

## **The Shifting Boundary of Minority Identities: The Japanese American Citizens League and Same-Sex Marriage**

### **Introduction**

Tadayuki John Ito<sup>1</sup>, a Sansei (third-generation) young professional Japanese American explained that LGBT issues are still touchy among LGBT individuals, but not within the whole Japanese American community:

“I feel it is still a touchy issue. Not within the Japanese American community as a whole, but with individuals in the Japanese American community like myself. As a Japanese American I want to be known as such. I don’t want to be known as gay. I am not ashamed to be gay, yet I am not proud. It is just the way I am. But I do feel a sense of pride to be Japanese. I am Japanese 1st, Gay 2nd and American 3rd.”

This paper will analyze the experience of LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) Japanese Americans.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), the national face of the Japanese American, appears to have long been sensitive to LGBT issues and officially affirmed the community’s diversity. Since 1994, the JACL has been officially supporting same-sex marriage due to their view that the “same” injustice was presented by anti-miscegenation laws as by placing a ban on same-sex marriage; one cannot choose one’s race any more than one’s their sexual orientation. This paper, referring to cases of mixed-race Japanese Americans and LGBT Japanese Americans’ positions in discourse among Japanese Americans, will analyze the inclusiveness and boundaries presented by Japanese Americans’ sense of “we” as a minority group. This paper explores whether their notion of “we” includes other

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees’ names are pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, LGBT people do not always regard each other as the same category. For example, expressions such as “GLB” or “L/G” are also used to clarify the subject group. Especially transgender people have been historically excluded by the other groups since they are regarded as “sick.” For more about LGBT politics, see Stryker (2006, 1-18). Here, I would like to use the term LGBT to describe a group of sexual minorities.

minority groups such as LGBTs, and treats them as the same minority. Using information obtained from 13 semi-structured interviews conducted in San Francisco and Los Angeles in August 2008, and based on articles from *The Pacific Citizen*, the newspaper of the JACL, I argue that in the eyes of many Japanese Americans being LGBT is still regarded as being more ‘marginal’ than being from a different or unusual race. LGBT Japanese Americans use their own inclusive notion of “we” in contrast with the notion of “we” held by the majority of Japanese Americans.

As Asian Americans debate the increasing complexity and diversity of the Asian American community, often (but not exclusively) discussed marginalized groups are gay Asian American men, lesbians and bisexuals and multiracial Asian Americans (Okihiro 1994, Williams and Houston 1997, Williams-Leon 2001).<sup>3</sup> Even during the gay movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, which took influence from the civil rights movement, Asian American activists who were lesbian or gay often did not reveal their sexual preferences in order not to jeopardize their efforts (Leong 1996, 6). Japanese Americans were by no means an exception to this.

At the same time, the absence of sexuality-related research in the area of Japanese American Studies contributes to the relative invisibility of LGBT Japanese Americans. Silence among scholars about sexuality is related to a fear of being regarded as one who conducts “incomplete and bad scholarship.”<sup>4</sup> Robertson also contends that through the title of her anthology, *Same-Sex Cultures and Sexualities*, she advocates “a kind of ‘cultural physics’ in which sexuality operates as a vector that occasions multiple

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<sup>3</sup> Originally, Japanese Americans married only within their succinct ethnic groups due to anti-miscegenation laws and traditions of ethnic cohesiveness; this was especially true before WWII. However, presently about half of Japanese Americans marry a person belonging to another racial/ethnic group; this is the highest rate of intermarriage among Asian Americans according to King-O’riain (2006). Therefore, the population of mixed-race Japanese Americans keeps increasing. On the other hand, the presence of LGBT Japanese Americans is remarkably not as visible as mixed-race ones.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, who conducted research about *Takarazuka* in Japan states “Apparently, the threat encoded in the insidious expression ‘It takes one to know one’ overpowered the fear of incomplete or even bad scholarship. Unfortunately, it is still too often the case that indifference, ignorance, and prejudice prevent researchers from considering the historical and cultural significance of gender attribution and sexual practices even when these have been and remain part of a very public discourse. Imagine scholars fifty or one hundred years from now writing about marriage in the late twentieth-century United States without mentioning the enormous amount of attention, popular and legal alike, paid to the issue of same-sex marriage.” (2004, 3)

interactions among groups of humans, and that transmits through manifold media different kinds of energy among humans.” (Robertson 2004, 2) The notion of “cultural physics,” the interactions of power, is applicable when thinking about the participation of people (both straight and LGBT) in associations such as Japanese American organizations, as the relationships people build in these organizations are the subject of “cultural physics.” Here, by examining the relationship between ethnic organizations and ethnic LGBT individuals, this paper can elucidate one aspect of cultural physics.

When considering the issues at play with mixed-race and LGBT Japanese Americans, a key term and concept we must employ is that of passing, which Teresa Williams repeatedly illustrates (Williams and Houston 1997, Williams 2001). Some mixed-race Japanese Americans try to pass as members of what they feel to be a more prestigious ethnic group and may or may not show interest in Japanese American organizations. Others might fail to pass as Japanese or another race, and then reconsider their identity. Of course, there are people who can pass themselves off as Caucasian, for example, but feel a strong sense of identity as a Japanese American. Similarly, LGBT Japanese Americans can pass themselves off as straight so as not to be excluded or feel ashamed. The role of passing is one of the clear similarities between multiracial and LGBT people (Williams-Leon 2001) amongst Asian Americans, and, therefore, it can be applied to the case of Japanese Americans. Through passing, mixed-race and LGBT individuals do not visibly present their reality and therefore, monoracial and heterosexual individuals recognize them as being part of their notion of “we.”

