INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION: ISSEI[1], NISEI[2], SANSEI[3]

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Abstract: The Internment of Japanese immigrants in North America after Pearl Harbor had different effects on the Issei, the Nisei and the Sansei. Factors such as age, gender and social status determined how they each perceived the event and the coping strategies they developed during and after. The principles of On[4] and Giri[5] instilled the Issei's silence on the subject. This created a gap in the process of inter-generational cultural transmission, with multiple effects on the identity formation of the Sansei. The first generation perceived the Internment as Haji[6], shame resulting from personal shortcomings. The Sansei, raised in a multi-cultural environment, were taught to be both group-oriented and better integrated in their generational segment. They shared the Japanese system of values but also acquired the inquisitiveness and assertiveness characteristic to hegemonic discourse. In light of the Issei's retractile tendencies, some perceived their Japanese heritage as socially depreciative. Caught in-between, the Nisei had to decide on either a monolithic, or a contextually-sensitive cultural upbringing of the next generation while mitigating immixed feelings of shame and guilt. My research focuses on the difficulties that cultural specificity, the cultural landscape and the Internment generated in the identity formation of the Sansei and seeks to measure the degree of cultural confusion experienced in light of the event.

Keywords: Intergenerational Communication, Internment, Silence, Sansei, Generational Identity.

Joy Nozomi Kogawa's emblematic *Obasan* begins by raising awareness to the omnipresence of silence: "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak" (preceding 1). Japanese immigrants to North America were circumstantially led to perpetuate "a nonverbal mode of apprehension summarized by the term attendance" (Gayle 128). Attendance in the case of the *Issei* and the *Nisei* takes the form of silence, represented by communicational anxiety or voicelessness which evinces different attitudes towards members of the same generational segment, the mainstream, and the younger generations of Japanese. According to King-Kok Cheung these silences can be: ”oppressive, inhibitive, protective, stoic

[1] Literally, the First Generation from the contracted form of the Ideogram "ichi" meaning one/first and "sei" meaning "generation". It is used to denominate A Japanese immigrant to North America.

[2] Literally, the Second Generation from the Ideograms "ni" meaning two/second and "sei" meaning "generation". It is used to denominate an American or Canadian whose parents were immigrants from Japan.

[3] Literally, the Third Generation from the Ideograms "san" meaning three/third and "sei" meaning "generation". It is used to denominate an American or Canadian whose grandparents were immigrants from Japan.

[4] Translates as the "debt of gratitude" and implies a social obligation to return a favor.

[5] Translates as the moral "Duty "or "Obligation" one inherently has towards elders, authority, spiritual deities, family, etc.

[6] Translates as shame. In a traditional Japanese community, consequences for individual actions were reflected on the community, and therefore attracting negative attention towards oneself was considered detrimental to the entire group.

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and attentive **(**Cheung 26). They are identifiable to different degrees in the interactional patterns adopted by each generation of Japanese immigrants towards members of both the *Uchi*[7] and the *Soto*[8] groups.

When the Internment uprooted and relocated the entire Japanese segment of the population of Canada and The United States, the authorities faced a cooperative group, adhering to their given label of "model minority". This was translated as lack of assertiveness and race-specific docility, being later perpetuated as justification for the *Issei*'s refusal to discuss the matter. As a people, the Japanese favor: "Indirect communication, which is achieved through tacit understanding" (Iritani 90). Furthermore the Japanese rely on phatic communication almost as much as they do on the semantic element, leading to a form of dialogism which cannot be fully understood outside the sphere of the contextual. This was corroborated with the dismissal of the Internment and led to the *Sansei*'s perception of an artificially-imposed communicational gap rather than of application of *Gaman*[9].

The latter had, much like the *Nisei*, to reconcile the contrastive aspects of their multicultural identity. Unlike the *Nisei* however, they were unaware of the aggressive racism that their parents and grandparents were subjected to. The older generations' dismissal of the Internment has left the *Sansei* feeling cut off from their heritage (See Nobu Miyoshi 41, 50, 55). At the same time, although secessionism from the white majority was fostered to a lesser degree than in the case of previous generations, it generated cultural confusion and distance towards the mainstream. As a result, cultural division emerged among the *Sansei* as some chose to focus on a singular aspect of their heritage, while others attempted to balance both aspects of their heritage.

