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Filling Out Internment: The Need for Honouliuli's Inclusion in Internment Studies

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Filling Out Internment: *The Need for Honouliuli's Inclusion in Internment Studies*

By: Trey Muraoka

Introduction

In 1998, an unnamed television reporter from a television station in Hawaii was interested in doing a piece on the Honouliuli internment camp, in conjunction with the station showing *Schindler's List*. He contacted the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii (JCCH) hoping they could help him. But his inquiry was met with confusion and nothing clear. They could not give him much information and not even a location.¹ From this inquiry, a quest for the hidden Japanese internment camp began. And it was not until the early 2000s that the camp was found, sixty years since the last prisoner called Honouliuli home.

How do you hide the location of a Japanese Internment camp that covered a large

swath of land on the island of Oahu? How can this happen especially when the “majority” of the population claims Japanese descent? While the field of internment studies continues to grow today, what stories are we forgetting about? In the case of Honouliuli, it took sixty years and the inability to accurately locate the camp that ignited the spark to go and find it. For my family history, it took me a research fellowship to find out that I had multiple family members and friends imprisoned. This last part was baffling to me and illustrated how important this work I am doing really is. The internment camps are still a very touchy subject that not everyone wants to discuss, or talk about. It even took the United States government thirty-plus years to apologize for its actions.

Getting back to the questions I posed earlier, how was this camp hidden? There are several ways, not all of which I will get into. One

¹ Jane Kurahara et al. “Finding Honouliuli: The Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii and Preserving the Hawaii Internment Story,” in *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawaii*, eds. Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, 16-42, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 17.

of the easiest ways is to allow nature to do its work on the site, covering the site with dense vegetation and growth, especially when the site is in a valley in a remote part of the island. Another way is silence. Silence from the internees. Silence from the government. Silence from the people who witnessed the camp. Silence from everyone. These two ways are the biggest reasons the Honouliuli Internment camp was forgotten and nearly erased from Hawaii's history. If not for a curious news reporter researching a story, could Honouliuli be forgotten today? There is no way of knowing, but because of that one reporter, a surge started.

Now, you may be asking at this point, what does it matter if one camp isn't studied? There are a bunch of others that I can read about and learn about those. Which is true. There have been many books and essays produced on the many mainland camps, especially Manzanar. It is time to expand and widen the scope of internment studies. The reach of the internment camps were far-reaching and covered the whole continent. There were twenty-one states who
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participated in the internment camp process, whether it was temporarily detaining Japanese Americans or holding them permanently.² Including Hawaii into the study of these camps gives a fully participating nation that even had a territory—not a state—participate. More importantly, including Honouliuli internment camp would give us a different perspective on what it meant to be imprisoned in a camp.

The study of Japanese internment camps has historically been very polarizing. Immediate reactions called it a travesty and a crime, while some later sources have treated it very kindly. There have been more and more memoirs and essays from former internees recalling camp life. These sources are extremely helpful in the study of mainland internment camps and that experience. But what of the experience of Honouliuli internees? Why is their World War II experience often excluded from the general corpus of internment studies? What about the tailor, or the farmer in Hawaii who had no

² Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgement without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment During World War II*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 12-12.

allegiance to Japan but was still imprisoned because of his race? What was their experience, and how did they feel about being placed in prison for crimes they were unjustly charged for?

This paper will look at the diary of Sam Nishimura and interviews of other former internees, Shigeo Muroda, Shomei Kaneshiro, and Toso Haseyama. Their inclusion in this paper is essential not only because they give an insight to the daily life, emotions and memories of the camp, since there are few memoirs out there about the experience. The most famous account of life in an internment camp is Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar*. What these sources do is give voice to the people who spent time in the internment camps, not the scholars who wrote from outside the barbed wire. Nishimura's diary is the most intact memory piece, as his diary was very detailed about the daily minutiae of the camp and the repetitive nature. The interviews act as supplementary pieces to the diary, as they offer a different point of view and analysis of different aspects that Nishimura either briefly touches on

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or ignores altogether. There is some overlap between the different sources and the overlap only creates a stronger sense of what actually happened.

After reading through the interviews and the diary, I have begun to question the polarizing views of the camps. Can we view the camps as purely evil or as enriching experiences for the *Nisei*, or the second generation Japanese Americans? From Roger Daniels early scholarship in the 1970s to Alice Yang Murray's work in the late 2000s, Hawaii and Honouliuli is often forgotten or ignored. But the inclusion of Honouliuli is important for understanding how Japanese Americans view the internment camps. Honouliuli accounts are similar and differ from the mainland accounts and inserting Honouliuli into the narrative creates a deeper understanding of internment.

The peculiar location of Hawaii is something that was at the back of my mind in the writing of this paper. I do not address it directly, but it is something that I realize is very important. Hawaii's unique location and

relationship with the United States made it an interesting place to live during the buildup to World War II. While I do not attempt to discuss it in this paper, I intend to do further investigation in future works.

