INVITED PAPER

More than Half: Multiracial Families in the World War II Japanese American Incarceration Camps

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Abstract
In this first-person commentary, the author, an art historian, recounts family explorations of multiraciality and discrimination through her family’s literal journey to 10 camps where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during a period of xenophobia following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942. In addition to Japanese immigrants (Issei) who were banned from becoming U.S. citizens and their American-born children (Nisei), multiracial spouses and children with partial Japanese ancestry were also imprisoned. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) created a series of rules that applied to interracial married couples and multiracial children. Children with Japanese fathers were considered “more than half” Japanese with the belief that the male head of the household would establish and observe the family’s cultural values and practices. Multiracial children with White fathers were treated more sympathetically stemming from a desire to protect them from absorbing Japanese customs and ideas. Within the camps, multiracial families were subject to ostracization by families of Japanese descent as well as military personnel. The author’s children, upon entering public school, endured inquiries, taunts, and microagressions from peers. As parents, the author and her spouse, a fine art photographer, visited the camp locations to understand this dark period of U.S. to explore and document the places, talk with their children about their multiracial identities, and enable growth through experience and knowledge. All of the camps are in desolate locations and most are in ruins, but lingering discrimination from this egregious historical period exist and they affected the author’s children.

Keywords World War II Japanese American Incarceration Camps · World War II Japanese Internment Camps · Interracial marriage · Biracial children · Multiracial identity

Ten weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which formed the War Relocation Authority (WRA). This Executive Order granted the Secretary of War and military commanders the discretion to evacuate and incarcerate first generation immigrants from Japan (Issei) who were denied the opportunity to become citizens and their American-born children (Nisei). Uncontrollable hysteria led to the evacuation and mass imprisonment of over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, roughly 97% of the Japanese population living in the western states of the United States (Ono & Berg, 2010). Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, Head of the Western Defense Command, moved swiftly to remove persons of Japanese ancestry from California, Washington, Oregon, and Arizona. Evacuees experienced displacement twice: once when they were removed from their homes and a second time when they were uprooted from temporary housing and moved to more permanent housing (Nagata, 1998). The U.S. government established makeshift, temporary round-up centers, often converted horse stables, referred to as assembly or retention centers and 10 more permanent residences widely known as internment camps, but also referred to as relocation centers and concentration camps during the war. Today, incarceration camp is the preferred term (National Japanese American Council League, 2013) and the camps are often referred to simply by geographical location.

Nagata cites Ogawa and Fox (1986) to highlight a remarkable exception. “Although West Coast Japanese Americans were targeted for their proximity to Japan, barely 1% of Hawaiian Japanese were interned” (Nagata, 1998). The government could not afford to incarcerate one-third of
the island’s population, but the U.S. territory of Hawaii was under martial law for three years.

The economy of the states on the West Coast was not dependent on labor provided by persons of Japanese ancestry which meant that their absence would not impair the workforce. Their evacuation certainly left a cultural void in the states that they left. In the camps, the Issei and Nisei were in a much more racially homogeneous environment than the cities and towns from which they came. As the incarcerated faced hostility from the general population, inside the camps they were further subjected to anger, resentment, and intimidation by military personnel and other prisoners themselves. In the face of opposition, bonds developed among the internees. While such kinship was common, it did not extend to everyone held captive. Duncan Williams, director of the USC Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture, explained in an interview in the Washington Post:

I think mixed-race aspects of the incarceration suggest that there’s a kind of doubling of some of these feelings of exclusion, and a time when Japanese Americans and their loyalty to the U.S., their sense of belonging to the United States was questioned, and mixed-race children found themselves kind of questioned from multiple quarters (Laughlin, 2017).

Children with Japanese fathers were considered more than half [italics are mine] Japanese (Deu Pree, 2019). One such child was Virginia “Ginny” Matsuoka from Sonoma, California (Laughlin, 2017). Before the evacuation, one of her classmates called her a Jap and accused her family of starting the war. Her mother advised “next time he says that to you, tell him you are not a Jap, you are a half-Jap” (Laughlin). Ginny and her brothers were sent to a temporary holding center without their parents (a White mother and Japanese father). Ginny recollected that she was glad her brothers were with her: “Well, I didn’t meet too many children; they didn’t really want to play with me, I think. Because I would look different to them. But they didn’t bother me in any way, but they just didn’t play with me” (Laughlin). Multiracial children in the camps struggled to fit into the dominant cultures of either parent, a reality that has emerged in different eras and contexts in the U.S. (James et al., 2018).

