Pamela Sugiman, “Life is Sweet: Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians”



Deconstructing the Narrative

By: Rylan Kurvers



Interrupting the Sanitized Past

In the 1940s, the Canadian government forcibly removed people of Japanese descent. The traditional historical account of the 1940s often used the word **“evacuation”** to make the forced removal of Japanese Canadians sound like a routine wartime necessity, rather than a violation of the rights of Canadian citizens. The author Pamela Sugiman interrupts this narrative by reframing the event as a broad **"accumulation of loss"** rooted in institutional racism rather than military strategy.

Redefining the Nisei Experience

Nisei (second-generation Japanese Canadians) were citizens by birth but still classified as **“enemy aliens”** to justify their internment and the seizure of their property. Sugiman’s work uses **shared authority** as a research method in which the historian and the narrator collaborate to interpret the past. This approach acknowledges that the truth of history is found not just in cold facts, but in the Subjectivity of those who survived: how they felt, how they suffered, and how they chose to remember.





Reframing the Violence of Displacement

Beyond the physical removal of people, Sugiman emphasizes what scholar Mona Oikawa calls the accumulation of loss. This concept interrupts the idea that internment was a one-time thing. Instead, it highlights the violations experienced by Japanese Canadians: the theft of homes, the forced liquidation of family businesses without consent, and the state-regulated dispersal across the country.

The Theory of Composure

The most brilliant interpretation in Sugiman’s work is the concept of Composure. She argues that when survivors of internment tell "happy" stories alongside memories of cruelty, they are not being forgetful. Instead, they are actively composing a life story that maintains their dignity. By highlighting "the sweetness of life" and the kindness of strangers, the Nisei narrators are making a moral declaration: they are more than the trauma inflicted upon them by the Canadian government.





Subjectivity and Identity

History reveals that identity is not granted by the state but reclaimed by the individual. Sugiman notes that many Nisei narratives are fragmented, mixing tales of injustice with statements of loyalty to Canada. These narratives should not be viewed as unreliable but rather as declarations of national identity by people who survived a history of racial exclusion. When a narrator highlights their successes, they bring the past into line with a present in which they have moved from misfortune to "blessings," asserting their rightful place in Canadian history.

Reimagining Our Future

Reimagining our future is a vital teaching tool because it forces Canadians to rethink the **“march of progress.”** It warns that narratives of those who claim Japanese Canadians benefited from the internment actually block our ability to see how violence is perpetrated against subordinated communities. By centering **"resistant knowledges,"** we are challenged to act in the world with a deeper understanding of structural inequality.



Roy Miki, “Turning In, Turning Out: The Shifting Formations of 'Japanese Canadian,' from Uprooting to Redress”





Interrupting the Model Minority Myth

Roy Miki interrupts the liberal narrative that Japanese Canadians simply overcame their past through hard work and education. He argues that the postwar drive toward the professions and the **"self-imposed silences"** of the 1950s were not just signs of success, but symptoms of a disarticulated history of loss. This reframes Model Minority as a survival strategy where being **“more Canadian than other Canadians”** was a way to hide the trauma of betrayal by their own government.

The Rhetoric of Japanese Canadian

A central intervention in this article is the analysis of Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s language. Miki points out that the term **"Japanese Canadian"** was not used out of respect, but as a tool for dispersal and erasure. By adding **"Canadian"** to the Japanese label, the government attempted to **"soften overt racism"** while simultaneously demanding that the community be **"not seen, and certainly not heard."**





From “Enemy Alien” to “Raced Subject”

Miki explains how federal policies reduced a diverse community, which was separated by class, religion, and geography, into a single fixed identity: **“person of the Japanese race.”** It highlights the **"racializing syllogism"** used by the state to equate Japanese ancestry with being an **"enemy alien."** By exposing this logic, Miki redirects our understanding of the internment from a **"security measure"** to a systemic process of racialization where citizenship was legally ignored in the service of racism.

Reclaiming the Nation

The gem of Miki’s analysis is the shift. In the 1970s and 80s, Japanese Canadians were named by the state to **"claim"** the nation. Miki describes how a new generation moved away from seeking their identity in Japan and instead began **"reading themselves into the narrative of the nation."** This was an interpretation of identity as an agency-driven act: Japanese Canadians stopped being passive subjects of federal policy and became the authors of their own history through activism.





Redress as Social Justice

The 1988 Redress Settlement was a necessary resolution to a **"Democracy Betrayed."** This explains that Japanese Canadians would remain **"haunted"** by the **"enemy alien"** label. Redress aligned the Japanese Canadian identity with values of anti-racism, participatory democracy, and human rights. It reimagines the settlement (which was a formal apology) as a hard-won political exchange that forced the nation to confront its own racism.

Post-Redress Identity

Miki offers a resistant knowledge for the future and the idea that identity is always in movement. He argues that the redress settlement actually marked the passing of a fixed, wounded identity. Today, Japanese Canadians have always been a **"floating sign"** with the potential for unpredictable new meanings. This matters because it teaches us to avoid **"inclusion and exclusion"** processes and recognize how connected we all are in today’s world.



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