

University of Sarajevo

Faculty of Philosophy

Department of English Language and Literature

Issues of Identity in Selected Asian American Literary Texts

Problemi identiteta u izabranim djelima azijsko-američkih autora

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Student name: Ajla Đinalić

Student ID: 3694/2021

Supervisor: Associate Professor Ksenija Kondali

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1. Introduction

Identity, what informs it, and the many arising identity issues individuals face, are frequently discussed topics both amongst the general public and in academic writing. The topic of identity has been delved into in great detail over the past decades and in various fields of interest. In the context of literature, it may be considered from the perspective of how identity may be represented in writing, in addition to how literary representations of identity and identity issues can be seen as a form of documenting the development of a given group's self-perceptions across many years and generations. Furthermore, questions of identity within American ethnic literature, due to the country's extensive history of immigration, as well as the ensuing racial and ethnic conflicts, have been the focus of study across US universities and the world. In this paper, my focus will be on identity issues in selected texts belonging to the corpus of Asian American literature.

However, the term "Asian American" is far too broad and does not take into consideration the rich history and ethnic diversity of the Asian continent. Within the United States, David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma, in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, differentiate between five subgroups falling under the umbrella term of Asian America, those being Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Asian Indians (Yoo and Azuma 1-3). The five groups had begun immigrating to the US long before WWI and had greatly impacted its history, although this has only been acknowledged and seriously studied following the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, in this paper my focus will be on one ethnic group, the Japanese Americans, through an analysis of three selected literary works: John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables*, and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*. The aforementioned texts can offer insights from the gendered point of view, as well as one from two separate generations of Japanese Americans (in the case of one of the selected literary texts). The critical analysis will be performed by examining each of the text's most prominent characters, the ways in which the characters influence one another and are influenced by their environment, where applicable. Given the nature of Otsuka's narrative approach to the characters in *The Buddha in the Attic*, the approach will be adjusted to allow for this difference, which will be addressed in the section dedicated to her novel.

Okada's *No-No Boy* is reputable as the first Japanese American novel to speak out about the harsh ostracism the "no-no boys" faced in the years following the war, and was thus criticized by the Japanese American community at large who had taken a drastically different approach to their war-time history. Like Okada, Yamamoto is also a well-known writer from the Nisei

Japanese American generation. Her writing, both fictional and editorial, was dedicated to exposing racial issues and voicing the stories of the suppressed. Finally, Otsuka is the only Sansei writer of the three selected for this paper, although the main concern of *The Buddha in the Attic* is the experience of her ancestors, the Issei. As such, Otsuka's generationally more distant view of a common topic may present a valuable point of comparison to the previous two authors whose works spoke of the issues plaguing their own peers. Furthermore, the previously mentioned terms, "Issei", "Nisei", and "Sansei", will be clearly defined in the section of the introduction dedicated to relevant terminology.

Alongside the three primary texts, attention will be paid on drawing comparisons with Monica Itoi Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, an autobiographical text which details her childhood experiences in San Francisco, as well as the years she had spent in internment with her family and close friends. Sone's first-hand accounts are helpful in providing clearer descriptions and supporting the theoretical discussion of how the described experiences affected generations of Japanese Americans, as well as how the Japanese Americans' common experiences would then reflect on literary texts.

i. Defining Identity for the Purposes of This Analysis

The primary focus of this paper lies with the concept of ethnic identity, its formative elements within the Japanese American context, and how it shifted across multiple generations. These generational shifts are influenced by the larger national narrative of the American “melting pot” and its tendency to exclude the personal narrative of the other. Suzanne Arakawa summarizes it as follows: “a contested identity is the troubling ‘natural’ inheritance of ethnic Americans” (qtd. in Lawrence & Cheung 183). The idea of identity as being part of one’s inheritance will be especially relevant within the context of Otsuka’s writing. As a starting point in exploring ethnic identity for this literary analysis, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith in the 1996 collection *Ethnicity* offer the following definition:

'Ethnic identity' and 'ethnic origin' refer to the individual level of identification with a culturally defined collectivity, the sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community. 'Ethnic origin' likewise refers to a sense of ancestry and nativity on the part of the individual through his or her parents and grandparents. (Hutchinson and Smith 5)

Furthermore, Hutchinson and Smith also point out the linguistic tendency of the term ‘ethnic’ being used to separate groups into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, tracing this tendency back to the origins of the term in the ancient Greek word *ethnos* and the variety of uses in which it exclusively refers to a group of what the Greeks perceived as the ‘other’, human or animal. This separation has persisted until today, as we live in an age characterised by notions of ethnic identity and pride remaining strong despite the cultural globalization trend aided by the Internet. Hutchinson and Smith’s definition provides the basis for this examination into literary representations of the ethnic identity of Japanese Americans, in particular how subsequent generations connected to their Japanese heritage and traditions, and how their ethnic identity changed in response to historic events.

In this paper, the main constituents of Japanese American ethnic identity will be observed through analyses of the central characters in each of the selected primary literary texts. Manning Nash classifies these constituent features into three main ethnic boundary markers, with the rest being considered secondary (quoted in Hutchinson and Smith 24-28). These are kinship, commensality, and common cult. To summarize, kinship denotes ethnic belonging through biological and descent ties, commensality is the propriety of eating together, and common cult represents a system of implied shared values, religion being one such system (Nash, quoted in Hutchinson and Smith 25). Primary and secondary markers are identifying markers for those

belonging to the group in question, but may also be used by outsiders to engender stereotypes and prevent the groups assimilation into the majority, as will be observed in examples selected from the literary corpus.

Furthermore, Takahashi Jere has examined these constituents and Japanese Americans' responses to racial exclusion in a collection of interviews with two generations of Japanese Americans, *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics*. Jere notes that earlier generations of Japanese in particular had developed a unique identity which may be described as the "middleman minority" (Jere 5). Ethnically and economically, middleman minority groups such as the Japanese, were "numerically small, relatively powerless, and limited to specific occupations that are fairly lucrative but that place them in a buffer role between the masses and the elite" (Jere 5). In this buffer role, the Japanese occupied a higher social status than blacks and Latinos, but were still separated from the white elite and suffered discrimination similar to other minorities. Jere explains that it is due to the complexity of the Japanese's social position in America that they had come to isolate themselves from the majority. This observed social and political isolation, in tandem with various cultural traits of the Japanese which will be elaborated upon in the following sections, formed the basis for future generational responses and identity development in response to historic developments.

i. Terminology and Historic Overview

In addition to gender and generational shifts in understanding, it is important to first outline crucial historic events and aspects of Japanese and American culture which play a formative role in the general Japanese American consciousness. Only by approaching the issue from multiple angles can we form a basic understanding of the issues Japanese Americans face and how they can be observed in the selected texts. The following overview is primarily referenced and compiled from Erica Harth's *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, David Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma's *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, as well as select sources from Ronald Takaki's *A Larger Memory: A History of Our Diversity with Voices*.

The terms "Issei", "Nisei" and "Sansei" are commonly used to denote generations of Japanese in America, beginning with the first generation to immigrate in the late 19th and early 20th century, followed by the second and third generation, respectively, who were, in most cases, born in the US and received US citizenship. The Issei were not deemed eligible for citizenship until the passing of the Immigration Act of 1952, alternatively known as the McCarran-Walter Act. In Section 311 of the McCarran-Walter Act, naturalization rights, which were formerly restrictive towards Asian immigrants especially, were made available to all who filed for them:

The right of a person to become a naturalized citizen of the United States shall not be denied or abridged because of race or sex or because such person is married. Notwithstanding section 405 (b), this section shall apply to any person whose petition for naturalization shall hereafter be filed, or shall have been pending on the effective date of this Act. (Immigration and Nationality Act)

However, despite enabling Japanese to request naturalization, immigration quotas remained in effect, along with general negative attitudes towards those thought to be potential threats to US safety. President Harry Truman had initially vetoed the Act on the grounds of the Act not being an effective enough measure in removing such threats. Additionally, Franklin Odo points out the importance of another segment in the McCarran-Walter Act, namely, that it expands upon the legal definition of aliens. In Sections 212 and 237, respectively, the language used legalizes the forced mass detention of groups with subversive intent (the subversive nature being determined by the government), which is what the Japanese wartime internment was (Odo 335).

It was the Issei and Nisei who were forced into what the US government termed 'relocation centres' following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. With the signing of

Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, the US West Coast was declared a restricted area and approximately 120,000 Japanese were moved to ten camps across the Midwest. The removal was claimed to be necessary on the grounds that the Japanese were a potential threat to national safety, possibly spying for the Japanese government:

Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities (...) Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military Commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion. (Executive Order 9066)

During the forced removal, many lost their property, access to their bank accounts and savings, in addition to the racial stigma which would follow them for years, long after they were released. The details of the conditions in the camps are documented in secondary sources and in first-person accounts of internees. An example of the first is the following excerpt from Thomas Girst's *Art, Literature, and the Japanese Internment* in which he describes camp Minidoka where John Okada was interned:

Located 15 miles east of Jerome and 15 miles north of Twin Falls, Minidoka was constructed on a high desert area, elevated at about 4,000 feet and spanning about 33,000 acres total. Five miles of barbed wire surrounded the camp, and every five hundred meters watchtowers had been built with guards holding machine guns pointing inward. While nobody inside of that fence believed it, the official word had it that the construction was meant for the protection of the "evacuees" within – just as with the other nine internment camps set up in a similar fashion. (Girst 117)

Life for the interned Japanese was difficult owing to the harsh desert weather conditions in Minidoka. The situation was very stressful for them and this unease was likely greatly exacerbated by the presence of soldiers and guns, which many had perhaps never seen up close before. Monica Itoi Sone was one of such people. Sone, who was also interned in Minidoka,

described her first-hand experience of the desert's drastic temperature shifts and dust storms while living in the Minidoka barracks: "We felt as if we were standing in a gigantic sand-mixing machine..." (Sone 192). Sone's *Nisei Daughter* is one of the most notable autobiographies covering the internment and it also contains descriptions of camp Minidoka and its living conditions:

From where I was sitting, I could see nothing but flat prairies, clumps of greasewood, and the jack rabbits. And of course the hundreds and hundreds of barracks, to house ten thousand of us.

