



# Transpacific Convergences

**Race, Migration, and  
Japanese American Film Culture  
before World War II**

**DENISE KHOR**

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## Introduction

A photograph of the Fuji Kan in Los Angeles displays film posters and advertising banners hanging under a whimsical facade of Japan's iconic Mount Fuji. It is a brightly lit marquee, and the building itself appears nestled between storefronts, restaurants, and a bustling boulevard. Fuji Kan was first built in 1925 at 324 East First Street, in the heart of Los Angeles's Little Tokyo. It was among at least four theaters operated by Japanese in Los Angeles before World War II. At the Fuji Kan, the latest films from Japan were projected on-screen. Often these films were accompanied by musical instrumentation and a *benshi*, who provided live narration or commentary. It was the *benshi* with whom audiences identified and whom they longed for, their names publicized in local papers as prominently as the film titles and stars. Fuji Kan employed a cadre of *benshi*, each of whom brought his or her own style and performance to a given film show. Such dynamics made the filmic experience contingent, variable, and differentiated. While it was true that audiences in Los Angeles could now view the same films as audiences in Tokyo, the live performative elements at the Fuji Kan presented a view of cinema at once localized and irreproducible.

Operating at a pivotal time for Japanese in the United States, the Fuji Kan was more than a venue for commercial entertainment. When they moved across the cities and towns on the Pacific coast, many Japanese confronted a color line stretching from housing restrictions to the spaces of public accommodation. Against these exclusions, the Fuji Kan was something of a refuge, an untethered space that catered to its audiences. Throughout the decades, Japanese-owned theaters in the United States served a multiplicity of usages. Beyond offering film shows, they served as places of gathering, assembly, and collectivization. In conjunction with film screenings, they often held performances, lectures, sermons, rallies, community gatherings, or fund-raisers. Often located in urban centers, these spaces were even reconfigured at crucial moments to serve the barer necessities of housing and sustenance.

Even the screen at the Fuji Kan projected a plenitude of media across varying format, content, and genre. American feature films were the standard fare in the earliest days. When films from Japan began to be exhibited more



Photograph of Los Angeles's Fuji Kan in 1939. Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library.

regularly in the mid-1920s, they were most often coupled with short features ranging from travelogues, educational or industrial shorts, and, as the Sino-Japanese War escalated, propaganda films. Additionally, the Fuji Kan on several occasions exhibited *local films*, depicting views of the neighborhood and commercial streets as well as community activities, such as swimming competitions and judo matches. Showing local views and recognizable places, these films appealed to audiences' desires for self-recognition or "seeing oneself on the screen."<sup>1</sup> For Japanese excluded from political participation in the United States (as determined by law until 1952), local films presented the audience with an alternative form of public affirmation and recognition.

Providing a central gathering place for many Japanese, the Fuji Kan drew together an ever-widening public. Junko Ogihara was among the first to write about the theater and the film culture of Japanese in Los Angeles in the article "The Exhibition of Films for Japanese Americans in Los Angeles during the Silent Film Era" (1990). The early days of the theater were influenced by the city's fluctuating population. "[Japanese] families rolled in from the outlying farms in their Model T's to dine and shop in Little Tokyo," according

to one account, “[and] ended the night at the Fuji-kan, the local movie house showing Japanese silent films, complete with a silver-tongued benshi with shamisen accompaniment.”<sup>2</sup> Like the city itself, the Fuji Kan was tied to migration and the growing cycles of agricultural fields, its audiences expanding and contracting with the centripetal movements characteristic of the developing Pacific coast of the early twentieth century. Fuji Kan served its multiplicitous audience for decades until its closure during World War II. It would reemerge after the war as the Linda Lea Theatre in 1945 and Kinema Theatre in 1955.

From its earliest years, the Fuji Kan offers us a glimpse of the radical heterogeneity within American film historiography. It tells the story of film circulation moving multidirectionally across the Pacific, of ephemeral exhibition practices during and beyond the silent era, and of alternative film publics and contexts taking shape in the United States throughout the early twentieth century and beyond. *Transpacific Convergences* explores this multifaceted history by tracing an alternative public sphere of film practice and possibility for Japanese in the United States before World War II. Drawing on original archival research, *Transpacific Convergences* moves beyond dominant film industries and nationalizing contexts to reenvision the transnational and global dimensions *within* the historiographies of U.S. film and media. Even in the first decades of the American film industry’s development, films were being made by Japanese in the United States. Their early film production efforts, as well as their independently established production studios, were not entirely without precedent but shared varying traits with the emergent race film industry. Japanese films were also coming to the United States and circulated by U.S.-based benshi and across nontheatrical exhibition sites. Tracing these developments across the shifting technologies of the cinema, I go on to look at the impact of the sound transition as it reshaped Japanese participation in the film industry as well as the context of independent film production and exhibition. From across the Pacific and beyond, the routes of Japanese film culture moved ever expansively as Japanese theater owners also catered to Filipino audiences and their desires to view Filipino films. Taken together, *Transpacific Convergences* illuminates a plurality of filmmaking and filmgoing practices in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

I use the term *transpacific convergence* not to name or describe a particularized region or even a movement; rather, it is a heuristic for rethinking the terms of film historicism and historiography. As Jennifer M. Bean in *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (2014) notes, it is the historicist logic of

European and North American modernity that shapes early cinema's discourse of itself. This conceptual legacy not only "artificially bifurcates [the study of cinema] into Western and non-Western spheres, but also obfuscates a view of the rest of the world as anything other than a space to be conquered or developed." This lingering historicism has shaped the field's assumptions about cinema's technological and industrial modernity and has situated the major film industries of France, Germany, Russia, and especially the United States as the center, presuming all else as periphery. Looking to the formative moments in the New Film History, Bean notes, "however paradoxically, a particularly powerful means of forestalling critical interrogation emerged as a somewhat oblique and unintended consequence of revisionist approaches to early film history." The study of early cinema's orientation toward Euro-American modernity has obfuscated and provincialized the multifarious responses to early cinema's "arrival" across the globe.<sup>3</sup> In (dis)orienting this historicist logic, *Transpacific Convergences* illuminates uneven and disjunctive features of cinema's relationship to modernity. Beyond widening the historiography, the book follows the routes of film circulation and exchange to trace a counterpublic for national film industries and dominant film cultures.