The biased attitude still upheld against the Japanese after the Internment is primarily due to the category of race "extending from the shaping of individual racial identities to the structuring of collective political action on the terrain of the state"(Omi and Winant 66). According to the authors, a racial minority cannot easily achieve definition as the construct of "race" is something fluid, rather than predefined, " organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity between micro-level and macro-level of social relations"(67). Caught in-between the micro-level of one's race-specific interactional patterns and the macro-level of the mainstream's culturally shaping attitudes about gender, sexuality, race, class, etc., institutions like the media and the government, the subjective construct of "race" becomes: "an unstable and 'de-centered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (68-69). The *Nisei* and the *Sansei*, although raised similarly to their white peers, could not escape being racially-labelled and exponential stereotype, due to their specific visual markers. Race and cultural-attachment thus become categories that they must carefully consider in their attempt to assimilate within the mainstream social structure.

Karl Mannheim's 1928 essay *The Problem of Generations* concludes that the behavior and structure of society are determined by aspects of culture. He introduces the term of

[7] The term refers to one's closest group. Translatable as "home" or "inside", it defines the group whose actions reflects most on the individual, and at the same time, the group whose face the individual is trying to uphold. It is usually comprised of relatives and very close friends, and in some cases, of members of one's institutional affiliation.

[8] The term refers to everyone besides one's closest group. It is translated as "outside" and it comprises all those outside one's inner group.

[9] The concept is derived from the practices of Zen Buddhism. It encompasses behaviors such as endurance, tolerance and self-denial, and refers to facing difficulties with patience and dignity.

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generational actuality to delineate a difference between the experience of a group defined by blood/racial ties and a group with similar ages bound by the experience of an important socio-political event (303). He argues that sharing similar spatial and temporal coordinates is not enough to generate a specific a generation-specific consciousness. According to the author, only if the "tempo of change" experienced by a generation is sufficiently rapid can one speak about the development of a distinctive consciousness. Applying Mannheim's model to the case of Japanese immigrants in North America, one observes the emergence of a group-specific consciousness towards the Japanese and on being Japanese. The tempo of change imposed by the process of immigration-Internment-dispersal was sufficient to alter perceptions of the self and the mainstream. However, instead of a homogenous attitude, the cases of the *Nisei* and the *Sansei* evince ambivalence towards cultural make-up. Mannheim's theory also suggests that models of perception are shaped within the first decade of life by the dynamics of the community/events. The majority of *Nisei* were children or adolescents when the Internment took place (Yoo 3). Thus, experiencing the shame of the Internment, primarily through the silence and humility of their parents, had a profound impact on the way they perceived themselves as individuals and as members of an ethnic group. The *Sansei*, on the other hand, were raised in a different socio-political climate altogether and shielded from knowledge of the *Haji* of Internment. Consequentially, the older generations' refusal to discuss the Internment marked the emergence of an intergenerational communicational gap. The *Sanse*i experienced this repudiation of the past with mixed feelings of racial shame and generation-specific inquisitiveness.

The *Issei* and *Nisei*, bound by their sense of *On*, insisted that the conditions during Internment were not worth mentioning. When confronted with their own letters form the time they continue to insist that the event was less traumatic than it seems. Ken Adachi presents the camps as: "institutions which bred a prison complex" (252). But more than the awareness of being held involuntarily, the Japanese were shamed by their belonging: "at least spiritually, to the unspeakable horrors of the countries with which Canada (And the United States) was at war, countries in which all the tennets of freedom, equality and the democratic tradition had been violated" (252). Thus, they considered the denial of their rights as citizens was *Haji*. In Japanese society the approval of the community is central to determining an individual's actions. Disruptive behavior: "meant cutting oneself from the emotional security of identification" (Adachi 225). To be uprooted as a "yellow peril" was perceived as the result of personal shortcoming. This cultural specificity, corroborated with a psychology of silence translated in the older generations' reservedness in discussing the past. Furthermore, consequential to the race-specific modus operandi aimed at saving face the taciturnity when confronted by the *Uchi* group about the Internment was augmented in the presence of *Soto* interviewers. The reticence was due to an internalized belief that the Japanese were directly responsible for the event[10] which aggravated their sense of racial humiliation. While segregated in camps: "They felt ashamed and disgraced. There could be none of the traditional pride of carrying out the usual forms of etiquette which was so important to them. Domestic and personal security, for the Japanese, had been based on property ownership, occupations and family and community organizations. These