Our home was one room in a large army-type barracks, measuring about twenty by twenty-five feet. There were smaller rooms on both ends of the barracks reserved for couples, and larger rooms to accommodate a family of more than five. The only furnishings were an iron pot-belly stove and the cots. (Sone 192)

Both then and now, comparisons are often drawn between the Japanese internment in America and the Holocaust in Europe, typically to the Japanese's detriment. Amongst the Japanese survivors, it was a commonly held opinion that, since they were not starved, gassed and tortured, the Japanese internment was 'not that bad', ignoring that the act of interment itself was a violation of an ethnic minority's democratic rights and liberties. For example, in her paper *I Still Carry It Around* from the "A View from the Inside" symposium held at the Oakland Museum in 1976, Hisaye Yamamoto writes: "Perhaps, hearing names like Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz or Maidenek, we know that our concentration time experience was comparatively benevolent" (Yamamoto 69).

To this day, the use of the term "concentration camp" is contested on these grounds, in addition to lingering perceptions that the internment was justified and that the government has a constitutional right to strip people of their liberty without due legal process in times of war. Some critics, like Thomas Girst, argue that the term ought to be reserved for the Nazi-run concentration camps owing to what their intended purpose was, the events that took place and out of respect for the victims. On the other hand, Asian American authors and critics, such as novelist and filmmaker Ruth Ozeki in her foreword to the 2020 edition of *No-No Boy* (qtd. In Okada 9-20), generally see it as applicable to the internment of the Japanese and use it in their writing. Sociologist and Asian American history expert Takahashi Jere, in his seminal work *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics*, also uses the term "concentration camps" to describe the environment his parents were in during the war. John

Okada sarcastically describes the settlements as “concentration camps, which were called relocation centers” (Okada 30) in the partly autobiographical preface of *No-No Boy*. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “internment” and “internment camp” to avoid any confusion, as is most prevalent in scholarship on this issue.

ii. Generational Responses to the Internment

When Executive Order 9066 was announced, the Issei led by the JACL (Japanese American Citizens League) chose to quietly accept this decision, in the hopes that doing so would demonstrate their loyalty to America and its values. Erica Harth in *Last Witnesses* concludes that it is this behaviour, along with their remaining in enclosed communities and considerably small numbers in comparison to other ethnic groups, which has led to the Japanese American community being labelled as ‘the model minority’ of the US (Harth 12). Another argument for this label is that, in the decades following WWII, Japanese Americans worked hard to bounce back and succeed, re-earning their place in American society and proving their loyalty. There were individuals, especially amongst the Nisei, who had chosen to distance themselves from their Japanese heritage and strove to fully integrate into the American populace. This stance would come to influence their children’s attitudes in the future, examples of which will be examined further, in the section dedicated to generational relations and trauma.

Toyo Suyemoto, a Nisei who was interned at Topaz, Utah, attributes the obedient response of the Issei to an aspect of Japanese culture called ‘*gaman*’ (Japanese word meaning ‘to endure’), which values silent perseverance in trying times, obedience and loyalty (*Another Spring*, in Harth 23). Another potentially relevant aspect of Japanese culture worth mentioning is ‘*bachi*’. Jeni Yamada explains this concept as “divine punishment or curse; bad things happen to bad people” (in Harth 57). This concept implies that the Issei and Nisei perhaps felt as if they had done something deserving of such a punishment. This sense of guilt would often be passed down through generations.

It has been observed that when a group experiences a traumatic event, the psychological effects can persist and be passed down to their children and grandchildren, despite them not having experienced the event in question. This is known as family systems theory and psychologist Donna K. Nagata has documented this intergenerational trauma among the Sansei and even Yonsei and Gosei (fourth and fifth generation, respectively). In *Echoes from Generation to Generation* (quoted in Harth 61-71), Nagata explains how many Sansei expressed anger and frustration at what their parents and grandparents had to experience, but struggled to openly talk about the camps and what it was actually like and how it affected them, physically, mentally and emotionally. In many cases, Sansei confessed that when their parents mentioned camps, their immediate association was summer camps. It was not until they heard about the Japanese interment in history class that they became aware of what their parents were actually referring to. Hesitance to speak about this event, alongside the internalized sense of guilt and shame for

being Japanese, led many Nisei to raise their Sansei children without teaching them their language and native culture, effectively alienating them from their family heritage. Instead, Nisei parents actively encouraged the Sansei to always excel academically and professionally, as a means of making up for their perceived mistakes.

iii. Presenting an Example of Intergenerational Trauma

The effects of this intergenerational trauma are exemplified in the essay *Legacy of Silence*, co-authored by mother and daughter Mitsuye and Jeni Yamada (in Harth 35-60). Mitsuye Yamada had dedicated her career to various activist causes throughout her life, but found it difficult to address her internment experience, especially when it came to her children. She states that the main reason for her silence was that she did not want to burden her children with adult concerns, as a means of protecting them from a racist world. However, her daughter, Jeni Yamada, much like many other Sansei, felt betrayed by her family's silence and chose to distance herself from her Japanese heritage. It is interesting to point out how many of them felt a sense of solidarity with Jews, an important distinction being that Jews take pride in their culture and do not avoid discussing the Holocaust. Instead, many Sansei sought to blend in as much as possible with white Americans, but never truly escaping the anxiety that old racist currents might resurface and make them prisoners of conscience once more. As Yamada herself put it: "As long as our Caucasian neighbors and friends weren't threatened, they wouldn't threaten us" (in Harth 52).

Finally, there is also an observable difference in the experience from a gender perspective. Monica Itoi Sone's autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (published in 1953) follows her life story from early childhood to the end of WWII and, in doing so, also follows the development of her identity as a Japanese American, simultaneously foreign and, as she called herself, a 'Yankee'. It is clear that this idea was difficult to comprehend for her as a child, as she writes:

I had always thought I was a Yankee, because after all I had been born on Occidental and Main Street. (...) I didn't see how I could be a Yankee and a Japanese at the same time. It was like being born with two heads. (Sone 18-19)

The process of consolidating these two different identities culminates during the interment years, with both being questioned due to the cruel response of the American government towards her and her people, forcing them into what she describes as a "peripheral existence" (Sone 198). In the end, Sone views her parents and the Issei with a newfound respect for their sacrifices, embracing her Japanese heritage along with it. She does not lose faith in American democracy, as can be concluded from the ending to her autobiography¹. This is in no small part thanks to

¹ It is important to keep in mind that the book was published only a few years after WWII, so there is a possibility of post-war ideological influence in this section. US politics has much changed since then and important events might have influenced people in different ways. It is also necessary to note that not all Japanese, Nisei and later generations expressed such patriotic sentiments.

non-Japanese friends who accept her and refuse to judge her the way others did in the West Coast and during the war.

On the other hand, there were also many who chose to abandon their American identity completely. There was a noticeably higher percentage of men who felt this way, especially Issei veterans who had served in the military previously during WWI. Joseph Kurihara was one such Nisei veteran whose previous service was ignored and his loyalty to the US questioned alongside the other Japanese. Throughout his account (found in Takaki 202-210), Kurihara describes how FBI and military officials treated him as an alien and ignored his democratic rights, but later began recruiting Nisei to form a special all-Nisei military unit, advertising it as an opportunity for them to demonstrate their loyalty to their country. Kurihara and other likeminded veterans felt betrayed for not receiving special consideration owing to their prior services, leading Kurihara to renounce his American citizenship and leave for Japan once the war was over. Another means for expressing their discontent with their treatment was to become what would come to be known as 'no-no boys'.

2. No-No Boy

i. Who Were the No-no Boys

John Okada, a Nisei born in Seattle in 1923, was a sophomore student at the University of Washington when he and his family were removed to Camp Harmony and then to Minidoka. However, Okada remained in Minidoka only for three weeks before he was granted permission to leave. Not long after, Okada enrolled in the Army and trained to be a Japanese language interpreter for the Military Intelligence Service. He was presumably stationed in Guam in 1944 as a member of the 8th Radio Squadron, Mobile. *No-No Boy* remains Okada's only novel, although it is confirmed that he was working on a new one prior to his early death. What became of the manuscript to this second novel remains unclear.² I will first explain who the 'no-no boys' were, before connecting it to Okada's own choice during the internment. Contrary to what one may conclude after reading Okada's *No-No Boy*, John Okada had selected yes to both of the following questions.

Upon internment, Japanese Americans were required to fill out a questionnaire titled "Statement of United States Citizenship of Japanese Ancestry". This questionnaire brought into question their 'loyalty' to the US, with the two most relevant questions being 27 and 28, which were written as follows:

Q. 27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?

Q. 28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks by foreign or domestic forces, and foreswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization? (quoted in Girst 90)

The major issues with these two questions are that beyond questioning their loyalty, they enabled the US government to draft those who answered affirmatively into the army and station them anywhere, including Japan where many Issei and Nisei had friends and relatives. Besides forcing them to potentially fight against people they may know, question 28 was hurtful to the Issei and Nisei in differing ways. For the Issei it meant renouncing their home country, without promise of receiving American citizenship, while for the Nisei it implied that they were

² Further and more detailed biographical information on John Okada may be found in Thomas Girst's *Art, Literature, and the Japanese American Internment*, pp. 115-135.

originally loyal to Japan. They had to be in order to then forswear this allegiance, essentially admitting initial disloyalty which would then justify their internment. Additionally, as Girst points out, this questionnaire was issued to them while they were surrounded by armed guards, thus fear of the potential consequences was heightened (Girst 90). This context may be one of the many reasons why, out of approximately 75,000 people, almost 65,000 answered yes to both questions.