At the same time, much of the racial discourse, be it monoracial or multiracial, while acknowledging and even celebrating multiple racial and ethnic identities, is framed within the contexts of compulsory heterosexuality and institutionalized heterosexism (Williams-Leon 2001, 149). In this regard, Eng and Hom advocate for a queer perspective in Asian American Studies. They argue that:

“From a queer studies point of view, to insert questions of sexuality, sexual

identification, and sexual orientation into our concept of Asian American identity would immediately help to dislodge a static, outdated, and exclusively racial notion of who “we” are. Queer identity does not fit comfortably in the broadly polarized (and heterosexist) nationalist/nativist or assimilationist/feminist debate that has shaped Asian American studies and propelled analyses of Asian American racial formation during the 1980s and 1990s.”(Eng and Hom 1998, 3)

Likewise, presenting queer experiences and perspectives would further facilitate Japanese American studies in terms of providing an alternative paradigm of who “they” are. Minorities who lack in numbers have to present a more inclusive notion to convince others that they are the “same” as the majority. For example, sexuality will be regarded as a “less significant” category when compared to race and ethnicity. Therefore, LGBT Japanese Americans use a broad notion such as the “civil rights movement” to describe an issue or project their minority experience, utilizing their experiences at the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality, rather than sexuality alone. In the next section, I will overview the discourse trajectory of the Japanese American Citizen’s league (JACL), the nationwide Japanese American civil rights organization. This paper does not focus only on JACL and JACL statements do not always represent the ultimate consensus of all Japanese Americans. However, since the JACL is the one of the most sensitive organizations concerned with Japanese American ethnicity and rights in the United States, their discourse should be suitable to examine Japanese American opinion leaders’ general political stance.

### **The JACL overview: the changing field of the organization**

The JACL is the only nationwide Japanese American Civil Rights organization. Historically the JACL has helped abolish racially discriminative laws directly affecting Japanese Americans, such as the laws banning naturalization of Issei (first-generation Japanese American) and anti-miscegenation laws. The JACL has also functioned as the official representative of Japanese American interests when government agencies have

sought a cohesive Japanese American voice in regards to various policies and issues.<sup>5</sup>

From the first stages of its formation in 1928 to the early 1950's, the JACL's aim was to improve the social status of Japanese Americans and to make the majority of Americans understand that Japanese Americans were loyal citizens, often negotiating within an anti-Japanese atmosphere. Hence, the JACL's main focus was concerned exclusively with Japanese American interests. In other words, the political and social situation in America from the 1920's to the 1950's did not afford the JACL the leisure of considering the interests of other minority groups (ethnic or otherwise).<sup>6</sup>

During the 1960s, the JACL was affected by the civil rights movement that emerged from African American communities. Besides dealing with issues of racial identity and the socio-economic welfare of their communities, Japanese American youth questioned and challenged the legitimacy of their community leaders as well as the authority of American social institution (Takahashi 1997, 155). This stance was partly enabled by the upward social mobility of Japanese Americans after World War II (Takahashi 1997, 158; Kurashige 2002, 127-34). In the post-war era, the JACL's expanding 'frame of reference' is prominently displayed in its interactions with other ethnic minority groups such as other Asian, African American and Latino groups. More specifically, groups that only a few years before would have been deemed external radicals began to work cooperatively with the JACL. The JACL, to some degree, incorporated the more radically progressive thoughts of a new generation of Japanese Americans, yet it still remained moderate in its stance towards wider social issues.

According to the 2007 Chapter President's Handbook, the organization boasted over 20,000 members in 113 chapters located in 26 states and in Japan (JACL 2007, 17).<sup>7</sup> Especially after the success of the Redress Movement, in which the government apologized for the internment camps of WWII and paid \$20,000 USD in compensation

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<sup>5</sup> Such as the time of internment, abolishing anti-miscegenation law, establishing the G.I. Fiancées Act. For more information about JACL's historical achievement, see Chuman (1976) and Hosokawa (1982).

<sup>6</sup> For the early stage of the JACL, see Chuman (1976:252) and Hosokawa (1982:27-32)

<sup>7</sup> For the organizational structure of the JACL, see figure 1.

to each individual who had been sent to an internment camp, the JACL positively committed itself to issues not only directly related to Japanese Americans, but also more broadly associated with Asian American issues. Moreover, in 1992, Lillian Chiyeko Kimura was inaugurated as the first female president of the JACL and passed resolutions condemning sexual harassment, supporting family leave legislation and affirming women's abortion rights (Yang Murray 1998, 286). Finally, in 1994 the JACL began openly advocating the right of same-sex marriage. More recently, there have even been suggestions to remove the word "Japanese" from the organization's name (Pacific Citizen, February 15-March 6, 2008). The JACL is no longer an organization exclusively for those of Japanese ancestry. According to their advocacy, one of their objectives is to "Challenge bigotry and discrimination and promote equality for all Americans and others who reside in this country regardless of race, creed, gender, religion, or sexual orientation" (2007-2008 JACL Program for Action, adopted by the National Council, June 2006, Chandler, Arizona).<sup>8</sup> The JACL now also says that "Today, with inter-racial and multi-ethnic marriages changing the face of the Japanese American community, the JACL faces additional challenges in looking to its future and to the future of the Japanese American community."<sup>9</sup> This statement illustrates the JACL's sensitivity to the diversity of the Japanese Americans' community.

