

Suggested title:

I BECOME A NISEI

by Isamu Noguchi

(To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of all nationalities. The racial and cultural intermixture is the antithesis of all the tenet of the Axis Powers. For us to fall into the Fascist line of race bigotry is to defeat our unique personality and strength.)

When people ask me why I, a Eurasian sculptor from New York, have come so far into the Arizona desert to be locked up with the evacuated Japanese from the West coast, I sometimes wonder myself. I reply that because of my peculiar background I felt this war very keenly and wished to serve the cause of democracy in the best way that seemed open to me. At other times I say that I felt sympathy for the plight of the American-born Japanese, the Nisei, or else that relocation offered a prelude of inevitable social change in which I wished to take part.

All of this is true. But I might also have said that a haunting sense of unreality, of not quite belonging, which has always bothered me made me seek for an answer among the Nisei.

Actually I knew no Nisei nor had ever heard the

word until two years ago when, as I was about to leave for Hawaii, I received through the mail a medal inscribed, "The Yamamoto award for Nisei achievement, 1940." Subsequently I met many of them on the Islands, young architects' assistants who feted and dined me. They looked upon me as one from the outside who had surmounted barriers which they felt closed advancement against them.

But it was only after December 7, when I again found myself upon the shores of the Pacific, that I actively came to associate myself with the Nisei in any way. I sought them out in Los Angeles and in San Francisco out of realization of their special misfortune. I wished to help. I also wished to know the people, who because of war I had suddenly become a part.

Soon I found myself among a group of young writers. We called ourselves The Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy. We wrote letters and articles on the meaning of democracy for the Japanese newspapers. I remember that fateful night when Shuji Fujii brought us Governor Olsen's recommendation for voluntary evacuation. Then it was all in the hands of the Army, and mass evacuation became a shocking reality.

We drew up a plan whereby we hoped even out of evacuation good might result in furthering democracy

and assimilation. In the lack of both of this we felt lay the root of the Nisei's predicament. I look back on our little group with gratitude for they taught me a phase of the Nisei I have not found elsewhere. They were the progressives.

The dust was blowing as I arrived in Poston, the new Japanese community on the floodlands of the lower Colorado River. Eye-burning dust, and the temperature seemed to stand at 120° for three solid months. Our food at 37 cents a day was no better than what inexperienced cooks could make it. And most of us became sick.

How strange were my reactions on entering camp. Suddenly I became aware of a color line I had never known before. The administration staff, some of whom I had known previously, seemed to change character. In my mind they seemed to have changed from the sensitive people I knew them to be into our keepers whose word was our law. Nevermore could anything be done without first asking them. Along with my freedom I seemed to have lost any possibility of equal friendship. I became embarrassed in their presence.

This is not to say that I came to identify myself with the Nisei. No, their background seemed too different, or does imprisonment make also a prison of one's

mind? I have talked to a number of Niseis who feel the same way. They avoid the Japs and also the whites; they are alone. "I am an American," they say, "not used to so many Japanese faces."

The average Nisei, however, seems to take race differences as a matter of course. They refer to the management as the Hakujin, the white ones, the Caucasians, or simply as the Americans. In contrast they call themselves the Japanese or the Nisei. Their attitude toward the whites is one of diffidence. From them they accept that which they begrudge each other. Among themselves they are sure, outside they are timid. I am told that the fear of discrimination was one of the main reasons that kept them from assimilation. Another was their relative youth, an average 20 with social, economic, and moral dependence on their parents and the community.

In spite of this the most obvious thing about the Nisei is his Americanism. People who visit these camps are immediately struck by the deep cleavage that exists between them and their parents, the immigrant Issei. They remark on attending Nisei talent shows or social events, "How pathetically American they are." Their

plays, their songs, and their speech are typically American. They know nothing of Japanese art and literature. They are puzzled by the Shibais, or Japanese plays, put on by their parents. Indeed, excepting for the very young, the language barrier is such that conversation between them is cut to a minimum.

