Intersectional Identities: The Self-Definition of Japanese American Women

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Abstract

This essay examines the self-definition of Japanese American women through an intersectional lens, recognizing the intricate interplay of multiple identities shaped by factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and more. While the portrayal of minority women by mainstream media as a homogenous group has resulted in damaging stereotypes that undermine the complexity and diversity of their experiences, the intersectional theory—which acknowledges the complex interplay of social forces, identities, and ideologies that legitimize power and disadvantage in society—offers a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Japanese American women. Incorporating historical context and Western feminist theories, this paper argues that the adoption of an intersectional approach is necessary to better understand the diverse experiences of Japanese American women and their self-definition, also stressing that promoting diversity and intersectionality can advance research and support individuals, creating a society that celebrates and embraces all of its members.

Introduction

Japanese American women belong to a minority group whose experiences are primarily influenced by gender, ethnicity, and religion. It is necessary to conceive the intersectional nature of race, gender, and religion to understand the micro-level experiences of minority women and explore how they have impacted the self-definition of Japanese American women in the contemporary United States.

Women of ethnic minorities have often been misrepresented in mainstream media as a single, homogenous group based solely on the most surface level aspects of their identity, like gender, ethnicity, or class. This type of representation has been perpetuated by the identity groups in power, which have traditionally been middle-class white men in public discourse and mainstream media.[1] This perpetuates harmful stereotypes and assumptions about Japanese American women, such as the idea that they are submissive or passive. These stereotypes not only ignore the diversity and complexity of their experiences but also reinforce systems of oppression and discrimination. As a result, women of ethnic minorities have been subjected to over-simplified ways of analysis, such as only considering ethnicity factors when analyzing their living conditions or only viewing their matter through the perspective of gender. These methods suppress the complexity of their unique identities and experiences, disempowering the group as a whole.

Intersectional theory provides a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Japanese American women in society. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a framework that acknowledges the complex interplay of social forces, identities, and ideologies

[1] "Guidance Note on Intersectionality, Racial Discrimination, and Protection of Minorities." The United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, September 27, 2022, 15–16.

that legitimize power and disadvantage in society. [2] This framework recognizes that individuals have multiple intersecting identities that shape their experiences and positioning in society. For example, Japanese American women are not solely defined by their gender or ethnicity but also by their religion, sexuality, class, and other identities.By adopting an intersectional approach, we can better understand the specific experiences of Christian Nikkei women and how intersectional aspects of their identities shape their positioning in society. For example, the experiences of Christian Nikkei women may differ from those of non-Christian Nikkei women. Studies have shown that Christian Nikkei women experience unique challenges related to their gender and religious identity, such as the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations within their church community.

Historical Context

Providing historical context is crucial for analyzing the identity of Japanese American women, as it has become difficult to discuss Japanese Americans as a single group due to increasing diversity. Japanese Americans use a system of generational labels to differentiate between those born in Japan and those born in the United States. The term Nikkei, derived from the Japanese term Nikkeijin, is commonly used as a broad term to refer to each generation following the Issei and, more specifically, people of Japanese descent who live outside of Japan in countries such as the United States and Canada. The colloquial use of these Japanese American identity labels varies, but they are commonly used within the community itself to

[2] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

define their own identities and experiences.[3] These terms are less commonly used in Japan and other parts of the world outside of North America.

The **Issei** refers to the first-generation immigrants who were born in Japan and migrated to the United States. Their children, the **Nisei**, were born in the United States and were American citizens by birth. The **Sansei**, the third generation, refers to the children of the Nisei. **Yonsei**, the fourth generation, refers to the great-grandchildren of the Issei. The Nisei (second-generation), were relatively homogenous, mainly made up of Japanese descents whose first language is Japanese and lean towards Japanese cultural values, but the Sansei (third-generation) and Yonsei (fourth-generation) have developed more diverse identities, leading to challenges in defining Japanese American identity as a whole. The increasing diversity of identities among Japanese Americans can be seen in the emergence of various cultural expressions and practices. For instance, the popularity of Japanese pop culture and the rise of multicultural marriages among younger generations, such as the Sansei and Yonsei, show how Japanese American identities are evolving.

