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## Sorted and Folded: Nisei Domestic Workers during the War

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Upon their return to Los Angeles immediately after the end of World War II, Rose Honda's family found itself unemployed and living in a hostel. Luckier than most, former employers had protected Honda family valuables. Honda's parents were also offered domestic employment by their minister. As Rose recalled, "Reverend Mark Hogue... wanted to take us into their home, and have my mother be the domestic worker and my dad the gardener..."<sup>1</sup> Though Honda's mother rejected the offer, citing enough work with her own family, her father accepted the position. These occupations were typical for the *Issei*, first generation Japanese Americans in the prewar period, but to Rose, born in the U.S, fresh out of high school, and determined to go to college and become a teacher, this was far from an ideal job. Ultimately, within the year she would follow in the footsteps of hundreds of wartime and postwar *Nisei*, by living in and cleaning an employer's home while attending college. Although they engaged in domestic work out of necessity, *Nisei* women found that they gained more than money in the experience. These workers became more attuned to the dominant culture, opening up an escape from future oppression.

Historians have gauged the extent of acculturation among Japanese Americans in the twentieth century through specific markers of identity. Some historians have focused on social and kinship networks by analyzing language and the survival of *Ie*, traditional Japanese household obligations, to track assimilation among *Issei*, *Nisei*, and *Sansei*. Historian John W. Connor found nearly equal retention of *Ie* among the first two generations, and a slightly diminished *Ie* among *Sansei*.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars observed that Japanese Americans' distinctive family and community structure facilitated integration into American political and economic life without sacrificing ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup> Still others have looked at the role of popular culture in acculturation. One study discovered that many *Nisei* cemented their personal American identity through consumption of popular music, yet remained unacknowledged as such by mid-century Euro-Americans.<sup>4</sup> The Los Angeles Nisei Week festival revealed Japanese Americans responded to political changes by highlighting Japanese links in the prewar era, but stressing an American identity during the Second World War, in an attempt to *retain* the unique character of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rose Honda, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Los Angeles Region: Volume II*, Interview by James Gatewood, March 17 & April 5, 1998, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 67-68.; *Issei, Nisei, and Sansei* refer to the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations of Japanese immigrants and their descendants; The Hondas, like other West Coast Japanese Americans, had been forcibly relocated into the interior of the United States shortly after the Pearl Harbor attacks.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Connor, "Acculturation and Family Continuities in Three Generations of Japanese Americans" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 36 (1), (1974) 159-165.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen S. Fugita and David J. O'Brien, *Japanese American Ethnicity: The Persistence of Community* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Susan Miyo Asai, "Nisei Politics of Identity and American Popular Music in the 1930s and 1940s." *Ethnic Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (2009): 92-V.

community.<sup>5</sup> Other research notes that prewar segregation funneled young women into ethno-cultural organizations that participated in mainstream American leisure activities while preserving ethnic ties. Postwar revival of these organizations restored the Japanese American community.<sup>6</sup> Although studies of *Nisei* domestic work exist, they are primarily focused on how workers' experiences fit into the larger framework of gendered and racialized work.<sup>7</sup> Using oral histories, this study concentrates on the overlooked intimate work relationship between *Nisei* domestics and their Euro-American employers and its effects on postwar acculturation.

This project relies on interviews conducted with fifteen women in the late twentieth to early twenty first centuries. Most of these women were close in age, resided primarily on the West Coast, and nearly all earned college degrees. Despite the small sample size, the similarity in their backgrounds provides a measure of control that reveals patterns among this group. The few interviewees that differ in origins only reinforce the findings through their divergent postwar experiences. Although oral histories are fraught with many limitations, ranging from faulty memories, self-censorship, and interrogator influence, they remain a very useful source for the project. As domestic laborers, these girls' and women's work experiences were more likely termed "private" by their employers and silenced in ways that, say, unionized factory workers were not. As a result, these interviews, taking place decades after the events, enabled interviewees to open up about their experiences without fear of embarrassing former employers with whom they had lost contact. Although memories may be faulty and modified by the intervening years, interviewees can still accurately assess the impact their years as household workers had on their lives. Unfortunately, direct employer voices remain mostly missing in these sources. However, the project is concerned with how Japanese American *workers* were affected by living with ethnically different employers, not how the employers viewed domestics or interpreted their attempts to assimilate. The interviews still infer what employers expected from interviewees' descriptions of house rules for job performance and socialization, particularly when teaching their *Nisei* charges white, middle-class etiquette.

