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Harmonies of Heritage and Trauma: Music, Generational Divide, and Identity in Japanese American Internment Camps

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During WWII in 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed executive order 9066, allowing the military to remove those of Japanese ancestry from the public and place them in internment camps. This allowed any person of Japanese ancestry inside the U.S. to be deemed a dangerous enemy of the state. Around 120,000 Japanese Americans were placed into hastily built camps located in the desert or swamp and had to live in horrible conditions. Those incarcerated, more than half of which were US citizens, had to suffer the humiliation of being treated as enemies in their own country (Yates, Kuwada, Potter, and Hoshino 2007). In my research, I aim to shed light onto music and its functions during the internment, both positive and negative. I suggest that the Issei, first-generation Japanese immigrants, and Nisei, second-generation, American-born citizens, used music in the internment camps as a means of emotional escape, resistance, and identity-affirmation. I also suggest that the U.S. government used music as a means of manipulation and control which was harmful to the internees.

To begin, the concept of "Yellow Peril, which originated in the late 19th century, refers to the white American fear that Asian people, primarily East Asian immigrants, would invade their land and disrupt American values. This led to the stereotyping of Japanese people as spies, as sexually perverted, and as unable to assimilate into a white American society. These stereotypes helped create mass hysteria against them that, coupled with the attack on Pearl Harbor, led to their

internment (Dundes 1995). Next, the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the government agency responsible for establishing and maintaining the internment camps, actively spent resources getting Japanese Americans to do "American" things like enlisting in the military, speaking English, playing baseball, and establishing democratic mock governments in the camps (Robinson, 2023). For music, this meant promoting western classical music and American popular music to Japanese Americans. The WRA's stance here is very complex. On one hand, "Yellow Peril" fears and suspicion made it seem justified to imprison those people, yet at the same time, the WRA promoted assimilation into western society in the camps fervently. This contradiction shows how prejudice clashed with patriotism during this period and highlights the misguided reasoning behind the internment itself (Dundes 1995; Parks 2004).

In this paper, I first suggest that music in the internment camps served as a form of escape for Japanese Americans. After the Pearl Harbor attack, any Japanese-affiliated cultural activities were generally banned from the public. In the documentary "Hidden Legacy" by Shirley Muramoto, Nisei Kayoko Wakita recounts how her father, who researched bridging American and Japanese musical styles, had to burn all his research papers to avoid suspicion from the government of being a spy. This shows the prevalence of a harsh anti-Japanese sentiment that forced Japanese Americans to stop anything pertaining to their traditional culture (Muramoto 2014, 5:11). Music Scholar Dr. Minako Waseda notes, "It was ironic because the internment. . . was unconstitutional. But in fact, in terms of the Japanese performing arts, it became a safe place for them to practice, because otherwise, they were not able to do that" (Muramoto 2014, 37:58). Ironically, the internment camps created a unique bubble from the suspicions of society where performing Japanese music would have been persecuted. Each camp had a music department that was funded by the WRA, which gave them access to stages, costumes, and sets. This unique situation ironically contributed to the prevalence of traditional Japanese music, specifically with the first generation, the Issei. Issei musicians and dancers gave lessons to both Issei and Nisei in camp, and the kabuki performances and engei-kai, or talent shows, brought people together (Waseda 2005). As Wakita recounts, "And so, for that moment, for those two, maybe three hours, people were in a different world" (Muramoto 2014, 52:00). It gave interned audiences an escape from their reality, and for the people performing, it gave a sense of accomplishment. It also gave both Issei and Nisei a sense of nostalgia for their past home and peace in forgetting their situation, even for a short while. Another way music was used to create escape was through building community through camp songs, which were composed by Issei in the camps. The camp songs usually create metaphors that connect the grandeur of the natural landscape around the camps to the need for hope and solidarity in the group. An example is Gila Relocation Center Song, which shows themes of emphasizing hope, emotional fortitude, and enduring hardship, while comparing it to nature through lyrics like "praise the fortitude," "giant cactus stands dauntless, with this spirit live boldly," "reclaim the wasteland," and "look to hope, peace finally rings." When sung by everyone in the camp, it was used to console and encourage one another, again bringing them together and fostering community (Waseda 2005).