*Transpacific Convergences* tells a story of emergence, a cinema by Japanese in the United States during a transformative period. Between the years 1908 and 1917, U.S. film systems of representation, production, and distribution began consolidating into what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson famously outlined as the classical Hollywood system. Scholarship demarcates these pivotal early years by the changes to film style (particularly the development of continuity editing and narrative storytelling), the shift from single-reel to multiple-reel formats, and the demise of the smaller storefront theaters reliant on changing programs and short films. These were also the years that American film studios began consolidating in southern California and gave rise to the industry we now know as Hollywood. In *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (2004), Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp argue that the so-called transitional period did not merely pave the way for rationalization and a major studio system of mass production; rather, the era and the industry were marked by considerable instability and volatility. "The sheer diversity of representational, institutional and exhibition practices that coexist at this moment of transition," according to Keil and Stamp, "point as much to the eventual shape that Hollywood filmmaking would assume in the classical era as to other possibilities and other models lost in the wake of consolidation and standardization that marked the studio era."<sup>4</sup> *Transpacific Convergences* charts the emergence of a cinema

within and beyond this formative period. Moving across several major eras in film history, from the earlier nickelodeon period (1905 to the early 1910s) to the introduction of synchronized sound (1927 to 1930) and until the end of World War II and the changes to the studio system, it locates a cinema emerging over and against the rise of the dominating studio system and the assimilative power of its consolidation.

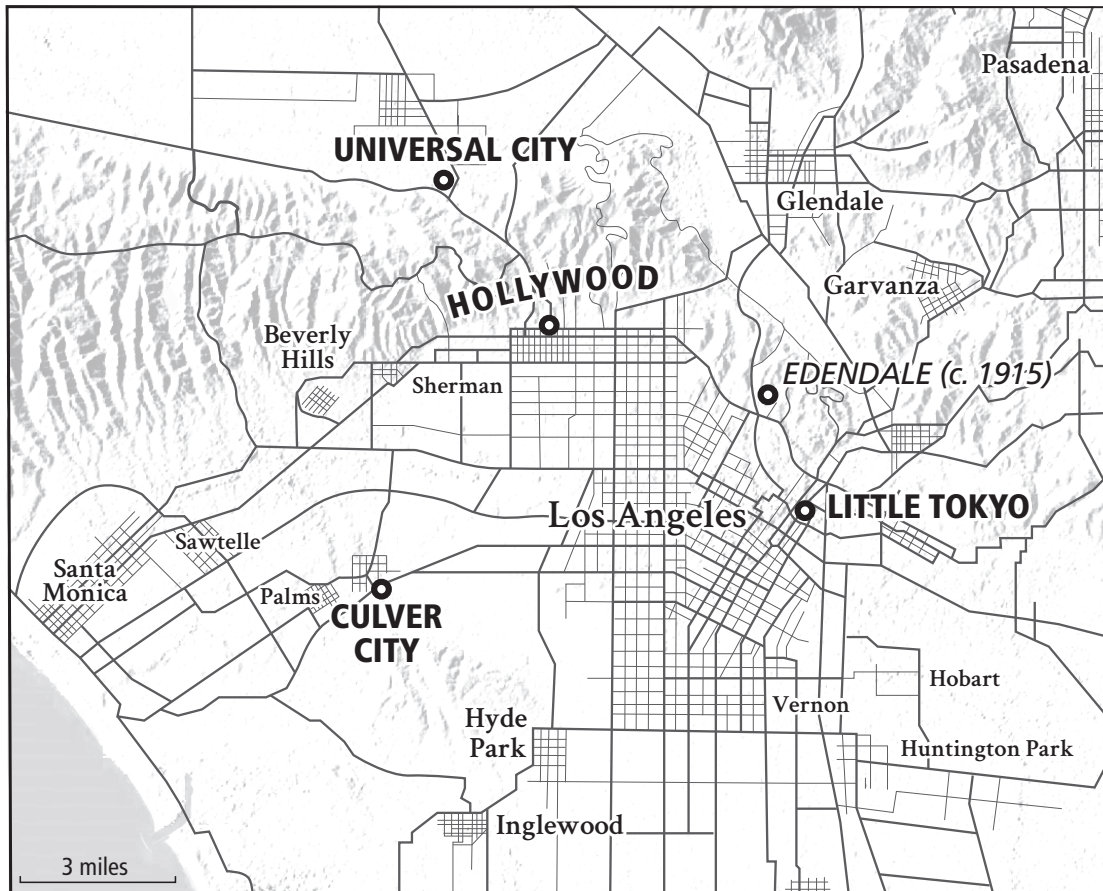
At the same time, *Transpacific Convergences* also tells an ensuing story of foreclosure. The early film production efforts by Japanese in the United States were short-lived; their films had inadequate channels for circulation and distribution. Companies were often stymied by lack of adequate capital and limited access to technology. These challenges were exacerbated as the sound transition transformed the institution of the cinema. Alongside the devastating effects of World War II and the mass removal of Japanese Americans to concentration camps, the fullest possibilities of this earlier era were not to materialize. Within this view, *Transpacific Convergences* traces a cinema that would ultimately not come to be. Calling for a “film history as media archaeology” approach, Thomas Elsaesser looks to contemporary digital media as a mode to rethink film historicism and the “idea of historical change itself and what we mean by inclusion and exclusion, horizons and boundaries, emergence and transformation.”<sup>5</sup> This approach means examining the change and continuity of media images, cultures, and practices beyond a teleological conception of film history. *Transpacific Convergences* charts these divergent and disjunctive trajectories to unsettle a successive and linear conception of film history. It traces a cinema no longer present and illuminates a past made available only across its relics, fragments, and archival traces. In so doing, *Transpacific Convergences* calls for a reimagining of the U.S. media past, not only of what that history is but also how and by what means it is told.

### Reenvisioning Asian American Media Pasts

The years 2019 and 2020 mark a pivotal moment for Asian American film and media as such founding media arts organizations as Visual Communications (VC), Asian CineVision (ACV), and Center for Asian American Media (formerly known as the National Asian American Telecommunications Association [NAATA]) celebrated key anniversaries alongside the fifty years since Asian American studies centers and departments were established at U.S. universities. To recognize and reflect upon this legacy and its implications for the future, a cluster of projects and productions were organized. The

Japanese American National Museum held an exhibition *At First Light: The Dawning of Asian Pacific America*, featuring an opening plenary with core Visual Communications founders Robert Nakamura, Duane Kubo, Alan Ohashi, and Eddie Wong.<sup>6</sup> The long-awaited documentary series *Asian Americans* was also released for public television. Chronicling the history of Asian Americans (including its filmmaking), the five-part docuseries was produced by the documentary filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña, who herself was a founding member of NAATA.<sup>7</sup> Other key events included the screening series *My Sight Is Lined with Visions: 1990s Asian American Film and Video*, featuring the work and contributions of experimental filmmakers.<sup>8</sup> Importantly adjoining these wide-ranging projects was *Film Quarterly's* two-part symposium and special dossier "Asian American Film at Fifty." Featuring contributing articles, the issue was guest edited by Brian Hu and B. Ruby Rich. In their introduction, Hu and Rich called attention to the important founding moments and institutions of Asian American cinema, from its genesis in the panethnic political organizing of the Asian American movement to the radical struggles for decolonization and ending the American war in Vietnam. Yet even as these events reflected on and celebrated these founding and originating histories, they also encouraged new lines of inquiry and new objects of study to emerge. For instance, Hu and Rich look to UCLA's Visual Communication's initial impetus to produce and circulate visual education materials to highlight the importance of the original multimedia and nontheatrical contexts in Asian American film and media history.<sup>9</sup> Other contributing scholars like Josslyn Luckett revisit the student productions from Ethno-Communications to elucidate the largely unrecognized filmmaking efforts of Asian American women as well as their interconnections with the LA Rebellion (African American independent filmmaking at UCLA in the 1970s).<sup>10</sup> These new and developing efforts represent a multitude of ways to begin rethinking Asian American media pasts.

