



“it’s just a dream, just a dream”

The WWII Japanese-American Internment in the U.S. in a Sociological Imagination Class Exercise

Thomas J. Mason, Kathleen M. Powers & Emmett Schaefer

University of Massachusetts Boston

thomas.mason001@umb.edu • kpowers621@aol.com • emmett.schaefer@umb.edu

Abstract: This is an account of a “Race and Power in the US” course exercise conducted at UMass Boston. In a unit on the Japanese-American internment during WWII and the movement for reparations in the 1970s and 1980s that culminated in 1988 when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act into law, the students are asked to put themselves in the shoes of a Japanese-American and to write a letter to a family member. The purpose of the assignment is to help foster in the students sensitivity (to paraphrase C. Wright Mills) to the interplay between socio-historical contexts and the individuals responding to them. The article includes a summary of the sociological imagination exercise as reported by the instructor, and two imaginative letters written by students.

EMMETT SCHAEFER, LECTURER OF SOCIOLOGY, UMASS BOSTON:

In a course I teach at UMass Boston entitled, “Race and Power in the US,” we do a unit on the Japanese-American internment during WWII and the movement for reparations in the 1970s and 1980s that culminated in 1988 when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act into law. In the second of two assignments for this unit I ask the students to put themselves in the shoes of a Japanese-American and to write a letter to a family member. The purpose of the assignment is to help foster in the students sensitiv-

ity to (to paraphrase C. Wright Mills) the interplay between socio-historical contexts and the individuals responding to them. The assignment reads as follows:

Discussion: After WWII and following the closing of the Japanese-American concentration camps, a heavy silence descended concerning every aspect of this experience. The silence was as deafening inside the Japanese-American community as outside. A combination of factors resulted in renewed discussion of the experience within Japanese-American families and the community in the late-1960s and 1970s. These discussions, and the reparations movement that emerged out of them, were accompanied by

Undergraduate students Thomas J. Mason (Sociology) and Kathleen M. Powers (English) enrolled in a Soc. 211G course on “Race and Power In the U.S.” conducted by Dr. Emmett Schaefer in Fall 2005 and Fall 2007 at UMass Boston respectively. Schaefer is a Lecturer of Sociology at UMass Boston whose research interests include Race and Ethnic Relations, Men’s Studies, and Gender Studies. Schaefer is a co-editor (with Cooper Thompson and Harry Brod) of *White Men Challenging Racism: 35 Personal Stories* (Duke University Press, 2003).

intense emotions within Japanese-American families and the community. In this paper you will explore some of these emotions as a way of grasping the interplay between socio-historical contexts and the individuals responding to them.

Assignment: The paper is a role play. You are to take the part of a family member in a Japanese-American family and write a letter to another family member. You need to make three choices to get started. First, are you an Issei, a Nisei or a Sansei [first, second or third generation Japanese immigrant to the US]? Second, are you writing to an Issei, Nisei or Sansei? Third, when are you writing? I want you to pick a time beginning in the late-1960s, so that you can connect the “present” with the past, but it can be during the early years of the Asian-American movement (late-1960s), during the spread of the Reparations’ Movement in the 1970s, or after the Wartime Relocation Commission hearings in the early-1980s.

Pick a time and a perspective that you think you have some understanding of, put yourself in that perspective, and address another family member. The letter should address aspects of the internment experience, as well as “contemporary” revelations and experiences. For example, you could choose to be a Nisei parent explaining to a Sansei daughter something about the internment, but mostly about why you never talked about it, and why you’re opposed to having it aired publicly now.

Be sure to review all relevant course material.

Criteria for evaluation:

1. Level of sophistication of understanding you demonstrate for the tensions within Japanese-American families and the community accumulating over the course of the internment experience and developing during the post-war decades.
2. Level of sophistication you demonstrate for the connections between these tensions and the socio-historical contexts within which they existed.

3. Your ability to convincingly put yourself in another’s shoes and take on that person’s perspective.

**CREATED BY THOMAS MASON,
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT,
UMASS BOSTON:**

Dear Brother,

It has been years since we last saw each other, and for that matter even talked. It seems so odd to be writing this letter. To think after a little more than twenty years of short ill-fated “Hello’s” and “How are you’s?” I have finally built up the strength to contact you. Don’t take my words wrong brother, in no way am I striking out at you for not contacting me. If anything, I see it as my fault. I’m the older brother and I should have been the one to explain. For that I am sorry.