This paper argues that for young *Nisei* women who entered domestic service during the Second World War, this occupation became linked to the traumatic relocation and internment experience, thereby sharpening their sense of "otherness," imbued by their Japanese heritage. Paradoxically, working in the home of upper-middle class Euro-Americans acculturated young *Nisei* workers and allowed them to reclaim their American identity after its denial from the American government. The *Nisei* workers studied in this project were mostly shielded from racism as children, developing a strong American identity that was questioned after the Pearl Harbor attacks. Forced to evacuate the West Coast and confined to camps, *Nisei* women's educational and career goals were placed on hold. Domestic service offered both an escape from internment and resumption of studies, while simultaneously creating new Japanese American communities in the Midwest and East Coast. Domestic service, however, was entered into with a mixture of appreciation and resentment, with employers seen as compassionate, but *Nisei* women chafed at being seen as "other". However, *Nisei* women also developed close, nearly familial, relationships with their employers or host families, through which they gained a deeper

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<sup>5</sup> Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival 1934-1990*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Valerie J. Matsumoto, *City Girls: The Nisei Social World in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

understanding of Euro-American customs. In the decades following the war, Japanese Americans minimized negative emotions connected to these experiences, emphasizing instead the charitable nature of their employers or host families in an attempt to shelter future generations from *Nisei* trauma.

The history of early Japanese immigrants to the United States began as a slow trickle in the second half of the nineteenth century. Before the Tokugawa Shogunate was overthrown during the Meiji Revolution of 1868, Japanese citizens were restricted from leaving the country. Convinced that they needed Western technology to modernize their country and resist Western colonialism, the Meiji government sent out a select group of male students to the United States.<sup>8</sup> Due to the receptiveness of Japanese to Western technology, the U.S. classified them in a distinct racial category from other East Asians, particularly the Chinese, whom were seen as backwards and unwilling to progress.<sup>9</sup> However this view radically shifted by the end of the nineteenth century, as social upheaval in Japan led to a surge in emigration of rural laborers. This, in conjunction with Japanese success as an imperial power, led to the re-characterization of Japan and its people as the “yellow peril.” By 1907-08, Japan and the United States entered into a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” restricting Japanese immigration into the U.S. In 1913, California passed the Alien Land Law, prohibiting *Issei* from purchasing or leasing land. By 1924, the United States halted all immigration from Asia with the Oriental Exclusion Act.<sup>10</sup> In the following decade, many Japanese Americans were restricted to service positions, often in domestic work, with many men gardening and women taking housekeeping positions in homes. While the *Issei* were forbidden by law to become citizens, their children, the *Nisei*, were citizens with greater access to education.

However, World War II and the internment experience abruptly changed the course of Japanese American acculturation. Following the 7 December, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan, the United States suspected many of its Japanese American citizens and residents of espionage. Those involved in Japanese community organizations and language schools were targeted and arrested, with the rest of the Japanese American population forcibly removed from the West Coast to concentration camps in the Mountain states and the Midwest by the end of 1942. Resettlement of internees began in 1943, with the goal of scattering Japanese American families throughout the Eastern Midwest, impeding the regrowth of a strong ethnic Japanese community.<sup>11</sup>

While many of the *Nisei* women interviewed maintained strong links to their Japanese heritage, they emphasized their American identity. Many had not sensed that they were treated differently as children, having formed cross-racial relationships, leaving them shocked when they were suddenly labeled as potential enemies in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing.

For many *Nisei*, childhood memories were filled with mostly positive interactions with non-Japanese American children. The *Nisei* occupied an ambiguous cultural space that incorporated both Japanese and American elements. However this bi-cultural identity did not prevent them from interacting with European Americans, particularly in larger urban areas.<sup>12</sup> When asked about the ethnic composition of her friends, Matsue Watanabe from Bainbridge

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<sup>8</sup> John E. Van Sant, *Pacific Pioneers: Japanese Journeys to America and Hawaii, 1850-80* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Matsumoto, *City Girls*, 150-165.

<sup>12</sup> Mei Nakano, *Japanese American Women: Three Generations 1890-1990* (Berkeley: Mina Press, 1990), 105, 111.