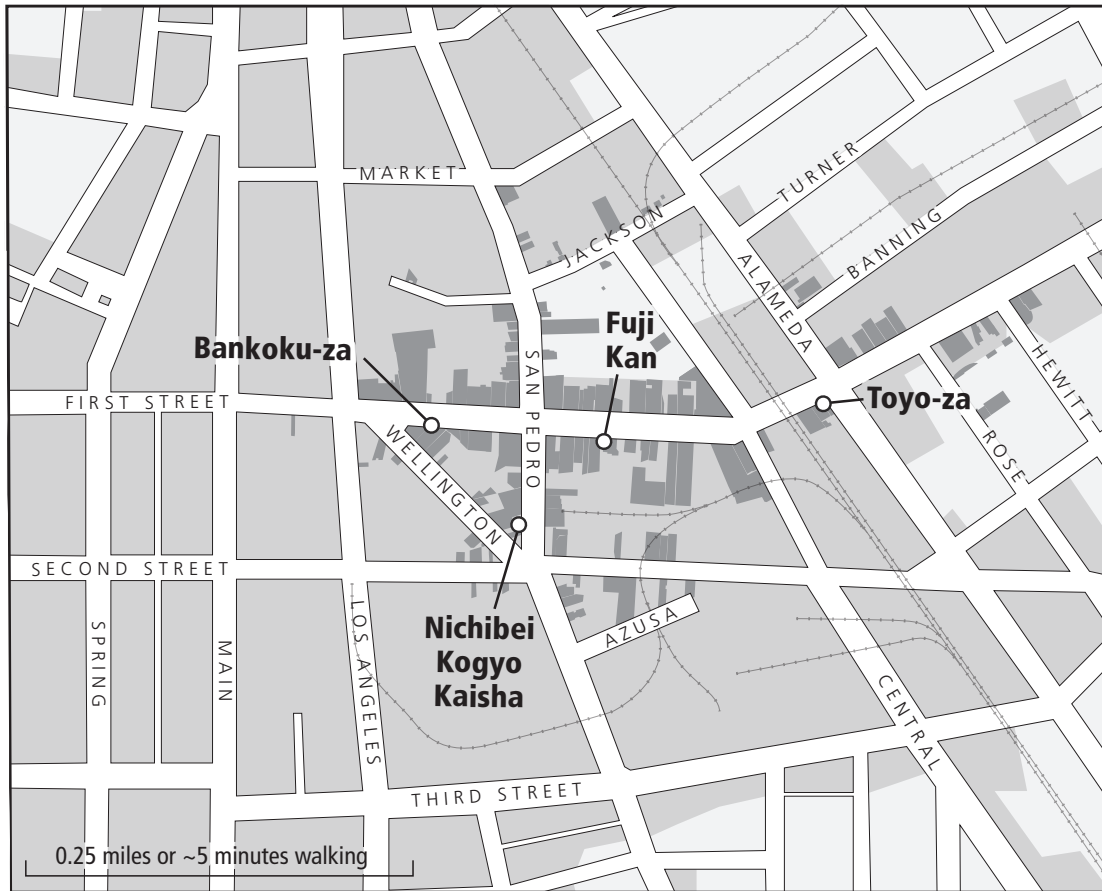
By looking to the first half of the twentieth century, *Transpacific Convergences* aims to reorient Asian American film and media history in several important ways. First, I reveal an earlier, longer, and more expansive history of Asian American independent filmmaking. Well before 1968, Japanese in the United States produced their own films and established what I would describe as an aspirational cinema based in the politics of racial uplift and respectability. Filmmakers also made a range of films during the period when the advent of synchronized sound transformed the institution of the cinema. In refocusing the lens on this earlier filmic era, the very terms *Asian American* and *independent* require considerable redefinition. Established long be-



The location of Little Tokyo was far closer to the early film colony Edendale (present day Echo Park) than the Hollywood studios. Source: Auto Road Map of Los Angeles and Vicinity (Rand McNally, 1926). Cartography by Erik Steiner.

fore the usage of this term, the cinema of the early period was neither self-consciously Asian American nor similarly politicized by the radical and revolutionary movements that gave rise to post-1968 filmmaking.<sup>11</sup> While these filmmaking endeavors were independent from the dominant film industry in both the United States and Japan, their relationship to major film institutions was not necessarily, or self-avowedly, oppositional. In reorienting the earlier era, I suggest these earlier filmmaking productions and practices may be understood within geographies of *proximity* and *circulation*.

The earliest film companies established by Japanese were all located in and around the city of Los Angeles. These developments were shaped by the formation of Los Angeles's Little Tokyo and its geographical relationship to the emerging film industry. Los Angeles had become a particularly vibrant hub



Map of film businesses in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. Sources: Map of Congested District of Los Angeles (Sanborn, 1920) and Little Tokyo Japanese Businesses 1940 (japantownatlas.com). Cartography by Erik Steiner.

for the 130,000 Japanese who arrived in the continental United States and Hawaii by the time the first West Coast film studio was established in Edendale in 1908. The early film colony was in the northwest region of the historic downtown, only a few miles from the burgeoning Japanese district in the East First Street area. This neighborhood grew as many Japanese arrived in Los Angeles from San Francisco. In addition to the great 1906 earthquake, Northern California had become considerably less amenable with the segregation of Japanese students by the San Francisco School Board, an incident that catalyzed the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement, and the stronger presence of white trade unions and anti-Japanese nativism. The population of Japanese in Los Angeles was doubled in 1907 and became the largest in the continental United States by the end of World War I. Consequently, Los Angeles's Little Tokyo emerged as a thriving commercial and residential hub and as a major artery of transit.