[10] Frank Miyamoto in "Problems of Interpersonal Style among the Nisei," in *Amerasia Journal* 13, (1986-87): 29-45 and Donna K. Nagata in *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment* (New York: Plenum, 1993), 26-35 explore the effects of the experience of injustice had in developing a sense of powerlessness and guilt among former detainees.

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were shattered at a blow" (Adachi 248). The comingling of *Gaman* and lingering *Haji* prompted the older generations to deny the *Sansei* the cultural feedback they needed. This elicited a degree of cultural division among the *Sansei* which was unfathomable for the older generations. Stanley Yogi points out that because of their heterogeneity in adopting cultural models the *Sansei* lack generational identity (1997 126).

The Japanese attach particular significance to interactions within the *Uchi* group. Declining to share information on common cultural background was thus naturally perceived by the *Sansei* as ostracism. Psychoanalyst Nathan W. Ackerman in *The Psychodynamics of Family Life* presents the individual as part of a social and emotional unit directly influenced in its structure by intergenerational ties/conflicts and able to instill long-term social change. The *Sansei* perceived a conflict between the injustice of the past and the unjustified – according to their specific cultural make-up – shame of the Issei[11]. Thus, although this fueled the *Sansei*'s confusion on heritage, it also provided them with models of *Gaman*, keeping their identity-formation linked to Japanese principles of behavior. Later this acted to raise awareness on the importance of their pursuing their constitutional rights (Nagata 209).

Psychiatrist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's interactional model suggests four dimensions co-mingling in determining one's relational reality: facts, individual psychology, systemic transactions and relational ethics, which usually strike a harmonious balance in terms of content (See LeGoff 2001). However, in the case of the Japanese, the facts, i.e., their ethnic-cultural background and socioeconomic status as immigrants, clashed with local systemic transactions in terms of social rules. Furthermore, the augmented Japanese system of accountability, guilt, loyalty, and legacy differed greatly from the mainstream's system of relational ethics. The *Nisei* and the *Sansei* managed to reconcile these aspects within a unitary socio-cultural identity. However, when challenged with the power templates relevant in inter-ethnic exchanges, coupled with excessive stereotyping on the part of the white population and their elders' refusal to express an opinion, the *Sansei*[12] were innately forced to concede to their marginality. The *Issei*'s refusal to discuss matters that are *shikata ga nai*[13] or consequential to *Haji* or *On* translated into feelings of anger and resentment as well as into the perception of a gap in the *Sansei*'s personal history. Carroll et al. have studied the consequences parents' trauma exerts on children. In the case of the *Sansei*, it led to an acute perception of pressure to assimilate corroborated with the loss of interest in the Japanese language and culture.

Murray Bowen's family systems theory touches on aspects such as the process of differentiating the self, the nuclear family emotional process, the multigenerational transmission process and the societal emotional process (1966). These can be used to offer insight on the

[11] See Donna K. Nagata's *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment.* New York: Plenum Press, 1993 pp. 75-102 for the intergenerational impact of the refusal to talk about the Internment.

