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### Japanese American Internment: Comparing the Voices of Differing Relocation Representations

December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, marked the first day in history where foreign bombs fell on American soil. Never before had this great nation been so blindsided by any country, especially one that had thousands of its own heritage living among the American people. The attack on Pearl Harbor signaled the entrance of a new force into the second global war: United States soldiers fought abroad against the clearly unjustified violations of liberty that the Axis power had committed against its people. History books have well documented how this event led to this declaration of war on December 11<sup>th</sup>, but there is a lesser focus on the effect that this attack had on the people of Japanese descent living in America during this time. These violations against American citizens were too ambiguous in their morality to be clearly justified, and were carried out by officials of the United States government. In February, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which called for the relocation of all Japanese American citizens living on the west coast to be evacuated to "relocation camps". Japanese American citizens had mere days to pack, store, or throw away their belongings before they were taken to assembly centers, where they would then journey to the camps themselves. These internment camps, or, as even Roosevelt called them, concentration camps, contained over 120,00 Japanese Americans for the duration of World War II, removing these citizens from their lives for three years. During this time, internees experienced extreme climates, cramped living conditions, inadequate food and restrooms, and the more serious psychological effect of being removed from one's home, unsure of both one's loyalty and identity.

In addition to administering the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to handle the affairs of moving hundreds of thousands of citizens from their homes, the United States government also issued a propaganda video in 1943 entitled “Japanese Relocation”. This video was one of many films produced by the Office of War Information Bureau during this time. It was meant to give its audience, non-Japanese American citizens, a sense of what the camps were like, and why therefore relocation was in fact a fair solution considering the post-Pearl Harbor America. The video, however, is extremely one-sided and clearly shows the internment experience in such a positive light that it goes as far as to obscure the truth of the experience. The picture “Japanese Relocation” deceptively attempts to place itself into an informative category of film, rather than a propaganda film, which gives seeming credibility to the statements it makes. The film, in its opening credits, describes itself as “an historical record of the operation as carried out by the United States Army and the War Relocation Authority” (00:31). This implies that the following picture is one without opinion or bias: a scholarly “record” of what happened to the Japanese American citizens after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Other aspects of the video also contribute to its portrayal as a credible source of impartial information. For example, the video’s ethos is supported by the choice of narrator, Milton S. Eisenhower, who was the director of the WRA. This assumes that because he was an informed man on the subject of internment, he is a reliable source of information, which gives credibility to the video itself. In the opening scene, Eisenhower states, “this picture tells how the mass migration was accomplished”, suggesting that the foremost goal of the production of this piece is to inform, not to persuade (1:20). This attempt to conceal the true purpose of the piece was not seen in all representations of Japanese American internment, and the honesty seen in those forms of presentations contrasts greatly with this propaganda video.

A more sincere account comes in the form of Toyo Suyemoto’s memoir, *I Call to Remembrance*, created after her time spent at the Topaz camp in Utah. Her personal anecdotes and

experiences, as well as her poetry, which she includes throughout her account, combine to form an expression of truth that is not seen in the video. Suyemoto was the mother of a young child, a teacher, and a poet, living in Berkeley, California. To the United States government, she was simply a Nisei<sup>1</sup>, or second generation Japanese American, and therefore a threat to national security. Her memoir includes some of her pre-camp memories; the first chapter begins in the winter of 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor but before the relocation movement began. Many Japanese Americans feared what was to come for them, as they witnessed the government become more strict towards Japanese American citizens. Beginning on December 7<sup>th</sup>, the day of the attack, around three thousand aliens, mostly male, were arrested and interned by the FBI (Daniels 72). In February 1942, a curfew was placed on Japanese Americans restricting them to their places of residence from the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., as well as restrictions on Japanese American travel to not much more than commuting to and from work, with some exceptions (DeWitt 294). Government actions such as these created much tension in the Japanese American community. Suyemoto captures this uneasiness in her haiku:

I cannot say it  
In measured phrases, but I sense  
Winds troubling the grass.

One notable aspect of this particular haiku is the extra syllable in the second line, which gives the poem its uniquely unmeasured quality. That she can no longer express her feelings in the traditional form of the haiku is significant; it's as if the "winds troubling the grass" also are affecting her ability of self-expression and identification with a form of poetry that is not only an important part of her personal life as a poet, but also of her Japanese culture. Thus, there begins to be a sense of lost identity and individuality, even before relocation occurred.

