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# Re-imagining Collectivities: The Mexican Japanese during World War II

Selfa Chew

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [sachewsmithart@miners.utep.edu](mailto:sachewsmithart@miners.utep.edu)

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**Selfa Chew**  
**Department of History**  
**Department of Languages and Linguistics**  
**University of Texas at El Paso**

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***Re-imagining Collectivities: The Mexican Japanese during World War II***

This paper explores the experience of the Mexican Japanese community during World War II through the poetry of Martin Otsuka as well as through my literary intervention in the narrative of the Japanese diaspora. Inspection of the research and creative writing process involved in narrating the Mexican Japanese relocation will throw light on the reconfiguration of identities that diasporic communities forge horizontally. My research and perspective as a Chinese Mexican writer allows me to argue that geographical displacement made possible the creation of new identities and solidarities during World War II that superseded, at times, nationalist affiliations.

The internment of legal residents and citizens of Japanese origin in concentration camps was, until recently, mainly studied from a national security standpoint. In the United States, immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941 the entire Japanese community was ordered to submit to the War Relocation Authority. The US Justice Department ordered the belongings of persons of Japanese origin seized, measure that was followed by the creation of various internment camps to detain around 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry.<sup>1</sup> Discrepancies between citizenship and the actual enjoyment of rights conferred through citizenship in the United States made possible the internment of more than 70,000 second or third generation Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Across the border, an energetic campaign took place to control the Japanese Mexican community, resulting in the deterioration of the conditions of life of those individuals who were arrested and removed from the borderlands. In spite of the impact of the relocation program in this area, the transnational dimension of the relocation project has not been sufficiently studied, its effects on the Latino community on both sides of the borderlands being particularly ignored.

State intervention in the lives of borderlanders was felt long before the Pearl Harbor attack. In their search for spies, inspectors at the Santa Fe Bridge in El Paso, Texas carefully scrutinized individuals entering the United States, an action that involved racial profiling and affected all persons of "Asian appearance".<sup>3</sup> Trading with 19 firms and individuals of Cd. Juárez, in its majority local small businesses owned by Japanese Mexicans, was forbidden.<sup>4</sup> Alicia Gallegos Bueno de Meléndez, then an elementary school student living in Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua remembers that such measure was largely ignored by local Mexican customers of grocery and meat shops or by the loyal patients of Japanese doctors in neighborhoods in need of medical care at a low cost. Alicia had a Japanese Mexican teacher, Eva Takaki, whose parents owned a local grocery store. The Takakis were greatly appreciated in Cd. Juárez and did not see any change in their relation with neighbors or customers.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, the list was extended to include Japanese in the interior of Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

On its part, the Mexican state demonstrated total cooperation towards the control of the Japanese population during WWII. *La Secretaría de Gobernación* not only ordered the registration of all Japanese in Mexico with municipal authorities but demanded their evacuation from the borderlands and coastal zones in January, 1942.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in March, 1942, the Mexican government allowed the entrance of US soldiers into Cd. Juárez with the purpose of searching several residences of Mexican Japanese families. As a result, 15 Japanese and Mexican Japanese men were interrogated in the Mexican garrison by Mexican and United States army officers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Daniels, *Prisoners without Trial: Japanese Americans in WWII* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Whispered Silences: Japanese Americans and World War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> "Immigration Officers at Bridge Are 'on Their Toes' against Spies," *El Paso Herald Post*, October 18, 1941.

<sup>4</sup> "Juarez Japs Put on U.S. Blacklist," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 26, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Alicia Gallegos Bueno, December 20, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> "Juarez Japs Put on U.S. Blacklist."

<sup>7</sup> "Japs Must Leave Juarez in Five Days," *El Paso Herald Post*, March 27, 1942. See also "Japanese in Mexico Ordered to Register," *El Paso Times*, January 14, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> "Juarez Japanese Arrested at Secret Meeting," *El Paso Herald Post*, March 19, 1942..