[12] Ken Adachi in *The enemy that never was* touches on the **problems** faced by the younger generations of Japanese immigrants as a result of being 'protected' from the knowledge of the Internment: "Only now do we realize that our parents neglected to instill in us a sense of our cultural heritage and ethnic history. This is the very crux of the young Japanese Canadians' identity crisis.... Why didn't they tell us what it was like to be a dirty Jap in Canada during the Second World War?"(362). He also notes an important difference between the ways in which the Nisei and the Sansei experienced the event and the subsequent cultural dilemma: "The search of some Sansei for 'identity' and their consciousness of marginality and of their minority status, of the need to reconcile the dualism between two cultures, may echo the uncertainties of the previous generation, but the Sansei effort lacks the often poignant tragedy of their earlier counterparts."(363)

[13] It translates as: "It cannot be helped". This attitude accurately gauges her attachment to the Buddhist religious philosophy which postulates the insignificance of man's struggle in front of Fate's all-encompassing determinism.

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manner in which the *Sansei* have constructed identity. I would like to borrow what Bowen calls overadequate and underadequate roles in the family and extend the difficulties they posit to the problematic of intergenerational communication. If the *Issei* and the *Nisei* refuse to take up their traditional roles of story-tellers the *Sansei* must overcompensate their roles as listeners and gather relevant information from *Soto* groups. This acted to further the rift between the generations and to alienate the *Sansei* from their Japanese heritage.

What these studies on family relations and interactional development have in common is their attention towards mutual position taking and mutual accountability in terms of both entitlements and obligations. Lack of information regarding camp experience from their families left the *Sansei* feeling both an intergenerational gap towards their *Uchi* group and a cultural gap towards the white majority. They also had to adapt their manifestation of *OyaKoukou*[14] as their elders perceived their inquisitiveness as improper. The *Sansei*'s desire to achieve definition of self was challenged by their mutual inclusion and, to a certain degree, exclusion from both the *Uchi* and the mainstream *Soto*. Thornton's (1992) defines identity as: "a dialectic between identification by others and self-identification, between objectively assigned and subjectively assigned identities. Much of an individual's inner drama involves discovering the assigned identity, reacting to it and recognizing that certain groups are or are not significant"(173). The *Sansei*, still facing lingering "yellow peril" stereotypes, experienced mixed feelings of guilt and desire to integrate. This posed difficulties in adherence to either cultural group.

The *Issei* and, for the most part, the *Nisei*'s shared refusal to speak of the past led to the *Sansei*'s experience of cultural displacement similar, though not as poignant, to that of the *Nisei* during the Internment. The latter had to mitigate the borderlines of systems of representation that were, given the circumstances, hostile towards each other and led to intergenerational and cross generational conflict[15]. They understood that the loss of socio-economic status subsequent to being uprooted meant that they were "reduced to nothing in terms of the concept and values of Canadian (or American) citizenship" (Adachi 20). According to Fugita and Fernandez, being incarcerated had detrimental effects on the *Nisei* ability to identify and relate to the dominant culture (207). Furthermore, Nobu Miyoshi considers that the *Nisei* silence the result of having been: "permanently altered in their attitudes, both positively and negatively, in regard to their identification with the values of their bicultural heritage; or they remain confused or even injured by the traumatic experience" (http://www.momomedia.com/CLPEF/sansei/identity.htm). Although they speak English fluently, the *Nisei* and the *Sansei* perceive a gap between their cultural formation and the instruments available to express their attachment to it. This often translated into pathological silence or social-retractile tendencies.

In the case of the *Issei*, silence was the result of awareness of *shikata ga nai*. This accounts for the scarcity of material available on the circumstances of the *Issei*[16]. Seeing the

[14] Translates as filial piety and respect for the elders.
[15] See Modell 1977:127–72, Daniels 1988:172–76 and Takaki 1989:212–29.
[16] According to Ken Adachi in *The Enemy that never was,* the former internees' tentative answers to interviewers' questions was the result of their cultural make-up "The Issei were simply being polite, answering his questions in a manner that reflected only what they expected the investigator wanted to hear. After all, social conformity required that they be 'polite' in public, that they accept and respond to the veneer of the impersonal civility of the whites at the expense of the more idiosyncratic. In such confrontations, Issei are not likely to volunteer any more information about themselves than they have to, answering direct questions with vague or mildly meretricious replies, concealing feelings and opinions – in direct contrast to the often noisy, acrimonious discussions of their intra-group encounters."(364-365)

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Internment as something that had to be endured generated the conviction that complaining would mean selfishness, *wagamama*. It also instilled a sense of obligation and frugality in the *Issei* that would later make them scold their *Nisei* children's lifestyles and would bring them into conflict with their *Sansei* grandchildren. The older generations demanded, by virtue of *Gaman*, a degree of compliance to traditional roles and values that the younger generations did not feel any attachment or obligation towards. The latter generally found out about the Internment later in life and from sources other than their families, which contributed to the experience of much resentment while growing up.