However, there were 7,600 men who answered no and because of this declaration they would later be dubbed 'no-no boys'. Labelled as disloyal by the government, the majority would be removed to Tule Lake centre and spend the remainder of their internment with little to no contact with their friends and family. Furthermore, 293 of them were tried for draft resistance and 263 were imprisoned. Upon release, this name and its implications would haunt them, especially amongst members of their own community. Okada's novel tackles the reasons behind saying 'no', as well as the mental toll and ostracism they suffered.

ii. The Case of a No-no boy

No-No Boy is the story of Nisei ‘no-no boy’ and draft resister Ichiro Yamada. Following his release from prison, Ichiro returns to his family in Seattle, but struggles to rejoin the Japanese American community due to the stigma and mistreatment of the no-no boys. He tries to separate himself from his family and form an identity independent from his family members’ ideals, primarily from those of his overbearing mother. Throughout his journey, Ichiro encounters various fellow Japanese and non-Japanese Americans who offer different perspectives on issues pertaining to ‘no-no boys’ and the Japanese American community in general. It is through Ichiro’s journey that the reader may see how these men were treated by their own community, under the influence of the JACL who were first to condemn their choices. Each character plays a role in this journey, which begins in the internment camps:

You, Mr. Judge, who supposedly represent justice, was it a just thing to ruin a hundred thousand lives and homes and farms and businesses and dreams and hopes because the hundred thousand were a hundred thousand Japanese and you couldn’t have loyal Japanese when Japan is the country you’re fighting and, if so, how about the Germans and Italians that must be just as questionable as the Japanese or we wouldn’t be fighting Germany and Italy? (...) If you think we’re the same kind of rotten Japanese that dropped the bombs on Pearl Harbor, and it’s plain that you do or I wouldn’t be here having to explain to you why it is that I won’t go and protect sons-of-bitches like you, I say you’re right and *banzai* three times and we’ll sit the war out in a nice cell, thank you. (Okada 58)

This quotation explicates one of the frequently given reasons for selecting ‘no’ – that they did not wish to defend a democracy which had taught them to revere it, only for that very democracy to strip them of their human rights and move their entire community out into the desert, out of the public’s sight. This sort of treatment directly contradicts the American national narrative of *et pluribus unum*, that America is the land of the American people whose rights are absolute. Furthermore, Yoon Seungho quotes Donald Pease’s *National Narratives, Postnational Narration* in his observation that it establishes the position of the Japanese as “an *anomaly* that is “internal to the state yet external to the national narrative” (Pease 549, quoted in Seungho 46).

In this light, their choice is easily understandable, as well as the choice of those like Kurihara, who went to Japan forever, often despite never having been there before. They wilfully left their American identity behind and embraced the one that was imposed upon them. However, this choice would come to haunt those who remained. Not all of them gave up their American

citizenship and instead attempted to reintegrate into the post-internment Japanese American community, only to be violently ostracized by their own people. Two such examples in the novel are the characters Eto and Bull, two Nisei veterans who view Ichiro as a traitor to his country and to his people. They continually call him a 'Jap', a term used pejoratively by non-Asian Americans and famously used by media and government officials during WWII. The irony of this naming does not go unaddressed, as Kenji talks about the truth most Japanese try to avoid as they cling to the belief that they had once and for all proven their loyalty:

They think just because they went and packed a rifle they're different but they aren't and they know it. They're still Japs. (...) People haven't changed a helluva lot. The guys who make it tough on you probably do so out of a misbegotten idea that maybe you're to blame because the good that they thought they were doing by getting killed and shot up doesn't amount to a pot of beans. They just need a little time to get cut down to their own size. Then they'll be the same as you, a bunch of Japs. (Okada 168-169)

The Nisei who fought want to believe that they were now fully-fledged Americans like everyone else and any negative treatment they received had to do with those like Ichiro who were giving the Japanese in America 'a bad name'. However, as I have mentioned previously when discussing ethnic boundary markers, complete assimilation and acceptance are practically impossible due to the majority group's preconceived notions which often prevent them from better understanding the ethnic minority group. The most common hindrance was race. Thomas H. Eriksen (quoted in Hutchinson, & Smith 28-31) offers arguments in favour and against treating race and ethnicity as separate theoretical entities, but in practice, distinct racial markers are rarely distinguished from identity and personality from the outsider's perspective. Discrimination relies mainly on visually recognizable features, which is why other Asian American communities sought to separate themselves from the Japanese during WWII. For example, Sone mentions the Chinese consul's decision that all Chinese should carry identification cards and "China" badges so as to differentiate themselves in public from the Japanese and spare themselves potentially dangerous encounters resulting from anti-Japanese sentiments (Sone 149).

On the other hand, there were also those who tried to understand and even supported the no-no boys' choice, those who sympathized with the Japanese's situation. Unfortunately, this was not necessarily always a positive thing. There were Americans who disagreed with the internment and took it upon themselves to make it right in whatever way they could. One such character in *No-No Boy* is Mr Carrick. Ichiro comes to Mr Carrick's engineering office in search of a job

and is given an offer immediately. He recognizes that the evidently generous offer is a part of Mr Carrick's apology on behalf of the American people:

The government made a big mistake when they shoved you people around. There was no reason for it. A big black mark in the annals of American history. I mean that. I've always been a big-mouthed, loud-talking, back-slapping American but, when that happened, I lost a little of my wind. I don't feel as proud as I used to, but, if the mistake has been made, maybe we've learned something from it. Let's hope so. (Okada 158)

Ichiro does not doubt the sincerity of Mr Carrick's apology. Furthermore, Ichiro believes people like Mr Carrick to be the real America, people who try to live up to the democratic ideals taught to them in school: "(...) he glimpsed the real nature of the country against which he had almost fully turned his back, and saw that its mistake was no less unforgivable than his own" (Okada 161). However, Ichiro still turns down Mr Carrick's job offer since, at that point in the story, Ichiro has yet to separate himself from his guilt, his mother and heritage.

The character of Ichiro's mother is largely responsible for his sentence and the challenges he faces because of it. She is supportive of Ichiro's refusal to join the army, but for an entirely different reason. Time and again, she states how proud she is of Ichiro for being a proper Japanese and for what she believes to be his unwavering loyalty to Japan. Her delusional belief that Japan had in fact won the war and that it was a matter of time before they would send ships to take back the 'loyal' Japanese back home, is largely to blame for the deteriorating Yamada family relations. As much can be seen from Taro, Ichiro's younger brother, who is ashamed of his mother and brother. Taro takes the first opportunity to enlist in the army, an act to redeem himself and simultaneously distance himself from the 'traitorous' Ichiro. For his part, Ichiro deals with these conflicting emotions throughout the novel. For example: "Sometimes I think my mother is to blame. Sometimes I think it's bigger than her, more than her refusal to understand that I'm not like her. It didn't make sense. Not at all." (Okada 160). It is only after his mother's death that the character seems to find release.

Seungho makes an interesting connection between Ichiro's envy of other families, not only Japanese, with the age-old American Dream and the rise of the suburban lifestyle following WWII (Seungho 47-48). Seungho describes the post war American suburbs as "site(s) of belonging", and that the suburban lifestyle offered an illusion of "historic amnesia and forgiveness" to the Japanese (48). In particular, suburban America promoted uniformity and conformity, things a no-no boy like Ichiro would yearn for after being alienated and locked

away for four years. Conforming to the majority and abandoning their parents' native culture would have been a small price to pay if it meant being accepted and blending in. Two such families in the novel are the Kumasakas and Kannos, both of whom had purchased typical suburban houses to settle in permanently. This is significant, because Issei commonly came to America to get rich and return to Japan a few years later, so they typically avoided getting any sort of permanent residence as it was deemed unnecessary. This act of purchasing a home solidified the message that they had finally accepted America as their new home and do not plan on ever returning to Japan. Ichiro recognizes this state and wishes he could have the same experience; however, his view of America was forever changed in the camps and prison. Ichiro has seen the ugly side of America and he can never see its veneer for anything other than what it is:

No wonder the world's such a rotten place, rotten and filthy and cheap and smelly. Where is that place they talk of and paint nice pictures of and describe in all the homey magazines? Where is that place with the clean, white cottages surrounding the new, red-brick church with the clean, white steeple, where the families all have two children, one boy and one girl, and a shiny new car in the garage, and a dog and a cat and life is like living in the land of the happily-ever-after? Surely it must be around here someplace, someplace in America. Or is it just that it's not for me? (Okada 165)

This is the post-WWII image of America which has persisted even into the 21st century, the image of the land of equal opportunity. Ichiro questions whether this lifestyle is simply "not for him", but at this point in America's history it is questionable whether it was meant for any non-white minority, not just no-no boys or the Japanese. While Kenji's father and the Kumasakas in the novel have indeed purchased such homes, it is never addressed how difficult the process itself was. It is documented that many suburban neighbourhoods had either explicit or implicit 'no colours' policies when it came to who was allowed in. In *Nisei Daughter*, Sone joins her mother in finding a coastal house to rent and cannot find anything, no matter where they asked, because of their race³ (Sone 111-115). Realistically, there is always the possibility that the two families were able to integrate in this manner as a result of the lingering guilt some people had regarding the treatment of the Japanese during the war. It is also important to keep in mind that

³ The scene in question takes place prior to WWII, but it is still relevant as such cases remained following the War's end. It is also notable that within the same text, the Nisei are allowed to leave the internment camps much earlier, whereas their parents are still classified as aliens and had to remain in the camps much longer.

the narration here is from Ichiro's perspective and therefore it could be argued that most other Japanese Americans seemed far better integrated into American society in comparison to him.