The Mixed Marriage Policy, authored by the WRA to protect the “Amerasian” children from exposure to “infectious Japanese thought” (Spickard, 1986, p. 7), presumed that the male head of the household set the cultural practices in the home. A White father was more likely to establish a Caucasian lifestyle according to these metrics: acquaintances (70% Caucasian/30% Japanese), diet (100% Caucasian), and customs (90% Caucasian/10% Japanese) (Deu Pree, 2019). Discriminatory anti-Asian attitudes and practices, specifically anti-Japanese, were not exclusive to the west coast (DeLeon, 2020). When mixed race couples with minor children who had a Japanese father were released from a camp, they were not allowed to return home to Washington, Oregon, California, or Arizona. They had to seek a new beginning in unwelcoming, if not outwardly hostile, places (Spickard). Some Japanese men were forced to leave their families behind and go alone to a camp unless a petition for their families to join them was granted. Japanese American women married to non-Japanese men usually were incarcerated alone. Although a non-Japanese husband could voluntarily join his spouse, few, if any, did. If both adults from a household were incarcerated, they faced increased economic hardship. Newborns, young children, the elderly and infirm, along with children adopted by Caucasian parents were incarcerated (Burton et al., 2002). Orphans from the Japanese Children’s Home in Los Angeles present a stunning example of absolute adherence to the evacuation. The orphans were taken to Manzanar where a “Children’s Village” was established in 1942 (Spickard). Imagined sabotage, fifth column activities, and invasion were the basis for widespread distrust and discrimination towards persons of Japanese ancestry with disregard for nationality (see Burton et al.). Anti-Japanese prejudice had been growing for decades before the war and the wave of fear after Pearl Harbor led to unconstitutional, inhumane action as reported by the Secretary of the Interior during Roosevelt’s administration:

As a member of President Roosevelt’s administration, I [Harold Ickes] saw the United States Army give way to mass hysteria over the Japanese…Crowded into [railway] cars like cattle, these hapless people were hurried away to hastily constructed and thoroughly inadequate concentration camps, with soldiers with nervous muskets on guard, in the great American desert. We gave the fancy name of ‘relocation centers’ to these dust bowls, but they were concentration camps nonetheless (Ickes, 1946, p. A-9).

In 2005, my husband Jon, a fine art photographer of third generation Japanese descent (Sansei), became interested in the incarceration camps. Like other members of his generation, his interest in the camps grew over time and he began to acknowledge that this historical oppression included him although no members of his family who lived in Hawaii were incarcerated (Nagata et al., 2015). Aging survivors had begun, reluctantly, to share more of their experiences in the camps with members of their families and wider audiences in diaries, interviews, and documentary films (Densho Blog, 2016). Nagata explains that “Japanese cultural values encourage emotional restraint, a fatalistic
view on life that discourages dwelling on the past characterized by the phrase ‘shikata ga nai’ (‘It cannot be helped’), as well as an emphasis on ‘gaman’ (to endure and persevere)” (2015, p. 361). These core values made it very difficult to speak of personal experience or indirect knowledge of the camps. My mother-in-law says “gaman” more often than (shikata ga nai), but these were core principles of racial ethnic socialization raising her children. In line with decades of his creative practice, he initially envisioned making landscapes of the camps’ surviving physical remains in their desolate locations and still lifes of objects found onsite. Over the course of three years (2007–2010), we visited the ten WWII Incarceration camps. Although Jon and I have had many discussions about how best to frame and present his photographs to the public, this is the first time I have analyzed his photographs through an art historical lens in writing. I selected two photographs for this commentary based on their visual strength and the significance they had for the project’s development. One is an image from our first trip that made us realize the important dimension that our children brought to Jon’s work (Fig. 1). The other is a photograph from a camp in Arizona built on Native American Reservation land, thereby broadening the scope of systemic racism that impacted multiple ethnic groups, beyond our family (Fig. 3). These journeys forced us to confront our country’s egregious history of prejudices and xenophobia without diminishing respect for our great nation (Yamashiro & Roley, 2016). Our experiences resulted in a deeper understanding of racism, valuable inroads to racial ethic socialization (Hughes et al., 2006), and commitment to increase others’ cultural intelligence. The burden of this history and our connection to it has inspired each member of our family to become advocates for social justice.