After the Internment, the government's policy of dispersal was aimed at dismantling the closely-knit communities characteristic to the *Issei*. Lack of contact with a homogenous Japanese community meant that the younger generations' adherence to Japanese traditions and values could only be enforced within the family. The Internment led to the disappearance of the *Kenjinkai*[17] and the *Gunjinkai*[18] that the *Issei* relied on when they first immigrated. Loss of property and little to no compensation also meant that *Tanomoshi-ko*[19]could no longer be relied on. Unreliable financial support from their *Uchi* group and the pressure of the community to uphold *Giri* having lost its poignancy, some *Nisei* found it easier to follow the model of their generational segment, in spite of lingering racism. Post-traumatic stress and the witnessing of their parents' humiliation led them to consider their cultural heritage as detrimental. Because of this, the model presented by their parents, i.e., identification with Japan, the former aggressor, was perceived as undesirable. This resulted in a tendency among these *Nisei* to generally avoid interactions with members of their racial segment (Mass 160). Others, on the contrary, felt deeply betrayed by the unconstitutionality of the actions directed towards them. In response they chose to associate only with other Japanese, forming communities closed off from the influence of the dominant culture. Regardless of their choice, the *Nisei*, more than the other generations of Japanese immigrants in my opinion, were forced in a position "Suspended between departure and arrival" (Eng 204), being unable to achieve a sense of fixed identity or a sense of belonging. As a result, they remain, not only geographically, but also culturall: permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability" (ibid.).

After the Internment the Japanese had to rebuild their livelihood with meager, if any, compensation for their possessions. The boycott of Japanese businesses and difficulties in obtaining licenses for previously practiced trades meant that they Japanese had been primarily been relegated to the same occupations available as when they first arrived in North America. However, this time they focused on allowing their children economic mobility, rather than on economic stability. As a result, the *Nisei* achieved the highest mobility in the institutions at large, given the circumstances (See Makabe 1976 86-107). It is my opinion that the dispersal of Japanese communities eventually helped, rather than hindered, assimilation. Before the Internment, a large focus of the anti-Japanese campaign was directed against their communities. The amassing of a large number of people with different racial visual markers, who upheld their foreign traditions and spoke a different language, could tentatively be used as support for the claims of agitators, particularly considering Japan's policies at home and abroad at the time.

[17] Mutual aid associations for people coming from the same prefecture.
[18] Mutual aid associations for people formerly belonging to the same district.
[19] Rotating credit associations.

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However, these were problems only to those who, according to *Democracy Betrayed: The Case for Redress,* were self-appointed to solve them and stood to gain something as a result (16–18). As a result of dispersal, the Japanese became a less obvious racial group which aided in diminishing outbursts of racism. Even under these circumstances, the traditional values of the Japanese were preserved while the *Nisei* attempted integration with the larger generational segment. This combination of ethnical and social factors aided the latter in substantially improving their economic situation. Although an increase in social mobility generally translates as loss of interest for traditional values[20], the *Nisei* managed to sustain their Japanese cultural specificity.

