsuda

Over ozoni on New Year’s Day of 2011, I told my 86-year-old father I was going to a conference to discuss racial identity of Japanese Americans. “How do you think people saw themselves?” I asked about the Issei Uchinanchu. “Did they think of themselves as Okinawan or just Japanese?” He replied, “It depends, it depends who, where. Hawai‘i? California? Southern California? It depends when. When did they come?”

“It depends” is probably the answer to the question proposed in many chapters in this book, as questions about racial formation always intersect with particular circumstances in complicated ways. The particularity explored in this chapter is Japanese American progressive political identity, including its race and ethnicity aspects.

“You know what they said about Okinawans in the old days . . .,” a Nisei community leader said to me conspiratorially at a luncheon at the Okinawan Center. “Buta kau kau. Aka. That’s what they said about us.”

The first phrase is an amalgam of Hawaiian and Nihongo, meaning, roughly, “they eat pig slop.” The second phrase is political. Even in Hawai‘i, which in my father’s taxonomy was less progressive than Los Angeles, where he grew up, the taint of aka, red, Communist, is part of Okinawan identity. People whisper when they say it.

As a Sansei progressive, I have always traced my political lineage to the great Issei working-class scholar activists I was privileged to know as a child. Aka, by choice, at a time when this risked deportation, persecution, and execution. Some of the Issei, deported from the United States for their organ-
izing, ended up in the Soviet Union, where they were reportedly killed in Stalin’s purges (Ben Kobashigawa, conversation with author, 2000). Aka, vanished in a land they once considered a worker’s paradise.

What drives my quest to understand the identity formation of those who came from nothing and risked everything for their vision of a better world is the question we must answer in this century, if we care about the survival of the human race. As the number of unstable nation-states that possess nuclear weapons increases, as we zoom past the atmospheric carbon dioxide load under which human life can flourish, as global capitalism gasps for breath, like a dying fish in a basket on a boat, we must answer this question: Under what conditions do ordinary people decide to act collectively to demand democratic control over the conditions that affect the quality of their lives?

I lectured recently to a group of visiting Okinawan law students. “Do you think it is right that the U.S. is dictating to your government the conditions under which military bases are built on your island, regardless of what the people of Okinawa want?” I asked. No, they said with great earnestness, it is wrong, it is not democratic, and it is not respectful. You could protest, I said, like the students in Japan who aggressively opposed the war in Vietnam and were an integral part of a worldwide peace movement that eventually ended that war. At pains to answer me honestly, they said, through their professor who was translating, that they are not protesters. They feel strongly that the bases should not be imposed on Okinawa, but they do not think of themselves as people who could stop bases. They do not think it would work. They would not know how to do it. They are not the ones who can act.

“Doshite?” I asked.

“Wakaranai,” they answered, eyes full of regret.

In striking ways, they looked—with their pained, apologetic faces and their willingness to confess and explain their own absence of agency—exactly like my American students. It was not an absence of concern or an ignorance of the issues that paralyzed them. It was their identity. We are not the protesters; we are not the change-makers, that is someone else. I have heard this over and over from American students in many locations, and it breaks my heart, because it sounds like the death of democracy.
How is it that Issei, who could barely speak English, who had no legal status protecting them, who had no money or influence, risked the red-baiting and chose to participate in mass movements for worker rights? How is it that Nisei, faced with the assimilationist pressure of the war years, could form progressive organizations and remain steadfast, lifelong warriors for peace and justice? And what of the Sansei radicals who raised their fists in revolutionary defiance, alongside black and Latino nationalists; did they not raise their children to stand with the same militant pride? If the Issei and Nisei could do it in the middle of McCarthyism, why can my students, with all their privilege, not do it today? The withering of the belief that ordinary people can band together to make meaningful changes marked the opening years of the 2000s.

We faced the greatest economic crisis of our lifetimes, and yet there was no mass movement pushing back to demand jobs, housing, education, and an end to a system that benefits only corporations and warmongers. It is so obvious in this historic moment that the old order has failed us. Thus, in conversation, we explore the anatomy of silence.

“I have been thinking about the corrosive effect of cynicism,” a film studies scholar said.

“It’s possessive individualism,” a sociologist said.

“Everyone is still at the mall, or on Facebook,” a student said.

“My generation doesn’t know how, we grew up after Reagan, there was no critique of capitalism,” a Yonsei said.

While I wait for the answer, I look back at the experience of Japanese Americans who always had a critique and always knew where to go with it and how to convert it to action. Their experience may tell us something about where we need to go now.

These elements emerge as significant in shaping Nikkei activism: specific political study (i.e., reading Marx), connection to multiracial social justice movements, the presence of trained organizers, ethnic/social ties such that Nikkei identity was retained within political activism, cultural production, widely circulated left-leaning Nikkei publications, structural conditions—including race and class—that made injustice obvious, and finally, the presence of a global movement that people made part of their...
identity. These elements also emerge from the story of my family’s political education, which I discuss below along with a brief history of Nikkei progressives.