Our travel began in March 2007 when my husband Jon and I packed the van and bundled our three-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter into it for a five-day trip to Arkansas. We headed to Jerome and Rohwer, Arkansas, where two World War II Japanese Incarceration camps once stood. We chose these locations for our first exploratory trip because Arkansas was within driving distance from our home in Indiana. We took our children on this trip for the practical reason that the local school’s spring break coincided with the university’s which meant that our regular childcare was not available. It is also true that we rarely went anywhere without the children. As parents and academics, we investigated the consequences of being or looking Japanese in the Midwest today and on the mainland during World War II. In preparation for our road trip to Arkansas, I explained to our young children that this was an important trip for Daddy. We wouldn’t complain that the car ride was miserable, whine about being stuck in our seats, or that our destination – whether an empty lot or a small, economically depressed town – was boring. Jon drove 11 h and 47 min before he pulled into a driveway in Jerome, Arkansas on land that a farmer named John Ellington bought after the camp in Jerome closed. He parked on the edge of a lightly-traveled, two-lane highway (US Highway 165 at County Road 210) in a swampy region in the southeast corner of the state. Jon announced “this is it.” I was stunned. The “it” was an underwhelming stone monument, surrounded by a short, flimsy white fence at the end of a gravel driveway on private property. The modest marker and lack of signage did not sufficiently indicate or broadcast the historical or national significance of the place. I opened the van door to unbuckle the children and remarked that something heartbreaking happened here a long time ago. My son sprang out of his car seat to play with his soccer ball, throw rocks, and urinate in the grass. My thoughtful, inquisitive daughter asked why we were so sad. I told her that during a war, a long time ago, people were sent here to a prison because of how they looked, and how they looked was Japanese. She gripped the frames of her glasses, aghast, tears spilling down her cheeks and eyes closed tight. She murmured with incredulity, “Does that mean me? Does that mean that I would have been in jail too?” I held her gently and replied “yes,” reassuring her that our family would have stayed together. She protested, “But not you, Mom, you don’t look Japanese. You are white.” I vowed that I would have stayed with our family. In 2007, I was unaware of the WRA’s Mixed Marriage Policy that may have prevented me from keeping my promise.

Despite our interracial status as a couple, my husband and I bought an affordable house in a charming small, rural town that lacks racial and ethnic diversity. Repercussions of this choice emerged once we had children. Comments and slights from my children’s classmates regarding their race evoked deep personal questions, in addition to academic ones. How do we nurture young children to be confident in the face of racial injustice and to resist internalizing damaging stereotypes? What is the effect of multiracial identity for individuals who live that reality? Does the hatred of the fierce Japanese enemy from World War II still linger in small, rural communities populated predominantly by white residents, like the one in which we live? As my husband and I grappled with the complexities of raising multiracial children in a homogeneous environment, we also wrestled with what it had meant for our predecessors – particularly those forcibly removed from their homes on the west coast, held briefly in assembly centers before being
herded into incarceration camps during World War II. This project, strengthened by the participation of our children, contributes to the growing body of scholarship, memoirs, documentaries, exhibitions, and fiction that give voice to those who were labeled and mistreated as “enemy aliens”. This project, in particular, acknowledges the presence of children in the camps, including multiracial children, and allows us to consider the experience through children’s eyes, a powerful and underutilized means of learning about the past and its consequences. Children observe in ways that differ from adults. For example, Lydia and I had a conversation that transpires between generations of parents and children that shed light on how she processed her observations. When Lydia was in third grade, I tried to convince her to get her hair cut shoulder-length for all of the practical reasons of a caregiver. “You don’t like to brush it. You don’t like it when I brush it. It will be less work and take less time if it’s shorter”. She resisted firmly, saying she wanted her hair to be long. Since my line of thinking was not persuasive, I asked why. “Because I don’t want to look…” She hesitated. My mind completed her unspoken words with “like a boy” which had been my experience at her age. Her answer was “more Japanese”. She realized that she looked Japanese. Mura (1991; as cited in Nagata et al. 2015) found that some third-generation Japanese Americans internalize a sense of shame rather than pride in their “Japaneseness”. This brief conversation with my fourth-generation (Yonsei) daughter indicates shame. She wanted to minimize her Japanese appearance, though powerless to eliminate or change the perception of her racial identity. Individuals do not choose how they are perceived by others (Johnson, 2006). We began to absorb the truth that our children had already faced discrimination and that this would continue throughout their lives. This conversation was the turning point that changed the exploratory nature of Jon’s photographic project in 2007 to a serious commitment to travel to these places to more fully understand long-lasting consequences of World War II on racial identity. Without conscious intention, Jon and I joined his generation of Sansei who publicly claimed the significance and cultural trauma of these historical events (Alexander, 2004).

Visual Analysis

The children stand together in the center of the photograph (Fig. 1), echoing the vertical monument behind them. Lydia is as somber as her unruffled direct gaze behind her tinted lenses. She holds Luke protectively to her side despite the oppressive heat and humidity. Their arms completely encircle one another’s bodies. Luke cleaves to his sister with a look of concern on his face. The children are dwarfed by the 6-foot-tall marker that recalls an Ancient Egyptian obelisk in shape if not in grandeur, scale, or purpose. A shallow, two stepped cement pad gives modest elevation to the memorial. The words “Jerome Relocation Center” are
centered at the top of the highly polished face of the stone much like a family name inscribed at the head of a tombstone. The monument’s incised text imparts a brief history of the camp, a salute to the prisoners, and a commitment to constitutional freedoms for all Americans. It reads (Fig. 1):