Island, Washington reported, "...they were both [Japanese American and White]...I felt that we didn't segregate ourselves, anything like that."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Esther Nishio reminisced about her multicultural upbringing in Venice, California, exclaiming, "Oh, it was great! There was no discrimination at all, wonderful friends. It wasn't until I went to Venice Junior and Senior high schools that I came across a lot of *Nisei*."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Katie Hironaka, from Cupertino, California claimed "No, I don't think [I experienced discrimination] because one of my best friends was Caucasian...I think everybody really got along well then."<sup>15</sup> Even when they encountered taunting from other children, interviewees dismissed this as regular childhood teasing rather than racism. Peggie Nishimura Bain recalled, "...we became real good friends, and the other children were all Caucasians...but the boys were kind of mean...they liked to kind of fool around and tease us...but actually, they didn't really mean harm."<sup>16</sup>

The women's strong identification with the United States became apparent in their immediate reactions to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Haruko Hurt recalled, "It was something that was just foreign to me. Something *that* country, over *there*, Japan, did..."<sup>17</sup> Hurt clearly identified far more with the country of her birth than the one her parents came from. Similarly, Masayo Aarii did not link her ethnicity to the breaking news, claiming her family gave it little attention since they were isolated in rural lands, ignorant of the possibility that they would suffer any consequences.<sup>18</sup> When the orders for evacuation and relocation from the West Coast arrived, Nishio recalled feeling "...very disappointed. You know I had taken civics and studied about the constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and how great it was to be an American citizen. And, then, when the exclusion order came, I was really shocked and hurt."<sup>19</sup> Hurt was just as stunned, as she "...didn't think that we [Japanese Americans] would be considered part of the enemy."<sup>20</sup> These were women whose embrace of Americanization could be seen in prevalent use of Westernized names, with nearly half of respondents using one instead of their Japanese given names.

As the United States entered the Second World War, President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 forced the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans. This was devastating to many of the *Nisei* women who had diverse career and educational goals thwarted as a result. Faced with limited options, *Nisei* women often sought domestic work to escape these camps.

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<sup>13</sup> Matsue Watanabe, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview by Debra Grindeland, October 7, 2006, (accessed October 13, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Los Angeles Region: Volume II*, Interview by Darcei Iki and Soijin Kim, June 21, 1999, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 302.

<sup>15</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: San Jose Region: Volume IV*, Interview by Barbara K. Uchiyama, December 5, 1997, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 72-73.

<sup>16</sup> Peggie Nishimura Bain, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview by Alice Ito, September 15-17, 1998, (accessed October 14, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Los Angeles Region: Volume II*, Interview by James Gatewood, February 28, 1998, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 132.

<sup>18</sup> Masayo Aarii, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: San Jose Region: Volume IV*, Interview by Melina Takahashi, February 22, 1998. (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 308.

<sup>20</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 132.

Once installed with host families or employers, these young women often fulfilled their educational goals.

Many of the women interviewed recalled the various career aspirations they held prior to internment. For instance, Kimie “Kay” Fukamizu remembered courses taken in high school that she thought would help her become a nurse or stewardess.<sup>21</sup> Katsumi Kunitsugu was very clear about her dreams, declaring, “Well, I’ve always wanted to go to college because I wanted to be a writer, and it was just...regular ambition to go to college.”<sup>22</sup> Others were pushed by parents, like Kazue Yamamoto who was scolded by her mother, being told that she “should do something besides doing housework the rest of [her] life.”<sup>23</sup> Yet not all wanted to pursue higher education, as Kay Kuwahara explained, “...I’ve always wanted to be a beautician-always. And never wanted to go to College.”<sup>24</sup> Some of these women had already met with limitations linked to their ethnicity prior to the war. For example, Yasu Koyamatsu Momii recalled that in trade school “...they limited us to what...classes we could take...apparently they found it hard to place Japanese.”<sup>25</sup> *Issei* parents could also be a constraining force, as Haruko Hurt remembered, “They [her parents] didn’t think in terms of my working in an office. It was something that didn’t occur to them...”<sup>26</sup> Yet, for the most part, *Nisei* women, unlike their *Issei* parents, did not appear to feel hampered prior to internment. The lone exception among the women interviewed was Katie Hironaka, who noted the sacrifice she made to help her family on their farm, remembering “... I knew I wasn’t going to be able to go to high school, so I never thought of anything I would like to do.”<sup>27</sup>