This physical proximity was especially central to the early production companies established during the period when Hollywood was emerging as a major studio system. Even as these Japanese-led companies were peripheral to the developing industry, they still relied on, or were influenced by, developments and resources emanating from that industry, creating what David James refers to as “minor cinemas.” Some company founders gained prior experience working in the margins of the industry, while others relied on the industry for personnel or other creative or tangible materials.<sup>12</sup> Of course, Hollywood itself also made use of its locality, turning its geographical location into an invaluable asset. Not only did the earliest film pioneers and the emerging Los Angeles film companies utilize the favorable climate conditions, but they also benefitted from the open shop status of Los Angeles and the city’s shifting and growing demographic population. In writing about Mexican film culture and Hollywood, Colin Gunckel further notes that the very consolidation of the industry was shaped by the efforts to preserve an image of Los Angeles as a “white spot,” its actual racialized populations serving as a foil against which images of white Los Angeles were constructed.<sup>13</sup>

While situated at the margins of emerging Hollywood, the cinemas of this earlier period were simultaneously shaped by the circulation of people, culture, and film across the Pacific. Moving within and between the dominant film industries in the United States and Japan, participants of these earlier film cultures were influenced at varying scales by the developments and connections to the Japanese film industry. Aaron Gerow notes that film producers and studios in Japan had long envisioned an overseas market for its films. During a period in which American and European filmmakers were producing films set in Japan, Japanese filmmakers conversely imagined the “dream of export” as the “standard by which Japanese motion pictures could be recognized as a cinema.”<sup>14</sup> Even though Japan never realized these ambitions to cultivate a substantial international market, Japanese producers and distributors in the United States were influenced by these dynamics as they sought opportunities and possibilities within and between the major industries on both sides of the Pacific. Japan had a particularly robust domestic film industry. Unlike other parts of the world, U.S. film studios were unable to seize control of Japan’s film market due to the reorganization of the film industry and trade protections. According to Hiroshi Kitamura, Japan responded to the “Hollywoodization” of the world after World War I by strengthening and consolidating their film industry into a vertically integrated system. This allowed the industry to vastly increase their production output and ensure a domestic market. Moving multidirectionally across the

Pacific, Japanese who had work experience in Hollywood, including several who participated in the film cultures explored in this book, also circled back to the Japanese film industry to enhance these developments with adaptations of Hollywood filmmaking techniques and practices.<sup>15</sup>

These transpacific movements were a key part of the early film cultures in the United States. As I explore in the following chapters, some of the early production studios sought audiences not in the United States but instead looked overseas toward distribution markets in Japan. The impact of the sound transition in Japan also influenced the circulation of Japanese films in the United States. The industry's continual production of silent films during this period prolonged the silent-era exhibition practices in the United States. These transpacific interconnections complicate the center-periphery model of national cinema yet also challenge the later notion of a self-realized cinema "by, for, and about Asian Americans." In chronicling an earlier filmic history, *Transpacific Convergences* considers the overlapping and entangled circuits of transpacific exchange. Building from work by scholars like Laura Isabel Serna, it takes a historicized approach to studying circulation across borders.<sup>16</sup> Looking at a geography of varying scales, the book foregrounds the interface of the local and the national to historicize a phenomenon largely understood as a contemporary outcome of globalization and borderless flows. These reworkings of a historicized transpacific film culture also elaborate on the ways Asian American cinema and media can be rethought within a shifting historiography of Asian Americans (and Japanese Americans more specifically) reconceptualized globally and via engagements "between two empires."<sup>17</sup>

Second, scholarship on Asian American film and media has tended to focus on bad screen objects and the ideological production of negative images and stereotypes. This tendency reflects the field's concern and perhaps overinvestment in Hollywood and the "culture industries" as a center of production. Within this view, post-1968 independent Asian American cinema seems merely reactive, a negative screen by which filmmaking is either resistant or complicit. But new studies of Anna May Wong, Sessue Hayakawa, and Philip Anh have complicated this way of viewing the relationship of Asian Americans to the history of Hollywood by exploring the complex negotiation of individual film stars with screen images, the star system, and industry casting and production practices.<sup>18</sup> While these important studies shed light on a myriad of strategies deployed by Asians and Asian Americans to adapt, resist, and keep working in the industry, they also refocus our gaze at Hollywood itself. *Transpacific Convergences* moves further afield to consider a

multiplicity of film publics and a wider range of participation in the cinema. In her now seminal book *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (2005), Jacqueline Stewart looks beyond the dominant screen culture to consider the overlapping Black film publics in shaping the rise of American cinema. Criticizing a sole focus on the systematic objectification of Blackness in American popular culture, Stewart shows how some “accounts unwittingly replicate the marginalization of Blackness that characterizes minstrelsy and the dominant cinema by obscuring the roles African Americans have played as subjects of their own history with mass culture.” In re-orienting the study of Black images, Stewart brings into view not only early Black film exhibition and production efforts but also the relationship between cinema and Black migration to northern cities, especially in the formation of Black urban cultures in the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

This book aims to similarly widen and complicate the relationship of Asian Americans to the institution of the cinema. *Transpacific Convergences* emphasizes the multidimensional aspects of the cinema, or what Rick Altman refers to as “cinema as event.” This formulation moves beyond film as text. Highlighting the interchange between projection and reception, Altman calls for a study of cinema focused on multiplicity, instability, mediation, and materiality. Such an approach registers cinema as a constellation of events rather than a unified chain of images. It makes possible the recognition of the live and performative aspects of the cinema, the disunity of film as a material object, and the intermediality of the cinema and its viewing publics.<sup>20</sup> Building on these conceptions, *Transpacific Convergences* works to expand the objects, sites, and foci of filmic inquiry; in so doing, the book recognizes Japanese Americans as themselves participants in the emerging and changing film publics of the early twentieth century.

Finally, *Transpacific Convergences* looks across racialized historiographies and illuminates a multilayered historicity. While at the periphery of the studio system, the early Japanese filmmaking of the 1910s shares a border with the race film industry and African American film culture of the early twentieth century. Early Japanese film producers were similarly motivated by discourses of racial uplift, and the systems of alternative filmmaking and exhibition also reveal a historical point of overlap. From the use of Spanish words by Japanese benshi in California to the patronage of Japanese-owned theaters by Filipino filmgoers, the points of convergence and interracial encounter can become visible in the ephemeral archival fragments even when they are obscured within the dominant historiography. In looking to the study of cinema and media studies (and especially early cinema studies),

comparative race and intersectional approaches remain limited. Daniel Bernardi's edited collection *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (1996) continues to be one of few exceptions. Written over two decades ago, Bernardi noted then that film studies tended to ignore race altogether or take a singular racial group approach that elides the "historical, theoretical, and critical work on the meaning of race that these groups share."<sup>21</sup> More recent comparative scholarship includes Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon's *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* (2019) and Joshua Glick's *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958–1977* (2018). Though the work remains emergent in cinema and media studies, comparative and intersectional approaches have abounded for the past decade in the interdisciplinary field of ethnic studies (so much so that the field has reached its own abnegation). Nevertheless, ethnic studies scholars have led the way, chronicling and critiquing over a century of Afro-Asian encounter and beyond, from W. E. B. Du Bois's declaration of Japan as "champion of the colored races" to the identification with Black power by Asian American activists in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

