

Japanese Texas: On the Border of Belonging

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Abstract

Texans of Japanese descent represent a significantly smaller population than those belonging to other Asian ethnic groups; even so, they have a unique origin story that continues to leave a mark on Texas's transnational history, culture, economy, politics, and natural environments. For this reason, the stories of Japanese Texans merit far greater critical and cultural attention than they receive. Drawing on news reports, editorials, and propaganda prose from the first two decades of the twentieth century, this essay aims to amend parts of this lacuna by contextualizing Japanese Texan settlement as a singular mission-oriented project—an effort to magnify the region's rice cash-crop industry. From an economic perspective, local and US officials initially encouraged this venture; however, the nativist paranoias and prejudices of white America short-circuited its potential. Because many Japanese migrants came to Texas via Mexico, the US-Mexico border played a considerable role in crafting anti-Japanese sentiment, not only in Texas but throughout the nation. Thus, section one of this essay situates the history of Japanese Texan settlement within the context of a “border security” discourse. Section two examines and synthesizes selected interviews with Texans of Japanese descent conducted by the Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA) at Rice University. These personal narratives provide a bridge between the incredible origin story of Japanese Texans and legacies of accomplishment and contribution to a state and a nation that for more than half a century withheld the protections and privileges of full belonging.

Introduction: “Homeseekers of the Right Kind”

“Texas stands with outstretched hands bidding a hearty welcome to every homeseeker of the right kind.”
- Lee M. Taylor, *The Texan: A Tale of Texas* (1908)¹

The turn of the twentieth century was largely an adversarial moment in US membership politics, but the Japanese Texas enterprise seemed straightforward enough, at least initially. Encouraged by chambers of commerce and railway officials, most early Japanese migrants to Texas aimed to

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¹ Quote from “a toast on Texas” given by Lee Mays Taylor’s character Bob Lee (named after Robert E. Lee), the Texan in her historical romance *The Texan: A Tale of Texas* (1908). The full quote is worth reading in the context of this essay because it draws comparisons between Texas and Japan, and in theory reflects an archetypal Texan attitude that values immigrant contributions to the state: “What Texas could produce is a problem so large that none will dare figure on it. Japan, with resources not to be compared to Texas and only half the size, takes care of her fifty million people. Texas could easily take care of and support one hundred and fifty million. Thousands and thousands of acres of low-priced land are waiting only for the touch of the farmer’s hand to bring forth an abundant harvest, and they won’t wait long, for already immigrants are coming to Texas by the thousands and Texas stands with outstretched hands bidding a hearty welcome to every homeseeker of the right kind.” (113).

fulfill a specific objective: they wanted to transform the gulf coast's rice cash-crop economy. With continued encouragement, the state might have experienced an agricultural revolution; but within three decades, Japanese agri-colonies had withered in the face of white bigotry, economic depressions, and nativist paranoia about the US-Mexico border. Being concurrently welcomed and rejected, the stories of Japanese Texans productively complicate the propaganda fiction that "Texas stands with outstretched hands bidding a hearty welcome to every homeseeker of the right kind." Early Japanese Texans were deemed simultaneously the "right kind" of homeseeker and not, creating a paradox of inclusion through exclusion that Ana María Manzanos Calvo calls "hostile hospitality."² On the one hand, journalists, community organizers, and elected officials cautiously praised Japanese horticultural expertise, which they envisioned would help buoy the state's oil-booming economy and enable scientists at Texas A&M to study and create disease-resistant cultivars.³ On the other hand, whether they arrived alone or with families, via Mexico or by train from the west coast, Japanese Texans were for the first half of the twentieth-century not only denied the protections of full citizenship (as were all US residents of Japanese descent), they were strategically scapegoated as "smuggled spies," "peaceful invaders," and "surreptitious border-crossers." Thus, it is not hyperbole to say that Japanese Texas embodies manifold dimensions of a conflictive national imaginary. Its story is simultaneously an alternative Manifest Destiny frontier narrative; a micro-history about the false promises of melting-pot assimilation; and an illustration of white supremacy's contradictions and convolutions.

Perhaps because these settlers and their descendants represent a historically small populace when compared to other Asian ethnic groups in Texas, their voices and histories are tragically overshadowed. Understandably, scholars of US-American transnationalism tend to draw on distinctive accounts in order to demonstrate large-scale patterns, mobilities, and diasporas. In the story of Japanese Americans fighting for civic equality, scholars tend to concentrate on Hawai'i, California, and the Pacific Northwest as centers of migrant nationalism, economic development, and conflicted political sympathies.⁴ Even social critics of the period under study here paid scant attention to the Japanese footprint in Texas, outside of anxieties about border-crossers from Mexico. In *The Japanese Problem in the United States* (1915), H.A. Millis devotes one chapter to "The Japanese in Agriculture in Western States other than California," an examination that includes Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Washington, and Oregon. As Japanese Texan history demonstrates, population scale is often culturally imagined, especially where it bolsters xenophobia.⁵ Likewise, with the notable exceptions of Thomas K. Walls and Fred R. von der

² Calvo, "Junot Díaz's 'Otravida, Otravez' and *Hospitalia*: The Workings of Hostile Hospitality," 120.

³ For representative Texas A&M studies of Japanese rice, see "The Composition of Rice and its By-products," *Texas Agricultural Experiment Station*. Bulletin 191, June 1916; and "Varieties of Rice for Texas," *Texas Agricultural Experiment Station*. Bulletin 485, November 1933.

⁴ Mae Ngai argues that for immigrant groups, "nationalism is one of many elements that constitute ethnic identity in the country of settlement." The connections this nationalism makes are "produced from complex dynamic interactions between official and unofficial outreaches from the nation of origin and the various political and affective needs of people living in diaspora" (171).

⁵ According to census data cited by Edward K. Strong, Jr. in his research survey "Japanese in California" (1933), 340 ethnic Japanese resided in Texas in 1910, 449 in 1920, and 519 in 1930. According to census data cited by the Kinder Institute at Rice University in 2013, the Japanese population of Houston dropped by 0.2 percent between 2000 and 2010, from 3,574 to 3,566. Asian ethnic groups are Houston's fastest growing demographic, with the Japanese population being the only one to decrease in number during that decade (Klineberg and Wu, "Diversity and Transformation Among Asians in Houston," 12).

Mehden, historians and ethnographers of Texas typically omit the unique hardships these settlers endured and the contributions they made.