After I give some of the semantic debates that are currently going on in academia about these sites, I will give a general background on the history of the internment process, as well as some of Hawaii's history during this period. Then I will discuss the positive and negative narratives of the camps as they are made evident in different features. In "When Crime Creates Sanctuary," I analyze the ambiguous space the camps occupied. How could these camps be a site of oppression but also be a site of sanctuary? In the section "With Pain and Pleasure," I analyze the ways in which the camps were sites of great pain, but also immense pleasure. In the section "Where Hell Meets Paradise," I look closely at the location and physical environment of Honouliuli. And finally, I inspect the role food played on the prisoners.

What's in a Name?

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The polarizing narratives of the Japanese American internment can be summarized in how you name these sites of oppression. Roger Daniels confronts this in the title of his book, *Concentration Camps USA*. The use of the term concentration camps to describe the Japanese American camps has been contested because it often makes one think of the Nazi death camps in the same time period. The term internment camp is one that is wrought out of the euphemistic words the United States came up with to describe these camps. Along with, "relocation center" and "detention center," internment camp was a way for the government to hide the crime it was committing. Back in 1972, Daniels was one of the first scholars to go about and use the term to name the camps for what they really were. While others more recently deem the use of the term "internment camp" to be euphemistic. Mitchell Maki, Harry Kitano and S. Megan Berthold even go as far as to say that the use of that term is the "most

common semantic error.”³ In their book, *Achieving the Impossible Dream*, they name the camps as concentration camps from the very first sentence.⁴

As evidenced above, the feeling is that the use of the term “internment camp” pushes a much softer narrative. While texts that use the term are trying to bring awareness of the camps to a broader audience, they are not making as critical a stance. *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice* aims to “focus on the Honouliuli Camp and the very important role Hawaii played in the wartime activities of internment and imprisonment.”⁵ While their goal is very similar to that of Roger Daniels’ book, the editors of the journal do not make the same semantic stance as Daniels. The goal is not lost, nor is the effectiveness, but the added level of thought is missing. Even in *Manzanar*, a photo-

³ Mitchell T. Maki, et. al., *Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 4.

⁴ Ibid, 1.

⁵ Suzanne Falgout et al., “Background and Introduction,” in *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawaii*, eds. Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, xi-xxiv, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), xi.

essay book, they use the term “internment camp.” John Armor and Peter Wright do so because, “there were no gas chambers or medical ‘experiments...There were no attempts to work prisoners to death.”⁶

I will use internment camp throughout this paper not because I believe in the softer narrative I discuss above, but because there is a distinction between the Jewish camps and the Japanese American camps. At a base level, I do realize that the camps are similar. At the same time, I cannot help but acknowledge that there are many differences between the two. The Japanese American internment camps were not made excusable because they did not function in the same ways the Jewish concentration camps did. I side with the scholars who use concentration camp, but for the purpose of this paper, with the name of the site having internment included, I will use internment camps.

⁶ John Armor et al., *Manazar = [Ringoen]*, (New York: Times Books, 1988), 72.

The Buildup and Execution of the

Internment Camp Process

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan. This event was not the beginning of Japanese paranoia, but for many Japanese Americans living on the continental United States, “it was like a nightmare come true.”⁷ The war they feared had come and the paranoia rose to another level. One newspaper editorial wrote that the Japanese people should not be called yellow, because they did not belong to be “in association with the honorable peoples of the yellow race.”⁸ There were signs of growing apprehension towards Japanese Americans before Pearl Harbor, but the surprise attack allowed for all the emotions and doubts run free.⁹ In the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans now had a tangible reason to hate Japanese Americans. Sam Nishimura, however, quite plainly felt that the hatred towards Japanese Americans was because

⁷ Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 26.

⁸ “Editorials in the Wake of Pearl Harbor,” in *Only What we Could Carry*, ed. Lawson Fusao Inada (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000), 16.

⁹ Sandra C. Taylor, *Jewel of the Desert: Japanese American Internment at Topaz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 46.

the Japanese were “...persistent. They’re hard working guys. And the other guys are lazy, so they don’t work...Japanese would advance up and up...nothing they can do because Japanese is such a nationality that they’re industrious.”¹⁰ No matter the case, the heightened attention led the media to promote “the ancient vigilante tradition” and to hunt Japanese by themselves.¹¹

The bombing of Pearl Harbor led eventually to the issuance of Executive Order 9066. Issued on February 19, 1942, the order became the “foundation upon which more than 110,000 Japanese in the United States—both citizens and legal residents residing along the Pacific Coast—and selected individuals and their families from Hawaii were forced into internment camps.”¹² The military was allowed “to designate ‘military areas’ from which ‘any or all persons may be excluded’...”¹³ President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued the order, but one of the main

¹⁰University of Hawaii at Manoa. Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, *Waiialua & Hale’iwa: The People Tell Their Story: Sam Nishimura*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii-Manoa, 1977), 353.