### **The boundary of the issue: what is "our" issue and what is "their" issue?**

However, even if radical JACLers try to broaden their frame of action, they still have to negotiate its boundary. Gamson (1983) argues that "to sustain collective action, the targets identified by the frame must successfully bridge abstract and concrete. By connecting broader socio-cultural forces with human agents who are appropriate targets

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<sup>8</sup> JACL website: [http://timothytest.net/jacl/jacl\\_v2/about/program-for-action.htm](http://timothytest.net/jacl/jacl_v2/about/program-for-action.htm); accessed November 16, 2008

<sup>9</sup> "JACL Today in Organizational Background", <http://www.jacl.org/about/about.htm> accessed November 16, 2008. In addition, the phrase "We are also affected by the changing demographics of race, ethnicity and age" implies the aging problem of Japanese American community ("About the Japanese American Citizens League" <http://www.jacl.org/about/about.htm> Accessed June 5, 2011).

of collective action, one can get the heat into cognition.” (Gamson 1992, 33). Radical constructivism, as presented by Melucci, often runs a risk of losing the members of collective action: “Action is an interactive, constructive process within the field of possibilities and limits recognized by the actors. The accent on the limits to the process of construction, which always take place within the boundaries of a given field, avoids the risk of a radical constructivism that would be difficult to sustain” (Melucci 1995, 61).

Similarly, when the JACL was in disputes about same-sex marriage, some members thought it was too radical and not “our issue” (Iiyama 2002, 5). Also, some Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans) thought the expression “API” or “Asian and Pacific Islander”, was inappropriate to describe “our” group (Murakami 1997, 171-2). However, if non-Japanese Asians and Pacific Islanders were excluded from membership and their issues dealt with elsewhere, the JACL’s role and influence in the United States would be significantly smaller. Therefore, it would be difficult to keep the organization going given the fact that there has been little new Japanese immigration compared to immigration from other Asian countries such as China, Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines. The total population of Asian Americans cannot be ignored.<sup>10</sup> Melucci again:

“Nevertheless, without the capability of perceiving and making sense of its boundaries, action would not be possible. In fact, radical constructivism finishes by destroying the relational dimension of social action and presents itself as the ultimate version, perhaps more sophisticated, of a voluntaristic paradigm” (Melucci 1995, 61).

By presenting alternatives, the JACL has changed both membership and the area of action.

Indeed, the history of the JACL can be regarded as the construction of a

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<sup>10</sup> Asians make up about 4.38 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2009\\_5YR\\_G00\\_&-redoLog=false&-mt\\_name=ACS\\_2009\\_5YR\\_G2000\\_B02001](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_&-redoLog=false&-mt_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G2000_B02001) accessed June 30, 2011)

collective identity among Japanese Americans. However, do Japanese Americans in these organizations really even have a collective identity? The following section will analyze the trajectory of the JACL to include same-sex marriage as an issue belonging to “we” – a “we” opposed to a conservative “they,” who are reluctant to learn from the past and to change.

### **The JACL and same-sex marriage in 1994: from Honolulu chapter to national board**

When the Hawaiian legislature banned same-sex marriages, the Honolulu Chapter of the JACL initiated a resolution supporting same-sex marriage at the February 28, 1994 Southwest Pacific District meeting (Iiyama 2002, 4). Ruth Mizobe, president of the Southwest Pacific District pointed out, “This is an issue of social equality. Our position is not an endorsement of homosexuality but to denounce discrimination...the government should not deny gays and lesbians equal benefits and privileges and sanctions that are accorded to all married couples. We are advocating for equal treatment, not for special or extra privilege.” She also said that “Historically, a parallel to same sex marriages is marriages of mixed races.” (Pacific Citizen, May 6-12, 1994)

On May 21 the JACL National Board dealt with this issue. Some felt same-sex marriage was “not a civil right issue but a moral one;” or “that it was outside of the province of JACL;” “not really relevant” to our organization (Iiyama 2002, 4). In response to these opinions, some people pointed out that when Issei immigrated to the U.S., interracial marriage was banned by state laws as it was considered “morally repugnant” and “unnatural”. Others argued that the JACL was extending their definition of civil rights and following a natural progression by extending civil rights to all. (Iiyama 2002, 4)

Although the argument that anti-same-sex marriage laws were similar to anti-miscegenation laws of the past persuaded many members of the JACL that

extending the notion of “civil rights” may be a logically reasonable thing to do, many Japanese Americans had a tough time accepting gay issues and even gay people. In Chizu Iiyama’s article, there are two further statements made by JACLers which reflect the general sentiment of the day of those who supported minority rights in general, including LGBT rights. The first one is by Lia Sigemura, former staff member of the National JACL who declared that:

“It’s no wonder that many of you might believe that the issues of lesbians and gays are not real Japanese American issues, because many people like me, when we come out are forced to leave organizations like the JACL who simply do not welcome us and do not address our issues of concern as issues serious to Japanese Americans. Sometimes we have to leave our communities, and sometimes we even have to leave our families. But times are changing and many of us who’ve learned our lessons from the Nisei generation are here to stand up and to be counted.” (Iiyama 2002:5)

Sigemura’s statement clearly shows that at that time, Japanese American communities were not friendly to gay people and, by referring specifically to the Nisei experience, she tries to connect Japanese American history as an oppressed, excluded minority group with that of gay people’s current experiences.

