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[2020 Honorable Mention] Six Days to Leave Home: The Diasporic Experience of Japanese Americans to American Incarceration Camps

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to American Incarceration Camps

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Dedicated to

Grandma Mich

Introduction

From 1891 to 1900, Japanese families began migrating en masse to the United States looking for better opportunities. Japan's Meiji Restoration encouraged global movement in order to revitalize the country, reduce growing population sizes, and improve foreign capital.[1] This diasporic movement was pivotal for the growth and development for both Japan and the United States. Though Japan was going through major societal shifts at the time, new possibilities were to be found in America, and many Japanese families came to the United States in search of improving their familial prospects. The Issei—those who moved from Japan to the U.S.—were first-generation Americans who uprooted themselves from their homeland to start new lives. The Nisei and Sansei, second-and third-generation Japanese Americans, were born in the United States after their parents immigrated from Japan.

Originally, diaspora was defined as a forced removal of populations from their homelands, although a modern-day definition of diaspora may also include even the willing migration of populations as well. Diaspora is the movement of people and the evolution of culture. In addition, diaspora also has a connotation of evolving spaces and the movement of ideas and beliefs. The voluntary diaspora of Japanese people to the United States models what many other peoples and families did during this time, since America was viewed as a land of opportunity and wealth. However, its riches and freedoms wouldn't be available to all. Violent vitriol against Japanese Americans flourished during World War II, with many white Americans protesting their presence in the United States. Using diaspora as a rhetorical framework, this paper analyses the cultural connection between American incarceration camps and the imprisonment of Japanese American

[1] Ayumi Takenaka, "How Diasporic Ties Emerge: Pan-American Nikkei Communities and the Japanese State," *Ethnic and Racial Studies: Diasporas, Cultures and Identities* 32, no. 8 (September 2009): 1329.

citizens during World War II. The forced removal of Japanese American families from their homes to concentration camps emphasizes the negative ramifications of diaspora regarding (forced) cultural assimilation, as well as a loss of culture, language, family, and bodily autonomy.

Deconstructing Racist Language

In order to properly understand the history of the internment camps, deconstructing the language or rhetoric surrounding Japanese Americans is a necessary part of the process. Analyzing discourse regarding the narratives and nomenclature surrounding historical events provides a substantial foundation in weaving the studies of language and history together.[2] This close examination of language usage is critical because of the dangers in misinterpreting and misrepresenting the "true nature" of the internment camps.[3]

The main three words used—internment, relocation, and evacuation—were deliberately designed to disguise the government's racist rhetoric surrounding those of Japanese descent. When Japanese Americans were initially removed from their homes, the government framed the removal as "relocation," and the camps were called "relocation centers."[4] Words like "internment," "relocation," and "evacuation" portray the very "inaccurate euphemism[s]" promoted by the American government and citizens, which was "employed to devalue" the reality that more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated without a just reason or a fair trial.[5] Using these words to describe the imprisonment of Japanese Americans fails to convey the gravity of the

[2] Deborah Schiffrin, "Language and Public Memorial: 'America's Concentration Camps'," *Discourse & Society* 12, no. 4 (July 2001): 508.

[3] Schiffrin, "Language and Public Memorial," 515.

[4] Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans (Revised Edition)* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 336.

[5] Stacey Camp, "Landscapes of Japanese American Internment." *Historical Archaeology* 50, no. 1, (October 2016): 170.

rhetoric surrounding the American incarceration camps of this time and erases the diasporic connotation surrounding the (forced) removal process. The dispersion of Japanese Americans to incarceration camps was not done for their own safety, nor did Japanese American families have a choice. Rather, they were ordered to leave their homes behind and forced into incarceration camps because they were of Japanese heritage, and so were considered a threat to the nation. Therefore, this paper refers to the internment camps as incarceration camps and American concentration camps. While some argue that the term "concentration camp" is too severe to be associated with the internment camps, there are many similarities between the German death camps and the American incarceration camps. Like internment camps, the German camps were initially known as "protective custody quarters."[6] While Japanese Americans weren't executed in the same way as those imprisoned in German death camps, thousands of incarcerees died from various ailments. Deep consideration of the language used to encompass these events is crucial in order to give proper consideration to the circumstances surrounding their imprisonment.