On February 19, 1942, Pres. Franklin Roosevelt signed into law Executive Order No. 9066 interni

ng over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, and this act irrevocably changed their lives. The majority of these people were American citizens. As a result of all this wartime hysteria, these people were forcibly removed from their homes on the west coast of the United States and also in Hawaii to be interned by the War Department in one of the ten Relocation Centers located in the interior of the U.S.A. At Jerome there were over 6700 interned from September 1, 1942 and through July 1944. These temporary shelters with shared living quarter community dining halls and bathing facilities were the norm. Constant on-going surveillance by the Army served as a constant reminder of each resident’s captivity and loss of freedom. This memorial is dedicated by the Jerome Preservation Committee an [sic.] also the Japanese American Citizens League to those persons of Japanese ancestry who suffered the indignity of being incarcerated because of their ethnic background. May this monument serve to remind us of these incidents and inspire us to be more vigilant and more alert in the safe guarding of the rights of all Americans regardless of their race, color, or creed.

The top of Lydia’s head meets the lines that read “constant on-going surveillance by the Army”. Not only do these lines mark her height, emphasizing her status as a child, they juxtapose these children, my children, with the persons who were held captive by the U.S. military two generations ago. The insubstantial fence forms a corner of a square that looks open because the enclosure extends beyond the frame of the photograph. The V-shape corner behind the monument is a subtle reminder of the menacing barbed wire fences from the 1940s and, simultaneously, makes it clear that this border’s purpose is to demarcate a small patch of ground and a memorial. The building and smokestack in the background are physical remnants from the incarceration camp that will inevitably deteriorate without intentional upkeep or preservation. The dormant sapling on the left balances the children on the right and refers to the promise of a future through nature’s seasons and stages of life. Conversely, the stone marker and its text are fixed. Despite the permanence of the words that are literally set in stone, the reminder begs a question. Have we as a nation succeeded in being more vigilant to defend the rights of all Americans regardless of race, color, or creed? The continued violence directed toward several racial groups, including black and Asian communities, reached a fever pitch in 2020. The answer to the question at this time must be “not yet”. Current policies and laws, like voting rights, and law enforcement practices fail to protect all Americans equally from physical harm or guarantee constitutional rights.

Nearly two-thirds of the upper portion of the photograph is a clear blue sky (Fig. 1). The black-and-white film transforms the sky into a flattened, washed out, white space. This was a frustration to photographers in the early days of the medium’s invention. Experimentation with Talbot’s negative/positive process in the 1850s led to combination printing to overcome such obstacles. Notably, French artist Gustave Le Gray added dynamism to the skies of his sunny-day seascapes by using different negatives to print sky and sea (Le Gray, 1857). In the photograph at Jerome the sky is one of the least noticeable aspects despite the fact that it
occupies a significant portion of the pictorial space. The “white” sky is unremarkable, hardly noticeable. Unlike the land, it escapes human-made partitions. In addition to this standard result of black-and-white film photography, the sky takes on a symbolic meaning in this historical context. Whiteness is a racial category that allows people to go unnoticed by the dominant group that establishes social and cultural norms, if desired. To be white in America grants the ability to move freely into almost any space because, for most white people, it is neutral (DiAngelo, 2018). Social constructs allow some people to move without constraint while some are subject to being monitored, restrained, or not welcomed (Brown, 2018). The Puritans baked white racial superiority into the foundation of our culture, shored up by the forces of the Christian bible, Aristotle’s philosophy, and Harvard University (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020).

The Journeys: The Weight of Place

At no point in my 21 years of formal education, spanning 1973–1994, did I learn about the 10 World War II Japanese Incarceration Camps (Fig. 2). My children and I discovered this part of American history because of my husband’s Japanese heritage, my children’s experiences with racial prejudice, and our intense travel as a family. To begin to fill in this void in my education, I read scholarship, interviews, memoirs, and fiction. I attended lectures, exhibitions, and had conversations with survivors. On the first trip to Arkansas, I read Impounded by art historian Linda Gordon and historian Gary Okihiro (Gordon & Okihiro, 2006). Their book featured Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the evacuation and it was my introduction to the vilification of Japanese American citizens and immigrants as “vipers” during World War II (Los Angeles Times, 1942). Lange, famous today for the iconic image of the Great Depression known as Migrant Mother (1936), worked at a series of federal government agencies: the Resettlement Administration (RA, 1935–1937), the Farm Security Administration (FSA, 1937–1942), and the Office of War Information (OWI, 1942–1944). She was part of a team of photographers hired initially to provide visual documentation to support the New Deal relief and later to support war initiatives. The federal agencies controlled the rights, release, and publication of images. Lange photographed evacuations of Japanese American citizens and their parents in San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, Fresno, and surrounding areas in California for the OWI, but the government kept them hidden from the public. Her photographs portrayed the so-called “enemies” with dignity that honored their humanity. “She was required to turn over all negatives, prints, and undeveloped film from this work – then her pictures were impounded for the duration of the war by the government” (Gordon & Okihiro, 2006, p. 20). “I had to sign when I finished, under oath, before a notary” (Gordon, p. 20). Lange’s documentary photographs, along with those made by Ansel Adams and Tōyō Miyatake, interned at Manzanar, provide key visual documentation of the historic event while it was occurring. They stood in the middle of history and recorded some of it with the medium of photography.