Diversity of Nikkei identities is notably reflected through the emergence of biracial Nikkei who speak Japanese. According to the 2020 Census, the number of people in the United States who identified as both White and Asian increased by 35% since 2010.[4] Socialized in a bicultural reality involving both American and Japanese culture and language, the Nisei were simultaneously expected to be "respectable Americans" and "respectable Japanese." Here, the term "respectable American" refers to a set of cultural and social norms expected of individuals who live in the United States and identify as Americans. These norms include honesty, hard

[3] "What Is Nikkei? - Discover Nikkei," Discovernikkei.org, accessed March 20, 2023, https://discovernikkei.org/en/about/what-is-nikkei.
[4] "The Two or More Races Population: 2020," United States Census Bureau, 2021,https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/the-two-or-more-races-population-in-the-united-states-grew-276-percent-over-the-last-decade.html.

work, individualism, patriotism, and adherence to laws and social conventions.[5] On the other hand, "respectable Japanese" may refer to a different set of cultural and social norms expected of individuals who live in Japan and identify as Japanese. These norms may include group harmony, politeness, respect for authority, and adherence to cultural and social traditions.[6] While the Japanese-born Issei had a solely Japanese cultural and linguistic identity, the Nisei internalized both Japanese and American values, and faced the challenge of reconciling these two sets of social and cultural norms.

The transformation of the Nisei identity underwent further transformation following World War II. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States became involved in a global conflict with Japan. Fueled by anti-Japanese sentiment, many white Americans began to view Japanese Americans with xenophobic suspicion and fear.[7] In 1942, Executive Order 9066, signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, forced approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent in the Pacific Basin into concentration camps without due process of law.[8] Among them, around two-thirds were Nisei, who were American citizens by birth.[9] As a result, many Nisei attempted to separate themselves from their Japanese cultural heritage. In August 1988, the United States Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act, a law that stipulated a public apology and financial compensation for the Japanese Americans previously held in internment camps during World War II.[10] However, this did little to undo the damage that had been inflicted

[5] Robert Griffith, "Research: What Is American Identity and Why Does It Matter?", The Zebra, November 12, 2021, thezebra.org/2021/11/12/research-what-is-american-identity-and-why-does-it-matter/.
[6] Yumi Ohashi, "What Does It Mean to Be Japanese?", Akita International University, August 2014, web.aiu.ac.jp/icpt/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/What_Does_It_Mean_To_Japanese.pdf.
[7] "Looking like the Enemy - Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment," Densho, November 10, 2021. https://densho.org/learn/introduction/looking-like-the-enemy/.
[8] National Archives and Records Administration, "Executive Order 9066: Resulting in the Relocation of Japanese," 1942, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066.
[9] "Japanese Internment Camps," Infinitecoop, accessed February 26, 2023, https://data.world/infinitecoop/japanese-internment-camps/.
[10] "Civil Liberties Act of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-383, 102 Stat. 903," United States Congress, 1988, https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/442.

on the Japanese American identity, including the generational trauma of internment. Japanese scholar Masako Kuroki interviewed a Nisei woman about the struggle between her Japanese and American cultural identities. As a Nisei, she grew up with parents who had experienced racism and persecution in America, which created a profound impact on her upbringing. In her interview with Kuroki, she said, "I don't know what Japanese culture is. I don't know what Japanese traditions are. The only traces of Japanese culture I can identify are in the food I eat."[11] For many Nisei socialized in a bicultural reality, it is not easy to distinguish between Japanese and American cultural influences. Her parents raised their children as they believed they should be raised, rather than as Japanese, American, or Christian. However, following the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, many Issei parents who had previously emphasized the importance of Japanese language and culture to their children faced a difficult dilemma: should they continue teaching their children Japanese culture and language if it meant risking drawing unwanted attention from authorities? Or should they assimilate their children into mainstream American society to avoid suspicion and persecution? As a result, many Japanese American families in the post-war era made the difficult decision to cease teaching their children Japanese, leading to a decline in Japanese language proficiency among subsequent generations. Instead, they encouraged their children to speak only English to appear more "Americanized" and ensure their safety. This approach to parenting reflects the complex struggle between maintaining cultural heritage and assimilating into American society that many Japanese Americans faced.

