

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

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THE INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE CANADIANS: BACKGROUND



"In 1941, 22,000 Canadians of Japanese descent were dispossessed of their property and belongings, and uprooted from their British Columbia homes to various sites of internment" (p. 186).



"Families were deemed desirable as laboring units and were put to work on sugar-beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba" (p. 188).



"If any men were perceived resisting by the RCMP, they were incarcerated in prisoner of war camps" (p. 188).



Community kitchen at Japanese-Canadian internment camp, 1943

Using concepts of vulnerability and composure, Pamela Sugiman interviews *Nisei* (second-generation) Japanese-Canadians and listens to their narratives about being interned during World War II. "At the same time that narrators describe these years as filled with hardship, turmoil, and racial injustice, they also speak of happy times, kindness, and the sweetness of life" (p. 186)

DEFINITIONS

- Hakujiin – a Japanese term meaning white people p. 191
- Issei – first-generation Japanese Canadians p. 187
- Nisei – second-generation Japanese Canadians p. 187
- Sansei – third-generation Japanese Canadians p. 190



Japanese immigrants interned during WWII forced to go to Japan, 1946. Many of these people are Canadian born and have never been to Japan

Sugiman addresses the importance of the researcher and interviewee working towards a shared authority over these complex, multi-layered narratives. Sugiman writes, "I have tried to share authority with the Nisei women and men—by listening closely to their words, by attempting to understand the nuance in their narratives, and by making connections between personal biography and historical context. I have, moreover, learned the importance of viewing 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).

While interviewing Nisei, Sugiman noticed a pattern to the stories the narrators told. "In spite of the hardship and injustices, if not atrocities of war, people delivered the message that life is sweet" (p. 191).

Sugiman's Question: "Why, I ask myself, did so many Nisei choose to punctuate accounts of hardship and unfairness with the conclusion that life is sweet? Out of their memory cache, why did some narrators highlight the benevolence and humanity of Hakujiin friends and strangers?" (p. 191).

VULNERABILITY, IDENTITY & BELONGING

"A feeling of vulnerability is a remnant of traumatic events in one's own past or in the personal history of members of one's family" (p. 192).



LISA LOWE

"A national memory haunts the conception of the Asian American... in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the "foreigner-within," even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before" (Lowe, p. 5-6).

The vulnerability that many Japanese Canadians feel today results from the "precariousness of their place in the nation" (p. 195). Japanese Canadians were discriminated based on their "race" without consideration of their Canadian nationality. Sugiman says, "even now [2009] they make a strong effort to constitute themselves as true Canadians" (p. 195).

"My dad always told me, you know, he always told me, even before, that I was born in Canada, and "You're Canadian, and there's no use going to Japan because I'll be a foreigner in Japan." " (p. 195) ~Akio Sato

Akio Sato was one of 150 Nisei men to join the Canadian Army. In the interview with Sugiman, Akio emphasizes his decision to enlist because of his "belonging in Canada as opposed to Japan" (p. 196).



CONNIE MATSUO had a three-month-old baby when she was told to leave Vancouver. Connie was sent with her family to work on a sugar-beet farm in Manitoba in harsh conditions, and began to write down her stories and memories from the war for her daughter and grandchildren to read. Connie says she doesn't want Hakuji people to know her story because "now they treat [us] like a *normal Canadian*" (p.197-198).

"Connie's logic represents a deliberate use of memory and "voice" in the selective telling of her life story. Her decision is not one of silence over speech. Rather, it is a statement against indifference, one that informs us of the ways in which social and political realities have a bearing on the articulation of personal memories. It is a combination of agency (choosing her own audience) and vulnerability (not being regarded as a "normal Canadian") that has shaped Connie's decision. The generation of memory stories for Connie is, in this sense, a micropolitical act" (p. 198).

COMPOSURE

"The vulnerability of Japanese Canadians in both memory and current experience forces a need for composure, and the sweetness of life today—the authority with which they can reflect on the past, express agency, and find comfort in the present—helps many Nisei women and men to regain composure and bring coherence to their lives" (p. 199).

As many Nisei voiced their stories, "initial discomposure followed by an attempt at recomposure resulted in a mixed or fragmented narrative" (p. 199). Michiko Koyama speaks about the hardship her family experienced, yet minimizes the suffering and always ends her stories on a brighter-note. Michiko talks about her Dad being blind, her family losing their belongings, and being given two-weeks notice to move out of their home. At the same time, Michiko claims her family (even with rations) did not suffer, and discusses the racialization by the Hakuji ending on a theme of friendship (p. 200).

"So in a way ... we don't want to bring bad memory up so we just kind of let it go and go on with your living style, eh. So, personally, myself, I think it was a good thing that we got—I shouldn't say it's a good thing, but more or less a blessing in disguise that we got moved out of British Columbia" (p. 201).

~Michiko Koyama

"As Michiko's words indicate, however, the blessing-in-disguise metaphor is voiced by the very same individuals who passionately and critically describe the cruelty of the war years. It does not, then, reflect forgiveness and forgetting. Rather, **it constitutes an attempt to bridge the past and present in a way that conveys recovery and survival rather than victimization and defeat**" (p. 201).

In this essay, Sugiman provides an avenue of understanding these oral testimonies. According to Sugiman, "These fragmented narratives must be understood not as unreliable, confused, or misguided on the part of the narrators, or as evidence of the uncritical, stoic, and complacent Asian Canadian. Rather, they are declarations of national identity and belonging by people who have experienced a history of racial exclusion and persecution" (p. 210).

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