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Suppressed Trauma : The Psychological Effects of The Japanese American Internment Camps

When America joined World War 2, Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order number 9066, interning all Japanese Americans and forcing them from their homes with little notice or preparation. This was presumably a precaution to make sure there were no Japanese spies amidst them, despite the lack of evidence, and the fact that no Japanese American was convicted of being a spy. According to Brian Niiya, content director for the Densho, an online database that's dedicated to preserving and sharing the history of the interned Japanese Americans, in his article "Executive Order", Niiya states that the US Government incarcerated approximately 110,000 Japanese Issei(first generation Japanese Americans) and Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans). Afterwards, the Japanese Americans face many hardships rebuilding their lives and shielding themselves against racial prejudice. In addition to the adversity, the Japanese Americans faced, the long term effects created by the psychological trauma from the internment camps affected the Japanese American communities for generations to come.

In the beginning of the Japanese American internment, the US Government had targeted Japanese American Community Leaders. The Densho's article called "About the Incarceration" had stated the US Government had done this the basis that the Japanese American Community

Leaders were “potential threats to national security.”(Densho). The abruptness of these arrests weighed heavily the leader’s families. Renee Romano, a writer for the *Washington Post* recalls a conversation with one of her Japanese American friends, Alice. Romano begins to explain how Alice’s parents were taken when the first Japanese Americans began to be incarcerated.

> Alice’s parents were caught up in this early witch hunt. Alice was 15 and living in Norwalk, Calif., when authorities arrested her parents because they taught at a Japanese language school. Alice and her 18-year-old sister were at school when her parents were arrested; they came home to find them gone. Alice still recalls the trauma of that day, marked by the sharp awareness that she didn’t even get to say goodbye to her mother and father before they were taken away. (Renee Romano)

Alice’s experience was one of many distressing situations forced upon the Japanese Americans when the US Government acted upon Executive Order 9066. Once her family had been released from internment, Alice had internalized her pain, as “‘Any loneliness or problems I did not share with anyone — particularly my parents, since I felt they had many more problems,’ she recalled years later.”(Renee Romano) I heard a similar story from my father, who spoke about how his late mother’s internment experience, as her parents were also Japanese teachers that were taken from them.

Like Alice, many other Japanese Americans were affected by the internment camps. Donna K. Nagata, a psychology professor at the University of California, discusses the psychological trauma of Japanese Americans during the camp in the article, “Psychological

Effects of Camp." She reports that due to the Nisei's youth, and having been born US citizens, the internees had felt like they had been betrayed.

> Unlike their parents, the Nisei sons and daughters of the Issei were American-born U.S. citizens. The majority were in their early adolescence and twenties when they were incarcerated...The incarceration was a serious attack on their American identity development and had signified impact on Nisei self-image. Amy Iwasaki Mass noted that, for the American-born Nisei, the government's treatment was a "betrayal by a trusted source" that led to "deep depression, a sense of shame, a sense of 'there must be something wrong with me"(Donna Nagata)

With this quote, Donna Nagata reveals that, most Japanese Americans felt like they had somehow done something wrong to warrant being incarcerated. As they were ashamed because they had thought something was wrong with them, they internalized their pains as Alice had done. Some felt bitterness to the Government for being incarcerated, and others felt that bitterness These feelings of betrayal and depression became validated as the majority of the US distrusted the Japanese Americans after the war.

After the internment camps and the Japanese Americans were released, their hardship did not end. Brian Niiya, writes about this topic in his article *"Return to West Coast"*. He reports that the majority of the US society asserted that Japanese Americans should be deported and their citizenships revoked.

> *The Hood River Country Sun* ran a poll in January 1943 in which 84% of respondents would not allow any Japanese Americans to return after the war. A *Los Angeles Times* survey published in December 1943 found that 9,855 respondents favoring the permanent exclusion of Japanese from the Pacific Coast states to 999 opposed. (Niiya Brian)

This staggering resentment of the Japanese Americans caused many of the Japanese Americans to feel an immense pressure to not stand out or spark trouble, causing most to become more reserved. I remember watching a rare interaction between my mother's mother who was a 6 year old when she was incarcerated, and my father's stepmother who had swum from mainland China to Hong Kong, to escape communist China. I remember noticing my step grandmother was always eccentric and very outgoing, while my Grandmother was usually quite quiet and always patiently listened. It was such a stark contrast between the two, that made me realize, first hand this effect from the internment camps. Despite her young age when she was incarcerated, My Grandmother was still affected by the camps, experiencing "the harsh camp conditions, witnessed the humiliation of their parents and sensed the feelings of shame associated with being Japanese."(Donna Nagata)

The Japanese Americans neglected to talk about the camps, trying their best to forget the experience. In an article called "The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma" Donna Nagata records that the Japanese Americans did not speak about the camps after the fact, as it was too painful for them to remember.