<sup>1</sup> Issei means first generation, Nisei is second generation, and Sansei is third generation. This is based off of the Japanese number system: ichi, ni, san correspond to: one, two, and three.

The propaganda video, “Japanese Relocation”, through its biased nature and incomplete perspective, effectively silences the voices of the displaced Japanese Americans, however Suyemoto’s memoir responds to this silencing by focusing on her individual experience, and acknowledging that internment affected each Japanese American on a personal level. Her memoir voices the struggle for identity among both the Japanese culture and American culture, which the video disregards completely.

The images seen in “Japanese Relocation” act as evidence to what is being presented, and there is a line crossed between showing a visual representation of a fact of the internment and what appears to be visual representation of an opinion. Because the information portrayed in this video is stated in a matter-of fact manner, without any reference to an opposing view, what is shown is accepted to be what is true. For example, the video explains that buses and cars were used to transport the Japanese Americans first from their homes to assembly centers, and then from the centers to the internment camps. This is indeed a fact of the relocation, and images of the vehicles used were shown in the video as this was described. However, when the film shows images of the internees entering the camps for the first time, Eisenhower describes them as curious and opportunistic, a statement that is not clearly supported but is accepted because of the juxtaposition of opinion and fact. The video itself is a one-sided account of the Japanese American relocation, presented as a factual and historical report. This is significant considering the influence that the Office of War Information held during World War II. In their essay, *What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942-1945*, Gregory Black and Clayton Koppes state that “from mid-1943 until the end of the war, the OWI exerted an influence over an American mass medium never equaled before or since by a governmental agency. The content of World War II motion pictures is inexplicable without reference to the bureau” (Black, Koppes 103). The wide scope of influence held by the propaganda films of the OWI during

this time reflects the significance of the lack of Japanese American perspective in these presentations of internment life. The audience watching this film and others like it only sees internment from the perspective of those who are desperately attempting to defend their actions, and who in the process silence the voice of the individual experience of these concentration camps. After leaving the internment camps, Toyo Suyemoto, as well as other internees, created memoirs that reflected a more truthful account of her experience. In the dedicatory note to her son, Suyemoto writes: “The task that I now have before me is the story of the internment years...for those who will wonder what happened to the Japanese Americans on the West Coast after Pearl Harbor” (Suyemoto 4). This need for Suyemoto to voice her side of the story is based upon the misrepresentation seen in other sources of internment depiction. Her memoir, and others like it, responds to the lack of the Japanese American perspective in representations of the internment camps such as the video “Japanese Relocation”.

The general representation being shown in this film is that relocation was a sacrifice that Japanese Americans had to undertake in order to assure the safety of America, and that this sacrifice falls within the bounds of morality because of the sense of community that the camps provided for the otherwise dangerous citizens. The first portion of the video focuses on the portrayal of relocation as the sacrifice of Japanese Americans. Federal officials knew that some economic loss would occur as the plan for relocation was executed. In its first *Quarterly Report*, issued June 30, 1942, the WRA stated, “it was probably inevitable that...some people would suffer” (Taylor 163). These hardships experienced by the Japanese American people were diminished by Milton S. Eisenhower, director of the WRA, in both his report to the House of Representatives and the propaganda video “Japanese Relocation”, for which he was the narrator. To the House, Eisenhower disclosed “there is no doubt that the evacuees made many financial sacrifices. That was inherent in the situation” (163). This outlook on the economic suffering of Japanese Americans severely erodes its intensity by asserting that this

loss was an inevitable outcome for these citizens. Similarly, Eisenhower states in this video: “The evacuees cooperated whole-heartedly. The many loyal among them felt this was a sacrifice they could make in behalf of America’s war effort.” (4:04). This quote exemplifies the way in which the video generalizes the Japanese Americans as a group willing to surrender their lives and freedoms for America’s safety. The use of the term “sacrifice” implies that the Japanese Americans had some sense of agency, for it portrays relocation as a choice rather than an obligation. Refusal to comply with government orders would have meant incarceration and separation from family and friends for an unknown amount of time, which did not allow for much choice on behalf of Japanese Americans. Suyemoto, in her memoir, addresses with a more personal understanding the Japanese American response to their removal. The act of relocation itself, for Suyemoto and many others, encountered the contemplation of how the Japanese culture shaped the Japanese American identity, and what that identity meant after being removed from their homes. Suyemoto writes:

The thought of leaving California without prospect of return wrenched my mind. The Japanese idea of *furusato* (one’s native place), the sense of belonging to a place where I had been born, schooled, and grown up, was not mere nostalgia, but an indefinable attachment to place (68).