As hours and miles stretched behind us, we became increasingly perplexed by the danger this group posed to national security and the military’s actions in the west. We realized the irrevocable cultural, economic, and emotional damage the incarceration caused. We were haunted by the knowledge that something similar could happen again. History does repeat itself. Over the course of three years my artist husband Jon, daughter Lydia (now 21), son Luke (now 18) and I, in a three-fold role as wife, mother, and art historian, visited eight locations. The travel was demanding, expensive, and emotional. Flights were required for two of the journeys and we took four long road trips to visit the camp locations. Two trips exceeded 100 hours of driving.

A few months after the first trip to the swamplands in Arkansas, our destinations were deserts. We drove to Minidoka in Idaho and Heart Mountain in Wyoming. The drive through the Big Horn Mountains to get to Wyoming was harrowing and memorable. Jon’s hands sweated as he gripped the steering wheel and I averted my eyes to avoid seeing how close the van was to the steep, deadly decline. The children played DS games and watched movies on portable DVD players. The motel in Cody, WY was sold out. The small, outdoor pool was jam-packed with people, but Lydia, Luke, and I edged our way into the pool to get relief from the heat. During this trip, we agreed to limit drive time to eight hours per day and stay at motels with pools whenever possible. Lydia and Luke had both taken swimming lessons and were excited when they were able to practice swimming in the evenings. Jon was granted a semester-long Appointed Research Assignment for the Fall semester in 2007. With no courses, he and Lydia planned to go to Arizona during her fall break. The trip had to be canceled and rescheduled, but Jon and Lydia still went. This was the only trip that the four of us did not make together (Tables 1 and 2).

The entire family flew to Los Angeles for spring break in 2008 to go to Manzanar, the most well-known of the Incarceration camps. A guard tower, still intact, made our stomachs turn at the thought of being watched and essentially held at gunpoint for years. Grandma and Grandpa Hawaii, affectionately dubbed by my children, met us in Los Angeles as a lovely surprise for the children. They took us to Disneyland and it was a delightful departure from the usual, grueling itinerary and the dusty, lonely, expansive deserts. The colorful, immaculate, entertainment park full of
fun, family, and fantasy contrasted sharply to the barren land, relentless wind, and ramshackle condition of the camps. During a heat wave in the summer of 2008, we drove to Amache in Colorado and Topaz in Utah. Warning signs about poisonous snakes and rodents carrying the hantavirus greeted us and reminded us once again of the fragility of life in such inhospitable environments and the resilience of the people held in captivity there. We were all excited to see a turtle making its way through the sand. It spoke to the fact that vitality could withstand the starkness of the forbidding, hostile environment. In Utah, the grass was so dry that it would have been easy to ignite. Billboards warned drivers on the highway not to pull over onto the grass. Despite the heat, Luke sweated while he tossed balls in the air and played with a remote-control car. Lydia collected rocks for fun and insects for her class’ upcoming bug collection, assigned to all fourth-graders in our school district.

The price of gas surged past $4 a gallon when we made our last trip in the summer of 2009. Our final journey was the longest and the farthest from our home. We spent more than two weeks to visit the Tule Lake camp in Newell, California where people who were considered especially dangerous were put in a jail inside of the incarceration camp. In 1943, the WRA and the War Department developed a form to assess the loyalty of the people incarcerated. The form became known informally as the loyalty questionnaire (Loyalty Questionnaire, 1943). Two questions were controversial and divisive among friends and families in the camps. Question 27 asked the American-born young adults (Nisei) if they would join the U.S. military and face combat. Many struggled with being summoned by a government that held them unlawfully, expected them to go to war, and, to add insult to injury, to serve in a segregated unit. Question 28 challenged the stability and future of their immigrant parents (Issei) who could be left “without country” if they answered yes and swore allegiance to the United States forsaking any allegiance to Japan or other foreign governments. Those who responded no to these two questions were deemed the “no no” boys and sent to Tule Lake. We stayed in a rundown 1950s motor lodge that had geese on the grounds, but no pool. The town had one grocery store and not a single restaurant. I fed my children frozen pizza rolls warmed in the motel kitchenette’s oven and not much else. In Northern California,
at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains, and in Wyoming, we heaved the full weight of our bodies to force car doors open, working against the relentless winds that left me feeling battered and exhausted.

