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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
482-6181

Date: September 5, 1981
To: Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians
From: Lawson Fusao Inada, Professor
Re: Seattle Testimony, September 9, 1981

Honored Members of the Commission:

My name is Lawson Fusao Inada, Professor of English at Southern Oregon State College, author of Before the War, the first poetry volume by a Japanese-American to be published by a major firm, and author of several scholarly works on the Asian-American experience.

I come to you today not as Citizen 19228 but as an American citizen, a husband and father, and an educator of our young.

In the course of my research as a literary historian, particularly in the field of Japanese-American literature, I have encountered materials and been struck by insights that will be of value to this Commission and will serve to shed new light on the Camp experience in general.

An examination of literature is not as remotely-related to the task at hand as may at first seem: as with any major event involving masses of people, the insights arising from experience naturally follow and manifest themselves in the writing of the time--expressing for the record, setting the experience in perspective, and rendering it accessible to others.

Such is the way of culture and education--for our future generations.

Thus it was, then, that from the Camp experience came some of the most important Japanese-American writing of our time and also a substantial body of work by non-Japanese-Americans alike--for the Camps, after all, were an American experience.

No doubt you have heard testimony in a number of vital areas, delivered in a wide range of emotions. Much of this bespeaks to the strength and courage of the Japanese-American people; the cause is justice, to exonerate America.

It occurs to me, however, as it must have occurred to you, that because of the very nature of the Camp experience, much of the important testimony from former internees has not, and perhaps will not, be heard.

I speak here of those, in the majority, who could not or would not testify. These are those who can not or will not articulate the effects of the experience. These are those unable or unwilling to recount their "war stories," as it were, in succinct manner, with fluency.

These are not those who are dead. These are those who are alive, who have had to sublimate the effects of the experience to survive, who have swallowed the barbed wire, so to speak, so that it eats the interior, stops the throat, and strangles the heart.

Surely, by now, the statistics are in and the debate has been ample; in all good conscience, before time takes its toll, let us look to the heart of the matter.

And that, I submit, is to be found in the literature, written by those with their hands on the pulse. And the very reason for the existence of literature is because it just couldn't be said any other way.

Not with such force and power. And I need only cite The Diary of Anne Frank as one compelling example.

Before examining a particular work, however, allow me to set the context in which it functions.

Now, apart from the actual evacuation itself, and apart from all the individual and separate tragedies that occurred as a result, my findings indicate that the singlemost source of widespread damage was incurred by the instituting, in 1943, of the "Application for Leave Clearance"--otherwise known as the "Loyalty Oath."

All publications purporting to explore the Camp experience after 1943, in all genres and by writers of any descent, serve to substantiate this fact.

Thus, for your purposes, the "Loyalty Oath" can be a point of focus and a means of access to the entire experience. And in this area, expert testimony is also in order from the professional psychologists and social scientists stationed in the Camps, who observed and recorded the damage inflicted by the "Loyalty Oath."

The Camps irrevocably altered the course of Japanese-America; the "Loyalty Oath" practically destroyed it.

For a summary of the incidences surrounding the "Loyalty Oath," let me refer you to the popular history by Bill Hosokawa, Nisei: The Quiet Americans. The "Loyalty Oath" is at the heart of Michi Nishiura Weglyn's widely-acclaimed study, Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps; the "Loyalty Oath" is at the heart of Dr. Kazuo Miyamoto's epic novel, Hawaii: End of the Rainbow; the "Loyalty Oath" is at the heart of Jeanne and Jim Houston's autobiographical Farewell to Manzanar, sanctioned by the National Education Association.

On the surface, this "Loyalty Oath," this innocuous-looking questionnaire resulted in the transfer of 18,711 evacuees between centers, for purposes of segregation and, in many cases, eventual repatriation. Impressive statistics, certainly, but there is more to the story.

In actuality, the "Loyalty Oath"--a bad idea in a bad situation, made worse by governmental mishandling--served to segregate generation against generation, religion against religion, family against family, and wreaked havoc within households and individuals--a veritable civil war, with no winners.

The common term for this condition, of course, is "blaming the victim." The people had been set upon themselves, and when they emerged from the experience, they were not to be whole again.

The damage was irrevocable, and would extend into the lives of future generations; and for this there can be no real redress.

Thus it was, then, as has been noted and documented, that thousands upon thousands of the released people deliberately chose not to return to their former homes, taking the separate ways, instead, of exiles in this country.