**Issei Progressives**

At the end of the nineteenth century, Japan suffered from the same conflict between landed gentry and peasant farmers, alongside a growing urban poor, as did much of the world. Exploitation of workers in factory, mine, and field, burdensome taxes, and growing imperial ambitions imposed both a harsh material reality on large numbers of Japanese workers and farmers as well as a political awakening for progressives who studied Marx and watched intently as world events pushed class conflict toward revolutionary change (Kublin 1950, 322–328). The international involvement of Japanese leftists in the early 1900s is striking. They traveled to Europe and the Americas, participating in political action and organizing along the way. In the United States, they faced Palmer Raids and deportation, but they established a foothold, publishing radical/Marxist newsletters with wide circulations and working closely with the American left (Ichioka 1998, 380). Lenin himself thanked Japanese leftists for their opposition to war against Russia (Yoneda 1975, 7).

Yuji Ichioka (1976) and others have documented the organizing and political education of Issei radicals. Prominent features include an international outlook and political action across racial lines. Issei participated in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (Dubofsky 1969). IWW activist Joe Hill traveled to Hawai’i, meeting workers in the early—largely unsuccessful—days of organizing on the plantations (Chinen 2010, 77). And Issei like Jack Kimoto—later arrested and tried under the Smith Act in Hawai’i—marched with the “army of the unemployed” in California demanding jobs during the Great Depression (Jack Kimoto, conversation with author, 1977).

Sen Katayama co-founded the American Communist Party and helped organize Japanese Workers Association branches in New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. His writing, translated into many languages and distributed globally, was part of his pledge to speak out on behalf of the oppressed: “I will be the bleeding mouth from which the gag has been snatched, I will say everything” (Katayama 1918, 39).

Katayama’s comrades participated in the Oxnard sugar beet workers’ strike of 1903, a landmark in the history of Japanese American and Chicano
solidarity in the face of hostility from the reactionary arm of American labor, personified in Samuel Gompers (Street 1998, 193–199; Almaguer 1994). Katayama regularly published in Japanese American Communist publications, exhorting solidarity with workers in Korea and China, as Imperial Japan tightened its grip on those nations.

My father identifies a Meiji education as one of the ways in which Japan’s “beat the West” mentality inadvertently nurtured a leftist consciousness. The Issei were from poor, peasant stock, but they could read. The newspapers and pamphlets promoted by Katayama and other radical intellectuals/organizers found a ready audience among the thousands of working-class Issei who were refugees from the exploitive economic practices of Imperial Japan. My grandfather, Jinkichi Matsuda, and his Okinawan comrades in Los Angeles were among them, active supporters of the International Labor Defense (ILD), a group that raised funds to support worldwide worker organizing and resistance to persecution of worker-radicals (Ginger 1983, 256–258).

The Issei arrived as young workers, learned political economy, and continued their political work after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, joining the United Front Against Fascism. Abandoned by many on the U.S. left, the West Coast Issei were herded into internment centers. The Marxists among them supported the U.S. war effort, even as they were snubbed by the Communist Party. In its first issue published following suspension due to the internment, Dōhō, published by Seiji Fujii, proclaimed, “Today, it is the fundamental task of all pro-democratic Japanese Americans, both Issei and Nisei, to rally the people around the war policies laid down by the President” (Fujii 1943).

The Communist-affiliated Dōhō urged those eligible to volunteer for military service and those able to relocate under War Relocation Authority programs designed to settle loyal Japanese Americans in the Midwest and other inland locations.

After the war, Issei progressives continued their organizing efforts. They were persecuted during the McCarthy era, and they fought back, joining the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born to fight politically motivated deportations (Smith 1959, 46). In that group, they worked closely with Korean, Chinese, Mexican, and European immigrants (Garcilazo 2001). Although labeled a “Communist front group” (House Committee on Un-American Activities 1957, 7) by red-baiters, the committee included many liberals and civil libertarians who were not Marxists.
My childhood community, the Okinawans in Los Angeles, was active in all of this history. Don Matsuda was born in Los Angeles in 1924. His father, Jinkichi Matsuda, was an Issei Okinawan forced off the land by taxes. Jinkichi Matsuda wrote of his experience.

A letter came asking for money
Traces of an unsteady brush
Younger brother, just turned fourteen,
Takes care of mother nearly sixty and two grandmothers,
eighty and seventy-five
So early for a full man’s load of suffering on your back
Taxes, taxes, emergency taxes
Though a tiller of the land, your belly is half-empty
And I went overseas! Three old women . . . living day by day
Four lives and one horse?
Younger brother! I will squeeze blood to raise the fifteen dollars.