In addition, Congressman Norman Mineta, one of the leaders of the Redress Bill 442, appealed:

“When we fought for redress, we won. We could not have won that battle if we had stood alone. If organizations had taken the position that redress is a Japanese American issue and had nothing to do with African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, or with gay and lesbian Americans...they joined with us because they understood and believed in our argument that a threat to anybody’s civil rights is a threat to the civil rights of all Americans. And they acted.”

Mineta also spoke of Congressman Barney Frank who was openly gay and made redress

one of his top priorities (Iiyama 2002, 5).

Both Mineta and Frank broaden the frame from a sexual minority issue to a larger civil rights issue, a frame that can include an array of differences, from a variety of different categories. Specifically, Mineta's statement connecting the redress movement and the experience of homosexual individuals was effective in persuading JACL national conference attendees to vote "no" on Resolution 6, which would have banned same-sex marriage. Claire Omura, a delegate at the convention, had been instructed by her chapter to vote against the resolution but she changed her mind after hearing Mineta's speech and decided to vote in favor of same sex marriage (AsiaWeek March24, 1995).

At the 1994 convention, there were 30 votes for on resolution 6 and 50 against, 4 split votes and 11 abstentions (Iiyama 2002, 5). From that moment forward, the JACL officially supported same sex marriage. In 1998, the JACL National Convention in Seattle decided to officially acknowledge in the JACL constitution the rights of all its members regardless of sexual orientation (Iiyama 2002, 5).

### **Debates in the Pacific Citizen: civil rights or moral issues?**

Before and after the JACL National Board meeting, there were big debates among JACL members. In the Pacific Citizen, the official newspaper of the JACL, the opinions of both sides, both for and against same sex marriage were presented. One Christian woman who felt strongly opposed to the decision to support same sex marriage wrote:

"The term 'same-sex' is euphemism for sodomy. Sodomy is not a civil rights issue. It is a spiritual condition of fallen man's sinful nature...In closing, may I respectfully and lovingly urge the National Board to rescind its decision. God loves the sinner but hates the sin. For this cause did He send Jesus to die on the cross for us, to die a substitutionary death." (Pacific Citizen, June 24-30, 1994)

Mountain Plains District Council Governor Sharon Ishii Jordan said the JACL should not take positions on same-sex marriage because it “doesn’t affect a majority of members.” (Pacific Citizen, April 1-7, 1994) Likewise, Jeff Itami, the governor of The Intermountain District wrote “I would like to see this go not as a National Board decision but brought as a resolution to the National Council.....I don’t understand why it is here before us.” (Pacific Citizen, May 27-June 2, 1994) Reid Tateoka, Mt. Olympus Chapter member, was concerned that “Many people think it is not a civil rights issue; many think it will have repercussions on our organization generally.....the membership and leadership of the chapter.” The negative effect on membership was demonstrated by some JACL members quitting.<sup>11</sup> At that time, the JACL was not financially well-off. Fred Y Hirasuna’s comment in the “Letters from Readers” section represents another negative response toward supporting same sex marriage:

“We need more young members. We still need the financial support of the older generation. We need to strengthen the entire organization by paying more attention to the problems of weaker chapters. We need more regard for chapters and members in setting policies for the entire organization. We do not need a mud hunt for taking positions on civil rights issues which at least for the present, have remote concern with the organizational problems of JACL. We are not the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union).” (Pacific Citizen, June24-30, 1994)

On the other hand, those who supported same-sex marriage emphasized the issue as being one of civil rights, arguing that anti-same-sex marriage laws were similar to the anti-miscegenation laws in effect in the United States until 1967, which had had a profound effect on the lives of Japanese Americans. William Kaneko, JACL vice president for public affairs notes:

“Some have confused the same-sex marriage issue as a moral rather than civil rights issue, asserting that gay marriages are ‘unnatural’ and ‘unhealthy’ to society. Bear in mind that the same type of ‘morality’ justified the prohibition of

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<sup>11</sup> Esther Taylor, a female Caucasian, long-standing supporter of the JACL withdrew her membership because of JACL’s approval of same-sex marriage (Pacific Citizen, July 8-14, 1994).

inter-racial marriages up until 1967. In total, thirty-eight states at one time prohibited whites from marrying American Indians, Africans, Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Koreans, and Malayans. Inter-racial marriages were deemed as having ‘harmful social effects resulting in the production of a delegate and bastard offspring’ which would populate the states with a ‘delegated and ignoble population, incapable of moral, and intellectual development.’ How soon we forget.” (Pacific Citizen, June24-30, 1994)

Moreover, Neal Taniguchi, JACL vice president of general operations says, in accordance with Mizobe, that:

“The concept of same-sex marriage does not promote of legitimate homosexuality; it merely extends certain basic rights and privileges to couples who do not fit the “traditional” definition of a married couple. Historically, marriage is a religious institution, but in this country, it has become a civil institution, as well.....a person in this country does not have the right to impose one’s morals on another, much like we cannot impose one form of religion on everyone.” (Pacific Citizen, June24-30, 1994)

Both Kaneko and Taniguchi place primary focus on marriage rights rather than homosexuality, buttressing their arguments by connecting with anti-miscegenation laws that deprived Japanese Americans of the right to marry regardless of race.