Secondly, music was essential to the internee's well-being as a form of emotional release. Wakita describes how music helped relieve people from the stress of being interned: “It’s amazing how people learned to survive. They were in the worst place possible. You were in a camp. You were isolated. You were surrounded by sentries, and spotlights. And yet, in different parts of camp, you had a moment of peace and happiness” (Muramoto 2014, 51:35). To explore music as a catharsis further, we can compare this situation to the aftermath of the Great Japan Earthquake in 2011. In his article, Nakamura Mia describes how because of the earthquake, there was no power so it was very quiet, and many people lost their homes and had to live in shelters with no privacy from other victims. To create something fun and uplifting for people to do, many “recovery concerts” were organized. This unique situation caused people to be very tense, and that by attending these concerts, it let the victims have a cathartic moment. A concert organizer, Ito Miya, explains it well, “When we encounter a devastated reality, we set up a barrier and defend ourselves so that we do not have to get hurt. As we listen to music, particularly certain kinds of melody in classical music and traditional Japanese school songs, the barrier disappears, and we become unleashed and burst into tears.” Mia goes on to say, “music served as a catalyst for relieving the afflicted people’s tense bodies and bottled feelings during the first few months after the earthquake” (Mia 2021). I apply this situation to the internment as there are many parallels; the victims of both tragedies were found in a unique and distressing situation where music functioned as an emotional release from their tension and anguish.

Continuing, I suggest that music functioned as a form of resistance in camp. For the Issei, this meant using music to resist assimilation into American society. Actor, social rights activist, and Nisei, George Takei recounted how there were layers of barbed wire outside the Tule Lake camp and how 6 “goading and intimidating” tanks would patrol the perimeter. He says, “they should have been on a battlefield, not guarding outraged American citizens.” These horrible conditions and intense feeling of betrayal created disdain towards American society and turned them towards their traditional Japanese music (Kunhardt Film Foundation 2021). However, they still were in America and had built lives here, so this created an internal struggle between their ethnicity and nationality. Leaning heavily into their traditional music shows their resistance to the WRA’s aim of assimilating them into American culture, as well as their struggle of identity. This was even more complex for the Nisei. Even though many Issei were angry at the US government themselves, they were insistent that their children were American citizens. Wakita recounts another quote from her father, “you were born here, you are Americans. I know we are going to camp, but it’s because we are aliens of a country that never gave us citizenship. You must be loyal to the United States” (Muramoto 2014). This shows how the Issei, despite not having citizenship, valued American citizenship for their children.

The WRA heavily encouraged American popular music and western classical music in camps. They offered piano and violin lessons and created jazz bands that would play for ballroom dances, and it was the Nisei who participated in these activities rather than the Issei (Waseda 2005). By actively participating in American popular music, the Nisei reaffirmed their identity as Americans in camps. These jazz bands were also one of the very few opportunities for any

internees to leave the camps, as they would travel out to neighboring towns to perform for the public. An example of this was the George Igawa swing band from Heart Mountain camp, Wyoming. Jimmy Araki, a musician from the band, describes their unique popularity from outside of camp saying, "The crowds were very receptive to our music... we didn't solicit dance jobs; they came to us." This quote shows how towns from outside the camps were actively soliciting the band despite the heavy anti-Japanese social sentiment, which portrayed the Nisei as more "American" to outside society (National WWII Museum 2021).

As their parents, the Issei, encouraged them to act American and with the WRA's policies of assimilation, many Nisei played American music in order to "look the part" of an American. At the time, music that was considered "American" was the newly popular style of big band jazz for dancing, as well as the emerging forms of country music, bebop, and R&B. In addition to these styles, was a new genre of patriotic song called "WWII song" brought about by the war. Some examples are "This is Worth Fighting For" and "Remember Pearl Harbor" (Rose 2012). Doing certain actions to signal one's identity is a prevalent idea in immigration ethnography; performing what it means to be American. According to a study conducted by sociologists Sorrel, Khalsa, and Emerson, on identity-formation among immigrants in the United States, many immigrants feel the most "American" when participating in everyday activities associated with American experience. A participant in the study said "I think when I'm at work, when I pay my taxes, when I'm part... of the United States as a consumer, when I must be with either the government or the service sector. Pretty much day to day life; you're more American then." Performing American music is this activity for the Nisei and affirms their identity as American (Sorrel, Khalsa, and Emmerson 2019). It also appeases the WRA who so fervently want them to assimilate into mainstream American society. In a sense, I suggest that for the Nisei, performing American popular music in the camps was a form of resistance to the federal government to show that they are indeed loyal to the nation, and that despite having Japanese ancestry, they are a part of the American cultural fabric. I also suggest that, since they were no strangers to the racist propaganda created by the Yellow Peril, they played American music to signal to the general public that the stereotypes about them were untrue.