The first section of this essay establishes the historical context of white ambivalence toward Japanese Texan migration and assimilation. Heeding literary historian Gordon Fraser's recent call for "a scholarship not simply of race but of *racism* [that reads] newly resurgent racisms as structures of feeling," this essay places anti-Japanese prejudice within a US-Mexico "border security," rather than a strictly "Japan-bashing" or "Yellow Peril" historical context.⁶ Doing so, we can (and should), without sacrificing historical particularity, draw obvious parallels between the history of Japanese border-crossing paranoia and the racist and anti-immigrant rhetorics that plagues today's global discourse. Although a national consciousness of the panics, exclusions, and violence against Japanese Texans has been almost entirely erased, the marginalizing practices, rhetorics, and geographies of the imagination that produced them endure. Thus, in service of both presentist and historicist aims, I pursue a confrontational recovery of anti-Japanese pressures in and beyond Texas.⁷



⁶ Fraser, "The End of Reconstruction, Again," 175. *Italics original.*

⁷ Throughout this essay, I draw on whiteness studies discourse. For historians of US immigration and citizenship, the past thirty years have revealed both advantages and drawbacks to using whiteness as an analytic. Following the call of prominent cultural figures like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison for critiques of whiteness, immigration histories became a predominant medium through which to enact that project. For many of its practitioners, the framework of whiteness is ultimately about changing the ways "whites think of themselves, of power, of pleasure, and of gender" (Roediger, "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History," 132). The framework endeavors to reveal from within the hegemonic category its histories of violence, and to disrupt its ontological and epistemic authority.

[Kichimatsu Kishi in the Rice Fields with Laborers], photograph, Date Unknown; (texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph37189/: accessed December 12, 2018), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu; courtesy Heritage House Museum.

The second part of this essay highlights a few of the important narratives that have been collected by the Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA) at Rice University. Emerging from compounded cultural contact zones and incompatible affects (i.e. hostile hospitality), the archives and accounts of Japanese-Texan resilience are rich, complex, and deserving of greater scholarly attention. The interviews collected in HAAA embody the afterlives and manifold hybridities of this neglected history. As previously stated, these narratives emerge from unique migration stories that include overlapping structures of agrarian ambition, labor exploitation, nativist resentment, the Texas oil-boom, and geopolitical relations between the United States, Mexico, and Japan. Most interviews in HAAA are conducted with second- or third-generation Americans of Japanese ancestry.⁸ Many interview subjects were born elsewhere in the western United States, whether Hawai'i, Washington, California, or Colorado, and eventually migrated to Houston for work or to be near family. One interview subject's ancestors settled in Texas as marginalized Japanese Christians, drawing parallels to what Samuel Danforth in 1670 called New England Protestantism's "errand into the wilderness."⁹ Indeed, turn-of-the-century Japanese Texas in general could serve as a commercial, cultural, and ecological analog to that colonial Protestant project. What began in part as an errand into the transnational-American wilderness has since culminated in legacies of accomplishment and contribution to the state and nation that for decades withheld the protections and privileges of full citizenship.

Section One: Hostile Hospitality at the Japanese Texan Border

"The Japan of to-day is no longer the Japan of Japan but the Japan of the world."
- Count Shigenobu Okuma, "Our National Mission" (1914)¹⁰

Japanese emigration to other parts of the world, including Korea, China, and Europe, began in the 1860s after centuries of feudalism and ruler-imposed isolation. One nameless 1872 *Scribner's Monthly* writer describes "Awakened Japan" as "one of the marvels of the time. But a little while ago, to speak of Japan was to speak of something as remote from human knowledge and interest as though the empire were shut up in another planet."¹¹ (The writer credits the US for this transformation: "The youngest nation of the earth has rudely disturbed the secluded repose of one of the oldest. Japan sleeps no more."¹²) By 1870, a Japanese presence in the continental US was publicly discernable. The California census was the first to add "Japanese" as a second Asian response category (after "Chinese" in 1860).¹³ Unlike in other parts of the world, where migration was something like a dead-of-night escape experience, the Japanese empire encouraged migration, though at first only that of upper-class students.

⁸ First-generation—those born in Japan—are known as *issei*; second-generation are known as *nissei*; third-generation are known as *sansei*; fourth-generation are known as *yonsei*.

⁹ See Saibara-Naritomi, <https://haaa.rice.edu/nancy-elaine-saibara-naritomi-interview>

¹⁰ Qtd. in Masaoka, *Japan's Message to America*, 1.

¹¹ "Awakened Japan," 669.

¹² "Awakened Japan," 670. The writer refers here to the 1854 Kanagawa Treaty, which the US forced onto Japan.

¹³ Hoeffel, et al., "The Asian Population: 2010," 2.

By 1885, farmers and laborers had also begun to leave, largely in response to Hawai'i's demand for a sugar plantation workforce.¹⁴ The 1900 US Census reports only thirteen Japanese residents in the entire state of Texas; yet, a mere three years later, agronomist visionaries such as Russo-Japanese war veteran Kichimatsu Kishi (grandfather of HAAA interview subject George Hirasaki) and Christian theologian Seito Saibara (great-grandfather of HAAA interview subject Nancy Saibara-Naritomi) were already attempting to develop the gulf coast's rice industry.¹⁵ Hoping the typhoon-resilient farming techniques and rice cultivars of Japan would empower the gulf economy to withstand a shattering hurricane season like that experienced by Galveston, Texas in 1900, railroad executives and chamber of commerce officials encouraged Kishi, Saibara, and others to settle the stretch of coast from Brownsville to Beaumont.¹⁶ Those who immigrated were quick to learn both English and Spanish.

JAPANESE TO SETTLE IN TEXAS.

**Experiments in Rice Growing There
Prove Highly Successful.**

Washington Post, 23 June 1903



New York Times, 10 July 1904

¹⁴ The United States annexed the Republic of Hawai'i in 1898. Japanese employment quickly became so vital to the Hawaiian economy that, even after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the federal government did not initiate a protocol of mass internment there.

¹⁵ Census data taken from Mehden, "Japanese," 104; and Walls, "Japanese Americans in Texas," np.

¹⁶ The Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900 (which newspapers at the time called "The West Indian Hurricane") was the deadliest and costliest meteorological disaster in US history. Its massive storm surge washed away existing train tracks, making evacuation a near impossibility. Six to twelve thousand people died. After the storm, there was minimal interest in restoring the city to commercial prominence. With the advent of Texas oil, investments in trade, infrastructure, and mercantile enterprise pivoted to Houston. See E.B. Garriot, "Forecasts and Warnings," *Monthly Weather Review* 28.9 (September 1900): 371-378. See also Kevin Murnane, "As Terrible as Harvey Is, The Galveston Hurricane of 1900 Was Much, Much Worse," *Forbes*, 27 August 2017. Accessed 15 September 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinmurnane/2017/08/27/as-terrible-as-harvey-is-the-galveston-hurricane-of-1900-was-much-much-worse/#175dd1c2594e>.