Usually, the division of opinions among JACL members was mainly generational (Takahashi 1997; Hosokawa 1992). However, this issue also revealed regional differences. Almost all the chapters that reacted positively to this issue were in coastal regions. When I conducted the interviews in San Francisco asking about their notion of “being minority”, many referred to the regional character there.<sup>12</sup> The headquarters of the JACL are in San Francisco and about 70 percent of JACL members reside in California. Therefore, the JACL stance is strongly influenced by the political character of California residents. Bill Hosokawa noted this in his column:

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<sup>12</sup> The author conducted interviews with the people of the various Japanese American organizations including the staff of the elderly care facility Kimochi, Inc. in San Francisco and during Nisei Week, the biggest Japanese American festival in Los Angeles.

“The voting pattern among the district governors is curious. The three Pacific Coastal districts endorsed support of same-sex marriage. Central California and The Midwest and Eastern districts abstained. Is there a geographical influence on ideology? I don’t know. Will there be resentment in the hinterland that the organization is being dominated by coastal liberals? There is evidence to support fears that the rift will widen and eventually JACL will disintegrate.” (Pacific Citizen 1994, June 10-16)

This “geographical influence of ideology” is similar to the issue that arose in my master’s thesis (Hirano 2009), concerning the fact that people in San Francisco have a more inclusive sense of “we.” In San Francisco, the “they” were people and situations apart from San Francisco and outside its general realm. In contrast, “we” and “they” could be interpreted as a conflict between what might be called “coastal liberals” and “hinterland conservatives.”

On the other hand, in the discursive space of the Pacific Citizen newspaper, I rarely encountered the opinions of Japanese American Lesbians and/or Gay men in concerned with the 1994 JACL debate. An exception was Mr. and Mrs. Nakatani, parents who lost their three sons: one from racial hatred, and the other two from AIDS. In 2005, Nisei actor George Takei officially ‘came out’<sup>13</sup> publicly becoming the “face” of gay Japanese Americans. For example, there was a widely circulated article about Takei having wedded his long-time male partner at the Japanese American National Museum (Pacific Citizen September 19-October 2, 2008). Besides Takei and Lia Sigemura, however, people who can be assumed to have been strongly connected to this issue did not appear to have a voice in The Pacific Citizen. In regard to this point, Timothy Wright, an HIV activist and scholar gives us a hint by highlighting times when sexuality tends to be featured: He explains that male sexuality is a “safe” topic providing references to it are made in “tones of indignation, repulsion, anger, or purity” or in the form of degrading jokes and tabloid articles about immorality and crime; however, the more personal the connection to homosexuality, the more often the subject

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<sup>13</sup> The term “come out” means “Clarifying one’s sexual orientation.”

is shrouded in silence (Wright 2003, 280, cited by Robertson 2003, 5).

These theories might explain why even the Pacific Citizen, shines a positive light on LGBT issues, as there are few “visible” LGBT Japanese Americans in the articles presented in its pages. In essence, Pacific Citizen writers and editors feel free to speak in the abstract about LGBT issues, but are still not comfortable providing direct coverage of or naming the LGBT people in their midst.

### **The experience of gay and lesbian Japanese Americans**

Next, this paper will examine how people who are familiar with Japanese American organizations interpret the existence of LGBT issues, especially when they connect their experiences as an ethnic minority with those of sexual minorities.

While conducting fieldwork interviews San Francisco and Los Angeles, I asked my informants whether or not their experiences in their communities ever made them think about the issues faced by other minorities, such as sexual minorities. The answers I received varied from individual to individual. Some said “definitely(yes),” some said “no,” while others did not refer to sexual minorities at all and instead talked about other Asian American communities.

One Yonsei (fourth-generation Japanese Americans) college student Mike Takano told me that LGBT issues are still “touchy” within the Los Angeles based Japanese American community:

MT: ...and (in addition to how to continue involvement in the Japanese American community), I think one more big thing to address is gays and lesbians...that is overlapping the Japanese American community. In general, sexuality is a really touchy issue among Asian American communities, especially Japanese.

KH: Do you think sexuality is still taboo in the Japanese American community compared to other Asian American communities such as the Chinese American community?

MT: In JA, I think so because we don't actually have a space for

LGBT people. We have a position<sup>14</sup> but we haven't done anything last year and other organizations, compared to the Filipino community, where LGBT people are more welcomed and people embrace who they are as well, and I think that should be really included in the Japanese American community as well. In (Japanese American) student Union, I don't know any people who are open about their sexuality.

KH: Which do you think are touchier? Hapa (mixed-race Asian) issues or LGBT issues?

MT: I think definitely LGBT. I think Hapa communities are becoming embraced. If it was 20 years ago, it was a big issue. There was Hapa organization but it kinda disappeared. I think it's a good thing, in terms of that Hapa people are more embraced, it's becoming a lot better. You know, in the Japanese American National Museum they had an exhibition on Hapa, I think that is a good example of the awareness of this issue, this part of the community.