With its intertwined relationships to the LA Rebellion and the revolutionary filmmaking of Third Cinema, post-1968 Asian American independent filmmaking has a "family of resemblance" within this earlier era of film production and exhibition.<sup>23</sup> As Renee Tajima-Pēna, Glen Mimura, and the recent work by Josslyn Lockett have shown, filmmaking practitioners and foundational media arts programs like Ethno-Communications worked collaboratively across racialized communities and made work shaped by multi-racial coalition building and Third World anticolonial solidarity.<sup>24</sup> While the post-1968 period differs considerably, as I have indicated, this earlier period's interconnections to the race film industry and African American filmgoing publics (as well as other sites of convergence and divergence) illuminate an intriguing line of continuity. In rethinking the many pasts of Asian American film history, the book ultimately hopes to reimagine its many possible futures.

### On Lost Films and Writing Film Pasts

I first learned of early Japanese filmmaking in the United States in a footnote. As if breathing a life into existence, Yoshio Kishi briefly referenced the presence of two early studios called the Japanese American Film Company and the Yamato Graph Motion Picture Company in the now classic Asian American film anthology *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Me-*

*dia Arts* (1999).<sup>25</sup> Unbeknownst to me then, these two film companies produced some of the earliest known film productions by Japanese Americans. As I would later discover, most of these early films no longer exist. Films of this era were made of nitrate celluloid, a highly flammable chemical material. With their vulnerability to combustion and deterioration, many early films were destroyed. Over 80 percent of American silent-era films have been irretrievably lost. Early films made by Asian Americans were even less likely to survive. Produced outside the commercial industry and subject to racialized marginalization, early films by Asian Americans often eluded institutional preservation efforts. Excavating the history of these lost films has enabled my writing the history of early Asian American filmmaking.

Many of the films included in *Transpacific Convergences* are *lost films*, or films with no existing print. This book takes up the problem of “writing film histories without films” by widening the archive and expanding methodological approaches. Eric Smoodin has argued that the archival turn can potentially enlarge the horizons of cinema studies, opening possibilities for new directions and new historiographies. “Films themselves,” according to Smoodin, “might have a modest place and none of the singular importance that marked the discipline for so long.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it is in part the field’s privileging of extant films that has long shaped the scholarly writing on American film history. In shifting the objects of study and expanding the archives, *Transpacific Convergences* brings into view an alternative historiography, indeed a counterarchive of filmmaking practice and possibility.

I approach the study of lost films and ephemeral film practices as a primary rather than ancillary concern. Writing about the problem of lost, fragmentary, unreliable, and disappearing sources in the study of early African American filmmaking, Allyson Nadia Field has argued that “lost to us today, nonextant films nonetheless existed at a given time and place and functioned in particular contexts, had actual effects on specific audiences, and consisted of certain formal properties.” Even if the actual print no longer exists, excavating the context of production, exhibition, and accounts of reception can provide important insight into ephemeral film practices and on the formal qualities of the films themselves. Source materials may provide information on the length or format of films as well as narrative elements, whereas other editing and compositional features may be less easy to discern given the surviving evidence. To consider any of these aspects of lost or incomplete films, according to Field, requires us to “look beyond the screen” and to the broader culture of the time.<sup>27</sup> Wherein an actual print may not exist, the archives may provide insight into how films may have been formally constituted and how

ephemeral film practices may have been enacted, regardless of whether we can currently see it.

Existing archives make it possible to consider lost films and reconstruct lost film histories, yet they also present historiographical and methodological challenges. The archival turn in cinema studies has been enhanced by the availability of digital resources, such as Eric Hoyt's Media History Digital Library (MHDL), an indispensable resource for my research.<sup>28</sup> However, as Rob King importantly notes, whereas previous generations of silent-era film historians depended on a handful of trade magazines whose primacy was tied to their availability on microfilm, the MHDL vastly expanded these holdings by digitizing scores of additional sources; but "what goes unchallenged in this process is the historiographical primacy of journals and fan magazines in the first place." "The website's very usefulness bespeaks an inevitable circularity," according to King. "Existing methodological protocols have prioritized certain categories or materials for digitization (trade and fan magazines), which in turn ensures the ongoing production of scholarship that, in drawing on those same general categories, thereby conforms to established methodological protocols." Beyond additive or supplemental, the effort to expand the archive must also engage epistemological concerns and the modes of knowledge production. As King further asserts, "a more expansive conception of the archive unsettles traditional hierarchies of documentation by forcing sanctioned categories into dialogue with the margins. Such an interpretive practice will, moreover, be dialogic twice over. Not only will it be attuned to archival objects that interrupts or disrupts business-as-usual historiography, but it will also examine those objects for traces of the counterhistories lurking beneath the official record."<sup>29</sup>

While this study utilizes traditional film history sources, including trade journals and sources from the Media History Digital Library, the most important archives for *Transpacific Convergences* come largely from underutilized media-related Asian American collections. First, I draw extensively from Japanese American print media.<sup>30</sup> By searching Japanese American newspapers, I was able to identify filmmakers, producers, studios, and film titles, many of which were completely unacknowledged in American cinema catalogs and film listings. Short articles or notices in the papers identified local screenings of Japanese films. Not only did these sources allow me to map the routes of Japanese film circulation in the United States, but they also enabled me to chronicle the work of the benshi, who exhibited and performed with the films. Japanese American journalists and film critics wrote about films

and film viewings for local Japanese audiences and they also provided keen observations of Japanese participation in Hollywood and its film culture. Together with mainstream newspapers, both regional and national sources, Japanese American newspapers provided rich insight into early Japanese American film practices and public cultures.

The availability of Japanese American newspapers and other archival sources is itself a product of history and power. It was not until the 1970s and the emergence of the Asian American movement that alternative repositories for collecting the histories of Asian Americans was even conceivable. Japanese American newspapers were especially well preserved in collections because they were kept and used by U.S. military intelligence during the years leading up to World War II. Collected by the FBI as “raw data” on the “pro-Japan” sentiments of Issei, these sources served as justification for the surveillance, round-up, and mass incarceration of Japanese Americans.<sup>31</sup> While I consulted numerous microfiche collections, a significant portion of my print media sources come from the Hoji Shinbun Digital Archive, an open-access digital collection begun in 2017 by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.<sup>32</sup>

Second, such manuscript collections as the Takeshi Ban Papers at the Japanese American National Museum also provided valuable materials. This collection was donated by descendants in 1996. Ban was a traveling film exhibitor and benshi who set up Japanese film shows across the continental United States. Ban kept journals of his work between the years 1933 and 1941. These materials provide invaluable insight into the operation of Japanese film exhibition and delineate the scope and scale of the showman’s endeavors. Looking at Ban’s business records, as well as his correspondence with Noboru Tsuda and Suimin Matsui, exposes the centrality of nontheatrical venues and a broader network of filmic activity. Letters between Ban and the famed W. E. B. Du Bois (held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Library) document Ban’s film work beyond mere commercial or entertainment purposes. Ban approached the cinema as a “race man,” and his efforts to foster a viewing public illuminate his ideas about racial progress and uplift, as I explore in chapter 2.