Every trip increased my awareness of the impact of the historical stream of anti-Asian sentiments that persist to the present. The sites were chosen precisely because they were remote. Access by railway cars was a must; freight trains were a primary means to transport the passengers to conduct evacuations rapidly. Only some locations could be reached by road. The camps were so desolate, impoverished, and isolated that I could hardly believe I was in the U.S. Neither my American history textbooks or standard publications like the Rand McNally Road Atlas acknowledged their existence. We relied on a combination of popular atlases and American Automobile Association (AAA) maps to get to the general area in each state. Then we turned to two publications dedicated to the subject that offered more specific directions to find the former camp sites (Burton et al., 2002; Iritani & Iritani, 1999). Entertaining my young children in the van on long drives was a major challenge. We were lucky if their individual portal DVD players lasted an entire trip. We played games on highways with sufficient traffic. We each chose a color and then competed to be the first to spot 20 vehicles of that color. My family embarked on these journeys before vehicles came with mounted screens for entertainment systems. Keeping them busy was easier at rest stops, gas stations, and motels was easier. I had an arsenal of amusement that contained hula hoops, jump ropes, board games, balls of all types, butterfly nets, and an impressive stock of snacks. When we stopped for gas, adults smiled at me as I sang songs heard on playgrounds in the 1970s while the children skipped rope. We were most connected as a family during long car rides when we listened to stand-up comedy. We laughed at Larry the Cable Guy’s juvenile, somewhat age-inappropriate jokes and enjoyed our time together. My son’s developing sense of humor found a responsive audience during these trips. The entire family cheered whenever we crossed a state line. Once, after we passed the Illinois border, he told his sister “You are Ill-annoying me”. Everyone burst into laughter, except Lydia. Yet, much of the time in the car was spent with individual pursuits: driving, listening to music or watching a movie with ear phones, playing DS video games, drawing, reading, or writing. Always, a solemn emotional presence rode with us, as we thought often of families who traveled involuntarily to these places at an incalculably greater cost. As we traveled, the tiny glimpses into prejudice that affected our children became magnified as we more fully understood this dark history that weighed heavily on us.

The Incarceration Camps: The Vitality of History

The incarceration camps were built quickly and cheaply based on the design for standard military camps in the 1940s – lined with rows of barracks, latrines, and mess halls. In sharp contrast to the standard formation, armed soldiers patrolled the perimeters from watch towers with guns pointing toward the camp’s occupants. After the war, the government disposed of the buildings and sold the property. Local residents we met on our travels told us that some families bought a barrack to live in. Remarkably, some of the shoddy structures were still standing and occupied when we were there ten or more years ago. We spotted these dwellings that were scattered throughout neighborhoods in the surrounding towns. We found other physical remnants of the camps such as decaying cisterns, cement slabs used as driveways, a fire break converted to a runway at an airport, and cement foundations for factories and hospitals. A resident in Newell, California told us that the youth are completely unaware of what happened in their own backyard at Tule Lake. Manzanar, one of the camps that is now a national historic site maintained by the National Park Service, is the most preserved site. It has a museum called an interpretative center, some restored barracks, and a monument made famous by Ansel Adams’s photographs. At first, I was pleased if there was any kind of monument to serve as a mark, a reminder, a warning. Then I realized that most of the memorials listed the names of soldiers who fought and perished in the war. Memorials to fallen soldiers and headstones in cemeteries were built by families who lived in the camps while they were incarcerated. Other memorials were erected decades after the camps closed, like the one in Jerome. The fate of the grounds after the camps’ closures is unique to each site. Monuments to commemorate the imprisonment have been erected by individuals, who are local residents, survivors, or members of organizations such as the Jerome Preservation Committee, the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, and the Japanese American Council League. Most of the camps were built on land without controversy.

This was not the case in Arizona. The U.S. Army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) designated that camps be built on Indian reservations despite objections from the Colorado River Indian Reservation Tribal council, Superintendent of the Colorado River Indian Reservation agency, and assistant to the Commission of Indian Affairs. In 1865, the government established the Colorado River Indian Reservation for the agricultural Mohave and Chemehuevis tribes and more than 20 indigenous tribes associated with the river’s tributaries in Parker, AZ. The reservation was expanded several times in the 1870s to include land along the Colorado River in Arizona and California to
accommodate more tribes (Lillquist, 2007). All too familiar with the injustices inflicted on people by the federal government, the Colorado Indian Reservation Community wanted no part of the incarceration (Burton et al., 2002; Lillquist). Nevertheless, two locations in the heart of the Arizona desert were designated for two complexes. Gila River had two separate camps and Poston had three. Jon made travel arrangements prior to obtaining consent from the Gila River Indian Community Land Use Planning and Zoning Commission. The flights and dates for this trip had to be canceled. Jon submitted a written proposal that he presented in person at a regularly scheduled Natural Resources Standing Committee meeting. Fortunately, his trip to Arizona resulted in the permission needed to purchase the $200 permit, valid for one day only, from the Natural Resources Standing Committee Right of Entry. Escorted by security personnel known as tribal Rangers from the Gila River Indian Community, Jon and Lydia spent the day at the Gila River camp. Jon was not allowed to drive on the property, but the security guards took on a dual role as tour guides, sharing history of the land and guiding him to places of interest within the camp. Then and now, Native Americans felt great empathy for persons of Japanese ancestry treated so unfairly, so unconstitutionally, as they themselves had been, and for a short time literally alongside them. During the incarceration, no fences segregated the racial/ethnic groups. Nearby Poston, Arizona was also established on an Indian reservation, but did not have the same requirements to enter and explore the former camp sites. At Gila River, the kindness of the rangers, their respect for the land, and commitment to human dignity left an indelible impression on Lydia, deepening her empathy for all marginalized groups.