Background and History

On December 7, 1941, Japanese military forces attacked Hawaii's naval base, Pearl Harbor—killing thousands and entrenching America into World War II. Though many Americans with Japanese ancestry were born and raised in the U.S. as citizens, mistrust began to mount towards their communities. California had an extensive population of Japanese Americans during World War II, and many white Americans were concerned that Japanese Americans were secretly spying for the Japanese Empire, thus militarily weakening the West Coast. On February 19, 1942, less than two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed

[6] Schiffrin, "Language and Public Memorial," 510.

Executive Order 9066, which "authorized the military to exclude any and all persons…from prescribed military areas."[7] Since the entire Pacific Coast was considered a "military area," all who were considered a threat to public safety were forced to leave. It is interesting to note that, while Executive Order 9066 very ambiguously avoids any mention of Japanese people or Japanese ancestry, the document supported the systematic detainment and incarceration of anyone with Japanese heritage. Even though Germany and Italy were major political players in World War II, Americans with Germanic or Italian background were *not* incarcerated; only Japanese American families were classified as a threat and forced into incarceration camps. Thus, Executive Order 9066 was used to discriminate specifically against people of Japanese ancestry.

In March of 1942, Roosevelt established the War Relocation Authority (WRA) under Executive Order 9102; the WRA was a branch of the Federal Government responsible for choosing incarceration sites, overseeing the construction of facilities, and maintaining the camps while in use.[8] After the Executive Order was issued, Japanese American families had just one week to pack essential items, sell off the inessentials, and report to authorities for detainment and removal.[9] They could only bring what they could carry; their diaspora did not just separate them from their homes and livelihoods, but also worldly possessions—including family heirlooms. Dispersion to the American concentration camps was not simple and involved travel to various locations. While waiting for the incarceration camps to be built, Japanese American prisoners were held at "assembly centers," which were typically converted horse-racing grounds or fairgrounds.[10] Conditions at these assembly centers were dirty, unsanitary, and lacked basic living necessities.

[7] Delphine Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005), 15.

[8] Phu, Thy, "Visuality, Visibility, and the Asian Body: From Space to Text," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003), 62.; Schiffrin, "Language and Public Memorial," 511.

[9] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman,* 15.

[10] Hosokawa, *Nisei,* 322.

Once the incarceration camps were built and deemed habitable, Japanese Americans once again had to uproot themselves. They were transported to their designated camps by train, which was the most convenient way, since the camps were built on plots of land isolated from any cities or towns. A total of ten American concentration camps were built—in California, Arizona, Arkansas, Utah, and Wyoming.[11] For most Japanese Americans and their families, this would be their home for the duration of World War II.

Diasporic Elements in Japanese Values

A common question regarding the imprisonment of all Japanese Americans is: why did they not fight back against their imprisonment? The mindset that Japanese people are passive is, to this day, a common misperception about Japan and Japanese culture. The simplest answer to this question is that Japanese Americans were not only outnumbered, but also, they did not want to attack their American homeland. Since most Japanese Americans who experienced diaspora to the incarceration camps were Nisei who were born and raised in the United States, most had never been to Japan. While they had close cultural ties to Japan through their parents, most Nisei were culturally more American than Japanese, and "lived largely American lives" in aspects such as dress, language, and education.[12] Because of these differences, the Issei and Nisei experienced profound generational differences in their lives.[13] However, despite the presence of American culture, the Nisei were still exposed to cultural elements that their parents shared and maintained while living in the United States. These shared beliefs also affected the way Japanese Americans

[11] Hosokawa, *Nisei,* 339.

[12] Eric L. Muller, *American Inquisition: The Hunt for Japanese American Disloyalty in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 14.

[13] Paul R. Spickard, *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformation of an Ethnic Group* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 68.

viewed their diasporic experience while incarcerated. Another reason some Japanese Americans' refused to fight against imprisonment is because of specific traditional Japanese ethos that the Issei generation brought with them when they moved to America, which fused into the way the Nisei and Sansei generations were raised.

One such aphorism that often defines the Japanese way during times of crisis is *shikata ga nai (*仕方がない), which is an ideology that translates to "it cannot be helped" and is used to express strength and tenacity in the face of adversity.[14] The English equivalent to *shikata ga nai* might be something akin to the common saying, "it is what it is." While this mentality might seem passive to those who don't understand it, the *shikata ga nai* mindset sustained many through their incarceration period, providing them a way to cope with their imprisonment and preserve their dignity in a space that was humanly undignified.