Takano also explained that even within the JACL, the issue of Proposition 8<sup>15</sup> still “divides” members. In Takano's own words, it appears that racially “pure” LGBT Japanese Americans are less welcomed into the community than mixed-race Japanese Americans who define their sexual orientation as straight. That is, sexuality functions as a stronger boundary in the Japanese American community than race does. On the other hand, one Korean-Chinese who self identifies “as a queer, HIV-positive, Asian American; as a first-generation college student; as a child of immigrant parents; as a student; as an activist,” told me that:

“Japanese Americans have a long history in the U.S. and I feel as each successive generation becomes more and more Americanized, they are more open to the idea of homosexuality. I find that immigrants are less receptive and sometimes, downright hostile -- but that is just my personal experience.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The JACL established the LGBT sections and is becoming a truly pan-Asian organization which instantly gained 60 LGBT members within a year of its formation (Murakami 1997, 226).

<sup>15</sup> Prop 8 changes the California Constitution to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry and was passed by California voters in November 2008. Currently (June 30, 2011), only marriage between a man and a woman will be valid or recognized in California.

<sup>16</sup> E-mail with the author (2008, September 17).

Therefore, Japanese American attitudes towards LGBT individuals can be regarded as moderate within the wider Asian American community.<sup>17</sup>

On the national level, the JACL has been supportive of LGBT people's rights, especially marriage rights. The JACL has officially approved of same-sex marriage since 1994, the second non-gay organization to adopt such a policy, after the American Civil Liberties Union. Though, seemingly, Japanese American issues are not directly connected to gay issues, when Japanese Americans use the "civil rights" frame, it enables them to include gay issues as part of "our" agenda. The JACL political attitude, shared by people who are sensitive to their ethnicity, can be viewed as one representation of the Japanese American point of view. However, this was a very controversial issue in the JACL, and, considering the fact that there are a great number of Japanese American organizations, the JACL's official statements on LGBT marriage might not represent the actual opinions prevalent within the community itself, or the point of view of Japanese Americans in general as many may feel quite differently about the issues raised here. (Incidentally, some Japanese Americans do not even know that the JACL exists.) Therefore, this paper also attempts to deal with "gay" experiences and straight people's attitudes toward them within Japanese American organizations in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Similar to mixed-race Japanese Americans, LGBT Japanese Americans were invisible in Japanese American discourses but through the efforts of activists and some progressive JACLers, LGBT issues are now officially regarded as a civil rights issue which strongly relates to the experiences of Japanese Americans as an ethnic minority group. However, LGBT issues still seem to be touchy and are still regarded as distant issues by many Japanese Americans.

From Lia Sigemura's statement, it is obvious that differences of sexuality serve as boundaries within the Japanese American community, boundaries that include and/or

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<sup>17</sup> 51 percent of Asian Americans saw Prop 8 as a civil rights issue, while the other 49 percent saw it as a moral one. Russel Jeung, an associate professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University says that "Given this group's diversity, one should expect the Asian American population to hold a corresponding range of political viewpoints. But for those holding the stereotype of Asian Americans as morally and politically conservative, the community's majority support of gay marriage comes as quite a revelation." (AsiaWeek December 2, 2008)

exclude individuals. In a national context, the major Japanese American organization regards gay issues as “ours” in the name of civil rights. However, other than the JACL, there are various Japanese American organizations in every state which have differing opinions on the topic. In addition, the official statements of the JACL and the realities of everyday life sometimes disagree..

Ito, a Sansei young professional cited in the introduction, is gay and was previously active in community activities. However, he had lost interest in community activities. Ito did not mention the relationship between his sexuality and the causes he was previously passionate about. Interestingly, though he was very active in one of the flourishing Japanese American youth organizations in San Francisco, Ito was not aware of the existence of the JACL. This also indicates the disconnect between the nationwide JACL and the regional grass roots organizations. Ito illustrates his point of view: “Not within the Japanese American community as a whole, but with individuals in the Japanese American community like myself” speaks to Lia Shigemura’s view, saying that once JACLers “do not address our issues of concern as issues serious to Japanese Americans.” This quote is really confusing; is something missing? However, racial and sexual identities are indeed strongly intertwined for many LGBT Asian Americans.

Based on these comments, this paper concludes that minorities whose numbers are decreasing have to present more inclusive frames to convince other minorities that they are in fact facing the “same” experiences as together they become majorities. For example, according to this context, LGBT Japanese Americans sometimes identify as Japanese Americans using historical experiences of the entire Japanese American community, such as the internment camps and redress movement. They then connect those experiences with “their” experiences as LGBT Japanese Americans. By adopting strategies that relate strongly with the entire Japanese American community, LGBT Japanese Americans try to present a notion of “we” which convinces the majority of Japanese Americans that LGBT Japanese Americans are the “same” as other Japanese Americans.

Next, Asian Americans (including LGBTs) oftentimes have to prove to other Americans that they themselves are Americans. The very word Asian American triggers in the minds of other (non-Asian) Americans the image of something foreign, an “other,” even if Japanese Americans, for example, have been in the United States for well over 100 years. In this way, smaller minority groups must go through a multi-stepped process for gaining membership first in large minority groups, and, eventually, into general society. One Chinese/Korean American gay youth discussed his situation and experiences among Asian Americans and the LGBT community:

The greater AA (Asian American) community is not very open to homosexuality. And LGBT-identified Asians face racism within the larger gay community. Personally, I feel that I have to wage a battle for both minds and hearts on multiple fronts. I do not only have to convince mainstream America that I am indeed as American as anyone else, but I also have to convince the AA community that homosexuality is something people shouldn't feel ashamed of.