¹¹ Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA*, 32.

¹² Taylor, *Jewel of the Desert*, 30.

¹³ Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA*, 70.

players in this ordeal was General John De Witt, who was a big proponent of a mass imprisonment.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it was Roosevelt who signed off on Executive Order 9066 and made it official. This is despite Roosevelt having intelligence available to him that said “mass evacuation unnecessary.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, on December 7, 1941, the Territory of Hawaii was also in an uproar, but due mostly to the panic of the people in danger. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, 37.3% of Hawaii’s population was Japanese.¹⁶ Yet it was the popular opinion of some of Roosevelt’s staff that all of the Japanese in Hawaii should be interned.¹⁷ And they were well on their way to doing so. By December 9th, more than two months before the issuance of Executive Order 9066, a total of 367 Japanese who were deemed suspicious for many years, had been detained.¹⁸ And luckily for the Territory, Lieutenant General Delos Emmons saved the day. Handling much of the military

¹⁴ Ibid, 50

¹⁵ Ibid, 71.

¹⁶ Kashima, *Judgement without Trial*, 67.

¹⁷ Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA*, 52.

¹⁸ Kashima, *Judgement without Trial*, 72.

duties, he argued against the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, refusing to see them as the enemies that the government was making them out to be.¹⁹ He even went as far as to disobey orders to detain people, choosing to slowly work through the list he was given.²⁰

Nevertheless, Hawaii was under martial law.²¹ Many of the Japanese who were detained were sent to the United States Immigration station on Sand Island, where if deemed dangerous enough, they would be sent to the mainland.²² And many of them stayed there until March of 1943, when Honouliuli was finally built.²³ Built as the only permanent structure for Japanese in Hawaii, it was “constructed for the express purpose of confining internees and prisoners of war during World War II.”²⁴

And it is at this point where I look to take on the narratives. Following the opening of

¹⁹ Ibid, 75-76.

²⁰ Ibid, 77.

²¹ Ibid, 69.

²² United States National Park Service Pacific West Regional Office. *Honouliuli Gulch and Associated Sites: Draft Special Resource Study and Environmental Assessment*, 2014. (San Francisco: Pacific Regional Office, Park Planning and Environmental Compliance, 2014), 8.

²³ Ibid, 8.

²⁴ Ibid, 9.

Honouliuli, we have Sam Nishimura, who spent extended time at both Honouliuli and Sand Island.²⁵ The prior paranoia and hysteria has already taken place and the internees had been receiving those glares and questioning looks for years.

When a Crime Creates Sanctuary

Many internees were interned for a litany of crimes, but all of the reasons for imprisonment can be traced back to one common denominator: they were Japanese. Detained in April 1942, Sam Nishimura did not get a formal hearing until December 7, 1943. He spent three hours in the hearing to find out that “Evidently I have been interred for being a dual citizen.”²⁶ The process included getting multiple Caucasian friends to be character witnesses vouching for him.

Unfortunately, Nishimura had no faith in the process and wrote, “...sleep well for I knew that I would be going home to camp tomorrow.”²⁷ The painful thing about his realization is that Nishimura knew that his greatest crime,

according to the government, was that he was Japanese and American at the same time. I cannot fathom how I would feel if I was told that I was going to prison because of who I was. Yet for Nishimura and the other internees, this is what happened. The fact was that the government chose not to distinguish Japanese Americans from the enemy, the government felt the need to imprison them instead.

This criteria begs the question of why dual-citizenship was so reviled to the government. A tailor with dual citizenship was deemed so dangerous to the government that they placed him in an internment camp with other “criminals.” Though FDR greatly desired to intern every Japanese person in Hawaii, it would have represented a breakdown in daily life, because so many people in Hawaii were Japanese. Whereas interning 100,000+ Japanese Americans in the continental United States took away a small percentage of the overall population, interning 30% of your population is a significant

²⁵ Nishimura, Samuel Masao. *Diary of Sam Nishimura, 1943-1945*, (Honolulu: Nishimura, 2004), 3/4/1943.

²⁶ Nishimura Diary, 12/8/1943.

²⁷ Ibid, 12/10/1943.

loss.²⁸ Thus, the scope of Hawaii internment was much smaller and more focused. A high percentage of the Honouliuli internees were Buddhist priests and people with dual citizenship, or people that had current ties to Japan.

The decision to target and intern Buddhist and Shinto priests may seem strange, but the decision makes sense when looking at the way the American government viewed the Japanese. Buddhism represented a cornerstone of Japanese culture. It was regarded as an indicator of being Japanese. Thus, the fear was that Buddhism was preventing citizens from truly becoming an American.²⁹ Was Buddhism truly a problem? It is tough to discern whether the religion was actually a problem for the American government but they deemed it enough of a problem to target the clergy in Hawaii. In 1941, there were 182 different temples or shrines in the Territory of

²⁸ Linda Nishigaya et al., "Reviving the Lotus: Japanese Buddhism and World War II Internment," in *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawaii*, eds. Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, 173-198. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 178.