The struggle of the oppressed
Promises victory in the end
We will be victorious!
Think that the future will be bright,
Younger brother! To work is good
But take care of yourself too.
(J. Matsuda 1989, 171)

Seventeen-year-old Jinkichi Matsuda arrived literate, thanks to a Meiji-era education in Okinawa, and was able to teach himself English. The community pooled funds to lend him enough to go to college and graduate with a degree in dentistry from the University of Southern California.

Opening a dental practice in the middle of the Depression, serving poor Nikkei and Mexicans, he made little money, but as an educated man he was respected and called Sensei. Like his peers, working-class Okinawans with an interest in world affairs, he read Marx and Engels and struggled with other working-class immigrants for worker rights.

When I asked my father what his first memory of political activism was, he recalled being about five years old and watching his father and friends rehearsing a cultural performance of some kind that involved dancing and spears. Drinking, studying, performing, and eating were all done communally, with social life and political life intertwined.
An unusual aspect was the inclusion of women. According to Don Matsuda, this was a direct response to the theoretical analysis of the position of women by Marx and Engels. Women participated in cultural production in this community of politicized working-class intellectuals. The progressive Okinawan Issei produced a journal, *LooChoo* (an alternative spelling of Ryukyu), which included essays and poems by women, including my grandmother, Tsuyuko Matsuda. When the Nisei were old enough, they became English-language contributors to this journal.

The rehearsals of song and dance were not just for performance within the Okinawan community. Performances in multicultural fund-raisers for the International Labor Defense brought together large numbers of left-wing immigrants of many races. Immigrant activists were under constant threat of deportation, and they joined together with other immigrant groups, including Jews, Slavs, and Mexicans, for mutual protection. I can remember from my own childhood sitting in the kitchen of Paul Kochi and Kiyo Os-hiro, Issei leftists who barely spoke English, as they received visitors—black and white—who shared jokes and food over broken English conversation. In this period, Kochi-san was engaged in a legal battle fighting deportation, and allies of many races were supporting him. This is striking in contrast to the usual immigrant experience, which continues to this day, of the first generation isolated in a narrow silo of one ethnic community.

Food was another part of this cross-race organizing. The Los Angeles Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born held large festivals at which each ethnic group prepared food from their country, often dressed in ethnic costume as they served from their national booth. Marathon chess games, folk dances, food, drink, horseshoes, and costume: this was political work, but it was also play, entertainment, culture, and friendship. These were considered “Communist front” activities and were subject to government surveillance. It took courage just to attend, particularly for vulnerable immigrants. The courage was bolstered by the wafting scent of teriyaki grilling, the sound of accordions playing polka, and guitarists singing mariachi style (Garcilazo 2001, 284).

These mass gatherings did not happen spontaneously. Organizers visited farmers, laborers, gardeners, and vegetable sellers, talking about the need to band together to pursue common ends. According to Don Matsuda, the hardcore organizers and propagandists were Naichi. They immigrated slightly later than the first group, many of whom went to Hawai‘i at the turn of the century. They were more educated and more progressive, exposed to aka thought in Japan.
Organizers came to an audience ready for their message. Conditions in the United States were obviously stacked against immigrant workers, from racist immigration laws to exploitive labor systems. Tenant farmers were subject to crooked lease practices. Farm laborers toiled under starvation conditions. My father describes his father reading a letter secretly sent by the young daughter of a central valley farm family from the same furusato. She was begging for money in a ragged child’s hiragana, because they were out of food and her own parents were too proud to ask for help—please, Uncle, send us what you can because the food ran out several days ago.

The idea of worker solidarity, class consciousness, and “internationalism” made sense given what the Issei could see around them. Paul Kochi (1937) wrote in his memoir of crossing over the desert through Mexico, helped by kind families who shared their meager provisions:

What surprised me in having a good look at the mother was how much her type and her actions were exactly like my own mother’s. And the daughter bore a close resemblance to a farmer’s daughter back home. . . . The mother pulled out several thorns from the bottoms of my feet and gave me a pair of home-made zapatos—leather sandals. (Kochi 1978, 33–34)

They understood that this Japanese stranger was a poor peasant like them:

It seemed for them we were all immigrants traveling the same road and they understood our situation from their hearts. This class consciousness cuts across race and nationality and promotes a mutual understanding which, if preserved and extended, would make the deserts bloom. (Kochi 1978, 39)

Indeed, given the obvious conditions of oppression that had forced the Issei out of Japan and that rendered their way so hard in the United States, the question is not so much “why did some Issei become socialists,” but rather “why didn’t they all?”