Similarly, another traditional mindset that many Japanese Americans exhibited is *gambare* (頑張れ) and *gaman* (我慢)—meaning "perseverance" and "patience" respectively. Both principles are interconnected because they are meant to express tolerance, perseverance, and patience in times of adversity.[15] No matter the difficulty of a situation, "one should not show anger, fear, or other emotions," instead displaying a "stoic exterior."[16] While these philosophies contributed to their own silence in the face of discrimination and oppression, it also helped Japanese Americans to cope through the pain and trauma of incarceration. Because there was nothing they could do about their imprisonment, the best they could do was to try to carry on as usual. Like *shikata ga nai*, to demonstrate the philosophies of *gaman* and *gambare* was to preserve one's own dignity—both on an individual and societal level—in a landscape that was undignified.

[14] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 37.

[15] Takenaka, "How Diasporic Ties Emerge," 1335-1336.; Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 7.

[16] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 72 & 134.

Shikata ga nai, *gaman*, and *gambare* all illustrate the ways in which Japanese Americans shouldered the burden of shared communal trauma through forced diaspora while imprisoned.

Making a Home—Art from Incarceration Camps

The concept of *shikata ga nai*, *gambare*, and *gaman* (among other culturally significant principles), can be recognized in how Japanese Americans spent their time while incarcerated in American concentration camps. An element often identified in the diasporic experience is cultural assimilation—adapting traditional beliefs, customs, values, and behaviors in order to blend into a new society or group. Since those who appear different from others in society can experience discrimination and inequity, assimilating is often an attempt to appear culturally analogous. However, the incarceration camps pose an interesting cultural dilemma. Although the camps physically existed in the United States, the sphere in which the camps existed did not emulate normal American society, and so acted as a hollow and artificial landscape. Despite this removal of homeland and the absence of home, Japanese Americans created a sense of normalcy by establishing necessary community-based organizations, such as hospitals, churches, libraries, schools, and art programs.[17]

Though the land was sparse, Japanese Americans did what they could to keep busy while imprisoned. In addition to creating much needed institutions, they also assimilated to life in the incarceration camps by cultivating the land and space into a home-like entity. They planted flower beds, organized book drives, and even held shows for entertainment, including haiku poetry readings, concerts, dances, and plays based on Tolstoy.[18] Seemingly, the culture of the camps was

[17] Fu-jen Chen and Su-lin Yu, "Reclaiming the Southwest: A Traumatic Space in the Japanese American Internment Narrative." *Journal of the Southwest* 47, no. 4 (December 2005): 560.
[18] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 21.

created by whatever the Japanese American people had access to at the time or could create themselves. Similarly, the arts and crafts they created while incarcerated were made from various scraps and other random materials, and provide an invaluable indication of the ways in which Japanese Americans "pass[ed] the hours of confinement."[19] The objects that were made by incarcerated Japanese Americans represent "a physical manifestation of the art of gaman" and evoke the spirit of persevering and enduring hardship,[20] while acting as a coping mechanism for the trauma of imprisonment.[21] In this way, Japanese Americans used art as a means of "negotiat[ing] and articulat[ing]" their experience as prisoners.[22] It is interesting to note how the displacement of Japanese Americans is evident through the arts and crafts that they created while imprisoned; even their art experienced a diasporic affect, echoing the radical alterations in their own day-to-day lives while strengthening community connections.

Dissenting Diaspora

While many Japanese Americans opted to make the best of their situation through the ethos of *shikata ga nai*, others chose to take a more staunchly defensive position regarding their imprisonment. In 1943, the WRA set up screenings to determine the loyalty of Japanese American citizens, in order to assess whether they were fit for military recruitment.[23] All Japanese Americans over the age of 18 were served a loyalty questionnaire. While most questions were relatively standard, two questions stood out as particularly offensive:

[19] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 32.

[20] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 7

[21] Jane E. Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss: Crafting Survival in Japanese American Concentration Camps* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 125.

[22] Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss*, 124.

[23] Muller, *American Inquisition*, 35.

1. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?
2. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of American and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance and obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any foreign government, power, or organization?[24]

These two questions garnered much animosity and resentment among Japanese Americans, who felt that their peaceful incarceration should have been enough demonstration of their loyalty to the United States. Many mistrusted the purpose of the questionnaire and refused to respond. Others were fearful about what would happen if they did say no. Those who decided to answer no to both questions risked forced repatriation back to Japan.[25] As many Nisei had never been to Japan before, the questionnaire forced them to choose between fighting for a country that imprisoned them or migrating to a foreign country that they were not familiar with. The loyalty questionnaire also caused many problems for the Issei, as they were not eligible for American citizenship regardless of their answers.[26] The dilemma surrounding the loyalty questionnaire impeded the entire community, since it "divided friends, generations, and families."[27] While the loyalty questionnaire provided some a way of dissenting with their forced diaspora to incarceration camps, as well as the poor treatment of Japanese Americans, it also contributed to taking away their autonomy and identity.

