
ISSEI, NISEI, WAR BRIDE

*Three Generations of Japanese American
Women in Domestic Service*



Evelyn Nakano Glenn

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American Women in Domestic Service

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PREFACE

When I started gathering materials for what turned out to be this book, my goals were modest. My intention was to collect and assemble a set of oral interviews of Japanese American women employed as domestics. In teaching and writing about women and work, I had become acutely aware of the dearth of materials documenting the day-to-day struggles of Asian American, latina, and black women working in low-status occupations, such as domestic service, the most prototypical job for racial-ethnic women. Little was known about the conditions they confronted, what they felt about their situation, or how they responded to menial employment. Accounts in which women spoke in their own words about themselves and their work seemed the best vehicle for illustrating how gender, race, and class intersect to shape the lives of racial-ethnic women.

Once started, the project took momentum and drew me along. Questions raised by the initial interviews led to a broadening of the study both empirically and theoretically. My new aim was to uncover the relationship between Japanese American women's experience as domestic workers during the first seventy years of the twentieth century and larger historical forces: the transformation of the economy and labor market in Northern California and the process of labor migration and settlement in that locale. How did these forces affect women's work, both paid and unpaid, and what were their strategies for dealing with the conditions engendered by these forces?

A brief account of my personal and intellectual odyssey in pursuing this project may explain how these questions came to the fore. As a sansei, a third-generation Japanese American, I felt I had two initial advantages for carrying out the study: first, I had connections that would provide access that might be denied to others, and second, I had a first-hand acquaintance with Japanese American women's situations that would help direct my inquiry toward the most relevant issues.

Access turned out to be relatively easy. Though living and working in Massachusetts, I had longstanding family ties in the San Francisco Bay Area. My paternal grandparents arrived in Alameda in 1905; many of their descendants and those of collateral relatives continue to reside in San Francisco and the East Bay. These family connections proved to be decisive in my ability to carry out the study. Relatives and their friends provided introductions to issei (first-generation), nisei (second-generation), and war brides (post-World War II immigrants) employed as domestics. Without these introductions, which amounted to being personally vouched for, I suspect that many of the women would have refused to be interviewed. Some might have refused out of modesty: many of the women I interviewed protested that their stories could be of little interest to anyone, but they were willing to talk if it would be helpful. Others might have declined in order to preserve their privacy. Some women were working *sub rosa*, not reporting their income or concealing their employment from relatives. Yet almost everyone I approached agreed to be interviewed, reassured that my interest was legitimate and that I would respect their confidences.

My knowledge of Japanese American (*nikkei*) women was also useful, but it proved to be more limited than I had imagined. A great deal of what the women told me was surprising, even astonishing. I came to realize that my view of *nikkei* women had been colored by my childhood and adolescent reactions to the strictures imposed on females in Japanese American society. As a young girl I resented the whole notion of female subordination and the socialization it entailed. I respected my mother, grandmothers, and aunts for their selflessness and hard work. I appreciated their critical contribution to the family and to the economy through their toil as farm hands, cooks, boardinghouse keepers, operatives, and assistants to their

husbands. But, I vowed, I would not be like them. They were uncomplaining martyrs, catering to their husbands' demands and sacrificing endlessly for their children. Their own needs and wishes did not count. I viewed them as victims, and therefore as weak.

The eight women I interviewed in the pilot study overturned my preconceptions. These women could not be easily pigeon-holed. They were as varied in personality and character as any group of women could be. Some were, as I expected, uncomplaining and mild of speech; they denied any pain and glossed over hard times with conventional expressions of fatalism. Others, however, were outspoken and noisy. They complained vociferously about discrimination, selfish husbands, or arrogant employers. Some, as I anticipated, resisted talking about their feelings and avoided introspection. Others, unexpectedly, expounded remarkably sophisticated analyses of their work and the ties that bound them to their employers.

Most important, though, was that underneath their diversity lay a common core—a core of strength that was often hidden, but nonetheless palpable. When they talked about their hardships, they did so with pride and a sense of humor. Reviewing the interviews, I realized that these women were relating “war stories.” They had suffered mistreatment and injustice and deprivation, but through determination and grit they had endured and finally overcome adversity. Like old warriors, they felt a sense of camaraderie with others who had gone through the same struggle. Most impressive was the vitality of women in their seventies and eighties, many still employed. They were enjoying life as never before. They were busy enough not to be bored, yet were spared the cares and responsibilities that burdened their earlier years.