Regardless of generation, to complain was perceived as a shame, weakness and inability to comply to the stringencies of society so the Japanese, particularly the *Issei*:" endured hardship in silence for the sake of their pride. Such reticence stems from 'the Japanese spirit' (Yamato Damashii) which (…) is still alive in the minds of older Japanese who will clench their teeth and bear suffering no matter how grueling it is" (Iritani 98) Breaking silence means going against the common group psychology which dictated the normatives and prerequisites of an individual's behavior. The difficulties faced by the younger *Nisei* and the *Sansei* in acquiring information on the past become most obvious if one considers that they are eliciting it from a group considered whose mentality is most adequately represented by Joy Nozomi Kogawa's novel *Obasan.* The eponymous elderly woman lives in silence, her identity crushed by the fatal perception of the *shikata ga nai* she constantly makes reference to. Obasan shifts slowly throughout her house of memories, refusing to speak about the Internment or the trauma of being perceived as: "a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada'" (118). However, this is not the result of intrinsic desire to avoid recollection. Rather, she is following the principles of non-imposition and non-assertiveness which are considered behavioral staples for the traditional Japanese woman. Multiple references made throughout the novel delineate an individual who has literally "turned to stone" (198). Her manner of communication is a language of silence, "Obasan . . . does not dance to the multicultural piper's tune or respond to the racist's slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands." (226). She has effaced her identity to the point that she can no longer be defined outside her social role in the traditional Japanese family. When her husband Isamu dies, "the language of her grief is silence" (14), and when Naomi and Stephen leave the house she remains to live "in a silent territory" (226). She believes that her role as caretaker has ended, and with it, she abandons all reference to past inequities and hardship: "Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn't Obasan once say, 'It is better to forget'? . . . What is past recall is past pain" (45). In the end, she crumbles under the weight of her own silence, her unspoken frustrations and the constant internal conflict, becoming a white dwarf, the condensed essence encapsulating a lifetime of suppressed ideas, mentalities and revolt.

The drama of the *Issei* stemmed from their customary tendency to:" obey those who held power regardless of whether or not their rules was just" (Iritani 85). For the *Nisei* and the Sansei,

[20] A 1979 study by Tomoko Makabe continues her unpublished research on the influence upward social mobility on ethnic identity in the case of the Japanese-Canadians in Toronto. It concluded that social mobility was a determining factor for the Nisei's formal and informal attachment to their ethnic community, as well as to their awareness of being ethnic members and enforced the idea that "Ethnic group identity, either as a subjective-attitudinal phenomenon or as a behavioral manifestation, tends to be weaker among those members who have experienced greater mobility than those who have not experienced such mobility" (Makabe 1979 145).

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this was irreconcilable with their acquired awareness of personal liberty and civil rights. Writings by members of the Japanese diaspora in Canada and in The United States, such as John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Takashima Shizue's *A Child in Prison Camp*, etc., are indicative of the latter's desire to break the nexus of oppression and silence. While some authors simply seek to raise awareness to the perspective of the oppressed, others portray protagonists actively attempting to understand their roles as culturally heterogeneous Others in societies driven by homogenizing tendencies, providing: "an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlikely varieties of silence emerge into articulacy" (Lowe 6).

The *Issei* attempted through their silence to avoid being *wagamama:"* We must always honour the wishes of others before our own. To try to meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be 'wagamama'- selfish and inconsiderate. Obasan teaches me not to be wagamama by always heeding everyone's needs" (Kogawa 149) Ken Adachi defines this tendency towards non-imposition as a "cardinal principle of morality" (225) in Japanese society. However, for the *Nisei*, and more importantly, for the *Sansei* the subsequent silence meant being cut-off from the possibility of identification. The *Sansei*, raised in a multi-cultural environment, were taught to be both group-oriented and better integrated in their generational segment. They shared the Japanese system of values but also acquired the inquisitiveness and assertiveness characteristic to hegemonic discourse. In light of the *Issei*'s retractile tendencies and inscrutable silence some perceived their Japanese heritage as socially depreciative. Caught in-between, the *Nisei* had to decide on either a monolithic, or a contextually-sensitive cultural upbringing of the next generation while mitigating immixed feelings of shame and guilt. Although each generation was confronted with the multi-cultural dilemma, they each developed specific adaptive strategies which have led to the emergence of a specific outlook on the individual and on society. Cultural confusion generated primarily incorporation, rather than rejection, of core elements belonging to both hegemonic and marginal, in this case Japanese, identity markers, fostering a heightened sense of cultural awareness and a specific blend of individuality in the *Issei*, the *Nisei* and the *Sansei*.

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