[24] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 20.
[25] Muller, *American Inquisition*, 35.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman*, 20.

Loss of Bodily Autonomy and Self-Identity

The incarceration camps, and their related diaspora, had a severe negative impact on Japanese Americans in terms of self-identity, familial network, and cultural identity, which stemmed from doubts as to the intentions of Japanese American citizens. The events of World War II and the related incarceration camps demonstrates that "times of crisis and war tends to trigger a panic" regarding issues surrounding "the loyalty of American citizens," which becomes dormant during times of peace.[28] The rise in racial tensions stemming from the war led to conflicting opinions about who was considered an American. The Issei were not considered true Americans because they were not born in the United States, and the Nisei—and following generations who were born in the United States—were not considered American because they held Japanese ancestry. A newspaper article published by the Los Angeles Times stated: "If making 1,000,000 innocent Japanese uncomfortable would prevent one scheming Japanese from costing the life of an American boy, then let 1,000,000 innocents suffer."[29] This common belief led to a loss of identity and autonomy for Japanese Americans and enforced the idea that being born in America doesn't make you American. Furthermore, it perpetuated the mindset that white American lives were more important than Japanese American lives.

Since their forced removal took Japanese Americans away from society to a culturally ambiguous landscape, "[their] social body was made legible and controllable through symbolic appeals to geography."[30] The landscape is important to consider regarding ways in which Japanese Americans were viewed at the time. Because they were considered spies for Japan, and thus a

[28] Muller, *American Inquisition,* 135.

[29] Justin Ewers, "Journey into a Dark Past." *U.S. News & World Report* 144, no. 14 (May 2008).

[30] Phu, "Visuality, Visibility, and the Asian Body," 1.

threat to American soil, their rights to their own bodies were stripped away. The physical landscape that they inhabited (that of a prison) became their identifying quality, and **"**perhaps the most telling and unambiguous signifier of imprisonment was the expanse of barbed wire."[31] This physical barrier between the American concentration camps and civilization acted as a physical barrier between the Japanese Americans and their identity in society. In this sense, Japanese American's lives were at the mercy of the United States government; the government had the legal right (through Executive Order 9066) to hold Japanese Americans as prisoners. In their diasporic experience of incarceration, Japanese Americans lost all freedoms from society, which led to a lack of autonomy through the "erasure of individuality."[32] This erasure was further internalized by the displacement of cultural characteristics among the Issei, as well as following generations.

Generational and Communal Displacement

While in the incarceration camps, communication also posed a difficult problem through a lack of shared language. The pressures for the Nisei generation to culturally assimilate in the United States, as well as the diaspora of Japanese Americans to incarceration camps, left a significant language divide between the Issei and Nisei, especially considering that "most members of the Nisei generation...could not speak Japanese with the fluency of their parents, and few Issei parents could speak English as well as their children."[33] In addition, the authorities who regulated the concentration camps banned any use of the Japanese language, which not only oppressed and silenced the Issei who didn't speak English, but also left them without ties to their home culture through their native language.[34] This prominent language barrier between the Issei and Nisei was

[31] Phu, "Visuality, Visibility, and the Asian Body," 72.

[32] Phu, "Visuality, Visibility, and the Asian Body," 1; Chen and Yu, "Reclaiming the Southwest," 559.

[33] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 132.

[34] Justin Ewers, "Journey into a Dark Past."

also responsible for shifting the power dynamic from the older generations to the younger generations in the incarceration camps.

In addition to the break-down of self-identity and autonomy, the forced diaspora that Japanese Americans families experienced forced them to endure "the disintegration" of the typical familial dynamic "due to the spatial disorientation" that defined incarceration camps.[35] Since there was no capacity for economic opportunity within this space, and very few people held jobs, men's traditional role as provider of the family quickly became redundant.[36] This caused friction in the household, especially considering that women's traditional role within the family unit, for the most part, remained mostly unchanged—they still took charge of domestic labor, such as mending clothes, cleaning, and childrearing.[37] Another example of the way in which diaspora influenced the family unit was through the breakdown of traditional meals. Traditionally, meals were home-cooked, and that time was spent with family members. However, because families did not have access to their own personal kitchens (as all facilities were shared), incarceration camps' diaspora also altered familial dynamics associated with food. Set mealtimes no longer existed, and since incarceration camps had multiple mess halls, families tended not to eat together as most children chose to eat with friends instead.[38] The absence of structure in the camps contributed to the weakening of the traditional family dynamic, which also had a significant impact on the entire Japanese American community.