Another character to consider in the discussion of identity construction of this population as portrayed in the novel is the character of Kenji. At first glance he appears to belong into this category: Kenji is a veteran who had lost his leg in battle and as a result received recognition and compensation for his contribution. Kenji fought for his home country and for the Japanese Americans left in internment, much like the other characters Eto and Bull. However, we come to realize soon that Kenji is dying due to a severe leg injury, which is continuously eating away at his body and towards the end of the story he passes away in hospital. Kenji's story is an illustration of the alternate path Ichiro could have taken and of his perspective on the various issues within the Japanese American community. One paragraph in particular shows in what way Kenji presents a foil to Ichiro, in addition to portraying Ichiro's early sense of guilt. The two men are drinking at a club, reflecting on a previous conversation about whether they would switch places if they could. Kenji's answer remains no and the following paragraph succinctly describes the two characters:

So they sat silently through the next drink, one already dead but still alive and contemplating fifty or sixty years more of dead aliveness, and the other, living and dying slowly. They were two extremes, the Japanese who was more American than most Americans because he had crept to the brink of death for America, and the other who was neither Japanese nor American because he had failed to recognize the gift of his birth right when recognition meant everything. (Okada 94)

It is immediately clear what their respective positions are in regard to their personal sense of belonging, but it is also interesting how Ichiro's mental state is described as 'dead aliveness'. In that sense, Ichiro's journey towards self-discovery is also his coming back to life. However, calling Kenji "the Japanese who was more American than most Americans" may seem true from Ichiro's perspective, but as the story progresses it becomes increasingly more ironic. Kenji may have made great sacrifices for his country, but he is not blind to its faults as I have mentioned previously (he does not attempt to distance himself from those he called "a bunch of Japs"). He is also keenly aware of Ichiro's anguish and the ostracism he is facing, as is evidenced by Kenji's statement that, had he the choice to do so, he likely would not change places with Ichiro. Kenji would rather live with the pain of slow death, than be a prisoner of his mind like Ichiro.

It may be painful at first for Ichiro to hear that what he is going through is in some aspects worse than death, but it is a crucial first step in recognizing what his problem is. From the very beginning Kenji is his foremost guide throughout his life choices, although not the only one. As stated previously, every character plays some role in guiding Ichiro down his path of identification and healing. In this regard, the last character of this novel I would like to focus on is Emi.

Emi is a character who has likewise suffered greatly throughout her life, in addition to being left behind by her husband at the time when Kenji introduces her to Ichiro. Her role in his story is somewhat mixed, as they make love and admit to being attracted to each other, but she also comforts him like a mother, more than Mrs Yamada ever did. More than anything, despite her situation, Emi is the most patriotic character in *No-No Boy* and the most loyal in various ways. She tries to be faithful to her husband despite him leaving her to go to the front a second time, she works alone to preserve her family's farm while her elderly parents live in Japan and are unable to return to America. Despite the difficulties she faces, Emi still believes in American democracy. Her belief can be seen in the following response, which she gives to Ichiro after he expresses his envy of Emi and Kenji, believing that the two characters have clear purposes and goals in life:

But this country is different. They made a mistake when they doubted you. They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting you run around loose. Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them and be grateful to them and prove to them that you can be an American worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths. (Okada 113)

At first glance, her speech aims to comfort Ichiro by admitting that the country made a mistake and is trying to make amends, that it was not his fault. Seungho makes the same observation in regard to Emi's advice to Ichiro, that "it is not so much a cultural counter-practice as a compliance with an amnesic reaction to the "evacuated" history of the internment" (Seungho 59). Emi's speech makes it sound like there is a welcoming home for him in America, if only he is open to it. In the example I have given, being open to America's frailties and strengths requires Ichiro to "be equally big", to improve himself in order to be worthy of the opportunities given to him. There are elements in the novel which support Emi's argument, like the aforementioned character of Mr Carrick. However, when you stop and look at the word choice more closely, you can immediately recognize the familiar propaganda and the Issei/Nisei narrative of silence and *gaman*. Rather than demand an apology and public acknowledgement,

Emi asks that he be the one to forgive and forget. More than just forgive, what really gives it away is her saying that Ichiro should be “grateful” and “prove that he is worthy” of being American and of what the country offers him. The notion of worthiness as a quantifiable human value and of needing to prove it someone else, or rather to yourself, echoes the post-WWII sentiments of the Japanese Americans which I have discussed in the introduction. It is then clear that Emi has internalized all of these values and is not entirely different from the majority. Initially, her acceptance of him may set her apart, but it becomes clear that the comfort, and, more importantly, the conformity she offers, are not what Ichiro needs in this stage of his life.

The people Ichiro encounters in the novel do not give him all of the answers or instructions, since the journey towards affirming one’s identity is, by nature, one we all take on alone. Instead, their life’s stories and the differing perspectives help him get a better look at his situation. Unlike the traditional *Bildungsroman*, *No-No Boy* does not end definitively with Ichiro having affirmed himself based on what he has learned. Girst also believes that the ending of *No-No Boy* undermines the *Bildungsroman* classification “since Ichiro’s actions throughout the book may now be read as a sole effort to seek redemption via a confession of guilt for something he has apparently chosen not to do in the first place” (Girst 169).

Befitting of the ideologically complex and misleading period of the 1950s in America, Ichiro’s journey is only at its proper beginning by the novel’s end. Only from that point, having separated himself from his mother’s influence, may he begin building himself anew.

3. Seventeen Syllables

i. Hisaye Yamamoto, A Nisei Daughter

Similar to John Okada, Hisaye Yamamoto was a Nisei born in Los Angeles, 1921. Throughout most of her childhood, Yamamoto's family were farmers and migrated every few years because as illegal aliens they were not legally permitted to lease land for more than three years. During WWII, Yamamoto was interned in the Poston camp in Arizona, where she worked in the camp's newspaper. The newspaper job and the years spent in internment would come to affect her writing greatly, alongside the many and various editorial and publishing jobs she undertook in the years following the end of the war. Notably, when once asked how long it took her to write a certain short story, Yamamoto reportedly responded: "All my life" (cited in Cheung 65). Yamamoto offers an interesting opinion on the role and influence of the Sansei on Nisei like her, in regard to openly discussing and writing about their internment experiences. According to Yamamoto, owing to the Issei and Nisei's wilful ignorance of the emotional significance the internment held for them, many found themselves overwhelmed when, decades later, they were confronted by their children's incredulous probing (quoted in Cheung 69-70). It is the Sansei's exploration into the internment experience that acts as a driving force in pushing the Nisei writer to relive those experiences once more and discover that there are yet things left unsaid.⁴ Other details from Yamamoto's life which may be relevant in the analysis of her stories can be found in an interview with Yamamoto from 1992. In particular, Yamamoto mentions the influence of movies and contemporary beauty standards on Japanese youth, and that she recalls female friends who were raised in a strict environment, in line with traditional Japanese values.

There *were* parents of friends who insisted on their children conforming to Japanese ideals. (...) But even in our case the Japanese ideals (of the Meiji era) were held up to us children. Reprimands usually included mention of the exemplary behavior of Japanese children, how quiet they were and obedient, how demure the girls were and how brave the boys. (quoted in Cheung 79)

The Meiji era's values were especially influential in the lives of the Issei and therefore I will provide detailed information on this era of Japan's history in the following section. In my analysis of Hisaye Yamamoto's text, I will be examining two of her most well-known and acclaimed short stories, *Seventeen Syllables* and *Yoneko's Earthquake*. To summarize the two stories, *Seventeen Syllables* is written from the perspective of the young Nisei girl Rosie whose

⁴ The full text by Yamamoto may be found in Cheung (1994), as well as the interview with Yamamoto.

mother writes *haiku* poetry⁵ for the San Francisco based Japanese newspaper, *Mainichi Shimbun*, under the pen name Ume Hanazono. Using poetry to express herself, the mother attempts to connect with Rosie, but fails to do so due to the linguistic barrier. The mother's newfound love for poetry irks her husband and the story culminates with the father burning a first-prize *Hiroshige*⁶ painting the mother had received from the newspaper. The mother then confesses to having had an unfortunate affair and a stillborn child as a young woman in Japan, and having been thus forced to marry Rosie's father in America. Unfortunately, Rosie fails to understand her mother's feelings and the gravity of her situation.

Similarly, *Yoneko's Earthquake* is narrated from Yoneko's perspective, who is ten years old at the time when the events take place. The earthquake in question was the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, one of the strongest and most damaging in the recorded history of Southern California.⁷ During the earthquake, Yoneko, her younger brother Seigo and her mother are aided by their Filipino farmhand Marpo, while the father is driving home when the earthquake takes place and gets in a car accident. This accident permanently traumatizes him, preventing him from working in the fields and providing for his young family. Marpo takes over many of his responsibilities and it is implied that Marpo is involved in a romantic affair with Mrs Hosoume, Yoneko's mother. Following an incident in which Mr Hosoume slaps his wife for her disobedience to him, Marpo is fired and Mrs Hosoume is taken to hospital in the city to have an abortion. The forced abortion leaves a profound mark on Yoneko's mother, who blames the ensuing death of her son Seigo on the killing of the unborn child.

In my analysis of these two stories, my focus will be on examining the mother-daughter relationships between the Issei and Nisei. Emphasis will be placed on how the Nisei daughters perceived their mothers and how generational and cultural misunderstanding influenced the formation of the Nisei daughter's identity. In this regard, Yamamoto's stories offer readers outside the Japanese American community insight into the familial relationships of the Issei and Nisei.