As pointed out, minorities who are “essentially within another minority,” have to negotiate with society around them to be included in the same “we.” LGBT Japanese Americans, who are excluded from the Japanese American community, again are discriminated against in the greater LGBT society. In this situation, LGBT Japanese Americans have to present a varied and inclusive notion of “we” to convince others of the sameness between majority and minority.

### **The possibility and limitation of imagination**

Here, the notion of “prophecy” by Melucci is useful. It is “the act of announcing, based on personal experiences, that alternative frameworks of meaning are possible, and that the operational logic of power apparatuses is not the only possible ‘rationality’.” (Melucci 1989, 75-6) LGBT Japanese Americans present an alternative

logical framework, saying that their experience as a sexual minority cannot be separated as they assert their identity within the Japanese American community, which generally still regards LGBT issues as relatively unrelated to those of Japanese Americans.

However, prophecy contains an insurmountable contradiction. Prophets proclaim something other than themselves, while at the same time holding themselves up as a model (Melucci 1989, 75-6). Therefore, one always has to base on one's experience when presenting the alternative notion of "we". This point can be applied to the discourse about LGBT Japanese Americans. From their point of view, their sexuality has a strong impact on their lives in their ethnic community. Japanese American gay activist Paul Akio Kawata says "It's as much a part of who I am as being Japanese American. I can't separate the two." (Kerrita McClaughlyn 2002, 15) Furthermore, gay Japanese American Kenji Yoshino, who is a legal scholar at New York University School of Law states "I do not think we can move forward by focusing on old fashioned group-based identity politics. We must instead build a new civil rights paradigm on what draws us together rather than on what drives us apart." (Kenji Yoshino 2006, xii) These gay Japanese Americans are able to present their new alternative notion of "we" based on their own experience. On the other hand, while straight Japanese American people might be a racial minority in their daily lives, they maintain the majority position within the Japanese American community, having no first-hand experience of being a sexual minority. In their daily lives, it turns out to be difficult to transcend the boundary between ethnicity and sexuality in the name of "minority rights" or "civil rights."

Here we can see the majority-minority politics within the Japanese American community. In a nationwide context, Japanese Americans are an ethnic minority, less than 0.5 percent of the total U.S. population.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, both straight and LGBT Japanese Americans are categorized as an ethnic minority at the national level and are viewed as one group. However, once monoracial Japanese Americans form an ethnic

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<sup>18</sup> There are 796,700 monoracial and 1,148,932 (including mixed-race) Japanese Americans (US census of Bureau <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf>, accessed June 5, 2011)

group, the issue of ethnicity does not matter since it is the common element that binds these individuals together.<sup>19</sup> Here, mixed-race people face a first boundary, but they have gained acceptance to some degree partly due to their increasing numbers. In turn, sexuality functions as the next criteria to distinguish majority-minority within the group. Within the frame of civil rights, while ethnic minority issues and sexual minority issues can be regarded as identical in terms of marriage, the interpretation varies from individual to individual, although the JACLers' same-sex supporters' discourse is mainly focused on marriage rights, not "homosexual lifestyles."

### **Conclusion: broader notion of "we" among marginalized people**

The JACL, the national face of the Japanese American community, has been sensitive to LGBT issues and officially affirmed the community's diversity. However, some of its chapters and individual members' attitudes do not reflect the shift in the general atmosphere. There is a long list of various elements to examine and analyze when one researches the history of Japanese Americans. Therefore, one must make decisions about which part to highlight according to their specific organizational mission. In this paper, I focused on their sense of "we," its historical shift of topics at discourse level, and individual variations of interpretation about their positions as minority.

Sexuality still and will continue to function as an internal boundary within the Japanese American community. Logically correct statements do not always mean that every member of the group agrees with them. Moreover, though Williams-Leon concludes that "GLB and multiracial activism and visibility have increased," (Williams-Leon 2001, 159) compared to heterosexual mixed-race people, LGBT

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<sup>19</sup> However, mixed-race Japanese American pageant candidates have to show their Japaneseness with such things as language, name, or talent. At the same time, monoracial Japanese Americans who do not have any familiarity with Japanese American culture are disdained as "cultural imposters" (King-O'riain 2006).

Japanese Americans do not have the chance to increase their numbers in the ethnic group by way of reproduction. Therefore, their position within the Japanese American group will remain minority and always on the verge of being excluded. In this case, LGBT people must resist discrimination by presenting an alternative framework of meaning for the interpretation of one's experience, trying to make "majorities" remember their less-than-fortunate past when they themselves (the majority) were very much part of an affected minority. Williams-Leon casts the critical question:

Are GLB Asian-descent biracials being embraced more by the Asian/Pacific Islander GLB community than by the Hapa and/or multiracial community at large? If so, why? Although both groups are marginalized, do Asian/Pacific Islander GLBs have a more expansive and flexible understandings of their poly-marginalized status that allows them to include Hapas in ways that the heterosexual multiracial/Hapa community have yet to? (Williams-Leon 2001, 157)