Japanese Rice Colony in Texas.

The Japanese rice colony at Deepwater, Texas, under the management of Mr. O. Taya-yama, is producing about 500 acres of rice this year, of which the Japanese are cultivating an experimental plot of some five acres on the oriental plan of transplanting. As many of our readers know, it is the custom in the East Indies, China and Japan and, in fact, throughout all the eastern tropical rice producing countries, to grow rice plant in comparatively small pieces of available land, and then to set the plants out in wet

The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer,
Vol. 37, Issue 10, 1906

In theory, the rice colonization project would benefit all parties. Opportunities for land development in Japan were limited, and, as Nancy Saibara-Naritomi describes in her HAAA interview, some early settlers hoped to send food surpluses back to Japan to protect against threats of famine there.¹⁷ In the beginning, Texan representatives had high hopes for Japanese settlement, especially following the first major oil gusher at Spindletop outside of Beaumont, Texas in January 1901. Notwithstanding this encouragement, the advent of Japanese immigration to Texas faced ambivalence from the outset, at best.¹⁸ The rice enterprise would have helped sustain the economic and population booms that Spindletop ignited, but the racial panic of white citizens ultimately proved too potent. In most cases, these colonies did not outlive the almost always prosperous experimental stage. Saibara's colony, established in 1903 outside the town of Webster, Texas, near Houston, was one of the earliest and most successful. But even Webster (where the NASA Space Center is now located), which Saibara had envisioned would become a 1,500-settler colony, peaked with a population somewhere around sixty settlers. Other sites of Japanese rice colonization included Del Rio, Garwood, Port Lavaca, League City, and Deepwater.¹⁹

Rice was only the beginning of what could have been an agrarian revolution for the state of Texas. Other agricultural "syndicates" (to use a *New York Times* descriptor) pursued the production of cotton, tea, and silk, such as the one led by a Mr. Akioki in Bee County outside of San Antonio. Mr. Akioki aimed for his colony to support three hundred (and, eventually, three thousand) families. Those who supported the endeavor argued that it would "diminish the amount [of tea and silk] which the United States buys from the Orient."²⁰ The story of Mr. Akioki's effort was picked up in newspapers around the country. According to the *New York Times*, "the expectation is that the [San Antonio] newcomers will make good citizens and

¹⁷ According to Saibara-Naritomi, the Japanese government barred her great-grandfather from sending the US-grown rice to Japan, as they feared doing so would deflate prices there.

¹⁸ "Japanese After Texas Rice Lands," *New York Times*, 10 July 1904; "Japanese Head This Way," *Washington Post*, 8 January 1907.

¹⁹ Mehden, "Japanese," 104.

²⁰ "Tea and Silk in Texas," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 February 1906.

intermarry and coalesce with their Texas neighbors.”²¹ Sympathetic assurances of “good citizenship” were plentiful but ultimately uninspiring for whites who were anxious about miscegenation and economic competition.²²

Anti-Japanese feeling was, of course, by no means unique to Texas. But, given the state’s location, the Mexico-US border (where many Japanese were crossing, including, at the age of fourteen, the father of two HAAA interview subjects, George and Yoshio Fujimoto) was instrumental in crafting an ethnonational narrative of Japanese difference, character, and intent. Many, if not most Japanese migrants came to Texas by railway from the Pacific Western US, but the nation’s apprehensions were ignited by the border-crossing, or “surreptitious entry” narrative. Indeed, border anxiety partly emerged from the fact that, as urban sociologist R.D. McKenzie notes in *Oriental Exclusion* (1928), “It is impossible to determine the extent of surreptitious entry.”²³ Migrants who came to the US through Mexico endured tremendous scrutiny in both countries.

JAPANESE SMUGGLED IN.
Get Across the Border from Mexico,
but Are Caught.

New York Times, 12 January 1907

By 1897, Mexico’s connection to Japanese migration had already become complicated. Initially, the Mexican government wanted Japanese labor to embark on “a colonization scheme by which a large amount of waste land was to be brought under cultivation.” But Mexico “became alarmed at the prospects of... being as quickly overrun with Japanese as Hawaii was.”²⁴ When the Mexican government backed out of a strategic agreement, costing the Kissa Emigration company an estimated 150,000 yen, Japan demanded Mexico pay. Eventually, in 1908, the two countries reached terms that sanctioned Japanese migration. Americans were alarmed by this arrangement, fearing for years afterward a potential military alliance that would facilitate the movement of Japanese spies to the States and climax in Mexico hosting a Japanese naval base (a notion that Mexican officials insisted was absurd).²⁵ But even before the 1908 truce—and most acutely through 1907—newspapers shuddered at the imagined likelihood that the “undesirable and

²¹ “Japanese for Texas: Plan to Establish Colonies for Tea and Silk Production,” *New York Times*, 15 December 1905.

²² Like *The New York Times*, the *Salt Lake Tribune* finds comfort in the notion that “The Japanese who are going to Texas do not expect to form a settlement exclusively by themselves after the Chinese fashion, but will adopt American ways and customs, and become good American citizens” (“Tea and Silk in Texas”).

²³ McKenzie, *Oriental Exclusion*, 157.

²⁴ “Damages Wanted of Mexico,” *Evening Bulletin* (Honolulu), 14 October 1897.

²⁵ See “Rebel Forces Are Joyfully Received,” *El Paso Herald*, 16 March 1911.

forbidden element” of Japanese migrants could not be stopped from crossing into Texas from Mexico.²⁶

TROOPS ON GUARD AT TEXAS BORDER

**Spying Japanese Seeking En-
trance Thru Mexico**

The Fort Worth Telegram, 14 September 1907

CANNOT BE KEPT OUT

**Many Japanese Entering United
States From Mexico.**

MATTER WORRIES OFFICIALS

Madison Daily Leader, 15 April 1907

²⁶ “Seek to Ban Japanese,” *Washington Post*, 31 July 1907; “Cannot Be Kept Out,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* (Bemidji, MN), 15 April 1907.

JAPS GATHER IN BORDER STATES

Thousands of War Veterans
Are Rapidly Coming
Into Mexico.

Could Quickly Seize Texas
and California in the
Event of War.

Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH), 14 July 1907

JAPANESE HORDE STILL CRAWLS THROUGH

Hundreds Reach Mexico In-
tending to Steal Across the
Border and Others Are Com-
ing Over Northern Frontier.