Given that most had clear career goals, internment was a sudden impediment to their progress. As soon as possible, many of the women searched for a way out of the camps. These escapes came in two ways, by enrolling in a university or finding employment, as long as both were away from the West Coast and applicants signed loyalty oaths.<sup>28</sup> These two options were often linked, as domestic work was often necessary to pay tuition. Domestic work had long been considered an appropriate job for a young girl among Japanese Americans as a form of “training” for married life. It was often seen as temporary, and usually arranged by relatives in the prewar period. In a U.S. census taken in 1940, up to 25 percent of *Nisei* women were employed as domestics. Thus, wartime domestic employment was easily entered as a familiar job.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kimie “Kay” Fukamizu, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: San Diego Region: Volume III*, Interview by Debra Kodama, April 20, 1998, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Katsumi Kunitsugu, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Los Angeles Region: Volume II*, Interview by Leslie Ito, April 22, 1998, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 249.

<sup>23</sup> Kazue Yamamoto, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview by Megan Asaka, June 8, 2006, (accessed October 1, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Kay Kuwahara, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Chicago Region: Volume I*, Interview by Alice Murata, February 8, 1998 (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 382.

<sup>25</sup> Yasu Koyamatsu Momii, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview by Sharon Yamato, October 25, 2011 (accessed October 14, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Benson Tong, “Race, Culture, and Citizenship Among Japanese American Children and Adolescents during the Internment Era,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* Vol. 23. Issue 3 (Spring 2004), 28-29.

<sup>29</sup> Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride*, 124-127.

Mary Ishizuka typified the situation, recalling that in order to leave camp “you need[ed] to have a sponsor of some sort...[the Lincoln, Nebraska YWCA] said they would find me...a domestic position, and perhaps attend Nebraska University in Lincoln.”<sup>30</sup> Katsumi Kunitsugu, accepted by the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was placed in a schoolgirl position by the University.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Esther Nishio took a domestic position in Boulder, Colorado, explaining, “I wanted to enter the University of Colorado there. I had to establish a year’s residence, so I was there, working as a schoolgirl.”<sup>32</sup> Domestic work also had an additional benefit, as Haruko Hurt explained, “...So I thought that I’d better find a job that provided housing. The one job that I found was a baby-sitter...in this home in Chicago.”<sup>33</sup> Masayo Aarii echoed these thoughts, claiming that “For a girl, it’s safest to work as a housemaid, you know they give you room and board.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, for those that had already attended college, like Yasu Koyamatsu Momii, domestic service offered the only escape, noting, “If you wanted domestic [work] you could just go anytime, cause there were was lots of jobs available.”<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, many of these young women also left parents’ watchful eyes for the first time and formed communities with peers in these distant locations. The breakdown of parental authority had already begun in the camps. Interned *Nisei* had already formed cliques within the camp, eating separately from families in the mess halls. The lack of privacy in the camps had already encouraged internees to spend time away from elders in barracks.<sup>36</sup> For many young *Nisei* accustomed to interaction with diverse groups back home, camps forced racially homogenous socialization that reinforced a Japanese identity.<sup>37</sup>

Domestic positions in the Midwest and East Coast offered young women the opportunity to recreate communities with fellow *Nisei* young women away from the traditional supervision of elders in a less hostile environment. According to the interviewees, Mid-Westerners and East Coasters, less familiar with Japanese Americans, had developed fewer prejudices. Mei Nakano confirms this, noting that Minneapolis and Chicago were particularly accepting of Japanese American transplants.<sup>38</sup> Katie Hironaka pointed out that “...people back East...were kinder...they didn’t even know what a Japanese is.”<sup>39</sup> Mary T. Yoshida also found greater tolerance and acceptance from the people of Minneapolis.<sup>40</sup> Mary Ishizuka had a similar experience, recalling “People [in California] either disliked us...or bent over backwards to help us...In Nebraska they just took us as Americans...it was the first time I felt that people accepted me for what I was...”<sup>41</sup> Moving away to Boulder, Colorado provided “a sense of freedom..” in the Rocky Mountains for Esther Nishio.<sup>42</sup> Mary Yoshida gained comfort knowing that “others were coming out doing the same thing with other families” and soon she and other *Nisei* workers

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations Oral History Project: Rebuilding Japanese American Families, Communities, and Civil Rights in the Resettlement Era: Los Angeles Region: Volume II*, Interview by James Gatewood, May 27, 1998, (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2000), 217.

