"'LIFE IS SWEET': VULNERABILITY AND COMPOSURE IN THE WARTIME NARRATIVES OF JAPANESE CANADIANS"

BY: PAMELA SUGIMAN
FACTSHEET: CLARESSA GORDON-SUTO

Using the concepts of **vulnerability** and **composure,** Sugiman positions herself in the conversational narrative of Japanese Canadian oral history by interviewing roughly 75 Nisei women and men about Canada's internment era. Constantly reflecting on her understanding of the importance of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

but don't cry,
know the tears'll do no good
so dry your eyes

they told you life is hard
it's misery from the start
it's dull and slow and painful

I tell you life is sweet
in spite of the misery
there's so much more
be grateful
who do you believe?
who will you listen to
who will it be?
it's high time you decide
in your own mind

– Excerpt from "Life Is Sweet" (Merchant 1998)

While analyzing these complex and wide-ranging narratives—interlaced with empirical and moral messages—Sugiman reflects on how "the lyrics from the Merchant's song **'Life Is Sweet'** summon in thought and feeling the deep, nuanced, and enduring moral message that has been imparted by the Nisei (second-generation Japanese Canadians) who shared with [her] their stories of internment and, in so doing, narrated their life histories" (p.209, 187).

Hastings Park,
Our home is at
Hastings Park now.
We live in the Women's
our school
in the
Building

Hide Hyodo Shimizu teaching children detained at Hastings Park internment cite, Vancouver, in 1942.

*Educator and activist Hide Hyodo Shimizu, Nisei born, was instrumental in the education of Japanese Canadian children during the Canadian internment era.

Bringing stability and joy into many interned children's lives during a confusing and traumatic time.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND DISTINCTIONS

- **Issei**: First-generation Japanese Canadian (p.187)
- **Nisei**: Second-generation Japanese Canadian (p.187)
- **Sansei**: Third-generation Japanese Canadian (p.190)
- While Sugiman does not specifically state this, there is a distinction between her use of **'Japanese Canadian' and 'Japanese-Canadian'**
    - When used as a **noun**: Japanese Canadian
    - When used **adjectivally**: Japanese-Canadian (a hyphen is used)
- **Hakujin:** a Japanese term meaning "White" people (p.191)

SECOND WORLD WAR: INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE CANADIANS

Before exploring the concepts of vulnerability and composure, Sugiman outlines a quick yet dense WWII timeline that centers on the Japanese Canadian experience. Doing this helps to situate individual and intimate historical accounts with broader and more collective ones (p.189).

1939

BEFORE THE UPROOTING

95 percent of Japanese Canadians and Japanese nationals settled in B.C., concentrating on Vancouver's "Japan Town," the fishing community of Steveston, other coastal towns, Vancouver Island, and within berry farms in the Fraser Valley (p.188). With Japanese-Canadian communities in B.C. for decades, anti-Japanese sentiment had time to festered, most originating within B.C.'s coastal regions. Thus, long before WWII, Japanese-Canadian communities faced racism in countless realms of their day-to-day lives (p.192).

Nikkei fishermen, Fraser River, 1913

Sugiman highlights how "the federal government's merciless treatment of roughly 22,000 persons of Japanese ancestry (75 per cent of whom were naturalized or Canadian-born citizens) was without doubt rooted in racist sentiment and motivated by **economic concerns** about the growing competition posed by prospering Japanese-Canadian fishermen on the country's west coast" (p.188).

1941

THE BOMBING OF PEARL HARBOR

In December of 1941, Japan bombed an American naval base located in Pearl Harbour Honolulu. As a direct result, Canadians of Japanese descent were deemed **"enemy aliens,"** a term derived from **historically rooted racism and anti-Asian fear-mongering** (p.189).

Sugiman highlights the onset of WWII by sharing Issei Kotoma Kitagawa's personal experience: A resident of Duncan B.C., Mrs.Kitagawa, a seamstress, and her husband a taxi driver spent over four months "without knowing anything about tomorrow" Ms.Kitagawa added, "We secluded ourselves in the darkened house with the windows closed. Since there were not too many Japanese around, we felt surrounded by white people and, in fact, they did watch us carefully. They informed on us to the police,...They would watch from behind curtains" (p.192).