San Jose Mercury, 4 April 1907

PLOT TO IMPORT JAPANESE

Daily Attempts Made to Cross the
Border at Mexico

TORREON, Mexico, July 8.—Strong
evidence tends to support the belief
that a well organized scheme is in
operation which has for its object the
unlawful entry of Japanese into the
United States by way of Mexico.

San Francisco Call, 9 July 1907

TO CHECK THE JAPANESE

Thousands of Coolies Flocking Across
the Texas Border.

Washington, Aug. 6.—The state de-
partment has found it necessary to be-
gin negotiations with Mexico, with a
view of shutting off the influx of Jap-
anese coolies from across the Mexi-
can-Texas border in violation of the
new immigration law.

The Emporia Gazette (Emporia, KS),
6 August 1907

FIVE JAPANESE ARRESTED.
 Immigration Inspectors Catch Them Entering Texas Through Brush.

San Antonio, Tex., July 14.—The immigration inspectors at Laredo, on the Mexican border, arrested five more Japanese near Green station yesterday making their way into the State through the brush.

This makes fifteen that have been arrested recently. All of them will be sent, in charge of an officer, to San Francisco for deportation to Japan.

Washington Post, 15 July 1907

JAPANESE HEAD THIS WAY

2,182 Recently Landed in Mexico,
 Bound for Texas Line.

Dissatisfied with Conditions There, They
 Seek Entrance to United States
 Across the Border.

Washington Post, 8 January 1907

Ultimately, however, it was not the labor-Japanese but the settler-Japanese class that inflamed white US-American prejudice. After all, around this same time, Texans approved of a plan to bring 1,500 Japanese “coolies” from Texas, Mexico, and California to build railroads in Houston, Galveston, and Brownsville.²⁷ During an interview reported by the *New York Times* in 1904, the Vice President of the Imperial Japanese Commission to the St. Louis Expo praised “the conditions he found existing in Texas”: “I shall certainly take pleasure in recommending Texas to my countrymen as a great country for the production of their staple.” In the same interview, he tried to assuage what he saw as American class anxieties: “Heretofore,” he says, “our immigrants to America have been recruited from the lower ranks of common laborers. I shall use my best endeavors in inducing a better class of immigrants.... I believe that within a reasonably short time many Japanese of wealth and standing will become residents of the State [of Texas].”²⁸ But, of course, incidences of white panic about Japanese migration were packaged as part of the nation’s so-called “Oriental problem,” not so much a class problem, though the two were interlinked.

TO USE JAPANESE LABOR.

Hundreds Will Be Taken to Texas to
 Build Railroads.

Special to The New York Times.

New York Times, 15 February 1907

²⁷ “To Use Japanese Labor,” *New York Times*, 15 February 1907.

²⁸ “Japanese After Texas Rice Lands,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1904.

Furthermore, most colonists were not only well-educated, but politically positioned enough to raise capital, broker land deals, and procure the necessary equipment for long-term settlement. As Peter Coviello, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and other historians have demonstrated, the United States has long equated land ownership with whiteness and civic agency.²⁹ Japanese labor was one thing; property-holding was another.³⁰ According to some free-indirect discourse reporting by the *Christian Science Monitor*, “one reason why farmers in the Rio Grande Valley do not want another race in the valley is that there are two races there now, the Mexicans and the Americans who own the land, about half and half, and get along splendidly together.”³¹ In California and other states, “alien” land-ownership was already constitutionally limited if not out-right prohibited, as it would eventually become in Texas (1921). But in 1906, when Kichimatsu Kishi migrated, the state allowed Japanese land-ownership and even “welcomed having a Japanese rice farming colony,” according to Kishi’s grandson George Hirasaki. Kishi “bought land in Orange County [about 100 miles east of Houston]. And then in 1907-1908, he brought the rest of his family... and along with a number of other settlers formed the Kishi Colony in Orange County.”³² The resilient Kishi Colony, which at one point included thirty-two men, five women, and four children, suffered saltwater intrusions, winter freezes, labor competition, one world war, the discovery of oil, and, fatally, the Great Depression.³³

ANTI-ALIEN LAW PLANNED IN TEXAS

Washington Post, 20 November 1920

²⁹ As Coviello describes, antebellum America believed that “self-possession” preceded whiteness as the principal medium for determining civic standing: “The dependent person—the unpropertied laborer, the wife, the child, the slave—is... insufficiently self-possessed” (33-34). See also Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1999).

³⁰ In a July 1920 hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, a farmer named J.N. Bigger from Stockton, CA says the quiet part out loud: “I would be very much opposed to the Japanese who are born in this country becoming American citizens, but to exclude them entirely, I think we need them some for labor.” Admitting he had not been to the US-Mexico border, Bigger goes on to express his judgment that the perceived increase in Japanese migration was in large part due to increased border “smuggling.” *Japanese Immigration: Part One: Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization: H. of R., 66th Congress*. July 1920: 466.

³¹ “Japanese Acquire Holdings in Texas,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 November 1920.

³² HAAA interview quotes have been slightly edited for clarity. Hirasaki interview, 2.

³³ For more on the Kishi Colony and Kishi family, see the following: George J. Hirasaki, “The Kishi Colony,” http://hirasaki.net/Family_Stories/Kishi_Colony/Kishi.htm, accessed 30 November 2018; “Site of Kishi Colony Given Texas Historical Marker,” http://hirasaki.net/Family_Stories/Kishi_Colony/Marker.htm, accessed 20 November 2018. See also Robert Wooster, “KISHI COLONY, TX,” *Handbook of Texas Online*. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvk49>, accessed 9 September 2018; “TERRY, TX.” <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvt19>, accessed 9 September 2018.

TEXAS MAY BAR JAPANESE.

State Senator to Introduce Bill to Prevent Land Ownership.

New York Times, 20 November 1920

With the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) recently decided in Japan's favor, the US did not feel it could juridically exclude Japanese migrants the way it had Chinese migrants with the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). Even with this shift in international power dynamics, white Americans, including local Texans, began accumulating a battery of implicit and overt forms of exclusion against Japanese settlers. But, in part because of the war's outcome, Japanese officials and citizens in Texas confidently protested the passive-aggressive discriminations aimed at them. When, in 1905, ten sets of Japanese naturalization papers were canceled in Houston, a Japanese attaché to the St. Louis Expo, Oemaru Takayama, confronted Texas Governor S.W.T. Lanham in person, asking, "If Russian Jews, Armenians, and Poles can become citizens of Texas, why cannot the Japanese?"³⁴ Lanham reportedly dodged Takayama's question, presumably unwilling to admit that his state, along with the rest of the nation, was determined to exclude all men and women of Asian descent, believing they "cannot fit into our national life."³⁵ In cultural and congressional debate, the question of Japanese assimilation was often a comparative one, usually by gauging their imagined capacity for "Americanization" against that of Southern Europeans or Mexicans.