The WRA, with their stance of encouraging assimilation, used music to "westernize" all the internees, but especially Nisei. Even though Nisei had grown up in American society, the WRA still viewed them as more Japanese than American. I argue that this is harmful; forcing American culture on the internees while condemning their Japanese culture was hurtful to many of the internees because it created this struggle of identity, especially for the Nisei who were American citizens. In the study conducted by Yates, Kuwaeda, Potter, Cameron, and Hoshino they state, "Defining one's identity was a major theme running through the participants' narratives. All were U.S. citizens yet also wished to remain connected to their Japanese heritage. Takaki (1993) noted that many second-generation Japanese did not want to reject the culture of their parents, which had also become a part of themselves. The fact of the internment signaled to internees that embracing two cultures would not be tolerated. By virtue of their ethnic heritage and physically distinct characteristics, Japanese Americans were now the enemy." A participant in the study said, "I think

the worst thing all the time was…knowing that you are in prison. That you're there because…you're Japanese. And that was, to me, the most hurtful thing" (Yates, Kuwada, Potter and Hoshino 2007, 5). The WRA pushing against traditional Japanese culture in any sense was harmful to the internees, and this applies to music. To struggle with either fitting into American society or retaining your cultural heritage is an unfair position for any immigrant to be in, and not only did the WRA do this, but they did this to people surrounded by barbed wire in the desert.

Along with using music to try and assimilate the internees, they also used it as a means of manipulation and used music to deter resistance and subdue resentment. Keeping the internees happy by giving them resources, performances, and community through music was a strategic move by the WRA. It helped to keep the internee's content and less likely to rebel or cause problems. I argue that this too is harmful, because it was another tool the WRA used to keep them trapped in the horrible conditions of the camps. The WRA also used the traveling Nisei bands as an outward positive image to American society, signaling to the public that they were treating internees well and that the assimilation goal of the camps was working, which obscured the harsh reality behind the barbed wire (National WWII Museum 2021; Parks 2004; Waseda 2005).

I argue that music functions differently in camp to that of everyday life outside of camp. I draw four important takeaways from this study. First, in my experience as a student of Florida public schools, the internment wasn't taught enough in the history curriculum. I believe everyone should know more about it as basic American history. In a time when many feel like American history is being censored and erased to fit the wants of those in power, I think it is exceptionally important to remember our true history and shed light on the mistakes this country has made, so that we can learn from them and make sure they don't happen again. Second, it shows how music can be used to shape one's national identity. The Issei used music for solace, respite, and community. However, they also used it to resist assimilation into western culture due to their feelings of betrayal, creating disdain towards considering themselves American. Contrastingly, Nisei used music to outwardly perform "American-ness" and resist racist stereotypes, as well as affirm for themselves an American identity that was torn away by being interned. Third, it provides an example of a harmful use of music. My experience as a student of music at a collegiate level has shown me that in music history and literature courses the focus is on the positive effect of music, often without shedding light on harmful uses of music. I have always believed that you need to know the bad to fully appreciate the good in anything, so I apply this here: the WRA's use of music as manipulation shows a harmful function of music in the camps that then highlights how imperative their own music was to the internees. It makes the positive music they made together feel more powerful. As a musician myself, it makes me grateful that I've chosen to study the tool that helped those people survive in that situation and makes me want to be a musician even more. The Japanese Americans interned during WWII give a clear demonstration of the cathartic effect, strength, and community music can create through its use in the internment. I end this paper with the hope that music will continue to be used only for its community building and positive functions, and that we will recognize when history may begin to repeat itself.

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