I understand the tension that grew between us and quickly separated us in that cold January night back in 1943. Not only separated us as individuals, but as a family. Mother had nothing after father was sent away to the camp in Granada, CO. I realize you felt that I was leaving both of you behind and that, there was some malcontent I had. Being called a potential threat, yet still offering to fight for America. I was not in any way ashamed to be Japanese, this was not my reasoning at all, and I know at the time I never gave you my reasons. I just told you and mother that I had to go, shut you out for the rest of my short time in the barracks and then, I was gone.

My regrets are tremendous, and there have been many nights when I sit up and think of my actions and if I actually did the right thing. Joining the 442nd division was not a betrayal of the family in my eyes, and I know if father had been there he would have been taken aback by the thought of me joining. The fact is I did not agree to join the military service for THEM. But yet, I did it for

you and mother. Understanding that you felt I had been selfish, I am sorry. Yet you need to understand, that in no way was this a selfish fleeing from our captive world behind the fences. Nor was I attempting to separate myself from you and mother. I did it in the hopes that they would see that we were not of danger, hoping you and mom would be released faster. I thought about it long and hard, and in theory I wondered whether I had made the right choice. Fight for our country, the one that forced us to live in that desolate place, in hopes of early release.

As you know my theory was very wrong, and the loss of mom to the flu that long winter was very painful. I know you feel angry at me for leaving, and I understand your resentment. You being the younger one of us, I can understand how hard it was to first to be separated from our father, then face the death of our mother 8 months after I had left. It saddened me to hear about her death from you, and even though I wrote back and explained how wary it had made me, there was nothing I could do to escape my decision. I had been drafted, and couldn't return "home" till my leave was over.

It hurt to read the letter you wrote, saying that you were ashamed to be my brother. I want you to know now that I was a little ashamed too. Not for the fact that I had done what I felt was going to help you and mom out in the long run, but because I had let you down.

There is just so much to talk about, and it bothers me most of all that suddenly hearing my kids ask "Dad, were you at the camps?", was what finally drove me to write to you. Not that I didn't want to reach you in some way, I just never knew what to say. Above all things I felt that most of what happened to our family, was better off in the past. If that was true I guess I wouldn't be stuck up at night thinking about your life, and how you are doing.

Speaking of which, how is Danny? He must be getting big, around ten or eleven? Wow, its pathetic that I don't even know my

own nephew's age. Also scary is how time flies by. Both Susan and Michael are getting up there. Susan will be going into college next year. She's a real smart girl, much smarter than her old man (although that wouldn't take much.)

Anyway, both of the kids keep asking me about the camps. I have no idea what to tell them. So what do I say? Nothing. Not a thing. I wasn't there nearly as long as you, because of the army, but I know how it was when I was there and I'm guessing it didn't change much. It's hard enough talking to you through this letter, let alone talk to my kids about something I feel they could never fully understand. My wife and I avoid talks about the camps if we can, but sometimes they manage to get a little out of us.

How could they understand why we don't talk? How could they even come to grasp the fact that those camps essentially ruined our foundation as a family and split us up? It just seems so petty to tell them about it. I simply tell them never to take anything for granted, with a forced smile.

Have your kids asked about what it was like in the camps? Surely, Danny is too young to ask yet, but have you shared anything with him about the "experience?" I remember when you were just a kid, before we went into the camps. You used to beg me to go play football with you in the backyard, and I'd always tell you to "get lost." You were such a pest!

The camps. They were like broken homes. It disgusts me to even think about them now. It hurts to occasionally hear your voice on the phone, to hear that angst in your voice, talking to me as if I am a stranger. We lost our old house, and everything in it, all for the "protection" of this country. Never did I once think that we would grow so far apart, that this country would divide us. That isn't to say I can not stand this country, and I'm sure the same goes for you, because it is all I know. It's all we've ever known.

I knew it was never mom's and dad's fault we went to the camps, I knew it was inevitable. At the time we were Japanese. The

enemy. Still I kept hoping for the war to end. Everyday on our missions you and mom's well being is all I thought about. But I felt regret when I continued to receive letters from you; knowing my attempt to help out proved futile.