²⁹ Ibid, 188.

Hawaii.³⁰ In those temples, there were 149 priests. And of those 149, 122 were interned.³¹ This amounts to about 82% of the priesthood in Hawaii. At its peak, Honouliuli held 320 internees.³² Just under 40% of the population was made up of priests. Think about that.

Almost 40% of the people dangerous enough to be interned at Honouliuli were priests. The men who led the religious services for many of the Japanese in Hawaii were deemed security risks.

The perception of Buddhist temples was not helped by the dual role they played as a Japanese language school. For in Hawaii, "a priority of most temples was to provide Japanese language instruction..."³³ But even nationally, Buddhism was viewed as one of the "primary sources of anti-Americanism at least two decades before America's war with Japan."³⁴ This is due to a misconception that Buddhism was associated with Shinto, the national religion of Japan.³⁵ This misconception wrongfully interned many

³⁰ Ibid, 176, Table 1.

³¹ Ibid, 177, 182, Table 2&3

³² United States National Park Service, 9.

³³ Ibid, 176.

³⁴ Ibid, 178.

³⁵ Ibid, 177.

Japanese Americans in Hawaii and on the continent. Buddhism and Shinto are not related and they are two very different religions entirely. Yet it is easy to see why they were associated with each other. Both were considered traditionally Japanese religions and practicing either was an easy way to identify someone as Japanese. What this shows is that even one's religion was enough to place you in an internment camp, even though you may have not done anything wrong.

This does not vary from the fear on the continental United States of *Kibei* being disloyal. *Kibei* were American born Japanese who received schooling in Japan. The thought and fear was that the time spent in Japan was damaging to those Japanese Americans. While all Japanese Americans were dangerous, the *Kibei* were especially dangerous because they did not have an American education, but a Japanese education. Though they were still American citizens, the ideology was suddenly different because the location of their education was not American. Mikiso Hane, a *Kibei* from California, returned to America after spending nine years in

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Japan. His status as a *Kibei* kept him lower than a *Nisei* and kept him out of serving in the army.³⁶

These factors illustrate that one of the biggest crimes one could commit during World War II was being Japanese. Additionally, anything remotely pertaining to Japan was enough to be a criminal. Japanese schooling or religious beliefs were deemed too Japanese and created questions of loyalty. These aspects of culture were the reasons for interning a person. The American government targeted a culture and a people. This is obviously where a lot of older sources create a negative narrative of the internment camps. The internment of Japanese Americans was a signal that you could be interned for something you had no control over, in this case, your identity.

This identity also created a sense of unity within the camps, as prisoners had something to bond over. Nishimura spoke about his time in Honouliuli after his release and remarked that the "barracks was like family; if you are

³⁶ Mikiso Hane, "Wartime Internment," *The Journal of American History*, 77 no.2 (Sept. 1990), 573.

occupied...you will be able to withstand the agony.”³⁷ The isolation also forced the internees to “...be able to make friends, talk to people. Then you won’t lose your mind.”³⁸ For Shigeo Muroda, the internment camp was a fascinating place because your accomplishments meant nothing in the camps. The only thing that was judgment-worthy was “you and how good a person you were.”³⁹ This gave everyone a chance to start over and become something they were not before. But most importantly, the inclusion in the camp meant they were the recipients of a great injustice and they were suffering together. Inside Honouliuli, the internees were not viewed as “enemy-aliens,” but just as regular people.⁴⁰ I cannot imagine the solace that notion afforded the internees. There were no judgmental stares from people, or suspicion from their neighbors, because they were all in the same place together.

³⁷ Ethnic Studies Project, 378

³⁸ Ibid, 383.

³⁹ Fujitani, Yoshiaki, and Shigeo Muroda. “Oral History Interviews, Muroda, Shigeo [manuscript].” *Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii*, March 1, 1994. <https://jcch.follettdestiny.com/cataloging/servlet/presenttiledetailform.do?siteTypeID=2&bibID=1288&walkerID=1445260196519>, 12.

⁴⁰ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 6. Tapestries | Spring 2016

This bond, in some respects, extended to the release of internees. While there was some envy towards those who got released, each release represented a chance. When one of Nishimura’s roommates was released, he viewed the release as “a good sign.”⁴¹ There were some illegible words in the diary, but the tone of the entry makes it seem as if the release gave him hope for his own eventual release. At the very least it gave him something to think about. Toso Haseyama was released and acknowledged that the other roommates he had probably were not too happy about it.⁴² But that reaction is human, is it not? To feel anger over what was an excusal of a crime when it seemed that everyone was interned for the same crime? The anger and resentment was not directed towards the other internees, but towards the government. What Nishimura’s diary proved to me is that there was a possibility that was a range of emotions prisoners felt upon each release and happiness was one of those emotions.