⁵ A traditional form of Japanese poetry popularized during the *Edo* period; its most notable characteristics being the seventeen-syllable limitation, with the syllables organized in the form five-seven-five and utilizing established naturalistic metaphors. Information on the *haiku* form and its history may be found in *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology*, edited by Faubion Bowers.

⁶ Ukiyo-e (wood block print) art by late Edo period master Ichiryusai Hiroshige (1797-1858). Further information on the ukiyo-e artform and Ichiryusai Hiroshige may be found in the article *Ukiyo-e Landscapes and Edo Scenic Places (1914)*, by Nagai Kafu, et al.

⁷ Further details on the event, its significance and consequences available at: <https://www.usgs.gov/news/featured-story/earthquake-southern-california-90-years-ago-changed-way-we-build>.

ii. Writing Japanese Women Across Generations

Similar to how the Issei mother played an important role in *No-No Boy* as Ichiro's main connection to Japan, mothers are often central to the short stories of Hisaye Yamamoto. As a Nisei herself, Yamamoto's stories often delve into the relationships between Issei mothers and Nisei daughters, as well as how these relationships and key events come to inform the daughter's later life. It is important to keep in mind, as Midori Endo points out, that Japanese Issei women were a group doubly oppressed, first by Japanese patriarchal values, secondly by Americans' racial stereotyping (Endo 208). On the former point, these values were enforced both by their husbands in America and the warnings these women received from their families back in Japan. Those who left or divorced their husbands were labelled as 'demodori', which is translated as 'boomerang woman' (Endo 211). This term was a mark of shame for the women, one which few were willing to carry as it implied that they were disobedient to their men and their families.

Issei women were also misjudged among the Japanese American community. In her essay "*Issei*" *Women: Silences and Fields of Power*, Marve von Hassell analyses how the Issei women's behaviour and speech served to protect them from a hostile foreign environment and a patriarchal native culture, but simultaneously distanced them from the Japanese American community and formed a stereotypical image which had persisted for years. Based on interviews conducted with Nisei women, Von Hassell notes how Issei women were often compared to bamboo. The comparison described their generation's "strength through flexibility and resilience", but simultaneously Issei women were also perceived "as passive, quiet, and submissive-qualities generally associated with powerlessness" (Von Hassell 551). However, Von Hassell believes that these conflicting images were a result of a cultural miscommunication between the Issei and their children. In particular, Von Hassell focuses on the influence of the conservative values prevalent during the Meiji Restoration in Japan (553-556).

To better understand exactly which values of the Meiji Restoration era were crucial in the formation of the Issei cultural mentality, I will first examine the historic context. The Meiji era of Japanese history began in 1868 when the Japanese government lifted the Sakoku Edict⁸ and opened up Japan to foreign countries commerce and relations. The period ended in 1912 with the ascension of Emperor Taishō on 30 July. The term "Meiji Restoration" refers to the

⁸ The Sakoku Edict was decreed in 1635 by Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, closing off Japan's borders and only permitting trade with China and the Netherlands. The edict was made with the intent to eliminate foreign influence on Japanese culture and political governing.

restoration of the political power of the imperial throne. Throughout the Edo period, which preceded the Meiji period, political power was entirely in the hands of the Shogunate and the Tokugawa dynasty. However, with the restoration of the imperial dynasty came the issue of how to govern a Japan undergoing cultural upheaval under Western, primarily American and Western European, influence. The imperial government's response was termed "kokusui hozon" (translated as "preservation of the national essence"), an ideology that upheld the absolute power of the government with the imperial family at its centre, and was based on Confucian philosophical teachings of social hierarchy and loyalty for the betterment of the collective, reinforced by Western utilitarian philosophy. The new ideology is best summarized in the Japanese Imperial Rescript on Education, signed in 1890:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded the Empire on a basis broad and everlasting....Our Subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein lies the source of Our Education. Ye, Our Subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious; as friends true." (quoted in Jansen 684)

For Japanese women, their role in the Meiji social hierarchy was clear. As daughters, wives, and mothers, women served the core unit of Japanese society, the "ie". The term translates to household, but is also understood as a corporate body which must last for generations and was governed by a patriarch who had complete authority over all members of the *ie* (Jansen 549). Generational continuity ensured that land and wealth would remain within the main family, and the wife's task was to provide an heir and serve her *ie*. The Meiji Restoration ideology expanded on the traditional understanding of the *ie* by extrapolating that service to the *ie* is direct service to the Emperor and to the nation. In one of the interviews she conducted, Von Hassell provides an excellent example of how influential Meiji ideology was on the daily lives of Japanese women. In an interview with Mrs. Nishimura, a Nisei, Von Hassell points out how Mrs. Nishimura's⁹ stories about her Issei mother focus on the male members of the family and her role in supporting them:

She used to weave all the clothes that the menfolk wore. She had to sew, of course, while she was quite young. She never spoke much of her sisters. She spoke of her brothers a lot, how talented they were, how they'd always win in the village festivals and things like that.

⁹ Von Hassell uses pseudonyms for all of her interviewees.

She did mention one sister much younger than her. But I never heard too much about her, whether she died young or whatever. Her brothers were more or less the ones who ran everything, so her job was mainly to clothe them and feed them and see that the household chores were taken care of. She had to have the water ready for them when they came out of the fields, and stuff like that. (Von Hassell 555)

However, as time passed the ideological values formerly intended to improve Japan's economic and political situation were taken too far, at the expense of the people. According to *The Cambridge History of Japan*, "By the turn of the century, the public mood of Japan had transformed, and a powerful conservative orthodoxy held sway. (...) Moderate conservatives had argued for cultural autonomy, for a modern industrial society that was in keeping with historical traditions, but they lamented the narrow views that now stigmatized change as inconsistent with the national character" (Jansen 716-717). The negative impact of Meiji conservatism is also apparent among Issei women in America. The Meiji ideology had taught women that their proper place was in the family home and that the only work appropriate for women was work which served the family without overshadowing the husband's authority.

To offer some examples from Yamamoto's stories, *Seventeen Syllables* shows two Issei women, Rosie's mother and Mrs Hayano, suffering in different ways as a consequence of stifling social values. Mrs Hayano is described as "stooped, slowly shuffling, violently trembling (*always trembling*)", despite her once being the beauty of her village (Yamamoto 24, emphasis in original). Rosie does not understand Mrs Hayano's condition, only that it began after her first birth and that since then she had given birth three more times. All of her children are girls, something the discerning reader can recognise and then piece together as the true reason Mrs Hayano's health was destroyed. Mrs Hayano's condition is one example of how Yamamoto's stories problematize the generational miscommunication stemming from cultural differences and silence. Endo summarizes it as follows: "issei mothers conceal and do not talk about their inner self and problems to their daughters" (Endo 210). Rosie is aware of the superficial details of Mrs Hayano's life, but does not come to the conclusion that the birth of her first daughter had devastated her health, nor that Mrs Hayano should not have further risked her health three more times afterwards.

To Mr Hayano, the pursuit of a male heir to inherit the family name was more important than his wife's wellbeing and she clearly had no say in the matter. In this sense, Mrs Hayano was reduced to her biological and social role, unable to refuse her husband's demands. Elaine Kim notes that such harmful marital relationships are a common occurrence in Yamamoto's stories:

“They (*the husbands*) ultimately crush their wives and shackle them to a life of endless toil beside them, not necessarily because they are evil, but because they cannot tolerate independence of any kind in their wives. (...) Most of them are unable to resist oppression without losing their spirit and their sanity” (quoted in Cheung 115, emphasis added).

Similarly, Rosie’s mother is punished for her disobedience in pursuing artistic expression. The destroyed *Hiroshige* is a clear message that her place is in the fields by her husband’s side, not writing award-winning *haiku* for Japanese magazines. It is also plausible that her husband had seen the award, as well as her frequent discussions about *haiku* with likeminded friends and neighbours, as her overshadowing him socially and intellectually. Furthermore, art made her an individual with her own thoughts and feelings, something Rosie imagines as there being two women, her mother and Ume Hanazono (Yamamoto 22). Writing under the pen name Ume Hanazono gave her a sense of freedom and recognition, an audience that wanted to hear what she had to say. The *Hiroshige* was further recognition of her artistic skill and its destruction reminded her of why she had arrived to America initially: “Her mother, at nineteen, had come to America as an alternative to suicide” (Yamamoto 37). In Japan, Rosie’s mother became pregnant with a young man from a family far wealthier than hers, an “indiscretion” which had brought shame to her entire family by association. After her son was born stillborn, she had no one to turn to for help and sought to go to America for a fresh start. However, her husband’s violent response is evidence that she had not escaped Japan’s patriarchal oppression. Rosie’s mother tells her life’s story calmly, since she is likely aware that it is too late for her to escape her husband. However, she does not wish for the same fate to befall her daughter, which is why the story concludes with a desperate warning: “Rosie,” she said urgently, “Promise me you will never marry!” (Yamamoto 38). Her mother does not offer further explanation, nor does Rosie want to think about her mother’s painful past and allow it to affect her choices. Instead, Rosie remembers her encounters with the young farmhand who had kissed her earlier in the story, Jesus Carrasco, and it becomes apparent to her mother that her warnings fell upon deaf ears.

Another interesting example is Yoneko’s mother in the story *Yoneko’s Earthquake*. Since Yoneko is so young, she is unable to piece together the significance of the events she witnesses. Following the earthquake and the father’s accident, Yoneko’s mother has an affair with a Filipino man, Marpo, and ends up pregnant. She is then forced to have a secret abortion and when her son Seigo dies of illness, she blames herself for his death: “Never kill a person, Yoneko, because if you do, God will take from you someone you love” (Yamamoto 57).

Throughout the story her mother is arguing with her disabled husband, who is constantly trying to establish his male authority over the household.