JAPANESE PROTEST IN TEXAS.

The Governor Is Asked Why Natural- ization Is Refused.

Special to The New York Times.

New York Times, 27 March 1905

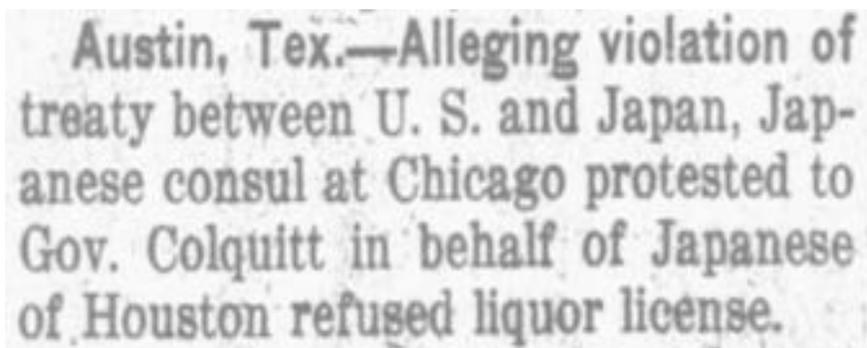
³⁴ "Japanese Protest in Texas," *New York Times*, 27 March 1905; "Japanese Protest to Texas Governor," *The Tucson Citizen*, 31 March 1905.

³⁵ "Texans to Oust and Aid Japanese," *New York Times*, 9 January 1921.

TEXAS JAPANESE PROTEST.

Allege San Antonio Police Unjustly Arrest Them as Vagrants.

Washington Post, 6 February 1907



Austin, Tex.—Alleging violation of treaty between U. S. and Japan, Japanese consul at Chicago protested to Gov. Colquitt in behalf of Japanese of Houston refused liquor license.

The Day Book (Chicago), 23 May 1914

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt made the informal Gentleman's Agreement that the US would not impose immigration restrictions if the Japanese Empire would prevent emigration to the States and Mexico. (With its quota system, the Immigration Act of 1924 essentially violated this deal, nullifying Japan's moral obligation to police expatriation.) Migration inevitably continued, though one self-declared expert on US-Japanese relations asserted in 1913 that "not a single Japanese laborer has come to the United States, to Hawaii, to Mexico, and to British Columbia since 1907."³⁶ Starting around 1912, the nation generated a deluge of propaganda, both anti- and pro-Japanese, on the topic of US-America's "racial situation."³⁷ These tracts focused on the policies and perceived impact of migration on places like Florin, California, where, according to life-long resident Alice M. Brown, Japanese laborers "changed the whole face of the land from barren unfertile fields to the fairest of vineyards and strawberry patches."³⁸ When mentioned in a Japanese labor or migration context, Texas primarily served the diatribes of those who opposed the "border smuggling" of migrants from Mexico; rarely was Texas publicly referenced to support the logics of legal settlement.

³⁶ Dr. David Starr Jordan, qtd. in Alice M. Brown, "Japanese in Florin, California," 2.

³⁷ Sidney L. Gulick, *The American Japanese Problem*, 3. The following texts represent a partial list: Kiyoshi Karl Kawakami, *American-Japanese Relations* (1912); Naoichi Masaoka, *Japan's Message to America* (1914); Kawakami, *Asia at the Door* (1914); Sidney L. Gulick, *The American Japanese Problem* (1914); H.A. Millis, *The Japanese Problem in the United States* (1915); Kawakami, *The Real Japanese Question* (1921); R.D. McKenzie, *Oriental Exclusion* (1928); and Yamato Ishihashi, *Japanese in the United States* (1932).

³⁸ Alice M. Brown, "Japanese in Florin, California," 4.

Jap "Peaceful Invasion" Extends to Texas

Colorado Springs Gazette, 7 January 1921

By the 1920s, fear of a so-called "peaceful Japanese invasion," a crisis ostensibly "far more dangerous than an armed conquest," had reached hemispheric proportions.³⁹ The US-Mexico border remained a focal point. In "America for the Americans," a polemic deeming the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 too progressive, white-power environmentalist Madison Grant writes the following:

Australia, New Zealand, and British Columbia are struggling to remain white men's countries and refuse to admit Japanese. Brazil has recently taken the same stand. Long ago California, for the same reason, demanded the exclusion of Chinese, and our whole Pacific coast is at the present time aroused over the danger of Japanese immigration. Mexico is threatened by an invasion both of the Japanese and of Europeans barred by our exclusion laws and will probably soon put up barriers to protect her own nationals.⁴⁰

Grant's solution to the perceived crisis? "[All] aliens applying for admission should be registered. This will prove to be necessary in the near future along the Mexican border to prevent the influx of Mexicans, Japanese, and south and east Europeans."⁴¹ (As "a necessary prelude to deportation on a large scale," Grant saw "great eugenical value" in a mandatory registration system.⁴²) Although the geographic and population scales of Japanese rice colonization were greatly exaggerated by locals and in the press, the US-Mexico boundary was, as it continues today to be, the xenophobic tripwire for a citizenry easily triggered by the racially coded discourse of "border security." State officials from as far away as Lubbock made anti-Japanese border crossings a key component of their party platforms. Of course, this is how racism warps our sense of scale: when threatened by imagined non-European invasion, the state shrinks to the size of a single backyard. When the citizenry's ethnic identity is not the subject of debate, "Texas is a State of unlimited opportunities."⁴³

³⁹ Grant, "America for the Americans," 347.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. 353.

⁴² Ibid. 354.

⁴³ Taylor, *The Texan*, 113. Sidney Gulick begins *The American Japanese Problem* (1914) by ventriloquizing and refuting the white logics for Japanese exclusion, addressing in particular the idea that "the Asiatic" must be excluded from American life because "their industry and thrift are amazing; they underlive, underbid, and outwork us. In open competition the white man has no show" (5). In *Asia at the Door* (1914), Japanese propagandist Kiyoshi K. Kawakami responds to such myths with the following: "The anti-Japanese agitators argue that the Japanese can live almost on nothing. The fact is that it costs the Japanese just as much to live as it costs any other people in the corresponding class.... It is chiefly untiring industry and unwavering perseverance, and little else, which crown Japanese enterprise with success even where the white farmer reaps a failure" (109-115).