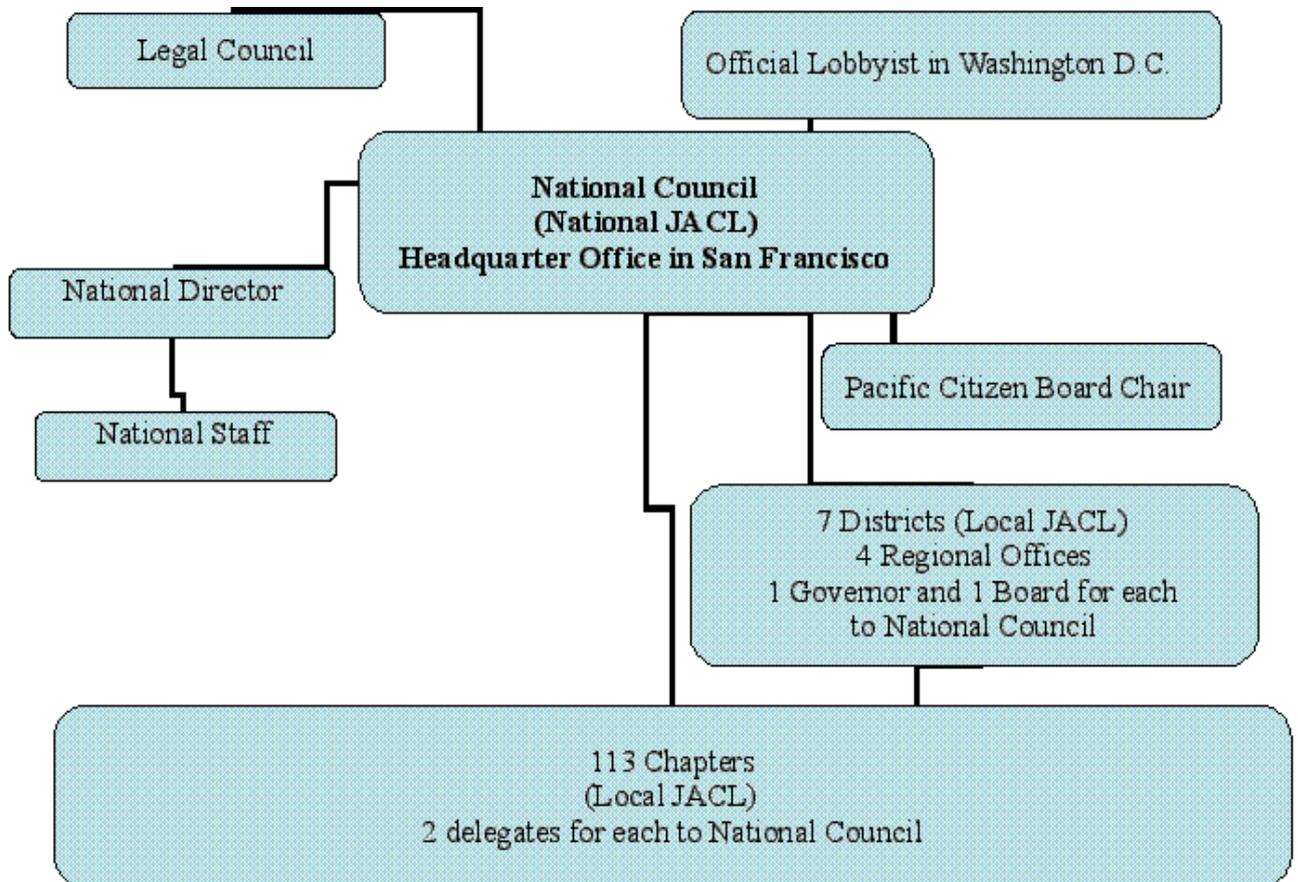
To answer this question, the author concludes that having different sexualities is still regarded as more deviant than being of different or ambiguous races. Japanese American historical understandings and notions of civil rights have a long way to go if they are to fill in the gap between race and sexuality. Therefore, to this day LGBT people are in weaker positions in the hierarchy of race and sexuality among Japanese Americans. In the future, more and more mixed-race Japanese Americans will participate in Japanese American associations and it can be assumed that there will always be at least a handful of LGBT people amongst them. Within these groups, the hierarchy will probably go as follows: 1. Monoracial heterosexual Japanese Americans 2. Mixed-race heterosexual Japanese Americans 3. LGBT monoracial Japanese Americans 4. LGBT mixed-race Japanese Americans. The notion of "we" would be the most inclusive in group 4 and narrowest among group 1, which would tend to show full respect to only the people who are the "same" as themselves. This is because people in weaker positions, usually minorities, attempt to present more inclusive frames than

currently accepted, as an alternative with which progress can be made. Usually these expanded frames fail, at first. However, with perseverance and nearly ceaseless tries and defeats, minorities have always pioneered the path to a more equal society with a “no passing zone” (Williams-Houston 1997) where no one has to hide one’s peculiarity for passing. Yet within organizations established for minorities, the politics of majority-minority still persist, and it can be assumed, will continue to persist.

Figure 1

### The Organizational Structure of the JACL

(Made from JACL Chapter President's Handbook 2007 pp8-16)



At National Council, delegates decide the following board members:

- President
- Vice President of General Operations
- Vice President of Public Affairs
- Vice President of Planning and Development
- Vice President of Membership Service
- Secretary/Treasurer
- National Youth Chair
- National Youth Representative

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