What seems unique to the radical Issei I knew was that they formed a community of like-minded people and actively read and studied political theory. This was a lifelong project. They were doing it as young men in the 1920s, and as old men in the 1970s, when Paul Kochi and Shingi Nakamura, whom I was privileged to know, would hold political texts under magnifying glasses to continue their study as their eyesight failed. Kochi-san
and Shingi-san never ended their activism and served as leaders in the Los Angeles welfare rights movement in the 1970s.\footnote{350}

Active political study, professional organizers, mass circulation of Japanese-language progressive newspapers, and participation in multiracial leftist formations made it possible for these Issei to turn their natural understanding of the unfairness of life on the bottom into political activism. Growing up in this period, some Nisei started life well positioned to become radicals.

**Nisei Progressives**

Many in the Nisei generation, born in the United States, were naturally drawn to the leftist politics they were exposed to from two directions. The many left-wing formations and publications started by the Issei complemented political and cultural developments of the day. The New Deal, with the accompanying legitimization of unions; the romantic left of the intelligentsia, from John Reed to Picasso; the active organizing among college students and young workers that was part of a nationwide network of committed strategists, all reached the Nisei along with other members of their generation. A working-class Okinawan plantation worker from Hawai‘i could attend “labor college” in California and gain firsthand experience in the details of running a successful strike, from soup kitchen to morale committee (Chinen 2010, 81). As Jere Takahashi (1982) has described, a Nisei college student could join a range of organizations—anarchist, socialist, Trotskyist, CPUSA, or some version of “democratic”—right on campus.\footnote{351}

For readers today, this organizational participation may seem like a naïve adherence to doctrinaire thinking, but this reading misses the reality that the left held commonsense appeal for young people who had seen their parents’ labor exploited and who grew up amidst the vilest anti-Japanese race-baiting imaginable. The Communist Party, for example, called for equality and fairness for workers and immigrants. The Communist Party of Hawai‘i, led by Nisei Charles Fujimoto, had the following platform in 1948:

[We support a] program of government condemnation of large estates and resale of the land to the people for home sites and small farms at cost. We support the revision of present immigration laws, such as the Oriental Exclusion Act, to provide naturalization rights to all immigrants regardless of race or color. We urge the public ownership of all
public utilities. On taxation, we believe in the principle of taxation according to ability to pay, with personal exemptions. We support the granting of immediate Statehood for Hawai‘i. (Butler 1949)

This platform was similar to the goals ultimately obtained by the Democratic Party in Hawai‘i, run by Nisei who were liberals, not Marxists.

The dark days of McCarthyism meant that the most radical Nisei were persecuted. In Hawai‘i, several were put on trial for treason under the Smith Act, and many more—the “reluctant 39”—were stigmatized and blacklisted because of their refusal to testify in witch-hunt hearings run by the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC) (Chinen 2010, 86). At that time, my family was living in Los Angeles. Under the blacklist system, my father was fired from thirteen jobs and finally opened his own television repair business in order for the family to survive.

For Nisei, like my father, who grew up with Issei Marxists and followed them to their meetings, it was natural to continue political work. My mother, Kimi Matsuda, was exposed to leftist politics as a university student active in the labor movement in Hawai‘i. Study groups at the labor canteen—a gathering place for visiting progressive GIs who would not patronize the segregated USO—were her introduction to Marx, and a labor canteen seminar taught by Ewart Guinier (father of critical race theorist Lani Guinier, and founder of black studies at Harvard University) was her introduction to African American history.

While Nisei progressives were a small subset of the Nisei population, they were not an insignificant presence. “Was it just a handful when you were in school?” I pushed my mother in a recent conversation. “Oh no,” she insisted, rattling off names of members of Hawai‘i Youth for Democracy (HYD), one of the many similar organizations with “Democracy” in their names, which stood for a version of democracy that included progressive analysis of political economy.

HYD, a University of Hawai‘i student organization, was “an interracial, inter-faith youth organization dedicated to character building and education in the spirit of democracy and freedom.” Begun in 1945 and officially recognized as a student organization in 1946, within the school, the group stood for “academic freedom, the right of students and professors to express themselves freely, and a campaign for more scholarships and dormitories.” Beyond the university, HYD “strongly support[ed] the campaign for statehood” and supported “an America progressively freer of prejudice and
poverty, and a nation working with the United Nations to preserve peace” (Ka Palapala Yearbook 1946, 93, 176). The group planned such events as International Student’s Day, How Today’s Youth Shapes the World of Tomorrow, Wages and Prices, Why You Should Vote, Post-War Japan, Russia’s Foreign Policy, and Is the American Press Free, with a particular interest in labor issues. Noted feminist/progressive leaders Patsy Mink, later elected to Congress, and Jean King, who later served as lieutenant governor of Hawai‘i, were members. The organized appeal to youth that generated the HYD is evident in this excerpt from a 1945 American Youth for Democracy recruiting pamphlet:

You’ve got to see such things as AYD’s first anniversary dinners held in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, where such prominent youth and adults as Lieutenant-Colonel Evens Carlson, Frederic March, Sgt. Al Schmid, Norman Corwin, Howard Fast, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Barney Ross, Orson Welles and others paid tribute to the youth of America and to their organization, AYD.