TEXANS TO OUST AND AID JAPANESE

**Insist on Colonists Leaving the
State, but Will Help Them
Recover Their Money.**

New York Times, 9 January 1921

JAPANESE ARE NOT WELCOMED

**People in Rio Grande Valley
in Texas Take Measures to
Drive Away the Colonists**

Christian Science Monitor, 26 February 1921

The years 1920 and 1921 were especially precarious for Japanese migrants, and particularly so for prospective farmers. During the postwar depression of January 1920 – July 1921, by which time the national rice market had collapsed, so-called “native” Americans sharpened their scapegoating gaze.⁴⁴ As evidence for “the [Japanese] agricultural conquest of Texas,” one witness to a congressional hearing in July 1920 cites reports of a 1000-acre land purchase by Japanese migrants near El Paso (apparently procured for the purpose of planting cotton and constructing a refrigeration plant).⁴⁵ According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the February 1921 “arrival of three Japanese families brought the issue [of Texan migration] to a crisis.” In response to these three families, who arrived in the Rio Grande Valley by train from California, the San Benito Chamber of Commerce sent a delegation to Austin to impress upon the Texas legislature its desire to have “protection against Japanese immigration.”⁴⁶ State senator William

⁴⁴ According to historian Thomas Walls, “Japanese rice colonists in southeast Texas, as with all farmers in Texas, were severely affected in 1918 by the dramatic drop in market prices for rice and other grains following the end of World War I. A few farms survived by switching crops, but many Japanese were suddenly without work. Some found jobs in nearby plant nurseries and restaurants owned by fellow Japanese Texans, while others simply moved away” (“Japanese Americans in Texas,” np).

⁴⁵ *Japanese Immigration: Part One: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization: H. of R., 66th Congress*. July 1920: 408.

⁴⁶ “Japanese Are Not Welcomed: People in Rio Grande Valley in Texas Take Measures to Drive Away the Colonists,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 February 1921.

Harrison Bledsoe promised that he would make every legal effort to block what he called “[the Rio Grande Valley] undertaking” of Japanese Texan settlement.⁴⁷ On a local level, members of the American Legion and city chambers of commerce organized “oust and aid” committees. Encapsulating the very paradox that this section of the essay aims to elucidate—that of hostile hospitality—such committees aimed to prevent arriving colonists from unloading their belongings at local railway stations. For so-called “aid,” B.R. Kato (in Brownsville) and the Okuma brothers (in Harlingen) were offered \$10,000 to recover their land purchases. As for the “oust” part of the equation, Kato and the Okumas were granted a forty-eight-hour head start before white residents would begin inflicting violence.⁴⁸ Both Kato and the Okumas chose to depart, stating they had been unaware of local animus. They reportedly declared “We do not want to live where we are not wanted.”⁴⁹

While the US-Mexico border was a major component of anti-Japanese sentiment during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Japanese Texas is woefully under-studied in historiographies of the border and of US immigration broadly. Indeed, this oversight obscures the outsized role Texas played—oftentimes right beside California and Hawai’i—in the national campaign to exclude Japanese migrants from US-American life. Likewise, panics over Japanese Texan migration invigorated cultural and congressional deliberations about “securing the border.” By recovering and studying this history, we can expound on what medical humanities scholar Rachel Conrad Bracken calls “the intricate borderland biopolitics evolving in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.”⁵⁰ What’s more, histories of the Japanese Texan border can help clarify existing political and rhetorical trends. With the US Border Patrol recently apprehending more non-Mexican than Mexican border-crossers, the geographic and rhetorical imaginaries of Japanese exclusion reverberate strongly with the current political moment. As we enter the third decade of a new century, we are living a modified version of an old story. Indeed, after Japanese internment camps were closed in the late 1940s, fencing was partly reused to enhance barriers at the Mexico-US border.⁵¹ And as this essay goes to press, the highest office-holders in the nation are planning to detain migrant children at locations that once served as Japanese concentration camps.⁵²

Historians have comprehensively documented the infamous forced internments of US citizens and residents during the 1940s. In some of the interviews collected by the Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA) at Rice University, subjects share memories of being interned as children or describe their parents’ experiences (and/or lack of willingness to discuss those experiences with them). For anyone interested in personal histories of internment during World

⁴⁷ “Anti-Alien Law Planned in Texas,” *Washington Post*, 20 November 1920.

⁴⁸ “Texans Again Bar Arriving Japanese,” *New York Times*, 8 January 1921; “Texans to Oust and Aid Japanese,” *New York Times*, 9 January 1921; “Texas versus Japan,” *The Independent*, 22 January 1921.

⁴⁹ “Texans to Oust and Aid Japanese,” *New York Times*, 9 January 1921. For more on this story, see “Jap ‘Peaceful Invasion’ Extends to Texas,” *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 7 January 1921.

⁵⁰ Bracken, “Borderland Biopolitics: Public Health and Border Enforcement in Early Twentieth-Century Latinx Fiction,” 32.

⁵¹ “How Walls Ended Up Along the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2019.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxbXhSAia_o&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 25 July 2019.

⁵² W.J. Hennigan, “Trump Administration to Hold Migrant Children at Base That Served as WWII Japanese Internment Camp,” *Time*, 11 June 2019. Accessed 14 June 2019. <https://time.com/5605120/trump-migrant-children-fort-sill/?xid=tcoshare>

War II, Natalie Ong's interview (2017) might be a good place to start. She was photographed with her mother as a baby in one of the most iconic images of US-Japanese internment.⁵³ Understandably, even interview subjects who are one or two generations removed from that chapter in history tend to situate their lives around that context. But overall, internment does not dominate the narratives collected by HAAA. In section two, I follow the lead that these interview subjects provide by emphasizing other vital dimensions of Japanese American transnationalism: e.g. family legacies, major life events, career accomplishments, labor histories, military service, community networks, social activisms, and general theories of citizenship and belonging.

The history elucidated in section one of this essay provides context for the interviews conducted and hosted by HAAA. But, more importantly, HAAA interviews keep the material impact of a neglected history in our line of sight. From the outset of their migration to the US, Japanese colonists and their descendants were forced to continually defend and reinvent themselves. In the end, the story of Japanese Texas is one of astonishing resistance, resourcefulness, and creativity. True, Japanese Texans represent a comparatively small population, but their cultural contributions to Houston and beyond are incalculable, continuing to this day through the well-established Japan America Society of Houston and the annual Japan Festival Houston, for example. Space permitting, I would discuss the oral history of every Japanese Texan HAAA interview subject. But beyond the three lives portrayed over the next few pages—those of Glen Gondo, George Hirasaki, and Nancy Saibara-Naritomi—I can only encourage readers to listen to (and in some cases watch) the growing collection of interviews at haaa.rice.edu.