Military and civil measures of population control were directed almost exclusively against Japanese and Mexican Japanese living in the borderlands. While United States newspapers staged a campaign against the Mexican Japanese community, the Mexican Italians or Mexican Germans did not attract the same attention in the newspapers. Because political rights in Mexico were not exclusive in terms of race or economic class in theory, the three groups were equally treated. Naturalized Japanese Mexicans were protected by the same legal frame that covered the rights of Italian and German persons who had become naturalized citizens of Mexico. Nevertheless, racism shaped the relocation program in Mexico and in the United States for which displacement affected mainly persons of Japanese origin residing in the borderlands regardless of their citizenship status.<sup>9</sup> Journalists carefully worded accusations against the targeted racialized group, declaring Japanese Mexicans as collaborators of the enemy without any due trial.<sup>10</sup> In spite of such public display of enragement against Japanese Mexicans due to reported espionage activities in the Mexican borderland on behalf of the members of the Axis, to this date, there is no documentation of any Mexican Japanese ever tried for espionage or treason in Mexico.

A long history of exclusion in the United States and discrimination of persons of color in Mexico culminated in March, 1942, when the Secretaría de Gobernación ordered all Japanese Mexicans to abandon the US/Mexico borderlands as well as the Pacific and Atlantic Mexican Coasts.<sup>11</sup> In the state of Chihuahua, Mexican Japanese men and their families were ordered to travel by railroad to the "prosperous farming community of Santa Rosalia", Chihuahua, where they would "earn a living for the duration of the war". On April 20, 1942 El Paso Herald Post announced that a group of 50 Juárez "Japs", including naturalized Mexican citizens, had been sent to a concentration camp near Camargo.<sup>12</sup> Journalist and general population in the United States did not show interest in following the steps of Mexican Japanese beyond their removal from the border cities.

While the United States borderlands newspapers reported the relocation of the Mexican Japanese in racist terms, Mexicans, in several instances, did not share the same view. At the beginning of the Second World War, Japanese immigrants in Mexico had integrated with relative success into the communities they chose to live in. Interracial marriages contributed to a certain stable existence. Diversity among Japanese immigrants was mirrored, in addition to religious, class, and ethnical characteristics, by the different occupations they held in the receiving country: fisher, miner, gardener, carpenter, doctor, barter and dentist were some of the professions they used to perform in Mexico.<sup>13</sup> The mobilization of these important members of many Mexican communities caused local protests and actions on the behalf of Japanese Mexicans, rarely identified in the United States. I was able to detect such resistance to the relocation program, evidence of a solid integration of Japanese immigrants into various Mexican social universes, throughout my review of the official files in the archives of the *Secretaria de Gobernación* as well as through the interviews I carried out with some Mexican Japanese living in a concentration camp during WWII.

Re-remembering, as Esteva and Prakash proposed, is the act of uniting, once again, the pieces of our fragmented community.<sup>14</sup> The borderlands own a subterranean memory that includes the once strong presence of Japanese Mexicans. Although historians have reported male Japanese immigrants in their evaluation of the displacement of this community, Mexican, Mexican Japanese and Japanese women and children were also affected by their removal. Evidence of their role in their communities was acknowledged by both the dominant media and the members of the micro societies that petitioned their return to their towns. *Time* reported in January, 1942 that

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<sup>9</sup> "Turning Back Japs in Large Numbers," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 27, 1906. "Japanese Threaten El Paso Valley Asserts This Man," *El Paso Herald Post*, July 21, 1920.

<sup>10</sup> "Believe Japs reported on U.S. Units". "Believe Japs Reported on U.S. Units," *El Paso Times*, March 22, 1942. According to *El Paso Times* "[...] information about the disposition of American troops in Fort Bliss and the Southwest has been relayed to Japan by short-wave transmitters confiscated by Mexican officers in houses of Japanese residents in Juarez, Mexican and American authorities believed Saturday"

<sup>11</sup> "Japs Removed from Border Area," *El Paso Times*, April 1, 1942. "At the Juarez railroad station Monday were 13 Japanese, arrested by troops under General of Brigade J. Jayme Quinones, commander of the Juarez garrison. They will be detained on a reservation in Central Mexico."