[35] Chen and Yu, "Reclaiming the Southwest," 560.

[36] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 110.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Chen and Yu, "Reclaiming the Southwest," 560.

Post-War Diaspora and Returning "Home"

The incarceration camps were kept open until the end of World War II; in 1944, Roosevelt repealed Executive Order 9066 after the Supreme Court decided that the government could not detain loyal citizens. Though the war was over, anti-Japanese sentiment was still prevalent in the United States, which made entering back into society and settling down extremely difficult. For this reason, many Issei did not want to relocate; although the camps were a source of oppression, they also provided safety and housing to thousands of Japanese Americans who had nowhere else to go.[39] By 1945, all incarceration camps were officially closed, except for Tule Lake; the last incarceree left in March of 1946.[40] Once again, Japanese American families were displaced—many could not return to the homes they owned before the war began, and others did not want to return. While some decided to return to the West Coast, others remained fearful of anti-Japanese sentiment and relocated to other places. Many went to the east, settling in New York or Brooklyn.[41] Chicago, Denver, Cleveland, and Detroit were other prevalent locations where formerly incarcerated Japanese Americans decided to reside.[42]

Shortly after the end of the war, incarceration camps were completely dismantled, and it is almost as if the camps never existed. Though the land still exists physically, it no longer holds the representational modality as it once did. Though the structures that formed the incarceration camps

[39] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 128.; Hosokawa, Nisei, 364.

[40] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 129.

[41] Spickard, *Japanese Americans*, 139.

[42] Greg Robinson, *After Camp: Portraits in Midcentury Japanese American Life and Politics* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 48.

are no longer there, the damage that was done still exists among current generations of Americans who hold Japanese ancestry, and the related diaspora encompasses various dimensions.

> "The internment eventscape exists at multiple spatial and temporal scales; although some of the behaviors under consideration occurred in the past, others are ongoing. The exact point at which the internment eventscape passes from the past to the present is blurred."[43]

By erasing the physical component of the incarceration camps, the absence makes it difficult to, as a nation, learn from past mistakes. Though the American incarceration camps were meant to be temporary and not built to last, the removal of the camps denies the existence of incarceration, and later reflection as a nation. Though the structures of some German concentration camps are a decade older than American concentration camps, they still stand today as a pivotal reminder of the power of racist rhetoric and the dangers of fear. It is important to remember that "the injustice against loyal Japanese Americans is injustice against America"[44] and in removing the American concentration camps, the United States suffers the loss of remembrance, compassion, and forgiveness.

Social Implications and the Importance of Apology

Though this country no longer has the physical landscape of American incarceration camps, it is still just as important to learn from past mistakes in order to avoid repeating them. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan officially apologized on behalf of the United States government for incarcerating more than 100,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. In doing so, he

[43] Camp, "Landscapes of Japanese American Internment," 181.
[44] Robinson, *After Camp*, 170.

signed the Civil Liberties Act, which recognized that the incarceration was racially motivated, and provided each survivor $20,000.[45] In February 2020, the California Assembly issued its own formal apology on behalf of the state's accountability. Though some feel as though the apology means very little after 80 years, others recognize the significance, especially considering America's current political climate regarding immigration and migrant camps. Though the incarceration camps no longer exist physically, the consequences of incarceration camp diaspora still resonate throughout modern society—which means that an official apology is still relevant and meaningful to those affected. California's official apology also makes a stand against the rise of racist ideology—for the past, present, and future.

> "Given recent national events, it is all the more important to learn from the mistakes of the past and to ensure that such an assault on freedom will never again happen to any community in the United States."[46]

The diaspora that hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans experienced through incarceration camps emphasizes the ways in which their identity, culture, language, and family were all affected through their removal from society. Although the forced diaspora of incarcerated Japanese Americans only lasted four years, the effects are still identifiable today. While this form of diaspora is not indicative of all diasporic experiences, it is one that still must be studied in order to properly understand cultural evolution and its effects on society, while mitigating the detrimental effects of fear, racism, and hyper-nationalism.

[45] Maria Cramer, "California Plans to Apologize to Japanese-Americans Over Internment." *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2020.
[46] Ibid.

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