

## An Organized Inequity

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*“An Organized Inequity” counters the accepted narrative of Japanese-Americans assimilating back into American society with ease. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s signing of Executive Order 9066 allowed for Japanese Relocation, as well as the hardships yet to come for those of Japanese heritage in America. It takes into account personal testimonies from camp inmates, examines education repertoire for children within the camps, as well as graduation statistics from Japanese-American students within the camps in comparison to white students, and other minorities within the States. The essay endeavors to explicate the effect that poor living conditions and ineffective education within the camps, as well as discrimination faced after the war, had on the strive and success rate of Japanese-American children after World War II.*

At first, they were gathered quietly, slowly, and then, all at once—a mass incarceration orchestrated within forty-eight hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Paranoia trailed closely behind the hysteria of war, turning rational thought into anxiety riddled with hatred. Those of Japanese heritage living within the United States at the time, found themselves ill-suited to face the hostilities that would soon engulf their world. By the end of 1942, two congressional committees began investigating means of evacuating the Japanese, including Americans of Japanese ancestry. On February 13, a meeting of the Congressional Committees on Defense and on Alien Nationality and Sabotage, passed a resolution, recommending that there be an immediate evacuation of absolutely all people of Japanese lineage, as well as any others whose presence was deemed by the U.S. government as being dangerous. The current, and generally accepted, post-World War II narrative of Japanese immigrants assimilating to become and well-respected citizens in American society, perturbingly disregards the immediate years before and after World War II that scarred an entire generation.<sup>1</sup> Families were torn apart, lives were shattered, homes seized from prior ownership—this country that so many sought to belong in denied the Japanese basic human rights, forcing them into cramped living spaces and subjecting them to inhumane living conditions. The make-shift schools strewn up within the camps provided a neglectful and disturbingly poor education. After the war, Japanese-American citizens returned to old neighborhoods where their homes once were, only to find instead warning signs, threatening those of Japanese heritage that they were no longer welcome there. This cruelty was not overcome in one sweeping stride of personal resilience. It had consequences that should not be overlooked. The internment of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans is one of the darkest stains on U.S. history, and subsequently stunted the educational growth of Japanese youth.

Executive Order 9102 was signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on March 18, 1942, creating the War Relocation Authority (W.R.A.). This organization was responsible for the forced

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<sup>1</sup> Many Japanese Americans discarded their identity after World War II to avoid any association, shame or embarrassment with being imprisoned. <http://www.asian-nation.org/assimilation.shtml#sthash.9KMBiWqo.dpbs>

relocation and detention of Japanese Americans living in the western exclusion zone during World War II. Within the W.R.A. existed a number of sub-organizations, all of which functioned within an intricate web to ensure that Americans of Japanese descent were being kept closely under watch. This included the W.R.A. Education Program, headed by Lester K. Ade, who, months after relocation, released the *War Relocation Center Education Booklet* for all of the volunteer teachers in the camps to abide by. This booklet provides a substandard outline of school procedures within camps, with the W.R.A. Director of Education himself, noting that, “There has been no attempt to document completely the educational program...”<sup>2</sup> The bulletin, consisting of twenty-three pages, was distributed to direct the instruction of approximately 27,000 school children. The Education Program was very well aware of the cramped quarters that students were being subjected to. The load the volunteer teachers took on was immense. Per teacher, the W.R.A. Education Booklet indicates that he or she would be responsible for upwards of forty students—and this was just per elementary school class. During the intermittent time between the publication of the instructional booklet, Japanese children waited in limbo.

The Topaz concentration camp in Utah officially opened on September 11, 1942. At its peak, the camp held 8,100 people after processing 11,000 Issei<sup>3</sup> immigrants and Nisei U.S. born citizens. A hospital, two elementary schools, and one school for all students in junior high through high school, constituted the major structures of the camp to accommodate thousands of recently inducted members of the camp. Although the camp opened in September, classes did not begin until October. Bob Utsumi was a member of the first junior high school class in the Topaz concentration camp. “Most of the classrooms were chairs and just tables, like mess hall tables and chairs,” recalled Utsumi.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Utsumi recalls an old chemistry teacher he studied under in the Topaz camp. “Oh, my feeling is Topaz had a bad set of teachers. ...Most of them were bad. They were not qualified. ...Some of the best teachers I had were camp mates. And then not necessarily college graduates either. ...Our chemistry teacher was terrible. He was an old man. He was dangerous. We didn’t have a lab.”<sup>5</sup> Furthering his explanation of the dangers within science education in the camps, Utsumi notes a particular demonstration that involved the injury of several students in the classroom: “Well, the test tube broke. And this time, couple of, one of the guys in the front row got cut.”<sup>6</sup> Mita Kawachi, a student in the Minidoka concentration camp documented

