

In Their Footsteps



Legacy of Issei women and the Japanese YWCA building*

*Young Women's Christian Association

Photo: Women in front of Japanese YWCA, 1936
(San Francisco Public Library History Center)

Created for October 2026
performance art piece by Melody
Takata, featuring:



Melody Takata



Francis Wong and
Lewis Jordan

Musicians



Genny Lim

Poet



Suz Takeda

MC



Hien Huynh

Dance



Crystel and
Cameron Hadley

Taiko

Zine by Crystel Hadley

1830 Sutter Street: home to Nihonmachi Little Friends, a preschool in the heart of Japantown.

Kids here learn taiko drumming,
say “ittadakimasu” before lunch,
and pound mochi at oshogatsu
(new year’s).



The building wasn't always a preschool. Its story starts with a remarkable woman: Yona Abiko. Yona arrived in San Francisco from Japan in 1910, part of a wave of Japanese women arriving in the US around that time.



Yona Abiko

Yona noticed these Issei¹ women, many of them picture brides², struggling to adjust to their new home in the US. They needed a place to gather, learn English, gain skills, and build community to support each other in this new country.

¹Issei: First-generation immigrants born in Japan

²Picture brides: Women who immigrated to marry Japanese men in the USA, typically arranged by matchmakers based on photographs



Picture brides arriving at Angel Island, California, c. 1910.
Courtesy of California State Parks, Number 090-706

I have found my tongue

By Genny Lim

Buried under the burning coals of a kotatsu
I have found a new voice
Under the trembling folds of my old, faded kimono
I have found a new way to speak
I have found a new thread
In the fraying of tradition
It unravels from the Eastern Rising Sun
To the Western shores of Gasshu Koku
In the land of broken tongues
I am learning a new language
With letters that sound like the
Chirping of a strange bird
Alighting on my tongue
The thrill of laughter and surprise
Fill me like a child taking her first steps
Will I stumble and fall?
Will I have the courage to
Make my own way in this new world?
Like a starling blown out of its nest?
Is this a new me?
Where will she take me?
I ask myself every moment of the day
Two tongues have I
One that guides me from the past
And one that shows me tomorrow!

Yona and her friends opened a boarding house for Issei women to learn English and American-style sewing and cooking.

The program was such a success that they quickly outgrew their space and raised money to acquire a new space at 1830 Sutter.

Even though they raised the money, they weren't legally allowed to own the land.



Young Issei women campaign for a Japanese YWCA building in the 1920s. *Generations: A Japanese American Community Portrait*

The Alien Land Law prohibited Asian immigrants and even their American-born children from owning land. Yona worked with the YWCA to hold the land in trust for the Japanese community.

The Red Thread

By Genny Lim

Unmei no Akai Ito
From the first, the thread found its way
Through thick layers of cloth
That weighed on my soul
Like a flower, past its bloom
A frayed thread, held up
With fingers never meant
To guide a needle, let alone
Embroider ducks and phoenixes
These hands, strong as fired clay
Not delicate and pliant as silk
Could change the course of fate
With the determination of stone
From the first, the thread
Found its way to you
Who stood, unflinching
Equal, side by side me
Neither above, nor below
But as brick and mortar
To build our new life
Our new home, Nihonmachi
Stitch by stitch as Issei, Nisei, Yonsei
Generation after generation
A whole cloth spun from a single thread
A solid foundation of love
Stronger than the rope of custom
You, the needle, I, the thread
I, the paper, you, the ink
Together, unbreakable
Unmei no Akai Ito
The Red Thread of Destiny!

Legendary architect Julia Morgan, one of the first women in her field, designed the new building at 1830 Sutter.

Her design was very much Japanese, with solid beams, a stage with shoji screens, and decorative wooden panels called ranma.



YWCA building, c. 1930s (Nihonmachi Little Friends via Carey & Co.).

For the Issei women homesick and struggling to adjust to the US, the space was a welcoming home away from home.



YWCA opening day, November 1932.
Photo by Moriyama Studio

Yona's song

By Genny Lim

She is walking with quick, wide steps
into the distant horizon
Where the shore ends and where
the tide washes over the rocks
Where I wait and watch,
day after day for her ship to return
What will she look like?
Will she know me?
Or will I be a stranger?
Sisters, from one shore to another
Bound by distance and time
Bound by the remembrance of childhood
And the voice of Okaachan calling
I watched her running with bare feet
Along the rice fields
Her long black braid swinging behind her
Chasing a butterfly hovering over the stalks
Then she disappears into the blue void
Of a big, wide world that would one day
Forge an invisible bridge over the Pacific
For her to cross and return home
And she would take my hand and
Together, bound by hope
We would cross any ocean, any border
To transform hatred into compassion
And enmity, into unity
And both shores, into home

In 1942, everything changed. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the US sent 120,000 people of Japanese descent to incarceration camps.



Dorothea Lange, Records of War Relocation Authority 1942

Given a week or less to leave, many had to trust neighbors to care for their homes and businesses.

Yona entrusted 1830 Sutter to the YWCA for safekeeping when she was sent to Tanforan, sick with cancer. Though the Quakers helped get her out and to Philly for treatment, she died just a few years later.