As Suyemoto portrays, the Japanese American compliance with relocation was more traumatic and in depth than the video suggests. Here Suyemoto acknowledges the value Japanese culture places on the “sense of belonging” and how that might have accentuated the feeling of a lost identity. The camps ripped them from their lives, though the immensity of this loss was observed more by the Issei, or first generation Japanese Americans. In her memoir, Suyemoto describes the atmosphere of the buses that drove them to the assembly centers: “...the Issei did not say anything as they watched the moving landscape. They were more acutely aware of the sudden exile. Their children babbled on in lively English without yet comprehending the loss of status in the country of their birth” (27). The Issei

undoubtedly masked their uncertainty and foreboding with their stoic silence on this long ride. Once in the camps, however, it became clear to all within just how serious of a loss the Japanese Americans faced. The video assumes that because there was a general acceptance of the situation, because Japanese Americans willingly submitted to the orders of the government, the camps themselves did not violate the basic human rights of Japanese Americans. Suyemoto, in contrast, comments on the ability of the human spirit to prevail in times of trauma. She writes:

...I reflected that when necessary, human beings can adopt to loss and discomfort. Japanese *gaman* was perhaps the key: enduring whatever happened, as the first-generation Japanese had done when they came to this country as strangers and met with discrimination and scorn because of their oriental faces and customs (68).

This perspective of the internment contrasts greatly with the propaganda video's assumption that Japanese American complicity equated their "whole hearted cooperation", for Suyemoto asserts that it was rather the cultural value of endurance that played an influential role in the Japanese Americans' reaction to being sent to the camps. She also takes into account that this reaction by the Japanese Americans was similar to the actions of the Issei when they dealt with racial discrimination. These are deep cultural values that play a part in the identification of all the generations of Japanese American citizens, for the Issei, Nisei, and even Sansei generations were able to adapt to the confines of these concentration camps, creating communities that were based upon these fundamental values.

The video also presents the internment camps as communities to support the morality of the governmental implementation of the camps. "Santa Anita racetrack, for example, suddenly became a community of about 17,000 persons...The residents of the new community set about developing a life as nearly normal as possible" (4:04). The video introduces the description of camp life in this manner:

Quarters were being built where they would have the opportunity to work and more space in which to live. When word came that these new homes were ready, the final move began. ...

Naturally the newcomers looked about with some curiosity. They were in a new area, on land that was raw, untamed, but full of opportunity. Here they would build schools, educate their children, reclaim the desert. (5:46)

This picture of camp life characterizes the camps as areas of promising futures for the internees and the Japanese Americans as both eager and enthusiastic to participate in the camps. The video uses examples such as the camp-run schools, farming, nurseries, and newspapers to support the idea of the camps as a second home to these internees. But when one is trapped within a small area, with no real purpose or goals like those outside the camps, it is easy to see how the close capacity and boredom incited activity from the Japanese Americans. Had they not had these schools or activities, had they lived their days secluded in their one room barracks, they would have effectively been prisoners of the government, trapped behind barbed wire and armed guards. The Japanese American community during the internment years was not, as the video suggests, an opportunistic creation of favorable circumstances, but rather their commitment to preserving their own identity. Suyemoto writes: “Though we inveighed against our internment...we were aware that beyond the daily routine of living, our functioning as a group of people depended on our own efforts” (87). Having been mistreated by the very country that they had called home for the majority, if not all, of their lives, Japanese Americans could only rely on each other for support in this traumatic time. Both first and second generation Japanese Americans had struggled to incorporate what they knew of their Japanese heritage into their lives in America, but now, having been estranged from this society, connection was found amongst this group of internees. In her book *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese-American Internment*, Donna Nagata states that in order “to deal with the



disruption of internment, many Issei turned to each other for support” (Nagata 29). Nagata also asserts that because “adolescence is often considered a critical time for identity development”, the Nisei, who were either adolescents or young adults, experienced “particular stresses that were highlighted by the internment” because it occurred during this important “developmental stage” (30). This psychological analysis of the two generations explains the creation of a community within the camps, for the disruption of internment affected each and every one of the Japanese Americans living in the camps, and therefore not only did they have extended cultural ties, but a binding and prominent sense of mutual suffering and thus mutual understanding. This analysis also supports the concept of individual suffering within the collective suffering, for even within the generations of Japanese Americans there were differences in responses. Suyemoto participated in several ways in camp activities; she taught English classes for both the Issei and Nisei, became a librarian at the Topaz library, and even contributed to the camp newspaper, *Trek*. In her memoir, she includes several of her poems that were published in this newspaper, including one entitled *Transplanting*:

#### Transplanting

No anchorage in shallow dust,  
No searching hold has found  
More than shadows to grasp  
Where hope withers in the ground.