<sup>12</sup> "Japs Must Leave Juarez in Five Days," *El Paso Herald Times*, March 27, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> María Elena Ota-Mishima, *Siete Migraciones Japonesas En México, 1890-1978* (México: El Colegio de México, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Esteva and Madu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism. Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 1998).

"[...] the 500 male Japs in Baja California (except 55 kept under close surveillance to help the fishermen and keep their canneries running) were evacuated from the peninsula, deposited inland in the State of Jalisco and set to work farming."<sup>15</sup>

On a personal level, my friend Rodolfo Nakamura reported the impact the relocation program had on the inhabitants of Palau, Coahuila. Sixty years after his family was disintegrated through the uprooting of his father, he consented to have a conversation in the living room of his home in Mexico City. Don Rodolfo was only 9 years old in 1942 when his only surviving parent was ordered to abandon his family and business along with other persons of Japanese origin.<sup>16</sup> Rodolfo witnessed with pain the massive expulsion from his town that resulted in his separation from his beloved father:

"Just a little after my mom died, they suddenly spread the news. One Friday they started saying that all Japanese were going to be picked up. And that was it. Everybody learned that on Sunday, at ten in the morning, they would have to be at the railroad station because they were going to be concentrated in Mexico City. All of them, without exception. Then people fixed lunch for them. You could hear the painful weeping everywhere. The station was crowded since very early in the morning because there were too many [Japanese Mexicans] leaving. It was very early in the morning when the Japanese started to arrive [in the station]. The train came from Melchor Múzquiz to Barroterán, a mining town. [...] On that occasion, a nonstop train from Coahuila to Mexico City was assigned to them. There was no transference from one train to another one because there were too many, the Japanese who came."<sup>17</sup>

The absence of those Mexican Japanese families from their homes in North Mexico speaks of a social disruption that has shaped our perception of race, citizenship and homeland security in the borderlands. The "good war" loses its innocence and its mythic mission to bring freedom to every territory in which United States intervenes if we look at WWII from the perspective of the Japanese Mexican relocation program.<sup>18</sup> The promise of democracy given in 1942 was globally extended by the United States at the expense of the liberty of the Japanese Mexicans, among other groups. Furthermore, a universal ideal that corresponded to European standards in terms of cultural practices and phenotypical characteristics was promoted by altering the racial composition of several communities in both the United States and Mexico, while the rights of American and Mexican citizens were cancelled on the basis of cultural membership and physical attributes.

Marginalized individuals and communities win important spaces through a constant renovation of language and the creation of their own literature affirming their existence and validating their struggles. Quite often alternative narratives to official histories have resisted their erasure and are passed from some individuals of a generation to another selected group of members of the following generation. Language remains a significant political battlefield that determines the interpretation of alternative and mainstream sources.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, scholars have procrastinated the research on the relocation program that took place South of the US/Mexico border for which the opportunity to register the voices of the Japanese Mexicans is almost lost with the passing of the generation suffering relocation or internment during World War II. The dominant version of this program reflects the idea that the mobilization of Mexican Japanese to Mexico City was a generous concession granted by the Mexican Government, as a substitute to incarceration of deportation or as a purely defensive tactic in

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<sup>15</sup> "Foreign Relations: To Shoe an Achilles Heel," TIME, January 26, 1942.