<sup>31</sup> Katsumi Kunitsugu, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 251.

<sup>32</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 317.

<sup>33</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Masayo Aarii, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Yasu Koyamatsu Momii, *Densho Digital Archive*.

<sup>36</sup> Matsumoto, *City Girls*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Benson Tong, 16-17.

<sup>38</sup> Nakano, *Japanese American Women*, 172.

<sup>39</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Mary T. Yoshida, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview by Megan Asaka, June 18, 2009, accessed October 20, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol III*, 200.

<sup>42</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 320.

established “Thursday, the maid’s day out” gatherings.<sup>43</sup> In Madison, Wisconsin *Nisei* domestics, “sought each other out, too, just to support each other.”<sup>44</sup> This support would be necessary as they found themselves thrust into the homes of strangers with mixed expectations.

Entering domestic service for many of the interviewees elicited a mixture of resentment and gratitude. On the one hand, *Nisei* women knew their options were limited and considered their employers benevolent rescuers. But the upper-middle class surroundings also sharpened a sense of otherness and vulnerability, further reminding workers of what relatives in camps still faced. Some workers were resentful for being forced into “demeaning work”.

Some of the interviewees described their live-in positions with gratitude. For instance, Mary Ishizuka professed “this was again a very lucky break for us, because she [Mrs. Stewart, employer] took me and my sister in. We didn’t have to do a great deal. But she helped me continue my education.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Ishizuka betrayed that there may have been some reluctance from Mrs. Stewart, continuing, “She wasn’t ready to take anybody in...” doing so only after receiving a letter detailing the sisters’ predicament.<sup>46</sup> Haruko Hurt believed her Chicago employers targeted interned *Nisei* out of kindness, claiming “people like this Jewish couple was alert to what was going on [internment] that’s why they advertised in Arkansas camp for jobs. You can understand that because they have...their people’s experience in Germany, in Europe.”

The majority of employers hailed from the upper middle class or held prominent positions. While in the nineteenth-century live-in domestic work had been common, demographic and economic shifts in the 1920s had made live-out work far more prevalent.<sup>47</sup> The predominance of live-in work among *Nisei* stands apart, related to both employer wealth and worker age. Mary Ishizuka’s employer was “Don Stewart...lawyer for the governor of Nebraska.”<sup>48</sup> Yasu Koyamatsu recalled that her employers lived in “Shaker Heights ...Cleveland’s old area, but it’s kind of nice...the maid’s room would be up on the third floor, but it had an elevator.”<sup>49</sup> Some, like Katsumi Kunitsugu, whose position was arranged through school, were more connected to their employers, as she worked for “an allergist...attached to the university hospital.”<sup>50</sup> Others only had vague information about their employers. Mary T. Yoshida knew “They were a prominent family...I never did meet the husband of the wife, because he was working in Washington, and I don’t even know what he did.”<sup>51</sup>

For some, employers’ wealth significantly benefited the domestics, with responsibilities reduced when they were part of large staff; however this could trigger feelings of guilt as well. Matsue Watanabe’s employer already had a housecleaner, a laundress, and a clothes ironer, leaving Watanabe scrambling to be useful as she explained, “there wasn’t anything for me to do. So I kept up her sterling silver on her dresser.”<sup>52</sup> Katie Hironaka had a similar experience, only

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<sup>43</sup>Mary T. Yoshida, *Densho*.

<sup>44</sup>Katsumi Kunitsugu, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 252.

<sup>45</sup>Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 215.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>47</sup>Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>49</sup>Yasu Koyamatsu, *Densho*.

<sup>50</sup>Kunitsugu, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 252.

<sup>51</sup>Mary T. Yoshida, *Densho*.