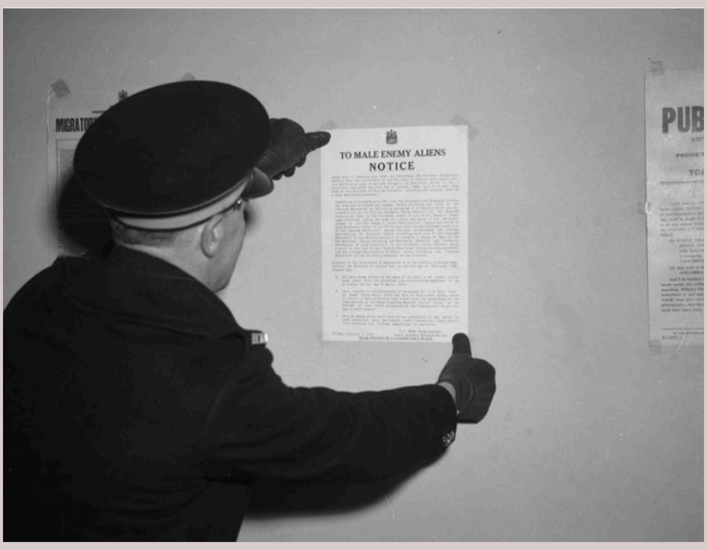
1942

CANADA’S INTERNMENT ERA

“On 14 January 1942, the federal government of Canada passed Order-in-Council PC 365, calling for the **removal of male Japanese nationals 18 to 45 years of age** from a designated “protected area” 100 miles from the BC coast” (p.187).

Separated from their families, “these men were then deposited in road camps in the Jasper area of the province of Alberta...” only weeks later “Order-in-Council PC 1486 was passed, expanding the power of the minister of Justice to **remove “all persons of Japanese origin,”** and **all possessions of “enemy property” were deemed possessions of government authority** (p.187-188).

The unjust actions taken against peoples of Japanese decent shattered Japanese-Canadian communities (p.188).



Hanging of “enemy alien” Notice

1944

LOYALTY TO THE NATION

S-20 and NISEI VETERANS REUNION

Photograph from the 1967 S-20 and Nisei Veterans Centennial Reunion, October 7, 1967, King Edward-Sheraton Hotel, Toronto, Canada.

By 1944, Japanese Canadians had faced years of being treated as enemy aliens, as criminals. Yet, the Japanese Canadians still looked to prove their loyalty to the Canadian nation and being allowed to enlist in the war efforts would do just that. “Such acts of nationalism are typically shaped by both gendered and racialized processes. For Nisei men, a symbolic demonstration of both loyalty to the nation and confirmation of manhood was enlistment in the armed forces” (p.195).

However, the public and certain government officials viewed Japanese Canadians as inherently disloyal (p.195). Even though, “...In a speech to the House of Commons on 4 August 1944, Prime Minister Mackenzie King stated, ‘It is a fact that no person of Japanese race born in Canada has been charged with any act of sabotage or disloyalty during the years of war,’” (p.188).

1945

ENLISTING AND REPATRIATION SURVEYS

By January 1945 **Japanese Canadian men could finally enlist.** “Akio Sato was one of 150 Nisei men to join the forces,” one of the many men who wished to prove his Canadianness through enlistment (p.196). Sato recalled 1945: “They were recruiting Japanese Canadians to…the Canadian Army,...**I got so excited**... my dad came up to me and says, I guess he saw me, he says … “it’s okay with him if you join.” So I said, “Thanks, Dad.” I almost cried. So, the next day I showed up…. I joined up and then so I was a member of the Canadian Army” (p.196).

Only months later, April of 1945, two notices were posted (p.202):

1. The first notice stated: “anyone who sought repatriation would receive **free passage to Japan.”**
2. The second notice: “offered (limited) financial support to people who agreed to **move east of the Rocky Mountains.”**

Directly after the notices were posted, Japanese Canadians were sent a “repatriation” survey.

1949

WWII ENDS, ANTI-ASIAN POLICIES PERSIST

The Japanese Canadians who stayed faced many more years of racial bigotry and discrimination.“The government explicitly stated that **Japanese Canadians should be “scattered”** across the country **“far and wide”**...” to avoid Japanese-Canadian communities rebuilding and reforming (p.192). Additionally, “cities and towns passed bylaws that set limits on the entry of people of Japanese origin and ensured against their congregation in any one neighborhood or vicinity” (p.192).

And, although the war ended in 1945, Japanese Canadians were prohibited from returning to B.C.’s coast until 1949 (p.192).

1980

REDRESS AND AGENCY

In the 1980s, there was a campaign for Japanese Canadian redress. It wasn’t until **1988**, “as part of the Redress Settlement, [that] the prime minister apologized to the Japanese-Canadian community for the violations of internment during the Second World War. This symbolic gesture unleashed personal memories on the part of survivors of the internment” (p.211, Note #3).