⁴¹ Nishimura Diary, 10/29/1943.

⁴² University of Hawaii at Manoa. Ethnic Studies Oral History Project. *Oral History Interviews, Haseyama, Toso.* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii-Manoa, 1994), 1742.

This unique bond between internees was something that can be interpreted as a good narrative. For the internees, internment created a unique bonding experience. Subjected to the same injustice, they all realized how the situation was unfair for all interned. In my sources, many of the prisoners hinted at the solidarity between themselves at Honouliuli. As a part of a small targeted group, some internees may have felt a sense of comfort in their fellow prisoners. While it may not have been a uniform feeling, there is evidence that the prisoners did build a community through their shared captivity.

With Pain and Pleasure

One of the jarring results of the internment camps was the breakdown of family structure for Japanese Americans. Nishimura made many remarks about his family throughout his diary, but most noticeable were the amount of times he mentioned that his family was visiting that day. In fact, those days were so important that he would prepare for them well in advance.⁴³ Internees at Honouliuli were given bi-weekly

⁴³ Nishimura Diary, 4/26/1943.
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visits from family where they were able to meet with them for an extended amount of time. However, for Nishimura these visits were not nearly enough and he lamented at the separation between himself and his family. He once worried at the lack of communication with his family, at one point mentioning that he had not received a letter from them in over two weeks.⁴⁴ The impact of an absent father for Japanese American families was very significant. *Sansei*, or third generation Japanese Americans, that had their father interned scored the lowest on a “positive impact” scale according to a national survey. In that data we can see how important a father was to the Japanese American family. Nishimura made his pain known in his diary and the separation seemed to be too much for him at times.

Nishimura was not only remarking at the visits of his family but also making note of special days and holidays that he missed. He mentions the birthdays he misses and the special moments he cannot be there and be a father. We can only

⁴⁴ Ibid, 4/19/1943.

imagine the pain he felt knowing the best he could do for his children's birthday was to send them a note. Or on his wife's birthday when Nishimura writes, "Today is wife's birthday. Hope she had a ~~good~~-nice birthday party at home."⁴⁵ Nishimura never gives more than a couple words to mention the days that he missed, but maybe it is in this brevity that we can truly see his pain. We do have one instance when he mentions that it pains him to have to watch his children grow up from afar.⁴⁶

Nishimura's pain and familial concerns are echoed by other families as well. The impact of an absent father has been mentioned earlier, but it is also worth mentioning that both parents often times lost control over their children in the camps. For internees at Manzanar, the internment camp in California, mothers and fathers lost their importance and power over their children because their traditional roles were usurped.⁴⁷ This was no different in Hawaii, but it

⁴⁵ Ibid, 8/21/1943. All emphasis and cross-outs are how they appeared in the diary.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6/27/1943.

⁴⁷ Susan Matoba Adler, "The Effect of Internment on Children and Families: Honouliuli and Manzanar." *Tapestries* | Spring 2016

sometimes created a different twist there. Some families were forced to leave the islands and move to the mainland, even joining a family member who was interned because of the financial strain.⁴⁸ But just as the Manzanar internees experienced, children with more freedom and lacking an authority figure were free to do what they wanted, sometimes without penalty.⁴⁹

For Japanese American internees, internment represented a breakdown in the traditional family structure and created problems. If a father or mother was taken away from the family, a void was created in the household. Whether it was the lack of a parental figure for the children or the lack of contact for the interned parent, the absence was very noticeable. In this instance, we can see where the negative narratives of the internment camp can be understood. As Nishimura shows, there was a

Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawaii, eds. Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, 217-236. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 230

⁴⁸ Ibid, 230-231.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 231.

great amount of damage done emotionally to the internee, but also to the other family members. On the mainland and also in Hawaii, familial separation was a painful consequence of the internment camps. The familial separation was merely part of the injustice the internment camps represented. For the crimes Nishimura and other prisoners “committed,” to be interned brought into question a greater hurt.

Removed from the real world and their responsibilities, internees were afforded great amounts of idle time for themselves. One of the most striking things about the internment camp experience is how many internees remember the lighter activities that they did while interned. The physical removal from the outside world was an advantage to the internees, as some saw the camp as a “paradise, whereas the outside world was hell.”⁵⁰ It was a physical paradise, as the internees could eat without working and be idle.⁵¹ But for Nishimura, it was the games and activities that were the biggest draw for him. One of his

favorite activities was baseball. Nishimura began to play baseball regularly “for evening exercise.”⁵² One of the few times he missed his chance to play, the internees played the soldiers.⁵³ Baseball and athletics are often used as the most common examples of the leisure internees had.