Language can be a powerful example of how identity formation has evolved. In the past, many Japanese American parents instilled a sense of "Japanese pride" in their elder children by

[11] Masako Kuroki, "Self-Definition of Japanese-American Women: Intersectionality of Ethnicity, Gender, and Religion," Japanese Sociological Review 50, no. 1 (1999): 59-74, https://doi.org/10.4057/jsr.50.59.

making them learn the language.[12] Many Japanese American parents in the early 20th century placed great emphasis on learning the Japanese language as a way to maintain and pass on their cultural heritage and pride to their children.[13] This was particularly true for the Issei who often faced discrimination and hostility, and struggled to assimilate in the United States.

This change in attitude is displayed in a letter written by Gordon Hirabayashi, a Japanese American who refused to comply with the internment order during World War II. In the letter, he writes about the pressure he and his siblings faced to abandon their Japanese language and culture in order to assimilate into American society to avoid being viewed as "the enemy."[14] Moreover, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese language became a disadvantageous trait, as it was seen as a distinguishing factor that could potentially identify individuals as enemies.[15]

Balancing East Asian and Western Values

Understanding Japanese American identity becomes even more complex in the case of Japanese American women. Japanese American women often struggle to balance their own personal needs with their responsibility to their families due to being socialized to put the needs of others above their own, a cultural value known as "amae."[16] This cultural value emphasizes the importance of interdependence and harmonious relationships within the family and community. However, this binary framework pitting individualism against family orientation is a

[12] Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 124-144.
[13] Eiichiro Azuma, "Brokering Race, Culture, and Citizenship: Japanese Americans in Occupied Japan and Postwar National Inclusion," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16, no. 3 (2009): 183–211, doi:https://doi.org/10.1163/187656109793645670.
[14] Gordon Hirabayashi, "Letter from Gordon Hirabayashi to his Attorney, June 10, 1943," Densho Digital Archive, accessed February 28, 2023. https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-67-12/.
[15] Tetsuden Kashima. Judgment Without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment During World War II (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 127-160.
[16] Takeo Doi, The Anatomy of Dependence (Kodansha International Ltd., 1971), 28-30.

Western construct imposed upon East Asian cultures.[17] In other words, the perception of East Asian women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented and victimized" is based on Western feminists' idea of the modern woman being "educated, modern, in control of their bodies and sexuality, with the freedom to make their own decisions."[18] This idea can be traced back to historical colonialism and imperialism, which contributed to the construction of a binary between the "modern" West and the "traditional" East through cultural and social-economic exchanges. Moreover, the feminist movement in the U.S. was often exclusionary and focused on the rights of white women at the expense of women of color—-Western feminist discourse has perpetuated a binary that positioned non-white women as inferior and in need of saving.[19] This fails to take into account the diverse experiences and perspectives of women in the West and East Asia. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that many women in East Asia have been fighting for their rights and agency long before Western feminism gained traction. Therefore, it is important to move beyond this narrow-minded logic and recognize the complexity and diversity of women's experiences across different cultures and contexts.