Connie Matsuo (1919-2014)

During the early days of Redress, internment survivor Connie Matsuo was asked to “describe these hard times to a public audience” (p.197). Connie chose to be selective about her audience and carefully chose what she wanted and what she did not want to share with her family and the Hakujin people. “Her decision is not one of silence over speech...It is a combination of **agency** (choosing her own audience) and **vulnerability** (not being regarded as a “normal Canadian”)..., in this sense, a **micropolitical act”** (p.198).

ORAL HISTORY AND SHARED AUTHORITY

While determining how to integrate herself into the Japanese Canadian conversational narrative (oral history) as an interviewer, Sugiman highlights three things that she must learn to understand (p.189):

1. The creation of narratives
2. Her complex relationship between herself as an interviewer and the Nisei women and men within her study
3. Interventions as a researcher—specifically, the powers exercised in interpreting and presenting the oral history in her own written words.

“Ultimately, the oral historian must respect what the narrator says” (p.209). By listening closely and looking to understand the nuance in their narratives, and by connecting personal biography and historical context, Sugiman attempts to share authority with the Nisei women and men who have allowed her to hear their narratives, their life memories and wartime stories (p.209).

Sugiman learns to view “the interview itself as a subjective experience that has as much to do with who we are, as it does with what we went through” (p.209). That, ultimately, Sugiman as an interviewer is influenced by her scholarly motives and personal history. And, moreover, that interviewees are complex multifaceted agents, who are more than just their historic victimization.

"…struck by the candour and humility of each [narrative], and by the complex ways in which the women and men structured their life stories, constructed a coherent identity, expressed agency and powerlessness, and inserted themselves into the collective history of Japanese Canadians," Pamela Sugiman asks herself why "…so many Nisei choose to punctuate accounts of hardship and unfairness with the conclusion that life is sweet?" (p.189,191).

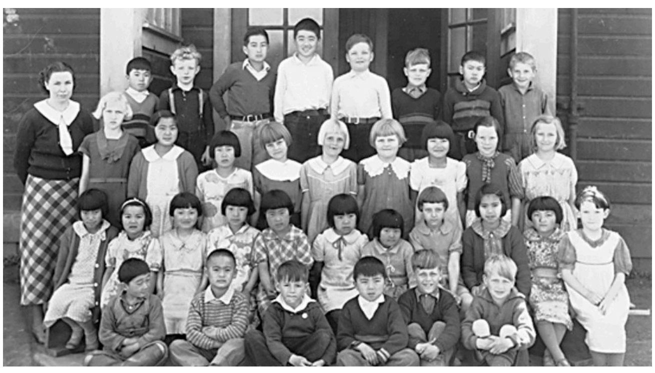
ENDURING VULNERABILITY

Sugiman quotes Mark Klempner stating, **"The recounting of a trauma narrative, can be a physically charged event entailing great vulnerability"** (p.192). Elaborating on this notion, Sugiman explains how these wartime experiences are not forgotten and thus even **over time, over decades, "many Japanese Canadians reveal a persisting vulnerability,** one of many **psychic scars left by a history of racial persecution"** (p.193). This results in different narrators choosing to express their vulnerability in different ways, "sometimes subtle and indirect, at other times with a deliberate intent." (p.194)

Narrator Jean (Yoshiko) Goto, illustrated her vulnerability by explaining a part of her adolescent years in pre-war Canadian schools.

- How she adopted a Western name (Jean) for the ease of her Hakujin friends and teachers—she was known as Yoshiko at home and Jean everywhere else.
- Along with how she was marked "**racially different**" based on physical qualities that she had—how they made her feel like "shrimp" in comparison to her classmates (p.194).

Unlike Connie Matsuo, mentioned in the timeline above, Jean used her agency to widely express her vulnerable experiences and current feelings. Jean expressed how **these vulnerable feelings still linger with her today**, "Well, we knew that the Japanese were just like, there was discrimination and prejudice and even 'til now, I feel that going into a strange place and…. I'm Japanese and they're looking at me. And I have that feeling, where my kids don't have that. But I do" (p.194).



Sunbury School, Delta Vancouver, in the 1936

Another major topic of vulnerability for many Japanese Canadians is the subject of '**place in the nation'** (p.195). Embedded within many of the Nisei's interviews, like Jean's, is the notion of being a "true Canadian" and recognized as a **"true citizen."** Many went to great lengths to "prove their Canadian identity through symbolic assertions of national loyalty, serving up evidence of assimilation, offering proof that they were culturally and subjectively distinct from the "Japanese" Japanese" (p.195). This had lasting impressions on the Nisei and the following generations of Japanese Canadians.