The internees who held jobs in the camps were on a strict schedule, but there was a lot of recreational time. As seen above, Nishimura had time every night to play baseball. He remarked about the monotony of his routine many times and once wrote that the day was “the same old thing.”⁵⁴ The routine went this way: breakfast, work until lunch, lunch, work more until four, leisure time, dinner, shower and then sleep. It does seem mundane, but there are definitely pockets of time for the internees to have their fun. If someone was not working in the camp, then they had even more time.

⁵⁰ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 5.

⁵¹Ibid, 5.

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⁵² Nishimura Diary, 8/5/1943.

⁵³ Ibid, 8/19/1943.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 8/17/1943.

But Nishimura worked as the camp tailor and opened his shop in March of 1943.⁵⁵ The schedule seems to have given him a sense of order and normalcy. Regulated by the meal times and curfews, this schedule was not of Nishimura's creation. He even remarked that he was "getting used with this life."⁵⁶ And nights often were a chance for him to reflect on his day and write down what went on.⁵⁷ Had it not been for the free time in the schedule, there probably would be no diary for us to read from.

Card games and the like were also very popular activities. Go, Mahjongg, Shogi and Hanafuda were some of the most common card games that internees played.⁵⁸ Toso Haseyama listed Shogi as the first leisure activity when prompted.⁵⁹ However, aside from the card games and baseball, there were forms of media entertainment. Radio, movies and magazines were made available to the internees. In fact,

⁵⁵ Ibid, 3/18/1943. Incidentally, Toso Haseyama was also a tailor and remarks in his interview that there was already a tailor at Honouliuli so he was forced to work other jobs.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 7/14/1943.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 10/25/1943.

⁵⁸ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 28.

⁵⁹ University of Hawaii, *Oral History Interviews*, 1740. Tapestries | Spring 2016

Nishimura makes mention that the whole camp watched a movie one night.⁶⁰ He also writes in his early time at the camp that the campers listened to the radio "as usual."⁶¹ These various forms of entertainment simply mean that the camp afforded the internees some leisure time. It is here that we must recognize the special nature of Honouliuli compared to the mainland camps. On the mainland camps there were obviously card games, but there is no evidence that they showed movies to the internees.⁶² The Honouliuli internees were granted some luxuries that the mainland internees never got. Is this linked to place? That is not a question I have an answer to right now, but it does complicate the image of the internment camps.

These different ways to spend free time place a positive light on the Japanese internment camps. Not only were the internees removed

⁶⁰ Nishimura Diary, 10/27/1943.

⁶¹ Ibid, 8/9/1943.

⁶² Richard S. Nishimoto, et al., *Inside an American Concentration Camp: Japanese American Resistance at Poston, Arizona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 94-95. This section of the book actually talks extensively about the mass gambling that was taking place at Poston. Apparently the gambling was rampant and a point of controversy to certain groups in the camp.

from the suspicious gaze of the outside world, they were placed in a “paradise” of lessened responsibility and freedom. Free to spend their time playing games and such, the internees found ways to entertain themselves. In the various forms of entertainment, a narrative of fun and levity can be produced. By taking this further, one could even stretch that it was better to be interned than not. Internment meant lowered labor demands, as they had the time to engage in nightly card games, or a baseball league. Especially compared to the Jewish concentration camps, the internment camps had less work involved. Therein lies the positive narratives that have been constructed about the camps.

Where Hell Meets Paradise

To examine the negative narratives of the internment camps, one must also look at the location of the internment camps. All of the internment camps were set up in less than desirable places and made the prisoners an isolated group. Honouliuli was no different. Covering 160 acres, the camp was built on a plain

in West Oahu.⁶³ The site is located seven miles off of the coast and “in a hidden gulch surrounded by agricultural fields. The gulch is 500 to 700 feet wide at the camp location, with steep slopes rising on both sides.”⁶⁴ The slopes left the camp well below the agricultural fields around it.⁶⁵ One former Honouliuli internee remembers three things about the camp: first, mosquitoes were around all the time. Second, the location in the gulch negated the need for blackouts. The location literally hid the camp to the point that they were not subject to the same rules as the general population. Third, the heat in the camp was so intense that internees shared a “naked friendship.”⁶⁶

It is this heat and the “naked friendship” that many internees remember. The memory of the oppressive heat is so prevalent that the internees at Honouliuli gave the camp a different

⁶³ United States National Park Service, 23.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁵ Burton, Jeff, Mary Farrell, et al. “Hell Valley: Uncovering a Prison Camp in Paradise.” *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawaii*, eds. Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, 43-79. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 45.

⁶⁶ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 21.

name, *Jigoku Dani*, or “Hell Valley.”⁶⁷ Honouliuli in the Hawaiian language translates to “blue harbor,” or “dark bay.”⁶⁸ The name “Hell Valley” alone speaks volumes about what the internees felt about the camp site. In addition, Nishimura wrote in his first week at the camp that mornings and nights were extremely cold.⁶⁹ The internees at Honouliuli were exposed to extreme temperatures. The location of Honouliuli shows two things. First, physically they were removed from plain sight of the general population and could exist in their own special world. And second, they were in a place that had varied temperatures. Exposed to sweltering heat during the day hours, they also experienced freezing cold during the night.