<sup>16</sup> Notes from conversation with Rodolfo Nakamura during interview on July 25, 2006. My translation

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Harvis Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> When researching the status of Mexican Japanese during WWII, for example, the use of the term "concentration camp" horrified even some social scientists who refused to accept that I use such words to describe the experience of a group of Mexican Japanese who were concentrated in specific locations. They argued that the conditions of Jewish in the European concentration camps were different and far more horrible from those under which the ethnic Japanese were held in the United States and in Mexico. The responsibility and degree of abuse that I seek to address demands that I continue using the term "concentration camp" or "internment camp" to describe those sites in which individuals from a specific racialized group were forced to live, work and, in some instances, die. The particularities, degrees of "horror" and differences between the camps established in the United States and the camps built in Europe are important, for which it is necessary to insist in the application of the term "death camp" to define the experience of Jewish during WWII in Europe and to continue using the term "concentration camps" that even United States newspapers used to report the internment of Japanese Mexicans.

view of the danger represented by the purportedly suspicious Japanese immigrants and their descendents.<sup>20</sup>

The advanced age of the relocation program survivors makes urgent the task of articulating an alternative narrative that deconstructs the official history. In view of the lack of compensation of any sort for the Mexican Japanese (or Mexican Africans, Mexican Chinese, Indigenous Mexicans and Mexican Arabians), narrating their stories through their own voices contributes to the remembrance of their community and reestablishes a sense of their multiple identities and solidarities with the various ethnic groups they are part of.

One of the voices is present in the poems of Martin Otsuka, a medical doctor who immigrated to Mexico in 1925 from Fukuoka, Japan. I learned about Dr. Otsuka from his daughter, Sidumi Otsuka de Tanaka, who agreed to an interview at her home in Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua. Mrs. Otsuka is very proud of her father who lived in Mexico for several decades. In 1942, he was living in Namiquipa, Chihuahua, with his wife Agrícola Ordoñez and his three children. Sidumi was then a three-year old child. Although Mrs. Otsuka de Tanaka is not able to provide an exact date, she states that in that year a platoon surrounded her family's home, unexpectedly. The soldiers searched every room and arrested Dr. Otsuka, taking him to the capital of the state where he remained for some days joining many of his compatriots in a crowded cell.<sup>21</sup>

In 1968, Dr. Otsuka returned to Japan to live his last years in his country of origin. There, he published his autobiography. The poems in this text are a testimony of a deep relationship with the Mexican landscape and its inhabitants, as well as of his love for a great love for his Mexican wife and his Mexican children. The initial days of the relocation program are narrated with an unedited gaze that marks his identification with the same soldiers that guarded him.

*Los mexicanos son compasivos*<sup>22</sup>

Después de haber sido tomado prisionero  
En la noche conversábamos amablemente con los soldados  
Yo les contaba la historia de los coroneles Hirose y Tachibana  
Heroica por sus obras valientes y patrióticas

Dr. Otsuka brings back and addresses the braveness and patriotism of the Japanese soldiers establishing common ground and inviting the Mexican soldiers to look into their past communities.

-Doctor, fume su cigarro!  
A pesar de que yo era un prisionero  
Ellos fueron muy humanitarios.  
-No se preocupe mucho, doctor. ¡Pronto será libre!  
Esas palabras fueron sumamente compasivas, conmovedoras.

While the title of this poem registers the compassion that some members of the working class expressed towards the victims of the relocation program, a close examination of the text reveals a delicate literary work that leaves a testimony of resistance within the Mexican community towards the management of Mexican Japanese. Dr. Otsuka remains in his poem, after the initial conversation, a passive subject receiving the encouragement as well as the feelings of the soldiers. The Mexican soldiers are in continuous movement, they talk to Dr. Otsuka, bring him food, and take him out for sunbathing. This passive role allows Dr. Otsuka to place in the foreground the solidarity that infantry soldiers extend spontaneously towards the Japanese Mexicans.

Dejé en la casa a mis hijos de 1 a 3 años  
-Fíjese, doctor, en México los huérfanos no se mueren de hambre  
Entre ellos bondadosamente me traían el lonche sin cobrar  
-Lo preparó mi esposa.

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<sup>20</sup> David Pérez López, *Historias Cercanas. Relatos Ignorados De La Frontera* (Chihuahua: Ichicult, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Notes taken during interview with Sidumi Olivia Otsuka Ordoñez de Tanaka on November 11, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Martín Tameyesu Otsuka, *Poems, Memories of My Home Town, and Chronic of My Travels in Mexico* (Sumiko Otsuka Publisher, 1987), 115.