**Visual Analysis**

The triangular footing, part of the foundation of a factory within one of the Poston Internment camps, is the central subject of the photograph (Fig. 3). It supports Lydia’s body, an echo of its original purpose as an underpinning for a factory. She sinks into the remnant like she used to lean heavily against me when she was bored, waiting for something like a conversation with a neighbor. Her body language draws on a theme that Gordon detected in Lange’s photographs – endless waiting (Gordon & Okihiro, 2006). Like the persons of Japanese ancestry who were evacuated and then incarcerated, my children and I spent a lot of time waiting in the heat until Jon wanted one or both of the children for a photograph. Using Lydia’s height as a gauge, the ruin in Poston is approximately half the size of the commemorative marker at Jerome, Arkansas. The horizontal layers in the massive cement footing, a second footing in the distance, the powerlines alongside the highway, and a series of arcs in the dirt road create patterns of repetition. These formal elements in the photograph visually reference the
consecutive historical, overlapping confinements that occurred in the 1940s.

Lydia stands slightly behind the block in its shadow, barely visible. What is hidden and what is seen is relevant to the past. Camouflage net factories were in operation at each of the three Poston camps as well as Manzanar and the Santa Anita Assembly Center (Gordon & Okihiro, 2006). This reverberates with the irony of the 1943 loyalty test. Regardless of their response, American-born Nisei were drafted to serve in the U.S. military. Similarly, Issei were trapped in a state of uncertainty, not being citizens of the U. S. or Japan. Clearly, these questions put them in a bind. Like their sons who joined the military to fight in the war, many people in the camps also contributed to the war effort. Five net factories were built in camps to bolster the production of materials needed for U.S. military defense. During WWII, camouflage nets covered valuable factories, bases, and plants that built aircrafts, notably Lockheed Vega Aircraft plant in Burbank, California and the Douglas Aircraft plant in Long Beach, California and, later, Boeing in Seattle, Washington (Beckett, 2017). The enormous nets created the illusion of entire towns to cover and protect industries vital to the military. Ironically, persons imprisoned because they looked Japanese, helped hide American assets from the imperial Japanese. Lydia’s subtle presence resonates with vulnerability, recalling the value of hiding military resources and the tragedy of hiding an entire ethnic population.

The Result – Owning Our Racialized Identity

Jon, born and reared in Honolulu, Hawaii, is of Okinawan descent. I was born and raised in Wisconsin and have a blend of British and Scandinavian ancestry. When we got married, I chose to take his last name, knowing that I would blend of British and Scandinavian ancestry. When we got married friends a decade older struggle with the confusion in the school system because of something as simple as the parents having different surnames from each other. I imagined encountering this problem, intensified by race. If we lived in Hawaii, our children would be considered hapa haole a positive, desirable racial identity. Hapa (pronounced hop-a), means mixed ancestry and haole (pronounced howl-e) means white. Based on the WRA’s Mixed Marriage Policy, my children would have been deemed “more than half” based solely on their father’s heritage. In our experience this rings true today, without such dire consequences. Because my children are perceived as people of color by most people, they experience a sense of belonging when we are in Hawaii. Both acknowledge now, as young adults, that they felt shame and disappointment because they looked different from friends and acquaintances in Indiana. Some Hoosier natives welcomed us to the community and we have established close friendships that we cherish. Others ignored or dismissed us as outsiders. It was obvious that Jon was not “from here” though, at times, residents asked me if we went to high school together. Our adult friends tell us that they never think of my husband and me as an interracial couple which echoes misguided claims of “colorblindness.” It also stands in contrast to the perception of our children as Asian by their peers.