White-ness

By Genny Lim

White walls, white stalls
White skin, white laws
White, white, to cover us all
White, white, to erase us all
In a shroud, in a cloud
In the dead of the night
In a screech of crows
They come, they come
To lock us up
They come to tell us
We are enemy aliens
They come to tell us
We are Un-American
We are the enemy
Lurking from our farms, gardens
Groceries, schools and homes
We are Issei, Kibei, Nisei
Wanted for our yellow skin
Banished to Tanforan
The smell of manure reeks
Through the linoleum-covered dirt floor
In a white painted stall, 10 by 20 feet
This, my new home
A white bulb hanging
Over a makeshift, prison life
Everything taken, gone!
All the years, all the struggle
To build a dream! Shattered!
Everything taken from us!
What good is English
When all have deaf ears?
Who can bear witness?
That we are true and loyal citizens?

The war has defeated us all
Our family and friends in Japan
Devastated by the bomb
Our family and friends here in the U.S.
Devastated by the hatred
White skin, white laws
Power is not strength
But too often, fear disguised as might
Oh, how I long for a taste of Nikujaga!

During the war, 1830 Sutter became home to Quaker activist group. Bayard Rustin, a gay Black activist who later co-organized the March on Washington, likely stayed in the building while working on campaigns with Black shipyard workers and incarcerated Japanese-Americans.



Jazz musicians at Bop City. Photo by Steve Jackson Jr.

All around 1830 Sutter, the neighborhood was changing. Thousands of African Americans migrated to San Francisco for wartime jobs.

The Fillmore's legendary jazz bars, which hosted the likes of Billie Holiday and John Coltrane, earned it the nickname "Harlem of the West."

Righteous troublemakers

By Genny Lim

If you mistreat a dog
You will mistreat a man
If you cut down a tree
You will abuse nature
If you dump toxic waste into the land or sea
You will pollute life on this earth
If you strike down a woman or child
You will strike down any living thing or being
If you deny the love of man to man or
Woman to woman
You will deny love
To be free is to love
To be free is a human right
To be free we must unite
And fight for and with one another
Black, White, Brown or Yellow
For every creed, color and race
Is of the human race
Let us fight for our incarcerated
Japanese brothers and sisters
Whose properties have been taken
By an unjust law
Let us fight for the civil rights of every human
Strangled by the rope of injustice
Let us be righteous, angelic troublemakers
Because not to resist inhumanity
Is to deny one's own humanity

WWII ended in 1945, but the Japanese community had lost their homes and businesses. Less than half the population of Japantown returned.

But that wasn't the end of the struggles. From the 1950s-1970s, the US government's racist policy of redevelopment destroyed large portions of Japantown and the Fillmore.

They tore down businesses.

People lost their homes.

Geary became an expressway dividing the neighborhood.

A thriving Black community, displaced.



Home being destroyed during redevelopment.

Photo: Burden Archive

1970-80s: Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions

Japantown was 40 blocks large before incarceration. It shrank to 25 blocks after the war. After redevelopment, only 6 blocks remained.

Activists fed up with the relentless evictions formed the Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions (CANE) to resist redevelopment.

Through sit-ins, protests, and lawsuits, they brought redevelopment to a standstill by the 1980s.



Protest demanding an end to evictions in Japantown

Against this backdrop, a group of parents and teachers formed Nihonmachi Little Friends (NLF) preschool.

In 1985, NLF started renting 1830 Sutter Street, bringing the Japanese community back to the building for the first time since before WWII.



Nihonmachi Little Friends' second year.
Photo courtesy of Cathy Inamasu

Yona envisioned a place for Issei women to gain confidence in their new home. 50 years later, the building became a place for the next generation to gain confidence in their multicultural identities.

In 1996, the YWCA was running into money problems. They announced the sale of 1830 Sutter and sent an eviction notice to NLF. NLF refused to leave, holding a protest with staff and students.



NLF staff and students protesting the eviction
Photo courtesy of Karen Kai

Elders in the community heard about the proposed sale. They remembered helping to fundraise and how the community had come together to buy the building.

Activists filed a lawsuit to stop the sale. It dragged on for six years until finally researchers found notes in Yona's diary and from YWCA meeting minutes confirming the building was purchased by and held in trust for the Japanese Americans community.

The YWCA finally agreed to settle, and NLF was able to purchase 1830 Sutter.

Thanks to the work of community advocates, 1830 Sutter was preserved for the Japanese community.



Over the next decades, NLF Director Cathy Inamasu raised community funding to ensure a stable future for NLF.

Mortgage, repairs, and a brand new building next door with a rooftop garden—Cathy's efforts secured a future for childcare in Japantown.

What Will You Remember?

By Genny Lim

What will you remember?

The hand that rocked the children to sleep

In the empty barracks with only rough

Army blankets to quiet their fears?

What will you hold onto?

The shadow of history

Torn from memory and tears?

What will you keep?

The strong hands that drove

The hammer through the barriers of

Contempt to build a sanctuary

For peace and posterity?

What will you remember?

The narrow road we marched

To keep the wind from scattering us like dust?

To keep the water from drowning us?

To keep the earth solid beneath our feet

So that the fire of resistance would

Burn in our hearts for generations to come?

Memory is boundless

Memory bears witness to who we are

Like, noren, hanging, split and divided

In this forsaken land

We must find our way home

Together, as one, united!

To protect what belongs to us

To leave our legacy behind

To be free!

Jiyu!

Dedicated to all those who stand up for justice.

Yona Abiko

Umeko Tsuda

Kyutaro Abiko

Julia Morgan

Bayard Rustin

American Friends Service Committee

Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions

Nihonmachi Little Friends

Cathy Inamasu

Soko Bukai

Gary Barbaree

Bob Rusky

Karen Kai

Donald Tamaki

Ben Reilly

Tracie Brown

Lloyd Wake

Dawn Mokuau

Melody Takata

And countless other community-members

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