Honouliuli was similar to the other internment camps on the mainland in its location. Many, if not all of the locations designated for camps were empty and unused.⁷⁰

Topaz, a camp in Utah, was one of the most

⁶⁷ Burton, et al., “Hell Valley,” 44.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁹ Nishimura Diary, 3/13/43-3/14/43.

⁷⁰ Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA*, 96.

extreme examples of the poor environment

Japanese Americans were exposed to:

The area was first visited by ‘white’ explorers in 1776, who called it the ‘Valle Solado,’ or Valley of Salt; its inhospitable alkali-laden soil frustrated completely the efforts of two distinct groups of Mormon pioneers who tried to settle there. A ‘barren valley’ at 4600 feet above sea level, with temperatures ranging from 106°F. in the summer to -30° in the winter, it has an average rainfall between 7 and 8 inches per year. Other climactic characteristics included wind ‘which keeps up a seldom interrupted whirl of dust’ and a ‘nonabsorbent soil which, after a rain, is a gummy muck...’⁷¹

Manzanar is also well known for being in an isolated location, deep in California desert at the foot of the Sierra Nevada range.⁷² Tule Lake had “bone-chilling frigidity” and “a harsh landscape barren of any foliage.”⁷³ These camps were only three of the many sites throughout the continent.

While Honouliuli was not nearly as extreme as

⁷¹ Ibid, 97.

⁷² Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, “From *Farewell to Manzanar*,” in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*, ed. Lawson Fusao Inada, (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000), 104-105.

⁷³ George Takei, “From *To the Stars*,” in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*, ed. Lawson Fusao Inada, (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000), 121.

these sites, especially the fluctuation in temperature at Topaz, the location was still very undesirable. These locations were unwanted and unused by pioneers and settlers who had crossed the country looking for suitable places to live. Yet, the American government deemed these lands as suitable areas for internees to live.

Food for the Body and Soul

A unified distrust in the food also gave the internees an area to work together and grow closer. Something as simple as food can be a tough adjustment for people as they are removed from their natural places. At Honouliuli, the food was something to get adjusted to. The opinions of the internees were split. Some people like Nishimura had no problem with the food saying that it was “pretty good,” since cooks from all over the island were at the camp.⁷⁴ Others complained that they only received baloney while in the camp.⁷⁵ And yet, Shomei Kaneshiro also remembers very simple meals centered on eggs.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ University of Hawaii, *Waiialua & Haleiwa*, 381.

⁷⁵ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 23.

⁷⁶ Hayashi, Tatsumi, and Shomei Kaneshiro. “Oral History Interviews, Kaneshiro, Shomei [manuscript].” *Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii*, September 25, 2013. *Tapestries* | Spring 2016

These quotes contradict each other and do not match up, unless the cooks from Hawaii in the 1940s knew how to prepare baloney in ways we do not know. Regardless, the food situation was very important to the internees at Honouliuli, so much so that they were willing to pitch in money and the government coupons they received to purchase cultural food items such as *miso*, *takuwan*, and tofu.⁷⁷ In fact one time, there was great anger because a shipment of food was not stored properly and got spoiled, thus ruining plans for a meal.⁷⁸ This unified effort to pool together resources to make meals for the whole community better and culturally familiar make me think that both parties who liked the food and complained about it have merit. The meals probably were very plain and simple, but there were days that they were made better because of the things that the prisoners purchased.

Even more so, the community effort to grow their own products probably helped the

<https://jcch.follettdestiny.com/cataloging/servlet/presenttiledetailform.do?action=AddTMyList&bibID=43734&siteTypeID=2>, 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 23.

food situation. One of the most impressive things that I found while reading the diary and all these other interviews and sources, is the fact that the internees had their own garden to grow vegetables and products that the camp did not provide. Nishimura remembers the garden that the camp had, but only mentions it briefly.⁷⁹ I can only guess that he did not play a big part in helping to tend to the garden because of his job as the camp tailor. However, Nishimura's mention of the garden means that it must have been a fairly important endeavor for some. And others remember that the vegetable garden was a big part of the camp. The garden was a source of food for the residents and the food they grew made some much happier.⁸⁰ Today, the archaeologists working on the site have found the locations for the garden at Honouliuli and state that "gardens, pools, and other landscape features created by the residents often embellished the stark layout."⁸¹ Going off of their analysis of the garden site, it also served as a psychological and

aesthetic boost. This shows that something as simple as a garden was a positive experience and allowed them to shape their internment in a way that benefitted them. It was a means to enrich their overall experience. While a garden did not work to erase the reality of their imprisonment, it did work to raise spirits enough.