Here was a curious contradiction. At one level these women were victims of triple oppression, trapped in work that is widely regarded as the most menial employment in our society, subjected to institutional racism of the most virulent sort, and subordinated at home by a patriarchal family system. As a result of these external forces, their aspirations and hopes had been dashed repeatedly. At another level, though, they were not passive sufferers. Ironically, the very difficulty of their circumstances forced them into a struggle for survival, a struggle that developed in them a corresponding strength and tenacity. They could look back with satisfaction at what they had

accomplished. They had helped support their children, gained some measure of independence from their husbands, and won the respect of their children and community.

It became evident that static models of class, race, and sex that would treat Japanese women simply as objects of history were inadequate and misleading. To capture the contradictions and dynamism of Japanese American women's situations, I would have to take a dialectical approach to class, race, and gender, an approach that captures the struggle inherent in all relations of dominance and hierarchy and thereby takes into account not only the efforts of dominant groups to maintain their privileged position, but also the active resistance of subordinate groups striving to carve out areas of autonomy and power.

I came to view labor exploitation and control as central to all three axes of oppression. The labor systems in capitalist economies are structured to maximize profits for capital while also maintaining race and gender advantages for privileged workers—that is, native white men. The particular mechanism by which some groups are subordinated is labor market segmentation. The market is divided into separate sets of jobs, with separate wage scales, for different segments: migrants and natives, racial-ethnics and whites, women and men. Formal and informal barriers serve to keep groups “in their place.”

The structure of the labor system in turn profoundly affects the family and cultural systems of workers. The harsh conditions under which migrants and people of color work, as well as low wages and insecurity, make it difficult for them to maintain family life. At best, they are valued primarily as individual units of labor, so there is little institutional support for family integrity. At worst, to the extent that kin ties may interfere with their malleability as labor, their family and community systems may be subjected to systematic attack. This has been the case for racial-ethnic migrants. Historically state policies and practices have been designed to recruit young adult migrants to fill labor needs, while also preventing them from forming or reconstituting families. The labor system also has an impact on the structure of individual households. The segregation of women into low-wage, low-status women's jobs perpetuates gender hierarchy within the home. Their secondary position in the labor market means that

women remain economically dependent and must accept an unequal share of domestic responsibility.

Systems of domination set up a dialectic, however, because subordinate groups do not passively acquiesce. They frequently resist exploitation and assaults on their autonomy. Struggle takes place at many levels and in many arenas. People of color are not content to remain in menial occupations, but strive to overcome color barriers to improve their positions. Migrants find ways to form families—if not through legal means, then through extralegal stratagems. Women resent the unequal division of labor and resources, and fight with their husbands to reallocate them more equitably.

I came to focus, therefore, on labor market segmentation by race, gender, and migrant status and examined where different cohorts of Japanese American women fit into the market at different times and how they maneuvered within the constraints imposed by that structure. I also began to explore the connection between their labor market situation and their situation in the family, looking in particular at the interaction between their oppression in the labor market and their oppression in the family and between their struggles in the workplace and their struggles at home.

As I compared the experiences of *issei*, *nisei*, and war brides, I became more convinced than ever that historical process was crucial to an understanding of their situations: first, the evolution of the local economy, with its shifting needs for different kinds of labor, and, second, stages in the group's migration and settlement in relation to that changing labor market.

If I wanted to understand individual experiences, I had to relate them to these historical processes. As patterns of similarity among those in a generation emerged, it became evident that these women's experiences were not comprehensible as idiosyncratic phenomena. Rather, their experiences grew out of specific sociohistorical circumstances shared with others in a cohort. The commonalities among women of a generation or cohort came about because they encountered certain key events in the history of Japanese migration, settlement, and adaptation at similar points in their lives. Moreover, the experiences of one cohort were systematically related to those of other cohorts. What happened to earlier cohorts established patterns that shaped the circumstances and choices of subsequent ones.