<sup>52</sup>Matsue Watanabe, *Densho*.

helping with family meals as an assistant.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Masayo Arie felt guilty about her setting, saying "...I [felt] so bad that here we were...in this beautiful house, even though we're working with the housework...and here my sister went through all this."<sup>54</sup>

Despite some of the positive assessments, many *Nisei* domestics resented the positions they were thrust into, becoming acutely aware of being "othered" because of their ethnicity. For women who had already entered domestic service prior to the Pearl Harbor bombing, the tragedy brought into stark relief how they would be perceived for the next few years. Some of these women/girls had developed warm relationships with their employers, intensifying the sting of suspicion. Haruko Hurt recollected her employer jokingly asking if she could look under her bed to see "...if [she] had a radio transmitter..." realizing that "Every Japanese, whether they were born here or immigrants were under suspect."<sup>55</sup> Hurt's frustration was evident decades later as she fumed "We could have protested to our dying days that we were not part of the enemy, but nobody would have believed us."<sup>56</sup> Although Katie Hironaka's employers did not directly discriminate against her, she recalled neighbors would "call...and say 'Gosh, aren't you scared to have Katie...in the house?'" eventually forcing her to leave her job.<sup>57</sup> These reactions were unsurprising given wartime media bombardment of grotesque Japanese caricatures. As historian John W. Dower points out, unlike caricatures lobbied at other Axis powers of Germany and Italy, the Japanese were consistently depicted as subhuman apes.<sup>58</sup>

For women entering domestic work during the war for the first time, the sudden turn of fortunes could be quite devastating. Mary Ishizuka, coming from a fairly comfortable home life before the war, complained, "It was just kind of humiliated me having to work right from the beginning...it was one devastating experience."<sup>59</sup> Ishizuka described her breaking point when "one holiday, I could hardly serve, because I was just crying..."<sup>60</sup> Masayo Arie felt equally demeaned by domestic employment, considering it distasteful. Esther Nishio shared a similar dislike, although she may have feared that her employers perhaps focused too much on her perceived exoticism, clarifying "...I didn't have a kimono. They probably would have asked me to wear it."<sup>61</sup> The frustrations boiled over for Yasu K. Momii, as she remembered, "vacuuming the stairway and I'm sitting there thinking, what am I doing here?"<sup>62</sup> Matsue Watanabe experienced a medical emergency, appendicitis, reminding her how lonely she was away from her family, highlighting her vulnerability.<sup>63</sup> Chizuko Norton recalled constant tension present in the home, admitting "...no one ever said you had to work all the time, I mean, constantly, but you got this feeling...part of me was on guard all the time so that I wouldn't make a mistake."<sup>64</sup>

Despite a disdain for the work and misery over their situation, many of the women interviewed recalled their former employers/host families with affection. This may be a result of several factors. First, while working as "schoolgirls" during their youth, a parent/child

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<sup>53</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Masayo Arie, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 131.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 84-85.

<sup>58</sup> John W. Dower, *Japan in War & Peace* (New York: New Press, 1993) 258-259.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 218.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 320-321.

<sup>62</sup> Yasu Koyamatsu Momii, *Densho*.

<sup>63</sup> Matsue Watanabe, *Densho*.

<sup>64</sup> Chizuko Norton, *Densho Digital Archive*, Interview Alice Ito, April 27, 1998 (accessed October 14, 2015).

relationship developed. Secondly, this experience also sped up acculturation of *Nisei* workers, allowing those formerly interned to reclaim their American identity.

Many of these *Nisei* workers were considered malleable, as they were very young when they entered their employers' homes. This kind of interaction was a remnant from prewar years when schoolgirl positions were seen as "finishing school" for young ladies.<sup>65</sup> Matsue Watanabe still attended high school as a senior when she entered domestic employment during the war.<sup>66</sup> Prewar domestic Kay Kuwahara "went to work in a lovely American home...and [she] stayed with them from junior year until [graduation]."<sup>67</sup> Such youth often led employers to treat *Nisei* workers more like children rather than workers. Peggie Nishimura Bain's employer would "shampoo [her] hair, and fit clothes on [her]..." and encourage naps, which Bain justified by noting that "they didn't have any children."<sup>68</sup> For Mary Yoshida, her employers had a similarly-aged daughter away in college and Yoshida "became buddies" with the younger son who taught her to play tennis.<sup>69</sup> Haruko Hurt remembers feeling like "...just one of the family..." because she ate at the family table.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps due to their youth, many *Nisei* workers came into their employer's home with little knowledge of housework and Euro-American customs. Although trying to learn how middle-class white customs differed from those of Japanese Americans stretched back to the prewar period, attested to by Katie Hironaka, wartime employment sped up acculturation.<sup>71</sup> Kazue Yamamoto perceived herself to be devoid of manners, relating that her family "...didn't have placemats, we didn't have napkins, we...were farmers."<sup>72</sup> Yamamoto professed gratitude to her employer for teaching her American etiquette, explaining "...she told me how to serve from the right and remove from the left."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Bain was taught "...ways to save steps, and how to save yourself."<sup>74</sup> Hironaka started as "a helper to Mrs. Campbell, because [Hironaka] didn't know anything about American cooking."<sup>75</sup> Mary Ishizuka also learned to cook from her employer.<sup>76</sup> Having previously been "othered" by American society for their Japanese heritage, here *Nisei* workers learned Euro-American customs that encouraged acculturation.