Dr. Otsuka establishes in his text that Mexican people take care of parentless children; therefore, his own children will be protected by his Mexican community in his absence, as one of the soldiers assures him in order to soothe the Japanese immigrant's pain. The next verses prove that the soldiers' words are not empty: the soldiers' wives prepare food for Dr. Otsuka without expecting any compensation, just as if he were another member of their families.

Su compasión hacía que mis mejillas se humedecieran.  
-Fíjese, ¡cuánto dolor le causará dormir en el suelo!  
Y me hizo una estera con papeles de periódico.

In spite of the harshness of the relocation program, and his knowing that his wife has begun a miscarriage due to the physical strain caused by her running after the arresting platoon, Dr. Otsuka evaluates the gestures of the soldiers as humanitarian and describes with great detail the acts that he considers empathetic.<sup>23</sup> The Japanese poet describes one of the soldiers making a bed out of newspaper in order to reduce the emotional distress and physical discomfort experienced by Dr. Otsuka. Not only the ingenuity of the soldier is shown through his use of the materials available; a strong bond is explained through this image, usually reserved in literature for an assuring parent promising his child that everything will be fine the day after. The author provides a glimpse of tenderness between two men from different ethnic groups and social class. While Dr. Otsuka is positioned in a higher class, as a trained professional, he is in a disadvantageous position due to his ethnicity. Nevertheless, the soldiers do not abuse their position of relative power in the context of WWII but they attempt to create a non-violent space for Dr. Otsuka within their own limits and using their own resources.

This literary moment transcends the temporary identification of military personnel and Dr. Otsuka, it becomes symbolic of the survival of Japanese Mexicans because neither the *Secretaría de Gobernación* nor the *Secretaría de Defensa* provided substantial assistance in terms of food, jobs or housing for relocated Mexican Japanese families who saw their living conditions highly deteriorated during their displacement.<sup>24</sup> As Dr. Otsuka confirms in his poem, Japanese Mexicans depended for their support on other members of the community they moved into, including persons with hardly any means themselves, such as the infantry soldiers that help Dr. Otsuka.<sup>25</sup> Not grandiose acts of heroic deeds, but minute details acquire significance while in prison:

Cuando se ausentaba el oficial de guardia  
Los soldados me llevaban a bañarme bajo el sol.

Dr. Otsuka's last two verses point out to the origin of his lack of liberty. Stemming from the officer, his deplorable situation is then a product of "superior orders" and it is related to the military hierarchy. Here, the poet states that, in the absence of their supervisor, the soldiers are willing to break the rules in order to raise Dr. Otsuka's spirit under the rays of the sun. They, the lowest ranked units in a state ridden institution take Dr. Otsuka from darkness to clarity, from coldness to warmth. The sun acts as a metaphor for hope, but also for the solidarity expressed by the soldiers through their concrete actions, contradicting the official position that demands the control of all Mexican Japanese.

This, and other poems by Dr. Otsuka, describe his integration into the rural community of Chihuahua, and express his position as a part of this social universe. The relationship described in his poems denies the rigidity ascribed to the relationship between stereotyped, racialized communities, in both the United States and Mexico. Those characteristics attributed to the Japanese during WWII are cancelled in Dr. Otsuka's poem imbued with sensitivity and validation of the human essence that he perceives in the Mexican soldiers behavior.

Inspired by Dr. Otsuka's decision to leave a testimony of transnational personal relations transcending transnational state projects, I wrote *Mudas las Garzas*, a narrative account of the relocation program that is not strictly historical but integrates creative writing. Embarking in this project involved a re-examination of my identity. As a Chinese Mexican American I analyzed the Mexican Japanese relocation program within the context of the multiple invasions that Japan carried

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<sup>23</sup> Notes taken during interview with Sidumi Olivia Otsuka Ordoñez de Tanaka on November 11, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Both institutions in charge of the relocation.