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<sup>2</sup> War Relocation Authority (WRA) Education Program in War Relocation Centers Densho ID: denshopd-p155-00015, 1942, <http://archive.densho.org>

<sup>3</sup> “Issei” is a term used to describe or specify the Japanese people who were first to emigrate from Japan.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Utsumi Interview Segment 13 “The poor quality of education in camp” interviewed by Megan Asana, Topaz Museum Collection, (2008) <http://archive.densho.org>

<sup>5</sup> *Excerpt from Bob Utsumi interview* In the case of Mr. Utsumi, he compares the education that he had in “class” to that of what he learned from other camp mates, ultimately saying that he learned more from the camp mates than those were hired to teach. The interviewer asks where the teachers came from—Utsumi says that he doesn’t know—no one would tell them.

<sup>6</sup> *Excerpt from Bob Utsumi interview* Mr. Utsumi further recalls one of his teachers as being especially dangerous. Another incident of possible permanent physical damage involved a mishap while performing an experiment with hydrogen gas that was left unattended. It eventually turned to sodium hydroxide, almost injuring several students in the class.

her educational experiences in the camp saying that she “learned only a little,”<sup>7</sup> and that she had to maintain a job in a warehouse, pulling her away from her studies.

The W.R.A. Education Program placed much emphasis on making sure that those living within the camps were expressing loyalty to the United States at all times. The children within the camps were required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance within the constraints of barbed wire. One Japanese student, from the campgrounds of Idaho, made this irony painfully clear in a poem titled, “Damned Fence.” The child’s name remains unknown, but the discomfort of the child’s time in the camp is obvious. “Damned Fence,” a short but deeply emotional poem, depicts the mass confusion that so many Japanese Americans faced during their time in detention. The closing of the poem particularly sheds light upon the anxiety of so many that happened to be of Japanese ancestry, and is indeed, quite haunting:<sup>8</sup>

Imprisoned in here for a long,  
                   long time,  
 We know we’re punished tho  
                   we’ve done no crime,  
 Our thoughts are gloomy and  
                   enthusiasm damp,  
 To be locked up in a  
                   concentration camp.  
 Loyalty we know and Patriotism  
                   we feel,  
 To sacrifice our utmost was our  
                   ideal  
 To right for our country, and die  
                   mayhap;  
 Yet we’re here because we happen  
                   to be a JAP

In contrast to the written criticism of internment, William Ikada, a student from the Minidoka Concentration Camp, wrote an essay entitled, “What the War Has Done to Us.” In it, Ikada detailed his journey from his home to a concentration camp in Idaho. He described the despondency and dejection he felt knowing he must leave one life and begin another elsewhere. “It was a very sad day for us all. I left many a friend behind which makes me very sad to think

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<sup>7</sup> Student essay: "My Experiences During the First Year of War" Mita Kawachi denshopd-p156-00053  
<http://archive.densho.org>

<sup>8</sup> Minidoka concentration camp, Idaho, Poem written in camp: Damned Fence Densho ID: denshopd-p126-00001, during wartime, <http://archive.densho.org>

about it even now,”<sup>9</sup> Ikada wrote. Nevertheless, remaining thankful for what he did have, ending the essay with an expression of gratitude towards the American holiday, Thanksgiving: “The ‘Thanksgiving’ meant more to me this year than it did to me any other. I felt very sad when I read in the ‘Life’ magazine that the people of Europe were being starved to death. ...I will always be thankful that I still have a school to go to.”

Nearing the end of the war, the *War Relocation Authority Teachers’ Handbook on Education for Relocation* was released by the heads of the W.R.A. While failing to outline a specific curriculum of study for the students, it did manage to go into great detail of the psychological effects the war may have imposed on the children.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BLOCKS (Education 30.3) Lack of self-acceptance. The desire to be American coupled with a fear of non-acceptance by other American groups appears to result in frustration. This shame of ancestry may result in an outward expression of distrust of other American groups—of intolerance toward everything Japanese. Symptomatic of this attitude is the denial by students of any previous association with “Japanese”; denial of any facility in the Japanese language; a rejection of all parental control; imitation of slang, dress, and characteristics thought to be typically American; and an expressed desire to escape racial discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

Japanese children growing up within the internment camps, throughout the West, were made to believe that something was innately wrong with them for being of Japanese heritage. They were systematically taught that their incarceration was justified based on their heritage.

