

Remembering Loss: Effects of Internment and Dispossession on Japanese Canadian

Collective Memory

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Introduction

Following the attack at Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Canadian government forcibly interned and relocated approximately 22,000 Japanese Canadians—comprising over 90% of the total Japanese Canadian population—from the British Columbia coast into other provinces.

Japanese Canadians were forced to leave everything behind; each person was allowed to take only one suitcase with them as they were relocated to remote work camps in other areas of the country. Their valued possessions, such as family heirlooms, businesses, homes, and fishing boats were either looted by private citizens or were seized by the Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property and resold to other citizens at cut-rate prices.

The impacts of the internment were devastating on Japanese Canadians, as estimates place the value of the lost property at 1.2\$ billion dollars in 2023 CAD currency. The internment also had impacts on Canadian society at large, as it demonstrated how policies based on racial discrimination could be enacted under the guise of “national security”. Despite the clear and long-lasting effects that the internment had on Canadian society, little research has been done on what impact the internment had on Japanese Canadian collective memory.

Methodology

The methodology for this research project involved analysing 21 interviews of Japanese Canadians who were affected by the internment and dispossession, as collected in the Landscapes of Injustice oral history archive. Interviews that were analysed included both individuals who directly experienced the internment and their descendants. The overarching question with which the research was conducted is as follows: What impact did the internment have on how Japanese Canadians conceptualize their place in Canadian society, both in relation to the government and Canadian society at large.

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Views on the Canadian State

As is expected the internment negatively affected Japanese Canadians' relationship to the Canadian government as several Japanese Canadians, such as Mary and Suzy Kimoto, expressed frustration towards all levels of government for enacting and engaging in a project of racial exclusion. For other Japanese Canadians the issue has become politicized, with the Liberal Party taking the brunt of the blame due to their involvement in arguing for internment and dispossession. Generally speaking interviewees viewed the Conservative Party in a more favourable light, since Brian Mulroney's Conservative government was responsible for undertaking the Redress Program in 1988. Similarly, the NDP is also viewed positively since their predecessor—the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)—had fought for the rights of Japanese Canadians prior to the internment.

Picture Citation: *Family at Slocan/New Denver?* (1941-49). Japanese American National Museum Photo Exhibition. Photograph by Leonard Frank. <https://discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2016/2/26/two-views>

Views on Minority Rights

Internment and dispossession left former internees, such as Roy Uyeda, with a sense of disillusionment over the Canadian political system as they experienced first-hand how democratic institutions can be wielded to pass racially discriminatory legislation that violate the same liberal principles they were intended to protect. Some interviewees left a warning for Canadians about the importance of protecting minority rights during times of international conflict, as seen through Mel Tsuji's statement regarding the rise of Islamophobia in Canada following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.



Forming a Japanese Canadian Identity

Many interviewees discussed their difficulty in forming a personal identity as they felt a tension existed between maintaining a Japanese cultural identity and assimilating into Canadian society. The traumatic experiences of internment left many survivors with a hyper awareness of their status as a visible minority in a racially hierarchical society, and they therefore took conscious steps to integrate their children into Canadian society in order to provide them with better opportunities.



QR Codes

Please scan the QR codes attached to each paragraph in order to listen to audio clips of Japanese Canadians discussing how the internment has impacted their collective memory. These audio clips were taken from interviews found in the Landscapes of Injustice oral history archive, and the viewer is encouraged to listen to the clips for approximately one minute.

Bibliography

Bud Madakoro, interviewed by Alexander Pekic, 10 July 2015, Toronto. Landscapes of Injustice Archive. https://loi.uvic.ca/archive/oral_history_mado1_2015-07-11.html

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