I decided, therefore, to organize my analysis in terms of the history of the cohorts. I set out to study systematically the three cohorts most heavily involved in domestic service—issei, nisei, and war brides. I conducted in-depth interviews and follow-ups with forty-eight women. This group comprised fifteen issei, aged 65 to 91; nineteen nisei, aged 48 to 84, of whom twelve had been raised exclusively in the United States and seven (referred to by the special term *kibei*) had spent part of their childhood in Japan; and twelve war brides, aged 41 to 55. Fourteen issei, two *kibei*, and one war bride were interviewed in Japanese, and the remainder in English. In order to better understand these women's relation to the community, I interviewed over thirty long-time members about social relations in the community and key events in its history. I attempted to get some insights into the women's social worlds by attending church functions, senior centers, group meetings, and informal social events.

I gleaned additional historical information from the census and a few early surveys and from community directories, church histories, and newspaper files. Community documents from the pre-war period were, unfortunately, scarce because organizational records and personal documents were lost or destroyed during World War II. Secondary materials from the perspective of the dominant group were more abundant. State records of various commissions and hearings gave insights into the thinking of anti-Japanese elements, though the purported facts contained in these sources were often unsubstantiated and distorted. The controversy they stirred up nonetheless stimulated a number of more "objective" scholarly studies that provided useful data on Japanese immigration and economic activities before the war.

My attempts to explicate the development of the labor market and the role of female migrant labor led me to the literature on labor migration, labor histories of other racial-ethnic groups, women's work in industrializing America, and domestic service. This comparative research led me to conclude that although many of the details of the Japanese American experience were unique, the underlying similarities to the experiences of other immigrant women and women of color were more significant. I realized that the case of Japanese American women could be used to address broad issues related to the labor systems of capitalist economies, the role of immi-

grant and racial-ethnic women in those systems, and the consequences of race- and gender-stratified labor systems for the family and cultural systems of minority groups.

I said earlier that this was a personal as well as an intellectual odyssey. The process of writing this book has not only allowed me to work through many ideas about the social organization of work and its relation to labor migration and to gender and race stratification; it has also brought me closer to my family and cultural roots.

I learned while talking to an aunt about the project that my paternal grandmother worked as a domestic for almost twenty-five years up until World War II. When I questioned my father about this, he told me that his mother had been employed full-time most of her married life, despite having eight children. Once her eldest daughter was ten or so, she took a full-time job at one of the big houses on Alameda's "gold coast." She rode a bicycle to work every morning, came home in the mid-afternoon to prepare a family supper, then returned to her employers' house after dinner to clean up their kitchen. Before that, when her children were small, she took in laundry, which she did in a large tub, boiling the whites and later ironing by hand. My father and one of his older brothers were delegated to pick up the dirty laundry from customers and return it clean. In addition, she supervised a massive amount of household work, aided by her eldest daughter, who left school after the eighth grade to help at home. My grandfather, a gardener, was a leader in the church, and a bit of a dandy. He carried himself with dignity and, when not dressed for work, wore a three-piece suit. He would not, as a true Japanese male, involve himself in "women's work."

The portrait drawn by the daughter-in-law and son of a dynamic, energetic woman was at odds with my own recollection of her, when she was in her seventies and I was six or seven. I remember her as a quiet, often melancholy figure, dressed invariably in black, sitting in her rocker. After forty years in the United States, she spoke no English; she rarely left the house, and never went out by herself. The new information, as well as the realization that much of what the issei women told me about themselves was also true of her life, made me feel that I knew her for the first time.

The most felicitous personal aspect of the project was the involvement of my mother, Haru Nakano, as interpreter and facilitator.

Her involvement allowed her to participate in an aspect of my life that she had never known first-hand and led me to see her in a different light, as an ally and colleague. Mom was an enthusiastic and tireless associate. She made numerous phone calls on my behalf, arranged introductions to many people in the community, accompanied me on interviews, and acted as interpreter when my childhood Japanese proved inadequate to the task. Her reassuring presence and tact put the women we were interviewing at ease. This undoubtedly contributed to the frankness of many of the interviews. I grew to respect my mother's skills and to appreciate her generosity and genuine goodness.

I owe much to many people, and not least to the issei, nisei, and post-war immigrant women who shared their memories, both bitter and sweet. Over thirty other men and women also gave generously of their time and thoughts about past and present life in the community.

In order to maintain confidentiality I have used pseudonyms for all these subjects and community informants. In some cases, I have altered personal details that might reveal a person's identity.