Japanese Americans were forced to abdicate their homes quickly in exchange for a new, more impoverished lifestyle. *The Managed Casualty*, written by Leonard Broom and John Kituse, details ten different families, all of which involve the mix of both Issei and Nisei generations, throughout World War II. Each family is unique in their income, relationships, and immigration story. The following family’s name, along with the individual names of those within this Japanese family, have been withheld for privacy. The life they knew was turned completely upside down after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Before the war, the parents of this family had achieved a respected status in the community in which they lived. The Pearl Harbor attack terrified the parents, and left them in fear for the future of their family. The shop that they owned was completely torn apart in a search for contraband by the Justice Department. It soon became understood by Japanese-Americans that the evacuation would certainly take place. In a desperate attempt to scramble together some money to take with them, the family put \$3,500 worth of

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<sup>9</sup> Minidoka concentration camp, Idaho, *Student essay: "What The War Has Done To Us"* Densho ID: denshopd-p156-00077(1942) <http://archive.densho.org>

<sup>10</sup> Minidoka concentration camp, Idaho War Relocation Authority Teachers' Handbook on Education for Relocation Densho ID: denshopd-p171-00184 (1944) <http://archive.densho.org>

personal property up for sale. They sold it all for the meager price of \$300. Although certainly not a family of immense wealth, the family was forced by the U.S. government to leave the comfort of their former life in exchange for a much colder and smaller one. The father fell ill at the start of the war, and at their new home,<sup>11</sup> the diet prescribed by his doctor was not available. Coal stoves heated their living areas, although cooking within the residential area was not allowed by camp officials. Their furniture was limited to old army cots, mattresses, and a few blankets. Frostbite became a regular occurrence, the barracks themselves were crudely constructed with tarpaper and sheetrock. Several of the apartments had no windows at all. The winter temperatures hovered near or below zero, and during the summer they could soar as high as ninety degrees or above. Frostbite was not the only killer within the camps. On April 11, 1943, James Wasaka of the Topaz concentration camp was shot and killed by a guard for approaching the southwest section of the fence.<sup>12</sup> This led to intense fear and hysteria within the camp.

Aside from the poor living quarters and health hazards, there was also an added element of malevolent psychological damage inflicted upon the residents of the camps. On January 29, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that volunteers would be accepted in an all-Japanese-American combat unit. Ironically, this call to action fell upon, in some cases, American citizens that were being held behind the fences of internment camps within the United States. The determining factor as to whether or not these few Japanese were granted permission to leave behind the bleak world of internment was a two-question questionnaire. These two questions were supposed to directly determine whether one was loyal to the United States. The first question was, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?" and the second was, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks by foreign or domestic forces and foreswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?"<sup>13</sup> This way of questioning was especially harsh on the Issei, or, first-generation Japanese, because they were denied citizenship in the United States. Answering, "yes" to the second question would ultimately leave them without a country. This did not go without protest within the camps. The questions were eventually completely changed and reorganized, but damage had long been done.

Some Japanese were allowed by the U.S. government to return to their old homes along the West Coast beginning in 1945 after the end of World War II, and the last camp officially closed in 1946. During the last two years of the war, a number of anti-Japanese groups sprouted up all

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<sup>11</sup> Manzanar Concentration Camp (Located at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in California's Owen's Valley)

<sup>12</sup> James Wasaka was killed by a single bullet to the chest by a military sentry who later testified that the shot from the guard tower, some 300 yards away, was a warning. The military took the body away and no inquest was held. Believing that a riot might be imminent, the military put soldiers on emergency alert. The *Topaz Times* and local papers printed the military's claim that Wakasa was killed while going through the fence, but War Relocation Authority investigations established that the body lay several feet inside the fence and a postmortem examination found that the victim was facing the guard when he was shot.