“Look,” Mr. Hosoume said, “if you’re going to contradict every piece of advice I give the children, they’ll end up disobeying us both and doing what they very well please. Just because I’m ill now is no reason for them to start being disrespectful.” (...) “That’s enough of your insolence,” he said. Since he was speaking in Japanese, his exact accusation was that she was *nama-iki*, which is a shade more revolting than being merely insolent. (Yamamoto 52)

Yamamoto is credited for giving voice to Issei women through their daughters’ narration and offering a glimpse into their identities as women raised with traditional Japanese values and having to live on the side-lines as their daughters grow up in a vastly different culture, coming to view themselves in a different light. In her critical essay *Hisaye Yamamoto: A Woman’s View*, Elaine H. Kim notes that Yamamoto’s stories may serve as “a warning to them (*the Nisei*) not to lose the experiences of their parents, which they (and she) can only partially understand” (quoted in Cheung 110, emphasis added). Similarly, Midori Endo observes that Yamamoto’s stories “narrate the mother through the daughter’s eyes” and the consequences of such a narrative approach can be detrimental to the mother’s identity: “When the mothers’ lives are told by their daughters’ voice or from their point of view, the mothers are silenced and their voices are removed” (Endo 209-210).

At first, the daughter’s gradual distancing from her mother’s native culture may seem overall a good thing, considering that the patriarchal Japanese tradition is largely responsible for the Issei women’s plight and inability to express themselves artistically. However, healthy parent-child relationships are fundamental in the process of self-discovery and forming an individualized identity. For such a relationship to exist, one of the key components is communication and this is what Yamamoto’s stories bring to attention. One of the most often quoted passages from *Seventeen Syllables* is from the very beginning of the story where little Rosie thinks to herself how much she wishes she could effectively communicate with her mother, but fails due to a linguistic barrier:

English lay ready on the tongue but Japanese had to be searched for and examined, and even then put forth tentatively (probably to meet with laughter). It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no. (...) Now, how to reach her mother, how to communicate the melancholy song? Rosie knew formal Japanese by fits and starts, her

mother had even less English, no French. It was much more possible to say yes, yes.
(Yamamoto 22)

It is not only an issue of Rosie not understanding the poetic meaning of her mother's *haiku*, but also of her not understanding the emotional significance of being able to express herself artistically for the first time in her life, of having something only her own. It then comes as no surprise when Rosie again fails to bridge the communicational gap as the *Hiroshige* burns, her mother's brief escape from her husband's control vanishing in the flames with it. Once more it is easier for Rosie to say yes, yes, than to think about the implications of her mother's pre-marital affair and the culture which deemed it a disgrace. In the end, it is the reader who pieces together the Issei woman's experience through what is omitted by what Elaine Kim describes as the self-absorbed Nisei child narrator (quoted in Cheung 110).

However, the miscommunication between the generations of women is an issue that is more complex than a simple language barrier. Von Hassell argues that one of the key aspects of Japanese culture and communication, "*enryo*" (Japanese for restraint), had also played a role in the lack of understanding between Japanese mothers and daughters. *Enryo*, deliberate silence, and indirectness in communication reflect the stratification of Japanese society (Von Hassell 561). Furthermore, silence and indirect communication are seen as polite and considerate in Japanese culture. Ambiguity allows both the speaker and the listener to avoid emotionally hurting the other person and allows space for interpretation based on established social norms. Issei women grew with the necessary social norms and understanding to navigate ambiguous conversations and silences, but oftentimes their Nisei children were not sufficiently familiarized and would thus interpret their mother's means of communication from the perspective of the American way of communication which is more direct. Therefore, silence and vague communication which the Issei women had learned and practiced because it was considered appropriate for women, was seen as passivity and disinterest by their Americanized children. Lastly, Von Hassell notes how, in one of her interviews with a woman under the pseudonym Mrs. Isono, the mother's silence was her way of "letting their children have some of the freedom that they themselves did not" (Von Hassell 562). Issei women like Mrs. Isono sought to give their daughters the freedom to choose for themselves by purposefully withholding their Japanese culture and heritage from them:

When I brought up my daughter, I thought that she was my only daughter. So I was not going to command her to do this or to do that. Because when I was in school, I was always told to do this or to do that. This was a negative way of treating children. That is not good

for children who want to improve on something. We had too many rules. So when my daughter grew up I thought I would let her do things her own way. (Von Hassell 562)

The Nisei attitudes towards their parental culture are not exclusively linked to their relationships with their mothers, as Issei fathers can also be pivotal in a child's development. In the context of Yamamoto's stories, we can see clearly in both *Seventeen Syllables* and *Yoneko's Earthquake* in several instances. In the child's life, the father is rarely present or significant, most often preoccupied with work as is the case with Rosie's father. As Charles L. Crow points out, the Issei father in Yamamoto's short stories is accompanied by "images of sterility, death, and disintegration" (cited in Cheung 119). For Yoneko, when her father becomes unable to work as a consequence of shock, his role in her life becomes insignificant as his focus is entirely directed towards maintaining the family hierarchy. In *Seventeen Syllables*, Rosie's father is preoccupied with the tomato harvest and has no interest in *haiku*, hence his fury when his wife sits apart to discuss *haiku* with Mr Hayano and Mr Kurano, expressing her individualism and ambitions beyond her role as wife and mother. In both cases the father becomes an antagonistic presence in relation to the mother, owing to the men's clinging to old patriarchal values at the expense of their wives' freedom. This perception of the father only creates further cultural distance for their Nisei children, to the point where it would not be amiss to say that many Nisei were more children of American culture than of their Japanese parents. With their identity so closely knit to it, it is then even less surprising that Nisei would feel betrayed by everything they believed to be irrefutable truths at the advent of the internment. In this sense, it is as if they had been betrayed by a parent. Yamamoto's stories may not deal with the internment experience, but this may be once again tied back to Okada's *No-No Boy* and the strenuous familial relationship it presents with the Yamadas. Placed together, Yamamoto's and Okada's writings may be seen as forming a multigenerational development of identity, one closely tied with gender and parent-child relations in a culturally conflicting environment.

4. Buddha in the Attic

i. The Sansei's View of the Past

Julie Otsuka is the only Sansei author of those I have selected for analysis, born in 1962 and thus has never experienced the WWII internment. Otsuka's writing takes inspiration from her family member's stories, as Otsuka's grandfather was arrested under the suspicion of espionage immediately following Pearl Harbor. Her family history forms the basis of her first novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, which has received many awards, including the Asian American Literary Award and the American Library Association Alex Award. However, *When the Emperor Was Divine* has also received criticism for its open treatment of the internment, even being banned in certain American schools for its portrayal of what may be colloquially described as the "ugly" side of American history. Nevertheless, Julie Otsuka remains a best-selling author whose works are actively studied at universities across America.

The final text I will be discussing in this paper, *The Buddha in the Attic*, deals with the female Japanese experience prior to the WWII internment, similar to Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables*. While Yamamoto portrays the Issei woman's experience through the eyes of the inexperienced Nisei daughter and their mother-daughter relationships, Julie Otsuka takes a different approach. Otsuka's work focuses on the Japanese 'picture brides' and is based on her historic research and personal accounts she had collected. I will provide information on the picture bride system and its socio-historic context in the next section as part of my analysis of the literary text.

As I have mentioned previously, the Sansei were angered by the treatment of the Issei and the Nisei prior to and during the internment. Furthermore, the Sansei also disagreed with their parents and grandparents' silent approach to the internment and the consequences they faced. For example, Traise Yamamoto describes a photograph of her Issei grandmother, Hisami Morimitsu Tanigawa, and speculates on the pain that lies beneath her neutral expression. Traise Yamamoto's bases her speculation on what she knows had happened at the time the photo was taken – Morimitsu Tanigawa's firstborn daughter, Ayako, was to be sent back to Japan with her paternal grandparents and they would raise Ayako as their own daughter. Her wishes were not considered important and Ayako grew up believing that her birthmother had abandoned her.

Even in the formal order of the studio portrait, my grandmother's face is exceptionally closed. Some quality of the way she holds her face catches my attention, and it is difficult to tell whose face is more impassive, the doll's or my grandmother's. Her face is neither set hard in resignation nor slack with grief. It is a face that understands its own readability, one that uses the conventions of photographic portraiture to contain what must be feelings

of chaotic desperation. Its surface is absolutely smooth, and in its almost studied blankness I think I can divine her anguish, the certainty of losing her child. (Yamamoto 1)

Silence is a key element in *Seventeen Syllables*, whereas *The Buddha in the Attic* presents narratives of individual lives and experiences, showcasing how plentiful and varied the women's fates were. The novel follows the women's lives starting with their departure from Japan to their forced migration and internment during WWII. Otsuka's individualized approach to one group's experience and identity is supported by Heike Berner's observation that "there is not only *one* experience and *one* identity" (Berner 11). Furthermore, Berner elaborates that presenting history as a multifaceted narrative allows an individual to find themselves and their identity within the constantly shifting parameters which constitute identity (12).

The novel's main characters are all Japanese women and the lack of a traditional narrative structure allows for the revelation of individual fates, the multiplicity of experiences which would, perhaps, otherwise have remained unexplored. For this purpose, Otsuka utilizes a first-person plural voice which she has dubbed a "choral narrator" or a "we voice" (quoted in Yuhas, *Six Questions for Julie Otsuka*). According to Otsuka, this narrative approach allowed her to "tell a much larger story than I (Otsuka) could have told otherwise. I had tried, in an earlier version, to tell the story from the point of view of a single picture bride, but the writing felt flat and uninteresting. I had run across so many fascinating stories during my research, and I wanted to tell them all—using the "we" voice allowed me to weave them all in" (quoted in Yuhas). Through eight chapters, the text covers the major events in every Japanese Issei woman's life – arrival in Japan and having intercourse with her husband whom she had just met, working gruelling jobs and learning of the reality minorities face in America, birth, prejudice, loss, and finally, incarceration in the camps.