The war was ravenous on the 442nd division, and we suffered many losses. I remember training was rigorous and I got called far worse than a "Jap." Drill Sergeants didn't like the thought of us having our own division, and it showed. It showed by the way they talked to us, treated us, pushed us around and by the way still some retorted to us as nothing more than foreign traitors.

To think that even after you serve your country, all someone can say is "You were one of the good ones." I always used to nod my head, give a firm "Yes Sir," and continue on my way. All I could think about was all the other "good ones" we had lived with at camp. But they were never good, you weren't good unless you fought for the country that took your life away. I guess being American just wasn't good enough?

I remember the camps, even though I left earlier than you, I still do. The awful food, the hot days, and colds nights. I remember mom trying to keep us happy (and probably herself), by saying father was ok and that soon enough I and you would be arguing at home again. It's odd enough but some of the best memories I have of you are those of bickering. Any memory is good now, especially since there has been no room for new ones.

I have nightmares all the time, about agents storming into the house and taking me away. It's unsettling waking up almost every night to that. Just keep telling myself "it's just a dream, just a dream." and slowly fall back asleep. Then again being put into the camps seemed like a big enough dream as it was. Do you remember those trains they took us there in? Jesus, did they smell awful by the end. It's funny but I was somehow happy to see desert when it stopped. Anything was better than that horrid odor.

This is so strange to be mentioning any of this to you; haven't been so open with

these things, ever, not even with my wife. My thoughts feel so jumbled and I have so many mixed emotions. Was all of what they did to us in vain? Where we really that dangerous as a group of people? If so, why did they bother to release us at all? Also why the hell did they allow us to join their army?

There is a look inside my head. It scares me, and has me biting at my nails every time. That is why I avoid confrontation with my children. They get away with so much compared to what mom and dad let us get away with. This family isn't breaking up, I simply won't allow it. Just avoid the talks of the camps, and avoid as much confrontation as possible.

You're my brother and I will always love you, even if you still resent me. If you have read this far, I know you care a little. Why? Well, because these thoughts were probably just as hard for you to read as they were for me to write about. Our family had no chance in that camp, in those situations. We were split in months. You were too young to go to war, I was just of age. You and mom told me not to go, I had other thoughts. They, THEY had other thoughts.

I miss you, and hope to hear from you soon. It would just be really nice. Regardless, I'm sorry, but in many ways I think they had doomed us from the start. The separations didn't help. Regardless of any animosity, I still care about you and hope your life is going good. This letter was not easy to write. Especially because speaking about all of this for the first time, I have so much more to say. Yet, it has left me mentally and emotionally drained. I just hope you take the time to read it.

Love,

Your Brother

**CREATED BY KATHLEEN POWERS,
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT,
UMASS BOSTON:**

October 24, 1968

Dear Obaasan,

Yes, my dear Nana, I addressed you as my Obaasan, a Japanese nickname for grandmother. Of course I never heard that nickname from you or my mother. I had to ask the old man in the nursing home where my mother works what the word was because I don't know much of anything about being Japanese. She always tells us we are American. It's as if we never had anything to do with being Japanese at all. That is why I am writing you this letter. I want to know more about my heritage, but my mother always puts me off. She says it is foolish to look to the past for answers. She is always pushing me to press forward, to become more educated, and that my education will give me any answers in life that I really need. Well, I do pay attention in school, and I am not getting any answers to my questions, and I thought you could help.

Recently I was helping my mother clean out the attic in our house. I came across a box of pictures. In it was a picture of my mom when she was just a little girl. She was standing next to you. You both look so sad in the picture, kind of lost. I asked where it was taken and she said it was at a camp in Wyoming. I told her I thought she lived in Oregon when she was little, and that she probably looked sad because she had to go to camp so far away. She had tears in her eyes and told me we had done enough cleaning for the day. I sure am glad I never went to camp at a place like that. It did not look like a fun place at all.

I went over to my friend Kathleen Brennan's afterwards and told her and her mother the story of my mom and me in the attic. Her mom said you are a peculiar lot, your family. She said she didn't understand why someone Japanese would want to name

their two girls Margaret and Sheila and I thought that was strange because there are a lot of girls with names like that in our neighborhood. She said she was Irish and very aware of her heritage and that there was a lot of good about it and that there was a lot of bad about it and that it was important to be aware of both.