<sup>13</sup> Loyalty questionnaire. (n.d.). Retrieved April 7, 2017, from [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty\\_questionnaire/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty_questionnaire/)

along the West Coast. Two of the most prominent groups were the Remember Pearl Harbor League (RPHL) and the Japanese Exclusion League (JEL). Both groups frequently wrote to newspaper editors to generate publicity. The JEL specifically pushed a political agenda that would not allow any Japanese to return to the West Coast. The JEL shared many of the same views as the RPHL. Art Ritchie, a member of the Japanese Exclusion League, wrote a letter to Senator Magnuson in January 1945, in hopes of getting an amendment to the Constitution to prevent Japanese immigrants from becoming citizens, and invited the senator to join the JEL.<sup>14</sup> There were a number of local representatives who were particularly vocal in their support of internment and opposition to any resettlement. Labor unions began to form between veterans seeking work, farmers, and truck drivers that were racially exclusive, and incredibly threatening towards any Japanese.<sup>15</sup> Racial animosity further fueled hatred and racial bias within the labor force. Before and after the war, a reluctance to accommodate Japanese of both the Issei and Nisei generations existed throughout the United States. In 1945, Charles Doyle, the head of Seattle's Labor Council viciously threatened, "You bring them back, we won't be responsible for how many are hanging from the lamp posts."<sup>16</sup>

The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council (NJASRC)<sup>17</sup> was formed by the American Friends Service during World War II in an attempt to resettle inmates from the government's concentration camps to colleges in the Midwest and the East Coast. This organization worked with young Japanese students and their families, ultimately helping more than 4,000 students resettle and pursue higher education. Despite the encouragement and opportunity that this organization brought to many Japanese students, there was still resistance. Allan W. Austin, an assistant professor of history at College Misericordia in Dallas, Pennsylvania, writes:

...the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council—struggled to overcome bureaucratic opposition and inertia on the one hand and the reluctance of many college officials to stick out their necks accept students who looked like the enemy on the other.<sup>18</sup>

He also wrote of lecturers and academic leaders along the West Coast who were openly hostile towards Japanese students, including Rufus B. von Kleinsmid, the fifth president of the University of Southern California. "...[M]ost of those who had to be persuaded to accept the students were afraid of public, alumni and trustee reactions."<sup>19</sup>

As if seeking a new start on American campuses after a world war was not enough, many Japanese American students felt an incredible amount of pressure to do exceedingly well where

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<sup>14</sup> Berner, *Seattle Transformed: World War II to the Cold War*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> This was of course before the Civil Rights Movement, so open hostilities and vocalized racial prejudices were quite common during this time.

<sup>16</sup> Droker, *The Seattle Civic Unity Committee*, 50

<sup>17</sup> The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council was formed by the American Friends Service (AFSC). The AFSC organization was originally established by Quakers and promoted pacifism during World War I, and worked towards improving race relations. They continued assisting those affected by war, including the Japanese after World War II. (*Densho Archive Encyclopedia*)

<sup>18</sup> Austin, Allen W. *From Concentration Camp To Campus: A History Of The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, 1942-1946*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

they did not feel welcome. In a forward to *From Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese American Students and World War II*, Roger Daniels writes, “They were expected to be models of excellence and propriety and came to feel that they were ‘ambassadors of goodwill’ on whom the fate of an oppressed people depended.”<sup>20</sup> “Many Nisei students increasingly seemed to give up hope for their future and [felt] unwanted in the United States.”<sup>21</sup> According to the Russel Sage Foundation, from 1940 to 1950, students of Asian heritage living within the United States had college graduation rates as low as ten percent—noting that only a fraction of that percentage was specifically of Japanese ancestry.<sup>22</sup>

Aside from various antagonisms on campus, many students simply did not have the means to attend any institution of higher education. As noted above, the first instances of forced relocation in 1943, many Japanese families rushed to sell their belongings in an attempt to salvage some type of equity to carry with them into the camps. Since they were away from their homes for months, most families had their houses and apartments repossessed by the banks. The health of many of the second-generation Nisei parents began to quickly deteriorate after the war. Medicines that were once offered to them before the war were not available within the internment camps. As mentioned in *The Managed Casualty*, quite often, the Nisei would have to set aside time upon release of internment to care for their aging parents. This was not only costly, but also time-consuming—eliminating time to concentrate on earning degrees.

Much of the Issei that emigrated from Japan came to the United States in hopes of a better future. The life that they had known either from the mainland of Japan, or the islands that surround it was either of unique inopportunity, or monotonous subordinate duties. Either way, it was enough to seek out a new life in a new country. Arguably, one of the darkest blots on the history of the United States during the twentieth century, is the internment of 110,000 Japanese civilians along the West Coast. The act hindered thousands of Nisei children from obtaining a normal, fair education; it also struck fear deep within the hearts of a generation of people. It was nothing short of a war crime and its echoes can still be heard today.

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<sup>20</sup> Austin, *From Concentration Camp To Campus: A History Of The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, 1942-1946*. 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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