In their postwar lives, most moved on to other careers and raising families, with many former *Nisei* domestics creating a distance between their wartime and immediate postwar experiences. Right after the war, some domestics, having earned college degrees, still found themselves relegated to domestic work. However, most of the women interviewed, eventually used their degrees to gain other forms of employment. In their later lives, wartime domestic work became linked to the internment experience, a taboo subject. Later recollections minimized the unpleasantness of domestic employment. Postwar limitations were also played down, with domestic work in this period re-characterized as charitable offers from host families. Bitterness

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<sup>65</sup> Glenn, 124.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Kay Kuwahara, *REgenerations: Vol I*, 381.

<sup>68</sup> Peggie Nishimura Bain, *Densho*.

<sup>69</sup> Mary T. Yoshida, *Densho*.

<sup>70</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 140.

<sup>71</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> Kazue Yamamoto, *Densho*.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Peggie Nishimura Bain, *Densho*.

<sup>75</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 82.

<sup>76</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 221.

over the wartime experience drove many former domestics to remain silent about these years with their children and emphasize an American identity over their Japanese ancestry.

Many relocated Japanese Americans made their way back West as restrictions were lifted before the war ended. Some of the women took the opportunity to continue their education in the West Coast. Mary Ishizuka transferred to UCLA from Nebraska Wesleyan as soon as she had the opportunity.<sup>77</sup> Mary T. Yoshida was persuaded by family, noting "...it was my older sister that came down from Seattle, and she's the one that encouraged me to go to college...she took me to Oregon State College..."<sup>78</sup> Rose Honda, who had graduated from high school in the camps, returned to Los Angeles and found part-time work as a domestic worker with a friend while they attended college.<sup>79</sup> Haruko Hurt, having joined the WAC, took advantage of the GI Bill and attended USC in 1946.<sup>80</sup>

Despite earning college degrees, many women remained limited to domestic employment in the immediate postwar period. Kazue Yamamoto remembered that in the South Hill neighborhood in "every other home back in the '45-'50 area, there was ...a [Japanese American] girl doing housework after we came out of camp, there were no jobs."<sup>81</sup> Both Masayo Arii and Rose Honda recalled people coming around hostels, where many Japanese Americans resided temporarily, looking for domestic employees.<sup>82</sup> However, these difficulties may have been linked to general postwar crises. For instance, Los Angeles, where a third of the respondents returned after the war, faced an acute housing shortage in this period. An influx of workers during the war had already taken a sizeable portion of available housing. Returning veterans and formerly interned Japanese Americans flooded a housing market struggling to accommodate them.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, domestic work may have offered an answer to a work and housing solution. Honda also pointed to churches as sites of recruitment, stating "Well, many of the non-Japanese people would bring ads to the church, or they would ask, 'Could you put this notice up, because we are looking for domestic workers?'"<sup>84</sup> Just as in the wartime period, young students procured domestic positions, as happened to Mary Ishizuka.<sup>85</sup>

However, it appears that these limitations may have been attributable to the postwar economy, for many of these women entered their preferred profession by the 1950s. Rose Honda described herself as very persistent in her efforts to enter teaching.<sup>86</sup> Mary Ishizuka found financial support for graduate school through her employer, Mr. Karl, owner of a shoe company.<sup>87</sup> She clarified the importance of pursuing other work, emphasizing "It was the first real money I was able to earn and to help my family...just being able to teach and doing something on my own..."<sup>88</sup> Chizuko Norton had reservations about the accessibility of the job

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 215.

<sup>78</sup> Mary T. Yoshida, *Densho*.