The late Masako Minami, who for many years ran the Eden Township Senior Center in San Lorenzo, personally introduced me to a number of issei women in her area. June Sakaguchi of the Berkeley Senior Center and Kay Okamoto, who started and still runs a program for issei in San Francisco, put me in contact with women from their areas.

The theoretical perspective developed in this study was stimulated and refined through discussions with friends and colleagues. I received much food for thought, as well as specific suggestions on an earlier paper growing out of this research, from members of the Women and Work Study Group. I thank all of them—Chris Bose, Carol Brown, Peggy Crull, Roz Feldberg, Nadine Felton, Myra Marx Ferree, Amy Kesselman, Susan Lehrer, Amy Srebnick, Natalie Sokoloff, and Carole Turbin—for many years of intellectual stimulation and support.

I learned a tremendous amount about issues of race and gender through intensive sharing and collaboration with Bonnie Dill, Cheryl Gilkes, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Ruth Zambrana. We are the only group that I know of that has done a comparative historical analysis of the effects of race-stratified labor systems on black, latina, and Asian American women. I am fortunate to be part of this group

of politically committed scholars; they always remind me that racial oppression is as pervasive in our society as gender oppression.

Peter Langer and I met regularly during the period when I was writing the first draft of this book to discuss and comment on each of our works in progress. His careful reading and positive suggestions for each chapter as it emerged kept my momentum going. Scott Miyakawa, who passed away in 1981, encouraged me in the early phase of my research. His knowledge of Japanese American history was exhaustive and authoritative. I still miss him, but am grateful for having had him as a friend and colleague for many years. Terry Kovick and Rosalyn Geffen did a heroic job of deciphering my scribbled-over copy to type a clean first draft. Insook Jeong was enormously helpful in checking tables and assisting in constructing the index.

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Mike Ames, editor-in-chief at Temple University Press, was consistently encouraging from the book's inception as an outline and abstract to its final production. His unflagging interest and patience through the long gestation period are deeply appreciated. Two anonymous reviewers for the Press provided detailed and useful suggestions for revision.

Two others must be singled out, because without them this book certainly would never have gotten off the ground. At one point I had over eighty interviews on tape and the prospect of analyzing them was daunting. They might have remained there, gathering dust, had not my friend Jean Twomey been inspired. She voluntarily undertook hours of transcribing and coding purely out of personal interest. Her enthusiasm and hard work gave me the impetus to finish transcribing, systematizing, and analyzing the data. Once this was done Jean and I spent hours discussing themes and ideas.

Even with this stimulation, it would have been easy to let the project slide. I was busy with other research, which was also important and absorbing and, because it was collaborative and funded by grants, usually took priority. The Japanese American project was a side line, relegated to weekends. This is where my husband, Gary Glenn, played a crucial role. He urged me to keep working on the

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project; he believed in its value and was confident that I could write something significant about the lives of these women. His overoptimism about how easy it would be to write the book turned out to be a necessary counterbalance to my tendency to agonize over my task. His enthusiasm kept me going through some difficult times. He also contributed to the work at every phase, from helping to clarify my ideas to critiquing drafts to participating in the final proof-reading. Finally, and not least, he carried much of the burden for keeping our household going, nurturing our children, and getting meals on the table, so that my time and energy could be devoted to writing. He did all these things with his usual good cheer.

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PART I

ROOTS

CHAPTER 1

Women and Labor Migration

Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, millions of women left their homelands in Europe, Latin America, and Asia to work in the United States. Later in the century black women began migrating from the rural South to seek livelihoods in the cities of the North and South. These women were an integral, yet often unnoticed, part of a migrant stream responding to the call for cheap and willing labor in various parts of the country. They migrated initially to find work but over time became settlers, establishing families and building communities in their new surroundings.

Women came alone or, more often, as part of families, as wives and daughters. Whether single or married, they found their lot difficult. Recruited as “cheap hands,” migrant fathers and husbands rarely earned a family wage. Moreover, many migrant families had destitute kin at home to support. In this context, women’s labor was essential for survival. Most of these women were accustomed to toiling in the household, and they continued to do so in the new setting, manufacturing many essential goods consumed by the family, nurturing children, and carrying out a myriad of domestic chores. As keepers of the home and socializers of children, they struggled to maintain their cultural traditions, often under harsh conditions. Additionally, many migrant women were forced into a new form of labor—wage work outside the home. In a period when the ideal for middle-class married women was to remain at home cultivating do-