I begin to see the peculiar tragedy of the Nisei as that of a generation of transition accepted neither by the Japanese nor by America. A middle people with no middle ground. His future looms uncertain. Where can he go? How will he live? Where will he be accepted? Will he be permitted to remain? He fears to become wards of the Government. Outside in Washington, D. C. and California a few people are plotting against his citizenship.

The new arrivals keep coming in. Out of the teeming busses stumble men, women, children, the strong the sick, the rich the poor, from the city and from the country. They are fingerprinted, declare their loyalty, enlist in the War Relocation Work Corps, are examined by a doctor and are introduced to their new home, 20 x 25 feet of tar paper shack, in which they must live for the duration five to a room.

Sometimes an indescribable longing for freedom

comes over me. I think of my friends on the outside. I happily get the mimeographed news of the Santa Anita and Tanforan Centers, and the 'Pacific Citizen; the only Nisei newspaper on the outside, all edited by members of our Writers and Artists Mobilization.

One night there came to us out of the blinding dust a voice crying, "You will go out of here grateful for an experience in democracy. Out of not participating in the war you will preserve the arts of peace. While not fighting the fight for freedom you will contribute yet to the victory. We will build a seed reservoir for the future. You are the middle people who will help teach Asia the meaning of democracy. This is construction in a world of chaos." (John Collier)

We have moments of elation only to be defeated by the poverty of our actual condition; the lack of water and equipment for farming, of tools and materials, our barrack surroundings. Sixteen dollars a month seems hardly an incentive to some. Others cool their ardour waiting in offices. We plan a city and look for nails. Some lose courage and think only of getting out. Most of them want only a chance to share in the war. They are hurt that since evacuation they may no longer join

the 5,000 already in the Army along with the Hawaiian Nisei still permitted to enlist. Many are leaving on furlough to thin sugar beets and to harvest long staple cotton.

Still for many a Nisei, this is opportunity. The engineer needs no longer tend to the flower shop, and he who will, may learn a new skill. While outside the battle for freedom rages, it is planned to build here a community, dedicated in democracy and to the proposition that the spirit of freedom may be nurtured and grow even in confinement.

Such is the challenge and this is the American answer of the War Relocation Authorities, a way so different from that of the Axis. Their objective is not just relocation in camps but in the heart stream of America. Their plan is to foster democratic participation and opportunity, to teach the Nisei to stand on his own two feet.

The directives to the other Relocation Centers now established in Utah, Colorado, California, Wyoming, Idaho and Arkansas are similar to this. Self-government is to be introduced gradually. As the ones to whom the experience will be of most use on the outside only the Nisei are eligible for elective offices. The first step is a

Temporary Community Council authorized to make recommendations. Next, an Evacuee Community Government with somewhat wider powers. There is to be a fair employment practices committee.

From the beginning there has been participation in the planning and the execution of the various work projects. At present, each department, such as agriculture or industry, has a Caucasian head under whose direction are assistants and crews mostly Nisei. Eventually, save for a few key positions, these camps may be run by the evacuees themselves as self-supporting enterprises in cooperation with the Government. We have been given courses in cooperative education. Our community store, which up till now has been run for community benefit is being turned into a consumer's cooperative on the Rochdale plan. As yet, there is no provision for producer's cooperatives and private enterprises are prohibited.

We are finding, the hard way, that cooperative self-help is not only educational but, because of shortages, priorities, and our limited budget, the only way to get things done. For instance, here in Poston which is the largest of the centers, we are making one million adobe bricks with which to build our own school houses for over

five thousand pupils. We are trying to get a saw mill to make our own lumber. We must find kilns with which to supplement our fast-diminishing supply of chinaware by using the plentiful local clay. The toy department wants a bandsaw to make toys for Christmas together with a man who can make clogs. If the soapmaker and the noodle-maker cannot get what they want they will have to somehow manage without.

At times how wasteful of energy seems our existence?