There were big cultural events like AYD’s Salute to “Fats” Waller, shortly after his death. Four thousand young people jammed Carnegie Hall to see the greatest names in the entertainment world perform in honor of the great Negro jazz artist. Among the sponsors and performers were such people as Duke Ellington, Leopold Stokowski, Count Basie, Deems Taylor, Bill Robinson, Jimmy Durante, Paul Whiteman and a list that made this AYD program an outstanding cultural event of the season. (American Youth for Democracy 1945, 22–23)

Don and Kimi Matsuda met in Chicago, where they traveled for a national Nisei for Wallace meeting.11 Henry Wallace was the Progressive Party’s candidate for president in 1948 (Hatfield 1997). The Nisei contingent of his campaign joined with other ethnic groups to encourage inclusion of racial justice and immigrant rights positions in the Wallace platform (Bahr 2007). This was well before the civil rights movement. The inclusion of antiracist positions showed the Wallace campaign’s willingness to depart from the mainstream. Most significantly, the campaign refused to exclude Communists and succumb to red-baiting. It is difficult through today’s lens to imagine an American political candidate so unafraid of leftist politics, and even more difficult to imagine Nisei, stereotyped as quiet assimilationists, as active participants.
The story of Nisei participation in the Wallace campaign and other militant, pro-labor, pro-peace, antiracist organized movements is undertold because it does not fit with the “good minority” story of the compliant Nisei. It was not a majority, but as my mother insists, it was more than a handful. In every city with a Nihonmachi, there were Nisei who were active at the union hall, who went to study groups on leftist theory, who walked picket lines. Some of their stories are recorded—including those of Kazu and Tak Iijima, Yuri and Bill Kochiyama, Ernest and Chizu Iiyama, Lewis Suzuki, and Karl Yoneda Kibei—but many more are unknown to recorded history.

A key feature of this cohort is their lifelong commitment. The Nisei for Wallace veterans went on to support the black civil rights movement, the anti–Vietnam War movement, and numerous labor and antipoverty struggles. They provided an elder presence when the Asian American movement blossomed in the 1970s, and they influenced Sansei activists by providing a solid counterexample to the valorized and obsequious “model minority.”

Today, my father can barely walk, but he will show up at a peace demonstration in front of the Japanese consulate, calling for removal of U.S. bases in Okinawa. He is an active member of Veterans for Peace, walking with a cane but still carrying a peace placard, just as he did as a young man caught on camera by the FBI, protesting the U.S. invasion of the Bay of Pigs. This picture is a preserved souvenir of his political activism, courtesy of HUAC. Don Matsuda was called before HUAC and blacklisted during the McCarthy era. He was a decorated war veteran who had volunteered while at Heart Mountain Internment Camp, but they called him “un-American.”

The patronizing tone of his interrogation by HUAC comes through the dry transcript. When Matsuda refused to identify himself in the photo from the Fair Play for Cuba Rally, the following exchange occurred:

Rep. Scherer. It is obvious to me that the picture in this photograph is that of the witness . . .

Mr. Doyle. I agree that he is a good-looking native of California . . .

Mr. Scherer. Well, let’s not compliment him too much, taking the fifth amendment on his Communist Party activities.

Mr. Doyle. Well I can compliment him on being born in the great State.

[Later, the representatives discuss Matsuda’s four battle stars.]
Mr. Doyle . . . I don’t understand how a man who has displayed the valor you displayed, to get four battle stars, in defense of our freedoms in the world, can do that and then be identified with an international conspiracy that openly says that, if necessary in its judgment, it will use force and violence to overthrow this Government. . . . And this man has had an education, attended the University of Chicago for a while. I want you to think pretty seriously, Matsuda. Aren’t you in the wrong outfit? Do you belong there?