<sup>25</sup> In Mexico City, the *Comité Japonés de Ayuda Mutua* provided temporary housing and meals for some of the relocated families but their means were insufficient and the space extremely limited.

out in China. My reflection on the massacres, rapes, and medical experiments that the Japanese state performed in China forced me to examine the purportedly "historical" antagonism between Japanese and Chinese.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the uneasiness that I perceived in some of my Japanese Mexican interviewees at the beginning of our conversations brought to the surface their own reluctance to confide in a Chinese Mexican as a result of stereotypical perceptions constructed in both Mexico and Japan. Once they learned that I had been informally adopted and raised by a Japanese Mexican family, the Nakamura, they accepted to tell me their stories. Later, we developed a deep relationship with a common goal: to denounce the cruelty of the Japanese Mexican relocation program and to demand the inclusion of this episode in the teaching of history in Mexico in order to bring the general public into a state of consciousness about the racial, economic, gender, and sexual oppression that still permeates our society.

The age of my interviewees in 2006, as well as the death of my dear friend Rodolfo Nakamura, prompted the decision to write *Mudas las Garzas*. Although I started this research in order to complete a PhD degree in History, a dissertation would take years to finish and its publication would also take some other years. I felt urgent to make their stories available to a broad public. Literature was the ideal vehicle to make evident the links among marginalized groups and to provide examples of solidarity as an attempt to erode the antagonisms created by state projects. In that spirit, I assembled a series of poems and short stories with interviews and a novel in order to present several faces of the Mexican Japanese relocation and concentration program and to connect the experiences of internees and displaced Japanese and their descendants to those of other marginalized communities in Mexico, among them the Chinese Mexican. I tried to describe the complexity of my position in a brief text included in *Mudas las Garzas*. This is an attempt to bring together my memory, as part of the Chinese Mexican community, and that of the Japanese Mexicans:

Doctor Fujimoto, no entiendo por qué entrego ahora un mito, cuando deseo rehacer la historia con el rigor de datos inequívocos que amparen mi verdad. Porque lo que yo tengo de usted son versiones fantásticas, relatos marcados por el amor de sus hijos, y notas oliendo a rabia y prejuicios. A pesar de que poseo todo un legajo de documentos oficiales, usted es la más esquivada entre miles de personas afectadas por la guerra. Podría decir que hasta hoy, usted es solo la suma de sus pasos desde que salió de Japón. Verdad es que hay tramos que la neblina cubre y no me deja ver qué punto del Norte llegó a conquistar con su sonrisa y sus hábiles manos de médico, de artista, de minero. Cierto es que me siento una bruja quitando telarañas de una esfera de cristal para ver su pasado y su futuro. O mi pasado y mi futuro, doctor Fujimoto. Porque ya entendí que yo soy usted y usted es todos los que tratamos de caminar sin pisar a los demás, comer sin quitarle el pan a nadie de la boca. Pasado y futuro. Pan y tierra y agua. La vida sigue siendo la misma en todas las historias, doctor. En la de sus compatriotas mineros en Coahuila, la del maderista japonés en Chihuahua, el científico humanista en Chiapas y el fotógrafo de la Ciudad de México. Y en la de todas las mujeres que caminaron los mismos tramos, el mismo destierro. Rabia y prejuicios. Mire que hace sesenta y tres años yo ni había nacido pero ya estaba allí con usted mi destino. Ya estaba contando mi historia de exilio en japonés y en español cortito a los soldados mexicanos que lo encontraron perdido en la Sierra. Pan y tierra y agua. Mi padre nunca habló mal de usted ni de nadie, ni en cantonés ni en español, pero dejó en su librero testimonios. Historias de sangre y fuego. Grabados de demonios amarillos hincando el diente en los cuellos de niñas chinas. Espadas atravesando los cuerpos de ancianos lánguidos. Terrible será tal vez para mi familia el que hoy me encuentre tratando de descifrar otra historia de horror a miles de kilómetros y muchos años de distancia de esas masacres en China. Increíble que hoy busque sanar las heridas de los japoneses mexicanos. Pero es que la vida es igual y es diferente. Y los japoneses en China son harina de otra historia. Y los japoneses en México pertenecen a este costal. Rabia y prejuicios. Como adolescente que