Mrs. Brennan did not go to school very long, but I always get the feeling when she goes on and on about stuff that she is very smart because she gets this excited look in her eyes and I figure what she is saying is very important. She said that she always thought that calling places like my mom stayed at a camp was ludicrous and I said I agreed even though I had no idea what ludicrous meant and I had to go home and look it up in a dictionary after. That only made me more confused when I found out what it meant because I certainly don't want my mom to ever send me to a camp that would be ludicrous. I was going to ask her more about it, but she and my father were so quiet at dinner and looked so sad I decided not to bring it up again.

My sister called from college and I told her the story and she said I should ask my teacher about the camps. Well that was a stupid idea because I asked the teacher about it and she decided to give the class a lesson on Pearl Harbor. I didn't learn anything about the camp at all and afterwards the boys in the class called me bad names and asked me if my grandfather dropped planes on Pearl Harbor for the Japanese. I said he wasn't even in Pearl Harbor for God's sake. He lived on a farm in Oregon and left Japan when he was very young. Then the boys said he was a Jap spy and I said they were stupid, but who knows maybe he was because a lot of the kids in the class won't talk to me now.

My sister came home for a break from college a couple of days later and my mother had a fit. My sister said it was good I was asking questions and that it was never too early to be socially conscious and my mother said that rocking the boat will only lead to trouble. My father had his head in his hands the

whole time my mother and sister argued which really surprised me because he usually only has to look at all of us and we know when to stop talking. I knew something big was going on but I just didn't understand it. My sister told my parents she is learning so much about life at some meetings she goes to at school, so much more than she was learning in class. My father got all red when she said that. She talked a lot about some hero she had named Martin Luther King and that he died fighting for all oppressed people, and my father said we are not oppressed, we are nothing like those people, and she said yes we are and there was a lot of yelling and red faces and I cannot believe all of this started because I asked about some camp.

Before my sister went back to school she said she was very proud of me for wanting to know more about my heritage and I guess that means being Japanese because ever since that lecture on Pearl Harbor the boys at school say I am really not American no matter what my parents say. Before she left she gave me a part of a speech that her hero Martin Luther King wrote. She said I wouldn't understand it now, but I should keep it because Mr. King had some very important things to say and someday I will know exactly what it means. She said you and grandpa and mom and dad all know what it means but there isn't any point in talking to you about it because you have all decided to stick your heads in the sand. She gets so crazy sometimes but I get the feeling this time she might be telling the truth because everyone is acting so different to me.

I have always been able to talk to you about anything and I don't feel like waiting to figure out what this says. It is very complicated but I can tell it means a lot. I know how my sister is. She always treats me like a little kid, so I know when she gave me something like this it must be super important. The speech says, "Being a Negro in America means trying to smile when you want to cry. It means trying to hold onto physical life and psychological death. It means the pain of watching your children grow up with clouds

of inferiority in their mental skies. It means having their legs cut off, and then being condemned for being a cripple." I know he is talking about being a Negro and my dad says we are not like them, but my sister says we are. My dad always says how educated my sister is, so I think she might be right. What does all of this mean Obaasan?

Love,

Margaret

October 26, 1968

Dearest Margaret,

You are such a bright and inquisitive child! It is hard to believe you are only twelve. Part of me says because you have asked you have a right to know the truth, but then the other part says you are just a child and have a right to be protected from some of the harsh realities of life. Know this Margaret. Despite what your sister in her idealistic way wants you to believe that the world is changing for the better, it is still a white man's world. As you have already guessed, the camp you saw your mother at in the picture is unlike any you may have imagined. We were thrust into a world, your mother, grandfather, and I, simply because we were of Japanese descent, not because we did a single thing wrong. That is the place you saw in the picture. We chose not to tell you about it because it brings back many painful memories, and when we left there we just wanted to put it all behind us and simply just fit in. I owe you now an explanation of it all, but it cannot fit in a letter. I invite you to come to my house next week and I will explain to you as much as a child's heart can understand.

Sincerely,

Your Beloved Obaasan