History shows that the red-baiters were actually the ones in the “wrong outfit,” shamefully violating their oath of office by participating in harassment of law-abiding American citizens who were doing as the Constitution demands: speaking up as citizens, peacefully petitioning their government, perpetuating a government of the people and for the people. As the African American singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson told HUAC:

I am being tried for fighting for the rights of my people, who are still second-class citizens in this United States of America. . . . I stand here struggling for the rights of my people to be full citizens in this country. And they are not. They are not in Mississippi. And they are not in Montgomery, Alabama. And they are not in Washington. They are nowhere, and that is why I am here today. You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of his people, for the rights of workers, and I have been on many a picket line for the steelworkers too. And that is why I am here today. (Bentley 1971, 778–786)

Nikkei progressives from Hawai‘i to New York stood in solidarity with Robeson, refusing to cooperate with HUAC, as they were wrongly accused of plotting the violent overthrow of the United States. My father and the Issei before him were judicious, gentle men whose weapons were pens and picket signs. Their commitment to the study of history and political theory, their constant debates, and their knowledge of world affairs teach a major lesson about the prerequisites of strong social change movements. It is a serious enterprise that requires courage, intellectual muscle, and intellectual work.
Sansei Progressives

The baby boom generation came of age in the ideological vacuum left by McCarthyism. Openly Marxist Japanese American publications no longer existed. Many active Issei and Nisei departed from visible political life after the scars and recrimination of the McCarthy period, and leftist Japanese American organizations disappeared. People who decide from a young age to side with the underdog and take risks for justice, however, never completely disappear.

The civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement were the call to action for the next generation. The predominant mainstream Nikkei political formation of the 1960s, the Japanese American Citizens League, was part of a coalition that sought passage of the civil rights acts and the end of Jim Crow in America. Marxists and radicals were allies in this struggle. My family participated in the No on Prop. 14 campaign, in a fight against the racially restricted housing covenants that kept Japanese Americans out of “good” neighborhoods in California. The campaign symbol in the Nikkei community was the character 家, the word for house, pronounced like the word for “no,” reminding people to vote “no” so they could buy the house of their choice.

The Vietnam War, with its horrific imagery of massacred civilians—elders and babies alike—was viscerally offensive to Sansei, who had experienced domestic racism and believed the U.S. public tolerated the slaughter of civilians in Vietnam only because the victims were Asian. A new militancy emerged, as black power and Chicano and Puerto Rican nationalism altered the tone of political discourse. The idea that a group once despised and belittled in racist culture could change that culture by aggressive confrontation appealed to young Sansei who took to the streets in direct action. They revived Japanese cultural practices, such as Taiko drumming, as part of their anti-assimilationist worldview. Sansei also revived the tradition of serious political study, and once again long arguments about the correct interpretation of Lenin’s “What Is to Be Done,” echoed in Los Angeles Nikkei living rooms (Nakamura 2009).

Sansei were leaders in the ethnic studies movement supporting “our history our way” and the inclusion of Asian Americans as part of American history. In this sense, Sansei activism is directly responsible for the book you hold in your hands, because the serious study of the Japanese American experience would not have institutional support at major universities if not...
for an ethnic studies movement that occupied buildings, organized student strikes, and literally brought military tanks out into the streets of San Francisco, all over the question of whether books like this one should be written and studied.

Some Sansei radicals had direct ties to past generations of Japanese American progressives.\(^{18}\) Chris Iijima, troubadour of the Asian American movement, was the son of Nisei Marxists who had dared to challenge the CPUSA on its support of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Sansei deliberately sought out old-timers like Paul Kochi and Karl Yoneda, who were still studying, marching, and organizing as they had since before the war, and learned from them.

In Honolulu, former Smith Act defendants Charles and Eileen Fujimoto, Nisei, and Jack Kimoto, Issei, became active once again, in the Hawai‘i Alliance, a branch of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Oppression, an outgrowth of the Free Angela Davis movement. They brought in Sansei participants, myself included, to support initiatives like the National Coalition to Overturn the Bakke Decision—a California Supreme Court decision that had ended affirmative action in that state. Aiko Reinecke, former Smith Act defendant, served as patron to many Sansei activists and ultimately received an apology and reparations from the Hawai‘i legislature (Matsuda 1998). Koji Ariyoshi, another Nisei radical who had fought alongside Mao Tse-tung in China, served as an adviser to Sansei activists in Honolulu (Joy Chong-Stannard, Director, Center for Biographical Research, University of Hawai‘i, personal communication).

The Sansei story of activism echoes that of the two previous generations: it was part of a multiracial coalition, included cultural production, was international in outlook, and included critical political study at its core. McCarthyism left no mass political organizing in place when the Sansei came of age. There was much reinventing of the wheel. In contrast to the Issei and Nisei experience, there was a noted absence of experienced professional organizers and an absence of mass working-class participation. The Sansei movement, though powerful and significant, could not attain the reach of what the Issei had established in their radical beachhead in the Americas. This may be why the Yonsei generation feels it is on its own, and why the Yonsei return to culture, Okinawan spear dances and all, is devoid of politics.
Conclusions

At a recent union-sponsored organizing effort I participated in, a young student told me she was excited to talk to “real workers,” a novelty in her political experience. After a screening of the film *Song for Ourselves*, chronicling the Sansei movement, a young viewer turned to me and said, “I am so jealous.” Perhaps greater exposure to the long and gallant history of Japanese American progressives will serve as a useful tool to this generation that holds in its hands the biggest change-making contradiction ever given to an American Nikkei generation, the most obvious disparity of wealth and power, alongside the sweetest promise of democracy.