Nonfilmic materials—including trade papers, collected oral histories, government documents, and ephemera—compose the bulk of my research archive. However, a singular film remains one of my most significant sources. I first discovered a print of *The Oath of the Sword* in 2016 at the George Eastman Museum (GEM) via its cataloging in the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) International Index. As far as I know, the film is the earliest

Asian American film with a surviving print. Made in 1914, the film was produced by a company in Los Angeles called the Japanese American Film Company. Its all-Japanese cast enact a story drawing on the conventional tropes of *Madame Butterfly* but also promulgate a vision of racial uplift and modernity not unlike better known race films of this era.

In preservation terms, *The Oath of the Sword* can be understood as an *orphan film*. In the early years of film preservation, the priority was to restore commercial releases from the major motion picture industry. The term *orphan film* designates films outside the domain of commercial preservation. It also means “motion pictures abandoned by its owner or caretaker” or lacking clear copyright or ownership. Writing about the expanding scholarly engagement with orphan films, Paul Moore further asserts that the term has been “deliberately left un-defined to include . . . the preservation of [any] films left on the margins.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, *The Oath of the Sword* was a classically orphaned film. The provenance of the donated print is not known. GEM records do not capture who donated the print and when. The original print was photochemically preserved in 1980 and reproduced as a 35 mm safety negative and print, which is the copy that I was able to initially view in 2016.

The materiality of the print shapes both preservation and the understanding of the film’s historiographical significance. GEM received the original film material as a 35 mm incomplete, silent tinted nitrate print. *The Oath of the Sword* was originally produced as a three-reel narrative feature, although its original length remains unknown. GEM’s surviving print was preserved in a slightly shortened version measuring 1,778 footage feet, still contained in three reels. As an incomplete film print, a critical part of recovering the film is using written materials to fill in the missing pieces. In the first chapter, I analyze the surviving film print materials against the coverage of the film in the trade press and in documentary evidence, such as the film’s scenario and the production company’s incorporation papers. Additionally, the incompleteness of *The Oath of the Sword* exemplifies the uncertain status of film as a material object. The fragility of nitrate and the practice of producing varied prints at this time means that early films of this sort can rarely be conceived as original, complete, or definitive. The possibility of recovering additional prints and in ongoing restoration work means that the status of an extant print can always change.

As of this writing, I am working on a National Film Preservation Foundation grant in collaboration with GEM and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) to preserve and restore *The Oath of the Sword*.<sup>34</sup> The original nitrate has so significantly deteriorated that preservation efforts must uti-

lize the safety negative, relying on the original nitrate only as a reference to restore the original tinting in the film. The restoration project will restore the original tinting to the film and yield a new print for storage at GEM and master digital materials to be held at JANM. My efforts here build upon a growing body of work in recovering pre-1968 Asian American films. Some of the most pioneering work has been done by Asian American filmmakers themselves. Arthur Dong discovered the only known existing material from *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1916) while working on his documentary *Hollywood Chinese* (2007).<sup>35</sup> According to Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, Dong found two reels of the 35 mm original negative and a 16 mm print in the basement of the Chinese American Historical Society in San Francisco. The surviving material is held and preserved by the Academy Film Archive.<sup>36</sup> Other research on the emergence of early Chinese American filmmaking efforts have led to the recovery of scant archival material and surviving reels for the filmmakers James B. Leong and Joseph Sunn Jue.<sup>37</sup> The work of Esther Eng and lesser-known Chinese American filmmakers also comes to light through the work of the filmmaker S. Louisa Wei and scholar Danielle Seid.<sup>38</sup>

To date, far less has been recovered for early Japanese American feature filmmaking. A surviving print of Sessue Hayakawa's *The Dragon Painter* (1919) was located at GEM by Stephen Gong and has since been restored and digitized.<sup>39</sup> In recovering and preserving *The Oath of the Sword*, it is my hope that the film can be viewed by future audiences and scholars alike and that new public audiences will encounter the film within the new viewing spaces of museums, film festivals, and digital media. While the contemporaneous release of the film was limited, as I detail in the following chapters, it remains possible for the once lost film to reemerge under new flickering (pixelated) lights.

### Transpacific Convergences

The book begins in 1902, with an early nickelodeon established by Japanese in Seattle, Washington; moves through the major developments in cinema, including the silent and sound eras and the rise of the studio system; and ends with changes in film culture in the 1940s and the devastating impact of World War II. It contains four chapters, each organized around film production, exhibition, and reception to tell a story of multiple overlapping film publics in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter 1 explores early Japanese American independent filmmaking as it emerged over and against the development of early Hollywood. This chapter

recovers the film production efforts of Japanese in the United States as an alternative system of film production and circulation. I emphasize early filmmaking endeavors by Japanese in the United States as a mode of filmmaking concerned with the optic of representing “the race.” Early Japanese American film producers and companies developed further within the context of a collective response to growing anti-Japanese sentiment on the Pacific coast. Seizing the modern apparatus of the cinema, Japanese in the United States utilized filmmaking to address their concerns for racial progress, uplift, and respectability.

Even before Sessue Hayakawa established Haworth Pictures, filmmaking enterprises by Japanese burgeoned in California and beyond. As early as 1912, Japanese in Portland, Oregon, were making educational films that showcased the abundance of agricultural crops harvested by Japanese farmers in California as well as other successes of the immigrant pioneers. These efforts in early filmmaking envisioned a transpacific film enterprise from its inception as producers sought audiences not only in the United States but also in Japan. Building on these early efforts, the Japanese American Film Company in 1914 opened offices in the emerging filmmaking capital, Los Angeles, and produced *The Oath of the Sword*, a film I closely analyze, while the Fujiyama Film Company in 1916 followed suit and established a studio in nearby Redlands, California. Japanese working in Hollywood contributed to other early film efforts. Oriented by their geographic and professional proximity to the major studios, these early filmmaking enterprises charted a path in independent filmmaking while also envisioning a new cinema in which Japanese were behind the scenes and in front of the camera.