<sup>79</sup> Rose Honda, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 67-68.

<sup>80</sup> Haruko Hurt, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 155.

<sup>81</sup> Kazue Yamamoto, *Densho*.

<sup>82</sup> Masayo Arii, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 25; Rose Honda, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 78.

<sup>83</sup> Don Parson, "The Burke Incident: Political Belief in Los Angeles' Public Housing During the Domestic Cold War," *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. 84, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 53-55.

<sup>84</sup> Rose Honda, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 73.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 215.

<sup>86</sup> Rose Honda, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 75.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 216.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

market as a Japanese American, but found she was in demand as a social worker after finishing her Master's degree.<sup>89</sup>

When reflecting on this period of their lives decades later, many of the former domestics tended to play down the difficulties they experienced. Esther Nishio, speaking of her wartime employers, insisted "Oh, they were a very nice Caucasian family, very frugal..." but then recounts an incident in which her dentist employer sewed up a gash on her leg without anesthesia, leaving unclear if the extra pain she endured was a consequence of penny-pinching.<sup>90</sup> Katie Hironaka distanced herself from other domestics, claiming her employers were "...nice- the people were nice... Of course, some girls didn't come across all nice people. They sort of treated you like a maid. Made you do things..."<sup>91</sup> Here, Hironaka made clear *she* was not a maid, and gained further validation when she explained that Whites hired Japanese Americans because "...they're honest."<sup>92</sup> Likewise, Mary Ishizuka attempted to deny the nature of her work as a domestic, rationalizing "But we never felt that we were doing – domestic work. The Japanese tend to look down on [domestic work] but after the war we forced to become domestics."<sup>93</sup> Rose Honda used humor to cope with exploitation, saying "We laugh about it till this day, because we made seventy-five cents an hour."<sup>94</sup>

This masking of wartime experiences would be reflected in how *Nisei* workers raised their children. Katsumi Kunitsugu explained that the topic of internment camps "we avoided because...[it] was such a pain, that we didn't even want to remember."<sup>95</sup> As for her children, "We didn't make it a point that they should know more about their Japanese background."<sup>96</sup> Chizuko Norton took a similar route, emphasizing that wartime experiences were "so painful and so humiliating...most of us decided to raise our children as if they were white."<sup>97</sup> Mary Ishizuka best summed up the reaction of the *Nisei* to the war period, claiming she felt "...more Japanese..." because she had been sent away, propelling her to "get out and away from the Japanese community..." in an attempt to "Americanize."<sup>98</sup> Though not all of the interviewees spelled out this reaction as clearly as Ishizuka, overall they did tend to fall in the same pattern. The trauma inflicted on the *Nisei* generation would be hidden by great success in the second half of the twentieth century. The *Issei* generation faced limitations as first generation immigrants with restricted access to education, and many had been confined to work as gardeners and domestic workers. The *Nisei*, on the other hand, were channeled into domestic work for a brief period lasting little over a decade, eventually pursuing alternate work of their choice. However, that brief interlude strongly impacted how they refashioned their identity in the postwar years. With their fellow countrymen doubting their loyalty to the United States in the 1940s, *Nisei* in the postwar years took the lessons of assimilation to heart to prevent a recurrence of wartime suffering. Whereas previous historians focused on either the camp experience exclusively, or pre war engagement with popular culture, to study Japanese American acculturation, this study

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<sup>89</sup> Chizuko Norton, *Densho*.

<sup>90</sup> Esther Nishio, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 321.

<sup>91</sup> Katie Hironaka, *REgenerations: Vol IV*, 85.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 221.

<sup>94</sup> Rose Honda, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 67-68.

<sup>95</sup> Katsumi Kunitsugu, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 261.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Chizuko Norton, *Densho*.

<sup>98</sup> Mary Ishizuka, *REgenerations: Vol II*, 226.

focuses on the necessarily close interaction live-in *Nisei* domestics had with their employers. The employers, as representatives of the dominant ethnic group in the United States, could easily serve as models for acculturation, which *Nisei* embraced to escape further oppression. The pressure to assimilate and the eventual backlash among different generations of Japanese Americans mirrors current tensions over the acculturation debate among other recent immigrant groups. These populations and their descendants are bombarded with similar messages and threats seventy-five years after Japanese Americans were unjustly imprisoned, calling into question the inclusivity of contemporary American society.