Oh, guard the exposed roots against  
Untimely sun and wind;  
Some other soil may prove  
More flower-wise and kind.

So let a richer earth restore  
What once had died in need;  
Strong roots will then respond  
And bear tomorrow’s seed.

This poem articulates the struggle that Suyemoto, as well as many other internees, felt as she attempted to establish her identity in an environment that was inhospitable to the growth of Japanese

American identity. She uses the harsh physical conditions of the camp to illustrate how no “exposed roots” could grow in the “shallow dust” of the camp wasteland, equating the attempt of Japanese Americans to form their torn identity through camp life to the attempt of a flower to grow in the unforgiving desert. The poem is not devoid of hope—in the last stanza, Suyemoto brings forth the possibility of restored identity, if only a “richer earth”, or freedom from the concentration camps, were provided. Thus, even in her contribution to the newspaper, a product of the camp community, Suyemoto voices the struggle Japanese Americans experienced within the camps to perform their identity. This perspective is nowhere to be seen in the propaganda video. If anything, the interactions and activities that took place in the camps show that it was possible for humanity to continue in a place where so much loss had been experienced.

The main reason for commencing the relocation of Japanese Americans off the west coast was the suspicion of foreign loyalties, as opposed to domestic ones. General J.L DeWitt, the Western Defense Command of the United States Army, and therefore the one responsible for the military security of the west coast, recommended to President Roosevelt his plan of evacuation. Thereafter, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, allowing for this evacuation plan (Netherland Institute). In his final report on the evacuation, General DeWitt describes the Japanese Americans as “a large, unassimilated, tightly knit racial group, bound to an enemy nation by strong ties of race, culture, custom, and religion” (DeWitt viii). He continues to justify his decision of relocation by stating that Japanese American “loyalties were unknown and time was of the essence” (viii). This analysis of Japanese American loyalties completely disregards the information presented in the federally ordered intelligence-gathering given to Curtis Munson, Special Representative of the State Department. This investigation, entitled the Munson Report, “certified a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group (Weglyn 34). Roosevelt and powerful officials such

as DeWitt ignored the report, giving voice only to the representation of internment that they wanted the public to know. The Office of War Information also acted as a platform to project this voice, as seen in “Japanese Relocation”. Eisenhower narrates, “We knew that some among them were potentially dangerous. Most were loyal” (1:00). This also represents the government’s official stance on the levels of loyalty in Japanese Americans in order to justify the creation of the camps. The video, in this description, identifies Japanese Americans as a collective “other” of people: it sets up the dialogue of “us versus them”, which ignores the legitimacy of Japanese American individuality while simultaneously providing reason for their lack of rights as given by America’s democracy. By setting Japanese Americans apart from other United States citizens, the video suggests that they are not entitled to the rights of other American citizens. During internment, Japanese Americans were given a survey to fill out, some of the questions dealing with the level of attachment the individual felt to America. Suyemoto’s reaction to these questionnaires gives a different perspective on Japanese American loyalty. In her memoir, she recounts several rhetorical questions she asked herself during the time of internment: “Was our loyalty to be measured by those who has prejudged us by our racial origin? Did the quality of devotion have no more weight than the paper on which the questions were printed?” (Suyemoto 146). These questions bring to light the arbitrary nature of the government’s attempts to quantify Japanese American loyalty, and shows how skewed the government’s findings could be, how easily manipulated. This crucial aspect of Japanese American loyalty played a significant role in the public’s opinion of relations with Japanese before and during the Second World War. Max Everest-Phillips, previous UK diplomat, writes: “In the worsening relations between the western powers and Japanese between the world wars, the myth of Japanese espionage was a powerful force. These strands of secret exaggerations increasingly distorted Japan’s relations with the outside world” (Everest-Phillips 264). The portrayal of disloyal Japanese Americans as seen in “Japanese

Relocation” contributes to the “worsening relations” between America and Japan because of the perpetuation of an incorrect assumption about sincere Japanese Americans. This emphasis on the disloyalty of Japanese Americans contributes to the video’s overall attempt to justify the creation of concentration camps.