The road to democracy is above all sought by the education department. As our whole community is in many ways a school, so also is our school to be a community school. Its curriculum will be based on community life, its method participation in work and growth. Its purpose is to develop the individual and prepare him for the future, so that he may face the world no longer as a Nisei but as self-reliant Americans. They ask, "How should we teach democratic citizenship? How prepare children for post-war rehabilitation? What knowledges, abilities, skills, attitudes should our schools stress?"

The answer to these questions, upon which will depend the outlook of about half the Nisei population, will be determined in a large measure, at least here in Poston, by the Office of Indian Affairs because we are on Indian land. I find it significant also that on our

staff are many fine people from Hawaii. Here if anywhere is goodwill combined with experience to give us an answer.

It will be hard, no doubt, to speak of democracy in a place like this. They will find young skeptics, and yet they will also find that for the Nisei there is no future other than Americas. It is upon her ever growing democracy that they look for freedom.

An additionally puzzling factor is the apparent duality of purpose in the relocation program, the one to settle us here and the other to have us out. The one holds that the mass uprooting of so large a section of the population cannot be righted excepting by planning. It believes that the factors which caused evacuation will keep the majority here until at least after the war. It sees this as a land and community development which may lay the basis for social engineering in the handling of oriental peoples for reconstruction and education to a more democratic way of life.

The other view considers that these camps are a travesty of democracy which at best leads to paternalism; that reclamation is luxury in time of war when labor is needed on the outside; that assimilation will be retarded and that no one cut off from the world can share in its rebuilding.

Whenever the time or whatever kind of world they emerge into, the Nisei will find it hard. They will find themselves in a strange land among strangers. Fields in which they formerly worked may no longer be open--and competition will be such as to soon drive them into marginal labor. I believe it is in anticipation of this that emphasis will be laid on handicraft and agriculture away from the white collar work to which most of them formerly aspired.

Present exit-regulations provide for furloughs, for commuting to work from camp, and for release to permanent employment. Aside from the farm workers being sent out, calls are beginning to come in from industries. Offers have been made for the training of special skills such as lense grinders.

It is here as potential craftsmen and artisans that I see a solution of the Nisei problem. The teaching of specific craft and industrial skills and their placement will not only serve our war effort well but will hasten assimilation, and diminish these camps to the point where only those who willingly wish remain. Tell us what jobs there are, give us the training, permit us your confidence as Americans, and you will find an eager army for democracy.

I observe that the Niseis do not know what to make with their hands. Not so the Issei who, old men for the most part with a lifetime of struggle intervening, now turn their free hours to the creative enjoyments they remember from childhood. Everywhere they are carving wood, making flower arrangements, making gardens, they put on plays and play the flute. I wonder whether the Nisei might not gain through the arts the self-confidence they so need. Perhaps by tapping the artistic resources of the Issei, to which the Niseis have been strangers, even a middle culture for a middle people might grow. Thus may the springs of their creative imaginations be released and themselves and America be enriched.

We who are artists know that any culture worthy of the name blossoms with the growth of the individuals and dies under Fascism. Let it be said then that the democracies fight for the equality of races and opportunity and the freedom of culture everywhere.

About "I Become a Nisei" In May of 1942, as the internment of Japanese-Americans in the Western United States unfolded, Isamu Noguchi voluntarily entered Poston War Relocation Center in Arizona. DeWitt Wallace (co-founder, with his wife Lila, of *Reader's Digest*)—at the urging of Noguchi's friend Helen Richards—offered him the then enormous sum of \$1,200 (plus expenses) to write an exclusive article on the "Japanese evacuation camps situation" for the magazine. Noguchi responded with this moving account of the Nisei (first generation Japanese-Americans), which he dubbed "a generation of transition" and "a middle people with no middle ground." At its best, the essay rises to the idealistic level of rhetorical self-examination of the finest American political philosophy. The opening lines, "To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of all nationalities," would not be out of place on our currency. Delivered very late, after the question of the camps had somewhat subsided—and, as Noguchi admits in related correspondence, in an entirely different form than originally agreed—it went unpublished at the time.

the **noguchi** museum

32-37 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, NY 11106 | noguchi.org

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