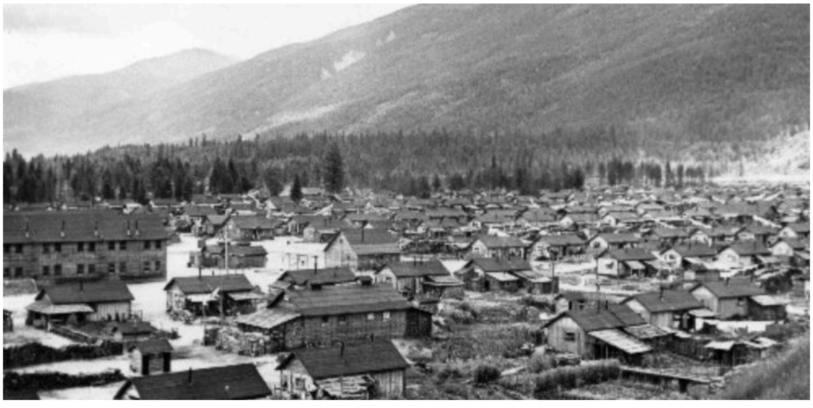
COMPOSING OUR MEMORIES, COMPOSING OURSELVES

As seen from the timeline above, Japanese Canadians faced years of racism; from politically determined anti-Japanese policies to socially constructed anti-Asian norms. Japanese Canadians after the war and after their internment needed to find ways to come to terms with what they had lived through and endured.

Looking at the work of Mark Klempner on trauma narratives, Sugiman explains that **trauma narratives "typically engage the teller in an effort to find closure..."** and can thus lead to a **blessing-in-disguise type narrative**: "The idea that the past is the past serves a therapeutic purpose; and one way to demonstrate that the past has indeed passed is to highlight the goodness of people and friendships with even those individuals who were bystanders and witnesses to the atrocities and indignities of the war years" (p.202). This method allows the narrator to compose themselves in such a way that **repairs themself and restores some of their dignity** (p.204).

Referencing Klempner again, Sugiman mentions how "**we have to be aware that these stories are ones that the interviewee has lived with for a long time."** and, "as a result, narrators have put in place **"self-defence mechanisms"** that the researcher may not immediately understand" (p.205).

Lemon Creek Internment Site, B.C., 2023



Lemon Creek Internment Camp, B.C., 1943

Powerfully Sugiman states, "Embraced in the concept of composure are assertions of agency, dignity, and self-respect, but these are also mixed with insecurity and vulnerability...Narrators shared tales of injustice alongside descriptions of the long-term benefits of internment. The documented collective experience of institutional racism during the war was the framework for symbolically significant and evocative personal memories of kind and generous "White" Canadian friends and strangers, and the downplaying of racist oppression in one's direct experience" (p.210). Interviewees share vulnerable stories with interviewers, composing themselves through tactics that restore their dignity and agency, bringing them back to the present; Sugiman respects these interviewees by listening intently and sharing authority with them on how these narratives get told.

Bibliography

Gordon-Suto, Claressa. *Lemon Creek Internment Site,* July 12, 2023. Photograph, Lemon Creek B.C.

Japanese Canadian Cultural Centure (JCCC). *Hanging of "enemy alien" Notice*, n.d., Photograph, National Association of Japanese Canadians, https://najc.ca/japanese-canadian-history/

Sugiman, Pamela Haruchiyo. "'*Life is Sweet': Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians.*" Journal of Canadian Studies 43, no. 1 (2009): 186-218.

Supplied. *Connie Matsuo,* n.d, Photograph, Nellie McClung Foundation, Kanaye Connie Matsuo (nelliemcclungfoundation.com)

Suto Family Archives. *Lemon Creek Internment Camp,* 1943, Photograph, Lemon Creek B.C.

Suto Family Archives. *Nikkei Fisherman on the Fraser River,* 1913, British Columbia.

Suto Family Archives. *Sunbury School Class Photo*, 1936, Photograph, Delta Vancouver B.C.

Toronto Star Archives. *Hide Hyodo Shimizu teaching children detained at Hastings Park, Vancouver, in 1942. With her are Midori Jane, age 6, and Naomi, age 10.* Photograph, The Canadian Encyclopedia, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hide-hyodo-shimizu

Yatabe Family Collection. *Nisei Veterns Centennial Reunion,* October 7, 1967, Photograph, Discover Nikkei https://discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2019/3/19/japanese-canadian-vets/