In reality, family-oriented values are deeply ingrained in Japanese culture, and American culture is not as individualistic as it is often portrayed. Japan is known for its emphasis on group harmony and social cohesion, reflected in the value placed on the family unit. In Japan, family is seen as the cornerstone of society and a source of identity and support. Similarly, while the United States is often associated with individualism, American culture also places great

[17] H. D. Harootunian, Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-17.
[18] Jung Ha Kim, "A Voice from the 'Borderlands': Asian-American Women and their Families," in Religion, Feminism, and the Family, ed. Ann Can and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 1996), 350-351.
[19] Louise Michele Newman, White Women's Rights : The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States (Oxford University Press, 1999), 22-56.

importance on the family, albeit in a different way than Japan. For example, in the U.S., the nuclear family, which refers to a family group consisting only of a couple and their children, is often celebrated, and there is a cultural expectation of individual responsibility for one's own family members.

While Japanese American women have been historically stereotyped as submissive and passive, a younger generation has been challenging this perception. They strive to find balance between expressing their individuality and respecting the values of their family and community.[20] This means understanding the limits and boundaries of what is considered acceptable in their cultural context and expressing themselves in a sophisticated and non-offensive manner. For example, they may speak up for themselves while still respecting the opinions and decisions of their elders. This approach allows them to assert themselves while still maintaining harmonious relationships with their loved ones.[21]

Another factor impacting Japanese American female identity is the idea of "the model wife." Many Nisei women are married to Nisei men due to the lingering influence of anti-miscegenation laws and family expectations of only marrying within Japanese descent.. Anti-miscegenation laws such as the California Anti-Miscegenation Law of 1850 prohibited marriages between "white persons" and "Negroes, Mulattos, or Mongolians."[22] As for family expectations, many Japanese American families placed great importance on marrying within the Japanese American community as a way of preserving cultural and ethnic identity. This expectation was particularly strong among the Nisei generation who were born in the United States to immigrant parents. For example, research by Kuroki found that one sansei interviewee,

[20] Mei T. Nakano and Grace Shibata, Japanese American Women: Three Generations, 1890-1990 (Berkeley: Mina Press Pub., 1990), 40-45.
[21]Kuroki, "Self-definition", 63.
[22] California Anti-Miscegenation Law of 1850, Cal. Compiled Laws of California, ch. 35, § 3 (1850).

anonymized as "D" , had a much different perspective on sexuality than other Nisei due to her mother's non-Nikkei ethnicity and parenting style. This led to a more open and healthy attitude towards sexuality for D and her children. D's process of self-definition can be seen as "playing out traditional images of women but trying to loosen their framework," as influenced by the Western feminist movement. One of the issues D struggled with was rooted in finding her place in traditional family dynamics. She initially wanted to be a "good wife," but developed feelings of anger and discontent.[23] Her negative feelings relate to cultural expectations or personal aspirations that were difficult to reconcile with the traditional role of a wife and mother. Through sharing her thoughts with her husband and the independence of her job, she began to see herself as a powerful woman—not just as a wife and a mother. By doing so, she was able to accommodate the needs of both herself and her family, balance traditional and modern expectations, and challenge the limitations of Japanese gender roles. In the Nisei generation, many women began to prioritize their own happiness and development over a sense of duty to their families. Through interacting with white peers, they realized they had the option to live their own lives and prioritize their individual desires. However, their unique situations were not fully understood by their white peers, and they often had to balance cultural sensitivity with their biculturalism.[24] Japanese American women who identify as bicultural often have to navigate the complexities of both Japanese and American cultures, which can lead to conflicts and challenges in their personal and professional lives. For example, they may feel pressure to conform to traditional Japanese gender roles and expectations within their families and communities, while also striving for independence and self-expression in the American context. They may also

[23] Kuroki, "Self-Definition", 66-67.
[24] Seth J. Schwartz and Jennifer B. Unger, "Biculturalism and Context: What Is Biculturalism, and When Is It Adaptive?: Commentary on Mistry and Wu," U.S. National Library of Medicine, March 2010, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2840244/.

encounter situations where their Japanese cultural norms clash with American cultural norms, such as in the workplace or in social settings. Balancing cultural sensitivity means finding ways to reconcile these differences and adapt to the needs of both cultures without betraying one's identity or values.