Mainland internment also had its ups and downs with the food experience. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston in her famous memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar*, remembers that the food made everyone sick and many of the cooks were first timers.⁸² In addition, food would spoil and the refrigeration was poor.⁸³ Thus, they often times did not have the resources available to them that people at Honouliuli had. But Manzanar did have a thriving agricultural scene. The camp was so productive that:

By September 1942, the storehouses were filled with the harvested crops. Manzanar became not only self-sufficient in feeding itself, but also shipped its excess crops to other camps to feed the prisoners there.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ University of Hawaii, *Waiialua & Haleiwa*, 381.

⁸⁰ Tasaka, *Confidential Stories*, 23.

⁸¹ United States National Park Service, 57.

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⁸² Houston, "From *Farewell to Manzanar*," 105.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 105.

⁸⁴ Armor, et al., *Manzanar*, 92.

They too had their own success growing their own crops to liven up their meals, but also for other internees who suffered the way that they did.

Food seems like something very simple and an unimportant factor in the grand scheme of things considering the internees situation. Food was something that served as a bonding experience. Whether it was over the fact that the food was terrible and made them sick, or it was the decision to grow a community garden for all to eat from, the food brought the internees together. For the Honouliuli internees, food gave them a way to shape their internment. They gained a way to actively change the environment that they were living in. A simple sign of life in “Hell Valley” was apparently enough to raise spirits.

Conclusion

The story of Japanese American internment has been told two different ways. One way speaks to the negativity and the outright injustice it was, while the other side is

saying that the camps really were not that bad. The two sides must be reconciled because each, alone, is incomplete. One way to do so is by looking very closely at Honouliuli. Honouliuli is important to consider because of the myriad of ways that it fits into both the negative and positive stories. Nishimura and the others were very much exposed to the same injustices as the mainland internees. While they were criminalized, persecuted and attacked for their race, the camps allowed them to find solace and care from other Japanese Americans. So in this site of oppression, Japanese Americans found camaraderie and acceptance.

The breakdown in family structure was a crushing blow to many Japanese Americans. In any instance, not having a parent around would be tough, but it was especially crushing to the Japanese Americans. Absent parents meant a missing authority figure that could help to reign in the children or provide for them. For many of the Japanese Americans who were imprisoned, they lost control over their lives. They could not be with their children and take an active role in

raising them, but the parents had to sit on the side and watch them grow up from afar and behind barbed wire. At the same time, they had some control in raising something and still meaning something. The garden and the food situation for Honouliuli internees were both important to their psyche and their stomachs. Honouliuli had a much better food situation than mainland camps and in their food, the Honouliuli prisoners affected their imprisonment.

The physical location of the camps were hellacious and unfit for living. Often secluded and removed from civilization, the location of the camps did not help the internees. The camps were constructed in places that people chose not to live on for one reason or another, yet the American government deemed them suitable for Japanese Americans. This speaks volumes about how the government truly viewed the “enemy aliens.” Yet this isolation gave them some respite from the outside world. In the camps, they understood who they were and knew that the struggle to prove themselves American was just as hard as not claiming Japanese descent.

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Internees had a chance to live in solidarity. There was a lowered sense of distrust and hatred. Everyone was enduring the same hardships. Everyone in the camps were wrongfully imprisoned for their race.

These are just a few examples of the way the positive and negative narratives come together. And it is in these examples that I struggled with how to feel about the camps. I recognize the invasion of civil liberties that the camp represented, but I also recognize the opportunities it created. It allowed for Japanese to find common ground with their peers. The experience also gave them a chance to explore different leisure activities. For the Japanese Americans in general, it provided an opportunity to escape scrutiny and hatred that was in their lives.

And again, Honouliuli is a fine place for us to start investigating the polarizing narratives of the camps. Honouliuli contained many of the same negatives of the mainland camps and had many of the same positives. But the prisoners at Honouliuli seem to have a much kinder

remembrance of the camp. It was Nishimura's quote that left me befuddled and realistically asking the question of narrative. Years after his release, Nishimura said in an interview that "Honouliuli internment camp wasn't that bad."⁸⁵ What was it that made the camp not that bad? And I think part of it is owed to the location of Honouliuli. When I say location, I do not mean the actual location of the camp on the island, but I mean the location of Honouliuli within the confines of America and in Hawaii. Had Nishimura been interned at Manzanar, or Topaz, or Heart Mountain, I believe that he would not say those words above. The factor of place changes perceptions of internment.

This is the impact that Honouliuli can have on internment studies. There are some national narratives that camp challenges. The perceptions of the camp and the local factors that brought about these perceptions have not been included in broader internment studies. The unique factors of Hawaii's population and location changed the meaning of internment for

those prisoners. Much of the focus has been on the mainland camps thus far and I am aware of the reasons why. The recent rediscovery of the Honouliuli camp and the lower number of interned Japanese in Hawaii have shifted focus away from the camp. It is time to study the site closely and give it its due recognition.

⁸⁵ Interview, 379.
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