> —Issei and Nisei alike—did not talk about the incarceration experience with outsiders or each other for decades. They displayed symptoms of avoidance and detachment

> associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Loo, 1993), mirroring the "conspiracy of silence" observed in trauma survivor groups across the world (Danieli, 1998). Results from a survey of over 400 Nisei indicated that more than 12% never spoke with their Issei parents about the camps, 50% spoke less than four times, and 70% of those who had any discussions conversed less than 15 minutes (Nagata, 1995). (Donna Nagata, pg. 40)

As many Japanese Americans were affected by this mortification and depression they carried from their incarceration, they had internalized that pain and trauma. As a reaction to this sense of shame, the Nisei and Issei did not want to talk about a time they had remorsed, despite the Nisei and Issei having done nothing to warrant their internment. Nisei tried to protect their children, the Sansei(Third Generation Japanese Americans) from further scrutinization by americanizing them, wanting them to"Grow up straight and tall and beautiful as they can, without all the sadness sort of branding them that they are different."(Donna Nagata, pg. 41). While their intentions were pure, this approach of raising their children was flawed as it alienized the Nisei from the Sansei, as "most Sansei lost connection with much of their Japanese culture and language, experienced pressure to excel in academics and careers, and avoided doing anything that might draw negative attention."(Donna Nagata) Between being pushed to be American from their parents, and the populous shouting that they were not like them, the Sansei grew up confused and were not able to exactly find their place. As a Yonsei(4th generation Japanese American) I've felt these residual effects of this americanization first hand. I didn't learn about the camps until I was in middle school, and even then, I only learned about it because I went to the Seattle Buddhist Temple that housed the work area for the Densho project

which taught me and the other children of the temple about the incarceration. In light of the Densho project, other Japanese Americans have become more open to sharing their stories, and have been making the steps to finally heal.

The incarceration caused heavy emotional trauma upon the Japanese Americans however, this experience helped them become more aware of issues dealing with social justice. In an article written by Stephanie K. Baer, a reporter for the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, called "Victims of Incarceration: The life-altering impact of WWII Japanese-American camps", reports on how the Japanese Americans are sympathizing with the newly demonized Muslim community.

> Japanese-Americans who lived through the incarceration or whose parents were in the camps say the negative rhetoric about Muslims and immigrants today reminds them of the racism they encountered decades ago and how damaging the experience was to the health and well-being of their community…
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> "The very same language, the same stigmatizing of certain groups identified by physical characteristics, by the way they dress, by the way they talk, their religion — those are all exactly the same," said Satsuki Ina, 72, who was born at the Tule Lake camp in northern California. "Japanese-Americans have lived through the lifelong consequences of that victimization." (Stephanie Baer)

After almost 75 years, the Japanese Americans of the internment camps have become more forthcoming about sharing stories from the camps, and with it, "multiple generations of Japanese Americans remain watchful of policies and prejudices that unjustly target other groups."(Donna

Nagata) As a Japanese American myself I feel like I may be slightly biased, but I find it striking that this current situation has come upon us again. Watching large groups of people, making the same mistakes they had done 75 years ago, is a surreal experience.

It's strange to me, as a Yonsei, that the Japanese American internment is never really discussed in our pre-college learning. I remember sitting in a high school US history class and they had talked about Japanese Incarceration for 5, maybe 10 minutes at the most. I had to force my teacher to say on the subject as, while everyone else was learning about their heritage, and how their ancestors fit into our history books, my history, and my heritage was given a measly 10 minutes. Because the Japanese Americans had not voiced their concern, and the lack of their presence in our history books, we find ourselves in a similar situation as we had 75 years ago, suppressing a people that we generalize as murders and rapists. We even watch stories very similar to Alice's experience of having their parents taken away without notice. The best thing we can do is become educated on the subject, so we can break the vicious cycle of repeating the mistakes of the past.

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