It may also be observed that, through its narrative structure, *The Buddha in the Attic* presents the stages of the race relations cycle experienced by the early generations of Japanese Americans. The term "race relations cycle" was coined by Robert E. Park and is often used in the field of ethnicity-based studies, an approach which emphasizes adjustment and assimilation into the ideological context of the majority. This approach is considered to be representative of the Japanese Issei and, to an even greater extent following WWII, the Nisei (Takahashi 3-4). Jere Takahashi lists the following four stages of this cycle, which would be expanded upon by later ethnic studies: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation (Takahashi 4). These stages will be further discussed within the context of chapters which best exemplify them.

Additionally, it should be noted that Takahashi states that the Japanese Americans' method of assimilation is unique in that the Japanese had adapted their native traditions to the American context, whilst maintaining a sense of community and ethnic affiliation. One such example can be found in *Nisei Daughter*: Sone recalls the annual *undo-kai*¹⁰ organized by Nihon Gakko, the Japanese school which most Nisei children attended alongside their regular classes at American schools. The event was greatly anticipated by parents and children alike, as it was an opportunity for families to socialize, children to play freely and parents to enjoy singing traditional Japanese songs.

The whole Japanese community buzzed like a beehive in preparation at least a month ahead, and at school we practiced Japanese folk songs, folk dances and marching drills to be performed at the picnic. (...) The Japanese school picnic was one occasion when every Japanese in the community turned out and all parents bought new clothes for their children. (Sone 71)

Sone recalls such events with fondness, but the Sansei generation were not raised in the same manner. Representative of the Sansei's political activism and desire for a distinct ethnic identity, Otsuka's writing seeks to rediscover this culture and the Japanese heritage of the Issei and Nisei, in addition to revealing previously overlooked, or misunderstood, histories. I have already elaborated on the cultural values of the early generations of Japanese Americans and on the key historic events in the previous sections. These topics will be discussed within the context of Otsuka's novel in the following section.

¹⁰ Sports festivals commonly organized at schools across Japan.

ii. Married via a Photograph

Firstly, I shall elaborate on the origins of the term “picture bride” and how the system was organized. Starting in 1908 and continuing up until 1920, thousands of Japanese women came to America through San Francisco to meet their new husbands for the first time. They were married through to a then-new system known as the ‘picture bride system’. It introduced young women, prevailingly from rural areas, to Japanese men working in America and who wanted to marry women from their native country. The matchmaking process involved exchanging photographs and introductory letters of the men and women and afterwards the young women and their families would make their selection based on the photographs, hence the term “picture bride”. Jemma Fagler summarizes the introduction of the system as such:

The resulting diplomatic crisis, in which both sides discussed going to war, was settled through the Japanese agreement to stop granting passports to laborers to immigrate to the United States, if the school board did not segregate Japanese children, and Japanese wives and children could join their husbands and fathers in the United States. Very few young men could afford to travel back to Japan and get married; therefore, to continue to send immigrants to the United States, the Japanese government set up the picture bride system. (Fagler 3-4)

The diplomatic crisis Fagler mentions occurred shortly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, when the city’s schools took advantage of the disaster to segregate the Asian students (Fagler 3). The political relations which resulted in the introduction of this system are not relevant in the context of this paper, but the resulting tensions remained and persisted in the form of racial stigmatization and social exclusion which deeply affected the newly arrived women. Traise Yamamoto states that, in America, “Nikkei¹¹ women have long been perceived by dominant culture as either perpetual foreigners or exotic others, both masks of ‘oriental’ difference” (Yamamoto 3). Additionally, it was not uncommon for the photographs and letters the women had received to be either outdated or falsified so as to trick the women into believing that their husbands would be young, handsome and wealthy.

On the boat we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were. That the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for us down below on the dock would bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the photographs. That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years

¹¹ A Japanese word which denotes people of Japanese heritage, but who do not have Japanese citizenship, also often used to denote the Japanese diaspora.

old. That the letters we had been written had been written to us by people other than our husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts. That when we first heard our names being called out across the water one of us would cover her eyes and turn away – I want to go home – but the rest of us would lower our heads and smooth down the skirts of our kimonos and walk down the gangplank and step out into the still warm day. (Otsuka 19)

Issei women were faced with countless crude realizations, but could not complain as they were taught by their parents and their native culture to be demure and withdrawn: “A girls must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist” (Otsuka 11). Thus, this idea of the propriety of silence for women and the social stigma of the ‘demodori’ woman is also present in *The Buddha in the Attic*, just as it was in *Seventeen Syllables*. In Yamamoto’s writing, the pressure exerted on Issei women is not overtly addressed due to the Nisei child’s viewpoint limiting the reader to an outsider’s perspective. On the other hand, Otsuka does express exactly that through warnings such as: “*If you come home, our fathers had written to us, you will disgrace the entire family*” (Otsuka 41, original emphasis). They were trapped in America, at the mercy of their husbands. The few that would escape either did so after finding a lover who would provide for and protect them, or ended up as prostitutes in brothels where they were considered the “exotic” offer.

A few of us ended up servicing them exclusively in pink hotels above pool halls and liquor stores in the seedier parts of their towns. (...) We introduced ourselves as Mistress Saki and Honorable Miss Cherry Blossom in high, girlish voices at the Aloha House, and when they asked us where we were from we smiled and said, “Oh, somewhere in Kyoto.” (40)

The Japanese women were not only misguided by the matchmakers in Japan and by the men they came to marry. Due to the difficult economic situation in Japan at the time, many women came to America with the intention to provide money for their starving families back in Japan, as well as to escape poverty themselves: “(...) perhaps we needed to send money to our family back home because their rice fields had once again been ruined by floods. *We have lost everything and are living on nothing but tree bark and boiled yams*” (Otsuka 30, original emphasis).

Like many others in world, the general populace in Japan believed the idealized images of America as the land of dreams and equal opportunity: “*This is America*, we would say to

ourselves, *there is no need to worry*. And we would be wrong” (Otsuka 19, original emphasis). What was far less known at the time was the reality that most often immigrants, especially people of colour, would have little choice but to take on menial labour for paltry wages, or work as maidservants to upper-middle- and upper-class white Americans. The women in Otsuka’s novel summarize their plight in the following manner: “(...) we never would have come to America to do the work that no self-respecting American would do” (27). The examples I have presented are only some of the many in Otsuka’s novel and they may be used to support another argument. Seunghyun Hwan believes that first generation Asian immigrants, including the Japanese, could be seen as having been exiled from their native countries. While Asian immigrants chose to move to America for work, Hwan notes that the majority were forced by psychologically dangerous circumstances, such as poverty, and typically could never return to their homelands (Hwan, quoted in Rudakoff 113).

What I have described encompasses the first stage of the race relations cycle and contact, in which the immigrant group first encounters the new cultural environment and the majority group. As can be observed from the women’s responses, the first contact stage is accompanied by shattered preconceived notions and misunderstanding made furthermore difficult by their inability to communicate. In response to their betrayed expectations, many women were angry with their husbands and with themselves.

One of us blamed them for everything and wished that they were dead. One of us blamed them for everything and wished that she were dead. (...) We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed. *I fear my soul has died*. (Otsuka 32, original emphasis)

Furthermore, it may be noted that the Japanese women were also abused for their inability to learn English. However, the Japanese women only had occasional contact with their American supervisors and who rarely addressed them other than to yell orders or demand sexual favours. Their Japanese husbands found their wives’ poor English shameful, the women only knowing crucial phrases like “Water”, “Go home”, “Yes, sir”, to quote a few examples (Otsuka 23-24). However, they would have even less time or reason to learn English with the birth of their children. Later, as the children acquired English themselves, the women felt even more isolated from their new environment. Some women could not endure the pressure of isolation and loneliness, and thus committed suicide: “One of us filled the sleeves of her white silk wedding kimono with stones and wandered out into the sea, and we still say a prayer for her every day” (Otsuka 39).

The following stage is conflict, both in sense of a cultural clash and literal, often violent, conflict with other groups. The Japanese women's self-perception was greatly influenced by white people, with whom they had had little to no contact prior to their coming to America. The first notable white person they meet is Charles, a man who presents an invaluable source of early information. The women are brimming with questions about American culture and some of Charles's responses imply that he is attracted to the Oriental stereotype of the demure East Asian woman, although the women could not recognize this at the time.

And was it true that that the women in America did not have to kneel down before their husbands or cover their mouths when they laughed? (Charles stared at a passing ship on the horizon and then sighed and said, "Sadly, yes.") (Otsuka 16)

In the chapter *Whites*, which is dedicated to the Issei's complex relationship with the American white population, the women's views of white Americans vary greatly depending on the type of contact they had. For those who worked in the fields, they could understand only a few words, so they had no one to communicate with, not even their husbands who constantly judged them and abused them. As time progressed, the Japanese were perceived to be taking over the agricultural market on the West Coast and violence towards them escalated. Naturally, being in such a volatile environment would then affect the women's sense of safety in their new homes, seeing themselves as surrounded by the "*savage American tribe*" (Otsuka 32, original emphasis). Similarly, women who worked in cities as maids to wealthier Americans vacillated between admiration of the wealth and beauty of their mistresses, to hatred for the humiliation they put them through, since maid work was considered the lowliest job for a woman in Japan (Otsuka 38). Issei women often compared themselves to the beauty ideals of the time, which promoted white physical and facial features, a behaviour which inflicted other racial minorities as well and would persist for generations:

We wanted to *be* them. How tall they were, how lovely, how fair. Their long, graceful limbs. Their bright, white teeth. Their pale, luminous skin, which disguised all seven blemishes of the face. (...) They had a confidence that we lacked. And much better hair. *So many colors*. And we regretted that we could not be more like them. (Otsuka 34, emphasis in original)

For example, in the previously mentioned interview with Hisaye Yamamoto, she remembers how she strived as a child to emulate the beauty standards imposed through then-popular images

of white Hollywood starlets, wishing she could have been born with blonde hair and Caucasian facial features.