⁵³ Fred Barbash, "'Mystery lady' Fumiko Hayashida in famous photo of Japanese American internment is dead at 103," *Washington Post*, 17 November 2014. Accessed 14 June 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/17/mystery-lady-in-famous-photo-of-japanese-american-internment-is-dead-at-103/?utm_term=.3b7ce06d1b71

Section Two: From the Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)—Gondo, Hirasaki, and Saibara-Naritomi

Glen Yoshiaki Gondo (2011): <https://haaa.rice.edu/glen-gondo-interview>



Glen Yoshiaki Gondo

Photo courtesy: Houston Asian American Archive, Rice University

Unlike many HAAA interview subjects, Glen Yoshiaki Gondo did not experience “any kind of prejudice” growing up. He was raised in Watsonville, California, which had a relatively large Japanese population.⁵⁴

Glen’s grandfather immigrated to the United States for economic reasons in approximately 1898 (according to Glen’s estimation). His mother was born in Honolulu, his father in Seattle, and Glen himself in Los Angeles in 1948. The youngest of three boys in the family, Glen was born soon after his parents had returned to LA after being forced into a Colorado internment camp for three and a half years. At the time they were forced to leave, the Gondos were leasing a farm in Stockton, CA, which the bank subsequently took over. After their internment, and with three young boys to raise, the Gondos started over with nothing to their name. They had been allowed to take only two suitcases of belongings to the internment camp. Glen’s parents never discussed their experience with him: “They wanted me to assimilate in America, speak English, have American friends and they never criticized the United States government for their internment.”⁵⁵

[insert Gondo.1 – Parents_internment.m4a.]

After attempting to start a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles, the Gondos moved to Watsonville, where they participated in a different dimension of the Mexico-US border experience than that described in the previous section. In Watsonville, Gondo’s parents participated in the bracero program—a government initiative to bring Mexican laborers into the United States for legal manual employment. Glen’s mother, “a very good businesswoman,” opened a camp that housed and fed 1,500 Mexican laborers each year from April to November.⁵⁶ The Gondos had fifteen

⁵⁴ Gondo interview, 4.

⁵⁵ Gondo interview, 5.

⁵⁶ Gondo interview, 3.

trucks, which were used to take the workers to the fields, where they picked berries, lettuce, and cherries. When he was aged between twelve or fourteen, Glen “would go out there and bring [the workers] hot lunches and feed them. And then we [would] come back. And we would feed them dinner at the mess halls like a regular army camp.”⁵⁷ Glen remembers the Mexican chefs making 15,000 tortillas a day, which he helped count: “I think it was seven tortillas in one batch and we [would] pick it up and fold it and put it in a tray.”⁵⁸ Glen was responsible for filling the fifteen trucks with gasoline. He also helped run the labor camp store, selling candy and soda. When the US ended the bracero program, the Gondos sold the labor camp and moved to Dallas, where they opened a Japanese restaurant. Eventually, Gondo’s parents moved to Houston, where they converted a car dealership into a massive restaurant called Tokyo Gardens. The restaurant, which closed in 1997, operated for thirty-five years.

[insert Gondo.2 – Bracero program.m4a.]

Undoubtedly, Glen’s formative experiences working at his parent’s restaurants and at the bracero camp helped him leave what would be an incredible mark on the food industry in Houston. After helping his father for eight years during the 1980s with a diamond business in New York, Glen and his spouse (whom he had met in 5th grade), moved to Houston to run a large sushi restaurant. Glen expanded his sushi business to catering, winning contracts at hotels, the Astrodome, and Continental Airlines. In the late 1980s, Glen opened live sushi bars in Fiesta supermarkets. In 2002, he opened his first live sushi bar in an H-E-B grocery store, which handled approximately twenty thousand orders during its first week.⁵⁹ By the time of his HAAA interview in 2011, Glen owned 153 sushi bars all over Texas. In 2013, at a ceremony at the Japanese Consul-General’s Houston office, Gondo was honored with the Spring Imperial Decoration by the Japanese government for his decades of work promoting Japanese culture in the US.⁶⁰ He was also inducted into The Order of the Rising Sun (fourth-class), the third highest order bestowed by the Japanese government. He is a former President of the Japan America Society of Houston and was instrumental in establishing the \$50 million-dollar Asia Society Texas Center, located two blocks from the Houston Holocaust Museum.

In his HAAA interview, Gondo speaks humbly about his profound accomplishments as a businessman and community organizer. He ends by reflecting about and thanking his mother and father for their example as “pioneers” who were among the first to bring the richness of Japanese food, history, and culture to the city of Houston.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Gondo interview, 6.

⁵⁹ Brad Meyer, “Palate pleaser: Sushi proves to be popular meal in area,” *Houston Chronicle*, 27 November 2007. <https://www.chron.com/neighborhood/article/Palate-pleaser-Sushi-proves-to-be-a-popular-meal-9594494.php>

⁶⁰ Molly Glentzer, “Local businessman receives Japanese honor,” *Houston Chronicle*, 7 May 2013. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/life/society/article/Local-businessman-receives-Japanese-honor-4496375.php>. Accessed 15 September 2018.

George J. Hirasaki (2011): <https://haaa.rice.edu/george-hirasaki-interview>



George Hirasaki
Photo courtesy: George Hirasaki

As previously mentioned, George Hirasaki's grandfather Kichimatsu Kishi formed the Kishi Colony near the bayou town of Terry, Texas in 1907. Hirasaki was born in 1939, two years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He started school in 1946, one year after the end of World War II. Needless to say, the war had "a very defining effect" on his childhood: "When I went to school, I found that the kids would point their fingers at me and call me 'Jap' and they would buzz their hand over my head and say 'Bomb Tokyo.' And so, I learned that 'Jap' meant the enemy, and so I told them, 'I'm not Jap, I'm a Japanese American. I was born here in Texas.'" George recalls his sister, who at one point expressed a desire to bleach her skin, referring to the racial slur "Jap" as "without the '—nese'": "It was too painful for my sisters to use the word."

[insert Hirasaki.1 – Kishi Colony 1907.m4a]

In 2004 and 2005, as president of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Hirasaki advocated for changes to street names in Jefferson and Orange Counties that were known as "Jap Road" and "Jap Lane." The latter was the location where his grandfather Kishi had settled. Locals resisted calls to alter the street names, arguing that the names actually honored the Japanese settlers. County courts required that the road names be changed, but they were revised to reflect local histories unrelated to the Japanese migrants. This suggested to Hirasaki that residents were more interested in denying their own racism than honoring his heritage. (In 2007, Orange County did rename its lane "Kishi Road.")