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<sup>26</sup> Jean Claire Kim's study of Black-Korean conflict during the 1980's in New York City is particularly enlightening in understanding the dynamics of the relationships among racialized groups... In *Bitter Fruit: The politics of Black Korean conflict in New York City*, Kim removes her analysis from the center of the polemic, to place the confrontation within a wider context that includes the power relationships in which the white dominance regulates inter-ethnic negotiations. See Jean Claire Kim, *The Politics of Black Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

desobedece a sus padres, me siento triste por usted y por mis antepasados y esta tristeza me lleva a ver la similitud y la diferencia entre su historia y la de nosotros. Si he rescatado sus fotos de las celdas de Lecumberri creo que el premio ha sido enamorarme un poco de su mirada digna, recta. De los brazos que sostuvieron mil ahijados indígenas. Pan, tierra y agua. Y amor y vida y medicina compartidos con extraños. Milagros que le atribuyen desde Chihuahua hasta Morelos. No entiendo por qué en medio de los pensamientos más íntimos de otros personajes tejo y entretejo su vida, tal vez porque su historia es mi historia y la de muchos otros. Tal vez porque su esposa también supo lo que era ser mitad y mitad y cuando veo su fotografía recuerdo a mi hermana y su piel suave, clara. Los ojos de una mujer oriental pero también el cuerpo alto, ondulado y fuerte de mi madre mixteca. Verdad es que hay tramos que la neblina cubre pero trataré de contar la fantástica historia del Doctor Manuel Fujimoto y otros honorables Japoneses Mexicanos, a salud de usted, de mi familia china y de mi hermana la que es mitad y mitad y completamente hermosa.<sup>27</sup>

Re-membering is a process that requires the examination of the different identities that form part of my culture. It is an act of association of experiences that allow me to identify with the suffering of an ethnic group that has transcended geographical boundaries. But this identification has been reciprocal and based on mutual respect. *Mudas las Garzas* was not published until I obtained the approval of the persons who magnanimously accepted to hold long conversations about their histories with me. Our collective task is now demonstrating that race does not determine behavior, that Mexican Japanese act and react according to specific contexts that determine a different outcome in every situation.<sup>28</sup> Re-membering is accepting that our mestizo image, the binary European/Indigenous, is no longer an encompassing identity but one that has the possibility to exclude, isolate, important components of the Chicano and Chicana cultures, such as those of Asian origin.

By declining to narrate the losses suffered by the Mexican Japanese during WWII, the Mexican, Japanese and United States societies defer their accountability for the racist projects that affected not only the targeted racialized group, but also the larger communities in which many Mexican Japanese were productive and appreciated denizens. Examining this instance of declared state of emergency will place in a specific context the social frame that makes legal the suspension of human rights and the non democratic mechanisms through which a specific group is controlled. Furthermore, it will empower the various racialized communities through the identification of those instances in which solidarity among transnational communities, particularly within the United States/Mexico borderlands, was constructed in response to oppressive state projects.

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<sup>27</sup> Selfa Chew, *Mudas Las Garzas* (México, D. F.: Ediciones Eón, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Leland Saito provides in *Race and Politics* an account of instances in which Chinese, Chinese Americans, Japanese, Japanese Americans, Filipinos, Mexicanos, Mexican Americans and Latinos in San Gabriel Valley have reacted to imposed identities by elaborating new ones. Saito's work proves that racial or ethnic identity is not permanent, single or biological but a complex, always in process, definition that is shaped by many factors such as generation, class and gender. Here, Saito, a critical ethnographer, addresses the variety of ways in which every generation at different localities constructs its ethnic identity, according to its own particular experiences. Mexican Japanese during WWII are, under this model, highly differentiated from Japanese soldiers occupying China or Korea; therefore, they deserve to be studied within their specific context. See Leland Saito, *Race and Politics. Asian Americans, Latino, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).



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