The purpose of the video “Japanese Relocation” was to ensure its audience that the decision to send Japanese Americans to internment camps was within the bounds of America’s democracy. By portraying the government officials as reluctant yet humane bearers of the necessity of relocation, the video rationalizes and placates any opposition to the camps.

Neither the army nor the War Relocation Authority relished the idea of taking men, women, and children from their homes, their shops, and their farms. So the military and civilian agencies alike determined to do the job as a democracy should: with real concern for the people involved (1:24).

This quote suggests that because the government officials were obligated to create the internment camps, which are not disputed in the video to be a contrast to the values of America’s democracy, this break with our moral values is acceptable because it was conducted in a democratic manner. This begs the question of what exactly a democracy should do in a time of war; clearly, this video offers the perspective that the safety of the nation is the most important aspect for both government officials and civilians to consider. The video assumes that because there was no outright opposition from the Japanese Americans towards the relocation camps, that they tried to retrieve a normal lifestyle within the camps, and that there was some possibility of disloyalty amongst them the internment camps were moral:

...We are setting a standard for the rest of the world for the treatment of people who may have loyalties to an enemy nation. We are protecting ourselves without violating the principles of

Christian decency. We won't change this fundamental decency no matter what our enemies do. But of course, we hope most earnestly that our example will influence the Axis powers in their treatment of Americans who fall into their hands (9:01).

These concluding lines of the video demonstrate two possible positions: either the government is truly trying to show the sense of moral righteousness that it believes to have earned based on its limited scope of the internment experience, or the government is choosing to ignore the indecent qualities of relocation in order to justify its actions to the American people. Michi Weglyn, the first Japanese American to write about internment, comments in her book, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*, that it was because of the combined lack of effort of United States government officials to adhere to the principles of the Constitution that the plan of relocation was instituted. She writes that both the Attorney General, Francis Biddle, and the President "lacked the driving, down-reaching commitment against racism within America's own borders, and the opportunity to assert the very principles for which Americans were then fighting and dying was lost" (Weglyn 68). Weglyn would argue in favor of the second position on the government's presentation of internment, that the video shows yet another instance where the government chose to disregard the actual suffering of Japanese American citizens in favor for a prejudiced and misguided perspective of the "Japanese threat" on the west coast. The last lines of the video perpetuate the idea of Japanese Americans as foreigners who do not truly belong to the land of America, and thus who are not truly entitled to live on this land. The comment "we are protecting ourselves" can only be read as true if Japanese Americans are not considered as part of this nation, for there was no consideration for the protection of the rights of Japanese Americans once they had been assigned to internment camps. In its final statement, the video presents its perception of the significance of the internment camps: implying it acted as a solution that brought forth the precedence of American security. This view, however,

disregards the extent to which this solution disseminates the unalienable rights given by the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, rendering the moral values of the United States government invalid. Suyemoto, in her memoir, describes her hope that her son, Kay, will understand the meaning of the internment camps as she has come to recognize it: “When he grew older he would learn that humiliation meant loss of face, the discrediting of dignity, an inward shame that eluded words to express it. I hoped he would also learn that honor revived would render humiliation unsullied and would make the years of internment significant” (Suyemoto 200). For Suyemoto, the significance of the camps lies not in their creation nor their intended purpose, but rather in the Japanese American people’s reclamation of honor for having endured with such strength and resolution the deprivation of their inherent rights. Though they were mistreated and misrepresented during the years of World War II, the capacity of the Japanese American will during this time will not be forgotten, their voices will no longer be silenced.

The attack on Pearl Harbor created the sense of panic in America, which allowed for the internment camps to be created based on the emergency situation. This idea of a crisis, followed by loss of inherent rights of a democracy, has been seen in other times during American history, most recently after the attack on 9/11. In such a time of uncertainty and fear, it is easy to lose sight of the truth of the situation for the more compelling fiction that is often told by propaganda outlets. This holds true for the representation of Japanese American internment camps in the propaganda video “Japanese Relocation”, which fails to recognize the voices and identity of Japanese Americans. Distinguishing reality from false perceptions is not always easy, but the memoir written by Toyoko Suyemoto offers a more complete and personal account of her own understanding of relocation, and allows one to comprehend the truth of the internment experience through one who had lived through it. The misrepresentation of reality seen in propaganda has been and continues to be a part of American

society—it is the duty of the citizens to inform themselves of multiple perspectives, and to not be goaded by fear into relinquishing the freedoms of the individual for the promise of security.

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