The students who tell me they “aren’t protesters” have the wrong idea about what political work is. The protest is the last day. On the first day, you read history. On the second day, you meet with friends over food and drink, and argue about what history teaches. On the third day, you find other people who are doing the same thing and you meet with them, and so on, leading up to a mass demonstration of tens of thousands, making specific demands and extracting specific concessions, all strategically planned for and organized around.

Another key lesson is about the role of race and antiracism in all of this. The Issei radicals were internationalists; they never believed any story about the inevitability of race dictating x, y, or z. Common humanity and class unity were abiding themes for them, which meant an aggressive and explicit antiracist stance. Even as a child I knew how to tell the difference between progressive and nonprogressive Issei. Progressive Issei would never use words like “Kuro-chan,” a diminutive and insulting term for black people. The most progressive allies in the broader left pantheon, like the IWW, the ILWU, and the Wallace campaign, were early adopters of anti-racism.

Racism was attacked. Race was not, however, denied. Issei LIKED being Japanese/Okinawan and had a great deal of chauvinistic pride about that. Ben Kobashigawa (2000) explained that Issei radicals like Shingi Nakamura embraced Okinawan performing arts in a deliberate effort to reject, “retokkan,” the “haji,” inferiority, imposed by the colonization of Okinawa. Elevating Okinawan culture brought self-respect, the groundwork for political strength. The focus on traditional ethnic forms of cultural production, particularly poetry, music, and dance, was a source of self-worth, and a gift to share with comrades of other nationalities. This
was part of a political belief that folk culture belongs to workers and is therefore admirable and inalienable. It was also a part of organizing. Everyone came to the table with their differences intact and valued. The predominant impression I received from stories of culture night at the ILD was . . . it was great fun.

When my mother met Paul Robeson for the first time, she reports he gave her a warm hug and said that he loved singing in Hawai‘i, where he was so warmly received. Nisei were among the organizers of Robeson’s debut concert in Honolulu (Robeson 2010), and he spoke often of his solidarity with Asian peoples. Robeson, quite capable of opera, focused on folk songs of many races. The music of ordinary people, sharing international solidarity, was the old left soundtrack the Nisei progressives sang along to. My lullabies included the Irish freedom anthem “Kevin Barry” and the German “Die Gedanken Sind Frei” (Blood-Patterson 1988, 214–215). Like the SNCC army that took courage in the darkest hour from singing freedom songs, the inclusion of ethnically specific culture as a prominent part of political action is a strand in the Japanese American political experience. This is seen most significantly with the Issei but continued with the role of culture in the Sansei/Asian American movement (see, e.g., the work of Chris Iijima and Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto and Janice Mirikitani) and in politically aware Yonsei artists like the filmmaker Tad Nakamura, who specifically reference that period.

The material conditions of deprivation and the overt racism my ancestors encountered resulted in both suffering and resistance. People suffer now, as well, but the cause is masked. Yonsei suffer from joblessness, poor housing options, absence of health insurance, heavy educational debt, and demoralization, but it is harder to see who or what is depriving them of the opportunity to thrive. With just a bit of political consciousness raising, the causes and potential solutions could become obvious, but there is no cadre of idealistic young organizers going door to door to start this conversation. Multiracial alliances with workers, serious political study, and professional organizing are the elements missing for the current generation. They tell me, and I hope they are right, that social media organizing can jump-start all of this. Nonetheless, the significant absence of mass-circulation, progressive news and analysis, whether in print or online, in the Asian American community stands in stark contrast to the record of thousands of regular readers reached by the progressive Nikkei press in the early twentieth century. On the island of Kaua‘i alone, the Marxist Yoen Jiho (Hawai‘i
Star), with a primarily Okinawan readership on the island of Kaua‘i, had a circulation of one thousand (Chinen 2010, 78).

The Issei and Nisei radicals whom I have loved and admired did not, as they dreamed, bring about a worker’s paradise in their lifetimes. They thought it was possible, given advances in technology, to feed and shelter and educate everyone, if we simply shared, and that we could have a lot of time left over for cultural production. They talked long into the night about what this would look like and how it would come about. The word “democracy” was prominent in these discussions. It did not quite happen, but I am their child, and I believe it could, still.

Notes

1 One such newsletter published by Japanese immigrant Communists was *Kaikyūsen* (Class Struggle), published in San Francisco. Renamed *Zaibei Rōdō Shim bun* (Labor News) and then *Rōdō Shim bun* (The Japanese Worker), the newsletter then relocated to Los Angeles, where it remained, and was retitled *Dōhō* (Brotherhood).