Impacts with Regard to Religion

Religion is an important aspect of identity for many Japanese American women, with the majority identifying as Protestant Christians. However, their experiences of religion are complex and varied. For instance, Kuroki's research reveals that some Japanese American women blend elements of Buddhism and Christianity, such as Nisei girl C. Others, like Nisei F and J, have left their traditional Christian communities to create alternative, inclusive, and multicultural communities. These diverse experiences illustrate the need for an intersectional lens when analyzing the social experiences of Japanese American women, as religion intersects with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity and gender, to shape their lived experiences.[25]

These Christian Japanese American women's self-redefinition can be classified into two groups: those who are reassessing Christianity within and beyond established Christian institutions, and those who are incorporating non-Christian Asian beliefs and concepts into their faith. This emphasizes the "experience of women" as a biblical hermeneutic criterion, highlighting the importance of women's experiences as a legitimate source of theological understanding and interpretation.[26] The biblical hermeneutic criterion is an interpretive method used to understand and interpret the Bible, which emphasizes the importance of considering the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which the text was written. In the context of feminist

[25] Kuroki, "Self-Definition," 59-74.
[26] Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12-26.

theology, this criterion involves giving greater weight to the experiences of women as a source of theological insight and understanding. This approach recognizes that traditional theological interpretations have often been based on the experiences and perspectives of men, which may not adequately reflect the experiences and perspectives of women. The two groups of Japanese American women mentioned before are applying this biblical hermeneutic criterion in different ways. The first group is reassessing Christianity and seeking to reform and challenge patriarchal structures within established Christian institutions. The second group is integrating non-Christian Asian perspectives into their understanding of Christianity and feminist theology, seeking to re-examine traditional theological views and practices from a feminist perspective.

Therefore, we can see that both groups are influenced by feminist theology, which emphasizes the importance of women's experiences as a legitimate source of theological understanding and interpretation. However, as noted in *Weaving the Visions* by theologians Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, the "female experience" often used as the starting point for feminist theology has primarily been that of white, middle-class women.[27] This highlights the importance of considering the diverse experiences and perspectives of women, including those of women of color and women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, in feminist theological discourse. In general, the biblical hermeneutic criterion provides a framework for interpreting the Bible and understanding theology in a way that centers the experiences and perspectives of women. By recognizing the importance of women's experiences and perspectives, feminist theology seeks to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures within religion and provide a platform for women to voice their perspectives on current religious practices.

[27] Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992),19-25.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the self-definition of Japanese American women is intricately intertwined with their experiences as women, as well as their Japanese, American, and Christian identities. Moving forward, it is important to recognize and celebrate the diversity within the Japanese American community and to continue to explore the complexities of their experiences. This includes acknowledging the impact of historical trauma and understanding how it continues to shape the identities of future generations. It also involves challenging harmful stereotypes and assumptions about Japanese American women, such as the idea that they are submissive or passive.

Cultural conflicts play a significant role in the self-definition of Japanese American women, but they are not passive victims. Instead, they advocate for exploration within the discourses of ethnicity, gender, and religion to reshape their identity in accordance with their own experiences. This intersectional approach is a rejection of traditionally conditioned cultural values and seeks to allow women the freedom to construct their own notion of identity. Moreover, society as a whole must strive for greater understanding and acceptance of diverse identities, including those within the Japanese American community. Lastly, while progress has been made in recent years toward creating a more inclusive and equitable society, there are still significant gaps in research regarding an understanding of Japanese Americans' experiences through an intersectional lens.

While ethnicity, gender, and religion are essential factors in shaping identity, further exploration is needed to understand better the impact of other intersections, such as sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and generational differences. In addition, the experiences of Japanese American women who identify as LGBTQ+ or belong to different branches of

Christianity or other religions require further attention. It is vital to support and amplify these individuals' voices and create spaces for them to share their experiences. By engaging in conversations that foster greater understanding and acceptance of diverse identities, we can work towards creating a society that celebrates and embraces all of its members.

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