HY: I am sure we were brainwashed by the movies we saw, to wish for blond hair, tall stature, etc. (...) Perhaps, unconsciously, we still compare ourselves to the white stereotypes of beauty, the movie stars. (quoted in Cheung 79)

Additionally, in such households, where Issei women managed everything and raised the children in their parents' stead, there were in some cases they would also occasionally become involved, whether of their own will or not, in sexual affairs with their mistresses' husbands. Most often these affairs would ultimately cost them their jobs, in many cases resulting in an unwanted pregnancy, as well as incurring their Japanese husband's anger. The women could not accept gifts either, whether from whites or from other Japanese men, as these gifts tended to be given them with the expectation of some returns: "...because in America you got nothing for free" (Otsuka 13). The Japanese women were surrounded on all sides by unrealistic expectations and potential danger, with nowhere to go for comfort and thus had to bear their burdens in silence. Some would later find solace in their children as they were born. However, many women were later disappointed when the comfort their children had given them at first was taken away from them and their children also became foreigners to their mothers.

Another interesting comparison to be made between Otsuka's approach and Yamamoto's is the Issei women's view of their children and their relationships. Whereas Yamamoto writes from the child's perspective and creates the image of the mother as a stranger despite the parental bond, Otsuka's mothers undergo an awakening process of realization. Initially, the mothers viewed their children as allies in a foreign land and found comfort in their presence. However, this would gradually change as the children went to school and distanced themselves from their Japanese parents in favour of embracing popular American culture. Often, the children might also encounter similar forms of discrimination at school or in public. Altogether these would come to weigh on the mother's conscience, because they had to work all day in the fields and leave their children to entertain and care for themselves. The women did not want to worry their children with adult matters, but even at a young age their children would notice when their mother was struggling:

They worried about us when we were sad. They knew, without our telling them, when our knees were bothering us or it was our time of the month. (Otsuka 50)

And we wondered if we had done the right thing, bringing them into this world. (Otsuka 51)

Finally, when they grew older, their children chose American names for themselves in order to fit in with their American friends. Many of them were taller than their parents and refused to behave in line with Japanese manners, which led to their mothers' feeling as though they had given birth to strangers: "I feel like a duck that's hatched goose's eggs" (Otsuka 58).

One feature of *The Buddha in the Attic* which sets the novel apart from the previously covered *No-No Boy* and *Seventeen Syllables* is that it looks at the Japanese internment from the non-Japanese or outsider's perspective. The final chapter, *A Disappearance*, is the only instance among the three texts selected for this paper where the author examines the rational and emotional responses of the general public towards the internment of the Japanese. While *No-No Boy* features characters such as Mr Carrick who openly judged the government's decisions, this portrayal was done retrospectively. *A Disappearance* is set in the time of the announcement of Executive Order 9066 and sheds light on the various reactions of the Japanese' friends and neighbours. The chapter is not limited to adult perspectives, because it also examines how school-aged children understood the situation, seeing that one day their classmates had simply vanished. How other's view us also plays a role in the formation of our identity, which is why looking at this chapter may offer additional considerations for the question of Japanese American identity. In particular, the external view of the Japanese was of significance to the author, herself a Sansei and looking into every aspect of her heritage. In an interview with *Harper's Magazine*, Otsuka elaborates on the personal significance of the final chapter:

I actually knew my ending from almost the moment I started writing the novel. It grew out of a piece of unfinished business from my first book. While touring for *Emperor*, I spoke to a number of Californians who'd been alive during WWII who told me that they had "no idea" about the camps. And I wondered how this could be true. How could you not notice that your neighbors and classmates had suddenly disappeared? (...) So I was especially interested in how the white children processed the disappearance of their Japanese classmates. What did their teachers tell them? What did their parents tell them? I also remember my mother telling me that when she returned to Berkeley from "camp" after the war, none of her classmates asked her where she had been for the past three and a half years. These were classmates she'd been with since the age of five. They just said hello to her as if nothing had happened. And again, I thought—what were they thinking, where did they think she had been? So the idea for that last chapter was something I'd

wanted to write for a long time—I wanted to explore that moment “right after” (the Japanese had disappeared), from the point of view of the white townspeople left behind. And at a certain point I realized it could be the perfect, unexpected ending to my new novel. (Yuhas, *Six Questions for Julie Otsuka*)

A Disappearance also highlights the lack of information offered to the general public during WWII. At the very beginning, the mayor of an unidentified West Coast town gives the public an official statement that “The Japanese are in a safe place, (...) They wouldn’t be safe now, would they, if I told you where they were” (Otsuka 85). Responses like these played a large role in the consequential spreading and acceptance of the prejudice towards the Japanese. Such statements contributed to the erasing of the internment from the American consciousness and memories of WWII revolving entirely around the United States’ victory, its impeccable ideals of justice and freedom. It is clear that, as the chapter progresses, the public are gradually moving on with their lives and forgetting their Japanese neighbours, properties once belonging to Japanese families being sold and repurposed by others. The inconclusive ending demonstrates the people’s acceptance of the new reality: “All we know is that the Japanese are out there somewhere, in one place or another, and we shall probably not meet them again in this world” (Otsuka 94).

The notion that the truth of the internment is being actively concealed from the people is also present in Okada’s preface to *No-No Boy*. In a conversation between an unnamed Japanese American man and a white lieutenant on route to Guam, the Japanese American explains to the lieutenant how the Japanese were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to camps in the desert, to which the lieutenant responds with the following:

“Hell’s bells”, he exclaimed, “if they’d done that to me, I wouldn’t be sitting in the belly of a broken-down B-24 going back to Guam from a reconnaissance mission to Japan.”
(...) “They could kiss my ass,” said the lieutenant from Nebraska. (Okada 30)

It is, indeed, likely that a white person, whose family had resided in the US for generations and had been raised with the nominal ideals of the constitutional rights of all men to freedom, would protest against such treatment. Exemplified by the lieutenant’s response, the white, middle-class were not made to endure racial prejudice or suppression. Thus, they were unable to understand fully the behaviour of the Japanese, their silent acceptance of their judgment (“And who were we to question the President?”) and would come to label them as the model minority in the decades to come (Otsuka 74). The Nisei’s method of quiet assimilation, hastened by the

aftermath of WWII, is thus the final stage of the racial relations cycle Takahashi had discussed. In the context of identity construction, the Japanese American community's method of assimilation and the image of the model minority resulted in the lack of personal connection to their Japanese heritage which latter generations of Japanese Americans exhibited. Additionally, this quiet assimilation is what made Sansei authors like Julie Otsuka curious about their community's history and is what drove them to explore narratives which might have otherwise gone unrecognized.

The political activism which began with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s would influence the Sansei generation to unearth such stories, such as Otsuka's story of the Issei Japanese women. *The Buddha in the Attic* offers a look into the culture and circumstances which lead to the generational trauma and silence of the earlier generations of Japanese Americans, revealing what the Nisei wished to forget and what mainstream history would conceal. Exploring such histories was a crucial part of the Sansei's search for identity and finding a means to communicate with their parents, together seeking justice for what had been done.

5. Conclusion

As may be observed from the three texts, ethnic identity is multifaceted and can neither be generalized, nor does it apply to all generations of Japanese Americans equally and in the same way. By examining the development of the Japanese American sense of identity from multiple perspectives, in particular socio-historic milieu, gender and generational shifts, I have demonstrated how this process is reflected in the select texts from the literary canon of this ethnic group.

Following the WWII internment, which was one of the most formative events in Japanese American history, John Okada's *No-No Boy* questions the Japanese American community's newfound position within American society and their future. Furthermore, *No-No Boy* brought to attention how a small group of Japanese men, the 'no-no boy' draft resisters, were stigmatized and ostracized from the Japanese American community, consequentially making them feel as if they do not have a place where they belong. The main character of *No-No Boy* undergoes a journey of self-discovery and at the end is able to separate himself from his Japanese heritage and his family which allows him to begin defining his identity anew.

Hisaye Yamamoto's two short stories, *Seventeen Syllables* and *Yoneko's Earthquake*, explore the mother-daughter relationships between the Issei and the Nisei from the child's perspective and in doing so reveal the generational and cultural misunderstanding which lead to the two generations developing differing identities. Furthermore, the two stories also expose how the Issei mother's identity as an individual and her potential for artistic self-actualization was suppressed by an oppressive patriarchal environment. The Issei women in Yamamoto's stories are victims of violent acts, but are forced to endure these acts stoically because Japanese cultural norms had determined that such behaviour was appropriate for a woman. However, the Nisei daughter is not aware of the struggle which lies beneath the mother's silence and does not attempt to connect with her mother.

Finally, Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* follows the lives of Issei 'picture brides' using a narrative style which Otsuka has called the 'we' voice (quoted in Yuhas). Otsuka's narrative style allows the novel to portray the multiplicity and diversity of Issei women's lives and to follow the process of cultural conflict and adaptation through its structure. Additionally, the author's viewpoint as a Sansei Japanese American is a factor to consider in the analysis of *The Buddha in the Attic*. Influenced by the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, Otsuka's novel questions why the Japanese American community's internment was not given the due attention during WWII.

This analysis only discusses three select texts on the topic of identity issues in the Asian American community. Further discussion can be made by including more works by Japanese American authors and authors from other Asian American ethnic groups. Many of the theoretical studies mentioned in this paper have noted on the ways in which the different groups' experiences in America were similar, but there is also space to examine how each group has developed its own unique identity within the larger Asian American community.

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