Chapter 2 charts the formation of an alternative network of film circulation and exhibition by Japanese in the United States. Upending the oft cited claim that Japanese cinema first appeared in the United States via the art house circuit of the 1950s, this chapter argues for Japanese cinema’s American encounter in an earlier moment and across an expansive circuit of exchange by and for Japanese Americans. Whereas Japanese proprietors operated film theaters from the first start of the nickelodeon era and beyond, Japanese films were also often projected in nontheatrical exhibition venues. Across the United States, agricultural fields, abandoned warehouses, Buddhist temples, community halls, churches, and even people’s backyards were converted into makeshift theaters to project and view Japanese films. By highlighting these nontheatrical contexts, I locate Japanese film exhibition as a *useful cinema* that extended beyond commercially or entertainment-oriented purposes.

This chapter also highlights the central role of the benshi in both performing alongside the film as well as serving as a film's distributor and exhibitor. Often it was the benshi who took the Japanese film on the road, moving from town to town with equipment and film print in hand. Working independently or in partnership with Nichibeï Kogyo Kaisha in Los Angeles, the benshi retained significant control in promoting, projecting, and exhibiting film. While characteristic of silent era exhibition at large, these dynamics in Japanese film exhibition ensured an irreproducibility of the filmic experience even as industries moved toward increasing standardization. Underscoring the localized dimensions of film exhibition, the chapter follows the work of Takeshi Ban, a benshi and Japanese film exhibitor who traversed hundreds of exhibition sites in the United States with Japanese films. Motivated not only by profit, Ban crafted a film public based in religiosity and transpacific politics.

Chapter 3 explores the sound transition as it took place within and between the film industries of the United States and Japan. Across a rapidly changing industry, Japanese in Hollywood found themselves incorporated into the efforts of the major studios as they sought to recapture global audiences. The emergence of sound technology introduced the problem of Hollywood's nationalization—as film became audible not only of sound but also of national languages. Hollywood looked to Japanese working in the industry to engage the development of the new medium as translators, interpreters, foreign-language actors, and writers. Yet these changes in the film industry also reinforced and fortified the system of racialized casting and production practices. In the transition to sound, early Hollywood sound films reengaged the screen Orientalism of the silent era, animating and making audible a new field of racialized speech sounds and sonic effects.

The chapter also examines the residual practices of the silent era as they continued across multiple aspects of Japanese American participation in production and exhibition. It looks at the first and only independent Japanese-language film made in the sound transition in the United States, along with a handful of amateur films made in the silent medium by Japanese producers. Finally, I look at the continual circulation of Japanese silent films within the sound era and the persistence of the benshi, whose work seemed to gain momentum with the outbreak of war in the Asia Pacific and as Japanese war and propaganda films began their circulation in the United States. Between national contexts and across the sphere of production and exhibition, together these discordant aspects of Japanese film culture mark the sound era's audible divides.

Chapter 4 considers the non-Japanese and working-class participants in Japanese film culture in the United States. Filipinos, in particular, were a sizable patronage for Japanese-owned film theaters. Looking at the theaters catering to Filipino patrons, I situate a film viewing public consolidated in opposition to intra-Asian relations and the racialized labor politics of Depression-era California. Japanese owned venues, like the Lincoln Theatre, were located in Stockton's Filipino district and contributed to a Filipino public world centered in urban leisure and consumer participation. Drawing on Filipino print media sources, I consider the implications of Filipino presence in Japanese film culture in the United States not only as economically motivated but also as constituting the sorts of cross-racial and localized encounters not easily incorporated into a singular conception of cinema, national or diasporic.

Not only did Japanese own or operate filmgoing venues for Filipino patrons, but they also played a role in exhibiting some of the earliest films from the Philippines to be seen in the continental United States and Hawaii. Tracing the circulation of Filipino films in the 1930s and 1940s, this chapter chronicles the transpacific movements of early Tagalog talkies and their exhibition histories in Japanese-owned theaters. Whereas the bulk of films under consideration were produced within the industry based in the Philippine archipelago, I include within this circulation history a relatively unknown and no longer extant Filipino film made in San Francisco, California, in the early 1930s. Additionally, Filipino films were often exhibited in California as "midnight rambles," following a common practice of racial segregation prevalent in the South.

In the epilogue, I look at the eventual collapse of these multiple film publics. Many of the promoters and exhibitors of Japanese film were incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II. The film culture itself emerged as a target of federal scrutiny and investigation. Confiscating film reels as perceived propaganda material, U.S. authorities viewed the film cultures of Japanese in the United States as a part of the wartime Pacific theater. I conclude with a discussion of our contemporary media era and the implications of new histories of media pasts.

FUJI KAN NO LONGER EXISTS. The physical site of its former location is now a Citibank and flanked on both sides by parking garages. Between the 1950s and 1970s, Los Angeles's Little Tokyo, like so many American urban neighborhoods, confronted the devastating consequences of urban renewal. With affordable housing and commercial businesses demolished (in addition to

the long-term impact of World War II and the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans), what remains of Los Angeles's Little Tokyo today is contained in nine square blocks. At present, there is no physical trace of the Fuji Kan, no reminder of its mark on the city, and virtually no recognition of its significance within the history of the cinema. Its presence is lost to us, much like the history in this book.

*Transpacific Convergences* recovers a history not easily reconstituted. Its forking pathways end soon after they begin. The routes of its travel require looking between and beyond the major film studios and dominant film cultures. It moves across borders and, at times, creates them. In telling the story of a lost film history, *Transpacific Convergences* reconsiders not only what that history entails but also the terms by which it is reimagined. Such a telling reveals a history of the cinema that has never been singular nor chronological. It is not led from the core to the periphery nor bounded by clear categories and designations. Instead, *Transpacific Convergences* illuminates a media past unfurled in its fragments. In mapping "alternative" and "marginal" film networks, routes, and practices, I do tell the story of the cinema, not of the history that would come to be but of the one that could have been.