The compulsion was to disperse and, as much as possible, to "disappear."

For above and beyond the despair associated with "home," above and beyond the stigmata to bear--the "when did you stop being a Jap" attitude to confront-- there was now an additional element, perpetrated and compounded by the "Loyalty Oath," to live with or try to avoid: and this was nothing less than a distrust of, even a loathing for, one's very own kind.

And for those that did return, the effects of the "Loyalty Oath" were there to confront on a day-to-day basis, with the Japanese-Americans themselves, in effect, accusing one another of being "Japs," or even "Americans."

And these were the communities that, contrary to post-War plaudits of "success," despite all the post-War praises for "out-whiting the whites"--as the pundits put it in national publications--these were the communities that had achieved their greatest success long before the destruction of the Camps, a hard-won success by a whole and healthy people of great pride and cultural integrity who, as with all other American nationalities, firmly believed in the American way, who exemplified the American way, and who went on to prove their "American-ness" with blood.

But in the meantime, the Camps had intervened, the communities had been fragmented, and any "success" was to be a qualified one, founded on the failure of justice. If anything, the Camps made "successful" victims, at immeasurable expense.

And if there had been a magical pill to eradicate one's "Jap-ness," I shudder to think how many would have taken it.

This is the context and atmosphere, then, in which one of the major American works of our time, and certainly the greatest single achievement by a Japanese-American, takes place. I am speaking, of course, of the novel No-No Boy, by the late John Okada, Seattle's own, an internee of the Camps, and a distinguished veteran of the United States Army.

To look to this work of art as a chronicle of a people, place, and time, is in keeping with the way we look to the work of our Nobel Laureates like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck for chronicles of their own peoples, places, and times.

No less an authority than the eminent historian, Bill Hosokawa, has this to say about the novel: "Nisei will recognize the authenticity of the idioms Okada's characters use, as well as his descriptions of the familiar Issei and Nisei mannerisms that make them come alive..."

And I daresay that, having lived the depth of the novel, one cannot walk the streets of Seattle, America, for very long without encountering the living substance of the book itself--the effects of Camp and the "Loyalty Oath" on the Japanese-American people.

As a matter of fact, the entire plot and subject matter of No-No Boy is devoted to the subsequent ramifications of the Camps and the "Loyalty Oath" in particular.

It is the story of just one Japanese-American family in Seattle immediately after the War. Ichiro Yamada, the protagonist, is a "no-no boy," just home from imprisonment, and immediately accosted and spat upon by a former friend, an Army veteran, who is also, of all things, a fellow Japanese-American.

Ichiro's father is now a broken man, a drunk, absent-mindedly tending the shambles of a tiny grocery. Ichiro's mother is going insane, a victim of both the Camps and the War. Ichiro's brother, consumed by the shame of having a "no-no boy" in the family, has only one goal in mind--to be old enough to join the Army and "prove" his "loyalty," his true "American-ness." The family, the community, is fragmented.

Some of the Japanese-Americans have been repatriated; some have died in battle, for America; some refuse to return to Seattle, out of bitterness and shame.

Ichiro's best friend, Kenji Kanno, an Army veteran dying from the lingering effects of a wound incurred in Germany, has this to say to him:

"...Stick it through. Let them call you names. They don't mean it. What I mean is, they don't know what they're doing. The way I see it, they pick on you because they're vulnerable. They think just because they went and packed a rifle they're different but they aren't and they know it. They're still Japs...."

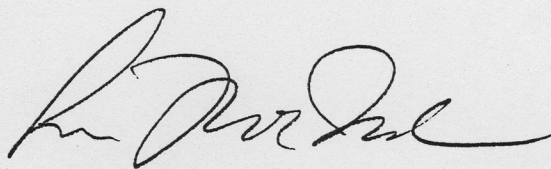
"...After that, head out. Go someplace where there isn't another Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. Anything but a Japanese...."

In the course of the novel, Kenji dies, Ichiro's mother dies, but Ichiro remains undaunted in his quest, the quest of his people, to be whole again.

In closing, then, allow me to have John Okada testify on my behalf. Here are just a few words from the final chapter of his book, his legacy to us all, which is not so much an end but a beginning--a continuing testament to the strength and courage of the Japanese-American people, and the hope that is America:

He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart.

Thank you.



5 Sept 81