We Have Emerged: “The New Nisei” and the Reshaping of a Community Within the Internment Camps.

Japan’s brazen and unprovoked attack on the United States’ military facilities at Pearl Harbor set in motion a deliberate and calculated U.S. Government policy of racial segregation which resulted in the removal of 121,313 persons of Japanese decent from their western communities into remote western areas. On February 19, 1942, three months after the air assault on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt demonstrated his disregard for civil liberties when he issued Executive Order 9066 and Civilian Exclusion Order 5. Both decrees authorized the War Relocation Authority to forcibly relocate the American-born Nisei, along with their foreign-born, Issei parents, relatives and community leaders—Sensei—into a number of assembly and relocation camps. Executive Order 9066 became the catalyst through which Nisei collectively loosened the constraints of a traditionally conservative Japanese-American culture. Throughout the war, but especially during the early stages of their internment, a generation of young Japanese Americans engaged in robust attempts to reconstruct their lives. Rather than accept the collective status of victims, Nisei managed to present themselves as historic actors whose overt and covert behavior would direct the course of their lives. As Nisei adjusted to the camps’ environments, they discovered that the forced internment caused a partial dissolution of traditional institutions. Such an environment presented an opportunity for the Nisei to reinvent themselves and at the same time, they created a sense of meaning and direction out of chaos.

This paper posits that between 1942 and 1944, Nisei used these camps as a stage upon which they evolved into major—albeit temporary---agents in their community’s reconstruction. Although by 1944 the Issei had regained their position of influence and respect within the Japanese-American community, Nisei still managed to successfully integrate the various separate social and cultural elements of a pre-war Japanese American society in a new way. The young Nisei, through their social and political interactions, transformed the internment camps into communities reflective of the diversity found among both Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals. The Nisei successfully managed to create a more pluralistic community that effectively embraced the diverse regional and class differences exhibited among the younger American-born generation. Through the review of internment camp newspapers, oral histories and diaries, it becomes apparent that this rapid and short-lived power shift occurred in several stages.

This paper also suggest that examining the Nisei experience apart from that of the general population of internees is significant because by 1940, their numbers
in total exceeded that of their Issei counterparts. Historian David K. Yoo states, “The focus on the Nisei experience girds the theme---a case for both the historical agency and for the broadening of the scope of Japanese American history.” Theirs is a story that chronicles the social changes unfolding during the period just prior to the outbreak of war. “They entered and exit a lone scene, confined in barbed-wire compounds.”

The first indication of change occurred when the Nisei along with their families moved into the hastily prepared assembly camps established along the United States’ west coast. Family cohesion and deference towards the elders quickly deteriorated. The second change involved the Nisei redefining themselves while reshaping their community. This occurred after the U.S. military transported the majority of the Japanese American population into one of the ten internment camps constructed further inland away from the designated military zones. Young people devised new dress codes, social mores, gender roles, and political alliances. The third transformation occurred after 1942 as many Nisei college students left the camps to attend Midwestern and Eastern colleges and universities. In addition many eligible Nisei were drafted into the military and went off to Europe. It was during this final stage that the Issei regained their influence and status. Towards the war’s end the remaining Nisei were politically naïve or unaware of the significance of the loss of their constitutional rights. Less outraged with the loss of their prewar status, the young people who remained were willing to concede to the older generation.

Almost immediately upon entering the internment camps, the Nisei found themselves freed from the restraints of their historic ethnic ghettos. One of the defining features of these ghettos had been the continued dominance of old world customs. Nisei did not use the generational reference simply to provide a convenient term for classification—they also used it to refer to character types and behavior. “For Nisei, generational identity was significant, steeped in common experiences and historical circumstances that infused self-identity and group identity within an immigrant-centered and racially circumscribed environment.” It undermined the cultural authority of the elderly Issei, liberated their children, and dramatically catalyzed the Nisei’s assimilation into the larger American society.” Within the ranks of their culturally and politically diverse generation, Nisei redefined the boundaries of race, gender and class, family, and political allegiances.

Sociologist John Modell suggests that “Nisei, because of their temporal affinity, experienced much of life together and clearly had a sense of generational consciousness despite variation based on factors such as gender, class, and region.” The detention experience cracked the thick cake of customs that had encrusted the prewar Japanese community.