## Notes

### Introduction

1. Johnson, "Places You'll Know," 24–50; See also Toulmin and Loiperdinger, "Is It You?," 7–18.
2. Ogiwara, "Exhibition of Films," 81. More recently, Fumiaki Itakura expands this work in a Japanese-language publication *Eiga to imin: zaibei Nikkei imin no eiga juyō to aidentiti*.
3. Bean, Kapse, and Horak, *Silent Cinema*, 2.
4. Keil and Stamp, *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, 2.
5. Elsaesser, *Film History*, 73.
6. For a cogent exhibition review, see Glick, "Exhibition Review."
7. For a review of the series *Asian Americans*, see Okada, "Representation, Recognition"; see also the interview with the filmmaker in Khor, "History."
8. The screening series featured a virtual event with the filmmakers Roddy Bogawa, Shu Lea Cheang, Richard Fung, Jon Moritsugu, Spencer Nakasako, and Rea Tajiri. See Sentient.Art.Film, "My Sight Is Lined with Visions," accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.sentientartfilm.com/my-sight-is-lined-with-visions>.
9. Contributing authors include Josslyn Luckett, Oliver Wang, Viola Lasmana, Lan Duong, and Melissa Phruksachart. See Hu and Rich, "Dossier."
10. Luckett, "Searching for Betty Chen"; other scholars like Klavier Wang look to new archives for reexamining the community-based multilingual media practices of Asian CineVision (ACV). Wang reidentified and helped process for NYU archives over 380 tapes made in the 1970s by the Manhattan-based media organization. Wang, "Awakening Immigrant Voices: Chinese Cable Television in 1970s–1980s New York Chinatown," paper presented at the Orphan Film Symposium, virtually, May 28, 2020.
11. For accounts of post-1968 Asian American cinema, see Xing, *Asian America*; Feng, *Identities in Motion*; Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*; Okada, *Making Asian American Film*.
12. James, *Most Typical Avant-Garde*.
13. Gunckel, *Mexico on Main Street*.
14. Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity*, 113.
15. Kitamura, *Screening Enlightenment*; see also Walsh, "No Place"; Itatsu, "Japan's Hollywood Boycott Movement."
16. Serna, *Making Cinelandia*.
17. Azuma, *Between Two Empires*; see also Yoneyama, "Toward a Decolonial Genealogy."
18. Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa*; Liu, "When Dragon Ladies Die"; Chan, *Perpetually Cool*; Wang, "Anna May Wong"; Chung, *Hollywood Asian*.

19. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 6.
20. Altman, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*.
21. Bernardi, *Birth of Whiteness*, 6; in addition to Bernardi's work, scholars have produced a significant body of scholarship on African American connections to the circulation of kung fu and martial arts films in the United States during the 1970s. To name a few, see Desser, "Kung Fu Craze"; Ongiri, "Just like Bruce Lee"; Cha-Jua, "Black Audiences"; for another comparative perspective focused on early Hollywood, see Marez, "Pancho Villa."
22. The scholarship on Afro-Asian connection centered on Japan and Japanese Americans includes Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race*; Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism*; Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism*; Schleitwiler, *Strange Fruit*; Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun*.
23. The phrase "families of resemblance" comes from Lipsitz, "Cruising around the Historical"; for a related concept in media studies, see Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation"; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism*.
24. Tajima-Peña, "Moving the Image"; Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*; Luckett, "Toward a More Perfect."
25. Kishi, "Final Mix: Unscheduled."
26. Smoodin, "As the Archive Turned," 100.
27. Field, *Uplift Cinema*, 26.
28. The Media History Digital Library has recently begun to expand its holdings into non-English-language sources.
29. King, "Early Hollywood," xi.
30. For a discussion of Japanese American print media, see Robinson, *Pacific Citizens*; Yoo, "Read All about It."
31. Azuma, "Hoji Shinbun Digital Collection."
32. The database is an unparalleled resource containing over 145 titles from the continental United States, Hawaii, and across the Japanese global diaspora. Sources like the San Francisco-based newspapers *Japanese-American News* and *New World Sun* began English-language sections as early as the 1910s. The majority of my sources were focused on the English-language sections and in newspapers produced in California and Washington.
33. Moore, "Ephemera as Medium," 136.
34. I would like to acknowledge the work of the primary participants involved in the restoration of *The Oath of the Sword* (via the grant proposal from the National Film Preservation Foundation), especially Caroline Yeager and Anthony L'Abbate, from the George Eastman Museum, and Karen Ishizuka, Thomas Gallatin, and Kristen Hayashi, from the Japanese American National Museum. Thanks also to Dan Streible for his continual support, and to Stephen Gong for his mentorship.
35. Arthur Dong also published a collection of his archival research on early Chinese American film history wherein he chronicles the discovery of *The Curse of Quon Gwon*. For a discussion of his restoration work, see Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.
36. Lau, "Marion E. Wong."
37. For scholarship on early Chinese American filmmaking, see Kar, Bren, and Ho, *Hong Kong Cinema*; Curry, "Part One"; Curry, "Part Two"; Wang, "Alter-Centering Chi-

nese Cinemas”; Gruenewald and Wang, “East-West Flows”; Gow, “Performing Chinatown”; Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture*.

38. *Golden Gate Girls*, directed by Wei Shiyu (2013); Seid, “Forever Her Chinatown.”

39. In 2008, Milestone released a DVD of the restored film *The Dragon Painter* along with supplemental materials.

## Chapter One

1. Ichioka, “Japanese Associations.”

2. Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race*.

3. Azuma, *Between Two Empires*.

4. The Supreme Court’s decision rested on the question of race. In its 1922 landmark decision, the court ruled that Ozawa was not “white” because he was not “Caucasian” (which was defined by the pseudoscience of racial taxonomy) and therefore ineligible for naturalized citizenship. For background on the case, see Ichioka, “Early Japanese Immigrant Quest.”

5. Ichioka, “Japanese Associations,” 409–437.

6. Palmquist, “Asian Photographers.”

7. Sueyoshi, “Mindful Masquerades”; see also Sueyoshi, *Discriminating Sex*.

8. Lupack, *Early Race Filmmaking*, 7; scholars and historians such as Thomas Cripps and Pearl Bowser conducted pioneering archival work on the history of race films. The scholarship on the race film industry, its filmmakers and film productions, is vast and includes Cripps, “Birth of a Race”; Bowser, Gaines, and Musser, *Oscar Micheaux*; Gaines, *Fire and Desire*; Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*; Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom*; Field, *Uplift Cinema*.

9. Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa*, 24–27.

10. Miyao, 27.

11. “Protest Referred,” *Los Angeles Herald*, January 27, 1916; “Proposal to prevent the celebration of [the] anti-Japanese motion picture,” January 1, 1916, in Gijiroku [characters] [Minutes of meetings]. Japanese American Research Project (Yuji Ichioka) collection of material about Japanese in the United States (Collection 2010), Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA [translated by Toshikuni Kawashima].

12. “Japanese Seek to Halt Film ‘The Cheat’: Censorship Board See the Opera House Picture and Approves It,” *San Bernardino Daily Sun*, January 22, 1916, 5; “Japanese Protest Photoplay Exhibition,” *Los Angeles Herald*, January 22, 1916.

13. *Moving Picture World*, February 19, 1916, 1114.

14. “Japanese Paper Makes Objection to Play of Local House,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, May 23, 1916, 5.

15. Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa*, 28.

16. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*; Rogin, “‘Sword Became a Flashing.’”

17. Fields, *Uplift Cinema*, 151–184.

18. *Motion Picture News*, February 19, 1916, 992.

19. “Japanese Seek to Halt Film,” 5.

20. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*.