3 Sen Katayama was one of the founders of the socialist and labor movements in Japan. When he moved to the United States in 1914, he began publishing a monthly journal called *Heimin* (The Commoner). “Under his influence, Japanese immigrant Communists, including Okinawans and women, appeared in the 1920s, and by the middle of the decade they organized Japanese Workers Association branches in New York City, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.” (Ichioka 1998, 380)

4 The United Front Against Fascism was a popular concept on the left during World War II. It required adherents to set aside ideological differences and the long list of left causes in order to focus all effort on winning the war. An editorial by the Japanese American Committee for Democracy explained the mission:

First: To contribute to the smashing of fascism by aiding the war effort, and
Second: To fight against all forms of racial discrimination, particularly those directed against Japanese Americans.

In a previous editorial we pointed out that the Nisei problem is but a part of the entire minority problem in America. As such, it cannot be solved apart from the Jewish, Negro, or other minority problems, afflicting not only this country, but many others. When we recognize this, we are forced to cross boundary lines and to confront a ferocious form of racism, which only fascism can thrust upon us.

If only because German and Japanese fascism constitute such an overwhelming menace compared to our native fascist fringe, a good case can be built for pushing the first plank of our program harder than the second. But if our thesis is correct—that our two basic aims are merely two arms of a pincer attempting to close in on fascism—then, it would be just as futile to push the first and ignore the second. For one arm of the pincer can do very little without the other, toward the defeat of fascism. (Japanese American Committee for Democracy 1945)

5 Ben Kobashigawa writes of the conflict between older Okinawan Issei and younger radical Issei who formed the “Seinenkai” in Los Angeles. “The Okinawan Seinenkai drew its political direction from the American Communist Party” (Kobashigawa 2000, 7).

6 Coincidentally, as this chapter was prepared for submission, the author witnessed a cultural performance with spears at the 2012 Eisa Festival in Honolulu on May 12, 2012. According to festival organizer Shari Y. Tamashiro (2012), the Young Okinawans of Hawai‘i performed a Meekata (e-mail to Sara Lee, May 30, 2012).


8 Discussion groups focusing on labor issues prompted many Nisei on college campuses to become politically active.

9 “The Hawai‘i Seven” were individuals connected with the ILWU who were charged with plotting to overthrow the U.S. government.
The Honolulu Labor Canteen was established in mid-1945 on the initiative of the local labor movement. Jack Hall, regional director of the ILWU in Hawai‘i, and Norval Welch, the NMU port agent, along with others developed the idea to establish a nonracist service canteen, because the USO and the Red Cross would not allow Asians or African Americans into their canteens. The canteen would emphasize the theme of labor-management harmony and offer labor education programs to people both in and out of the service. The canteen opened its doors on August 19, 1945. With the war ending, the canteen planned to transition to a peacetime community project with the following goal:

Recognizing the need to promote harmonious relations and better understanding among all racial, religious, economic and political groups and wishing to supplement the facilities now provided by existing organizations, we, members of Labor, Business, the Armed Forces and the Community in Hawaii, acting upon the initiative of Labor and friends of Labor, have formed the Labor Canteen.

The Honolulu Labor Canteen became a center of labor education and a congregating place for leftists in and out of the service (Marquit 2002, 10).

Henry Wallace ran for president in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket. His campaign was supported by many multicultural and progressive groups, including the Communist Party. Another such support group was the Nisei for Wallace (or Nisei Progressives) started by Japanese American activists who had been affected by the U.S. government’s forced evacuation of Japanese Americans to internment camps.


See Fujino (2005).

See Taylor (1993); Kochiyama (2004); San Francisco Chronicle (2011); and Rafu Shimpo (2012).

See Bryant (2005).

See Yoneda (1983); Yoneda (1975); Streamas (1998); and Friday (2003).


Nash’s ancestors included Issei pacifists and feminists and Nisei progressives involved in the Japanese American Committee for Democracy and other labor and civil rights movements. Nash was also influenced by Nisei Yuri Kochiyama, William Horhi, Minoru Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Fred Korematsu. “Issei–Nisei progressives were a vital component of my development,” he says.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was initially created in 1960 to coordinate the many sit-ins that began happening across the South after black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, refused to leave a lunch counter after being denied service. As the civil rights movement grew, the SNCC was influential in organizing sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, and other actions such as the freedom rides and voter registration initiatives (Zinn 1964). Music and “freedom songs” were an integral part of the SNCC direct action method (Guttentag 2009). The SNCC eventually dissolved in the 1970s (Zinn 1964).


Similar radical Nikkei newspapers were published in several cities throughout the first half of the twentieth century. (See note 1.)

References
Blood-Patterson, Peter, ed. 1988, Rise up Singing. Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Corp.