[insert Hirasaki.2 – _Without the -nese_.m4a]



George Hirasaki, “Kishi Road, Orange County.” http://hirasaki.net/Kishi_Road.htm.

Even though George’s exposure to overt racism ended in elementary school, he continued to feel pressure into young adulthood to corroborate his American identity.⁶¹ In 1957, as a six-foot junior in high school, Hirasaki joined the Marine Corps. For many second-generation Japanese Americans, including many who fought during World War II in the all-Japanese 442nd Infantry Regiment (such as HAAA interview subjects George Fujimoto and Kenneth Takehara), enlisting in the US military was a declarative act of resistance and identity. Hirasaki phrases his motivation to enlist in this way: “I am an American and I’ll put my life on the line as an American if necessary.”⁶²

[insert Hirasaki.3 – Marine Corps.m4a]

After the Marines, George attended Lamar Tech (now Lamar University), graduating with honors with a B.S. in Chemical Engineering. Growing up, George lived near oil fields, which he remembered as “being black, dirty. The oily water, the oily soil, pipes, pumps ... just a very messy place.”⁶³ His childhood impression of the work as “low tech” made him want to work in the chemical industry. But after earning his PhD at Rice University in 1967, his career took him to the Shell Oil Company, where he worked for twenty-six years as a prominent petroleum engineer, specializing in oil recovery and formation evaluation. In 1993, Dr. Hirasaki transitioned from industry to academia, joining the faculty of Rice University’s Department of Chemical Engineering. During the 1990s, Hirasaki created—and continues to run—an industrial consortium of oil companies called the *Consortium for Processes in Porous Media*. Hirasaki presided over this organization’s twenty-third annual meeting in April 2019. Hirasaki, now a Rice University Professor Emeritus, has long been an influential figure in both the industrial and academic landscapes of Houston.

⁶¹ George says his sisters continued to hear comments from teachers referencing “Japs” well into high school.

⁶² Hirasaki interview, 6.

⁶³ Hirasaki interview, 7.

Nancy Saibara-Naritomi (2012): <https://haaa.rice.edu/nancy-elaine-saibara-naritomi-interview>



Nancy Elaine Saibara-Naritomi and her mother.

Photo courtesy: Houston Asian American Archive, Rice University

One of the most riveting oral histories at HAAA is that of Nancy Elaine Saibara-Naritomi, an activist and the great-granddaughter of pioneer rice colonist Seito Saibara, due to her astonishing story and the passionate, quicksilver rhythm with which she shares it.

[insert Saibara.1 – Great-grandfather_s dream.m4a]

Saibara-Naritomi’s charismatic recitation of her family’s journey to Webster, Texas is worth listening to at length, both for its level of detail and for the amount of family and social history she packs into her narrative. Her grandfather, Kiyooki Saibara, had wanted to be a ship engineer in Japan, but he begrudgingly agreed to migrate when his father informed him that they would become Texan rice farmers. K. Saibara worked in the family rice business until 1968, when he had a stroke and was forced to retire.

[insert Saibara.2 – Coming to Texas.m4a]

Born in Pasadena, Texas, Saibara-Naritomi was a precocious child who observed the complicated psychology of hard-working parents unjustly dismissed from employment at crucial junctures in their lives. Nancy studied at the University of Houston for three years before dropping out for health reasons. During that time, she worked on the weekends at the Gondos’ restaurant Tokyo Gardens, where her mother had been employed from the time Nancy was eleven years old. The Gondo family lent the Saibaras the use of a company car for work and for Nancy’s commute to university. She describes the Gondos as “really, really sweet” and “very nice people to work for.”⁶⁴ While teaching ballet (which she studied for fourteen years), she took a two-week training course to become a nurse’s aide. It was during this time, in 1979, that Nancy met the Japanese research doctor that would become her husband. They married, and she emigrated with him to Japan. Together they had two children, whom she home-schooled to the chagrin of her husband and the Japanese schools.

⁶⁴ Saibara-Naritomi interview, 12.

[insert Saibara.3 – Divorce.m4a]

In 2000, after discovering her husband was supporting a mistress with his government salary, Nancy sued for divorce. The story of how Saibara-Naritomi, a foreigner to Japan, fought for reparations, which she received, and for custody of her two Japan-born children, which she did not, is a sensational account of transnational feminism. She shares several recollections throughout the interview that show she is not afraid to speak truth to power. For a time after the divorce, Saibara-Naritomi had no home in Japan. She taught English to support herself and kept warm with four cats who lived with her in her car. In 2006, Saibara-Naritomi returned to Texas to care for her mother. In the HAAA interview, she refers to herself and her mother as a “two-people package,” as she takes her mother with her to protest rallies and board committee meetings for KPFT, the listener-supported Houston community radio station.⁶⁵ In the interview, she expresses her hope to write a book advocating for unhappily married Japanese women who feel trapped by social and legal conventions.

I end this essay with the conclusion of Saibara-Naritomi’s interview, where she describes the importance of advocacy and of creating your own sense of “home.” Indeed, recalling this essay’s opening epigraph from Lee Mays Taylor’s 1908 novel *The Texan*, I believe Saibara-Naritomi hints at what it might actually mean to be a “homeseeker of the right kind.” In the following quote, she challenges the forms of power that historically subjugated her forebearers and offers a hopeful vision for the nation’s future. The following is her response to the interviewer’s question: “What is it like to be a Japanese American woman in Texas?”

[insert Saibara.4 – _That_s where I feel at home_.m4a]

I don’t know about that, unless I look in the mirror and I don’t have too much time to look at a mirror! You have to get consensus and get people to band together and stand up for their rights, but when people are afraid, afraid to talk to you because they’re afraid of losing their program that they volunteer for, then there’s tyranny going on or something’s wrong... and you need somebody who doesn’t mind the result. You know. I like to go to court, to fight for rights, and I’m not going to it just because I know I can win, or there’s a chance to win, because it’s not as fun, for one thing. You don’t learn as much, for one thing. And, if we all fought like that then nothing great would get accomplished. We have to be more responsible for the future. So, I’m not, uh—my home, hmm. My home is wherever there’s a fight, for justice, that’s where I feel comfortable. That’s where I feel at home.

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[Kichimatsu
Kishi,
wearing
glasses and
seated in the
second row]

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