My daughter’s initial questions regarding race were about whiteness. Soon after she turned five, she realized that her parents fell into two different racial categories that she called “white” and “not white”. I tried to explain that race has to do with ancestry and is sometimes, but not always visible in skin color, complexion, or appearance. At her young age, I did not attempt to address social constructs, the history of racial prejudice, or the falsehood that race is biological. It took several more years for her to realize that others placed her in the “not white” category. The pivotal moment occurred in an elementary classroom before the school bell rang to start the day. In third grade, one of my daughter’s classmates asked, “who is that blonde lady that brings you to school every day?” Lydia responded matter-of-factly, “my mom”. The student refused to believe her. This was the first time my daughter realized that she looked Japanese and that I looked white. Lydia was upset. We talked about how her looks were only part of what makes her who she is, who we are. Beliefs, character, benevolence, responsibility, confidence, and compassion were also key to defining a person. We emphasized that we were very lucky to have relatives that value education and kindness with a broad range of cultural practices and celebrations. We intentionally talked about traditions in my family and Jon’s family traditions that align with cultural socialization (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). For example, Thanksgiving in Wisconsin meant dressing up for a formal, sit-down dinner whereas the holiday in Hawaii would come with an abundant buffet and a casual atmosphere. Adults celebrate New Year’s Eve in Wisconsin with champagne and fancy clothing at parties with friends and strangers while children stay at home with babysitters. In Hawaii, New Year’s Eve is a family affair. Just before sunset, firecrackers are set off at the four corners of the house to clear away evil spirits for the new year. When the sun goes down, children deemed old enough by their parents join the firecracker festivities, lighting and tossing them toward the street. At midnight in
Honolulu, rolls of 10,000 firecrackers explode at the end of driveways lining neighborhoods throughout the city. While the smoke hovering over the island is still thick, it is tradition to eat soba soup with ingredients to promote prosperity, longevity, and good health (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). Our home in Indiana is filled with cultural objects that celebrate Japanese culture, like Jon’s grandmother’s dolls and a ceremonial kimono displayed on a wall like a work of art. Our relatives in Hawaii were fundamental in helping our children embrace their “Japaneseess” (Mura, 1991, p. 218). “Research has shown that children with a true multiracial or multicultural identity generally grow up to be happier than multiracial children who grow up with a “single-race” identity” (AACAP, 2016, para. 3). This is reassuring and hopeful for the future of my children and other multiracial children. The fact that my children were judged by their peers who were buoyed by stereotypes engrained through popular culture and generational racism made an indelible mark on their childhoods.

Family, friends, and strangers consider my children Asian, although they are half Caucasian and half Japanese. One of Jon’s cousins asked me, “You know your daughter looks Asian, don’t you?” Friends offer unsolicited evaluations that our son looks like a more even mix of Jon and me, more 50/50, but Lydia looks like her father to the point that I am completely erased. I respond to comments and compliments like “your children are so stunning, so exotic” in various ways: “I agree. They are beautiful”. “Thank you, I take full credit”. Strangers used to ask me: “Your baby is so beautiful. What country is she from?” When I was a brand-new mom, this was troubling. Uttering the words “I am a mom” didn’t feel true because it was such a raw, new layer of my identity. To be challenged surprised me. Eventually I was able to respond with humor: “She is from the wild land of my uterus”. A few years ago, a receptionist in a doctor’s office asked my daughter, “Do you have a parent with you? Oh, that’s your mom!” I was then asked to produce a driver’s license. It made me wonder how the scenario would have unfolded had I kept my maiden name. Was providing the four of us are together, no one questions that we are a nuclear family. When I am with my children, we are not unnoticed like the sky in the photograph at Jerome (Fig. 1); our relationship causes confusion and elicits questions.

Growing up in a small, racially homogeneous town in Wisconsin and attending a Scandinavian college in Minnesota, I did not think much about my whiteness or the privilege that came with it (McIntosh, 2003). As a child, I encountered difference in terms of mental health and LGBTQ lifestyles not commonly open in the 1970s, at least in the upper Midwest. My mother worked at the state mental hospital with long-term patients diagnosed with psychosis. Both of my parents had colleagues who were openly gay. I was given the gift of exposure to differences that led to a sincere embrace. I love studying and traveling to experience culture, art, history, world religion, multiple points of view, values, customs, and lifestyles. The most impactful experience I have had with difference is as a mother. It has transformed my experience of whiteness by expanding my comfort level with my husband’s culture and heritage while simultaneously heightening my awareness that I am not “whole” in either racial group unless my children are present. Places that lack visible racial and ethnic diversity ferment the oversimplification of race, religion, and nationality. Lack of experience and exposure makes it easy to believe what is presented in the media and movies as a true representation of race and culture. After 9/11, Muslims, whether residents of the U.S. or countries in the Middle East, were considered terrorists rather than members of a shared religious tradition through the worship of the God of Abraham. Illegal immigrants crossing over the southern border who risk their lives to seek refuge in the U.S. are stereotyped as violent drug lords – often the cause for fleeing – have been called murderers and rapists by former President Trump (Lee, 2015). Our friends and neighbors consistently refer to my husband as Hawaiian instead of Japanese. I believe that he meets their idea of a laid-back Pacific Islander to such a degree that his actual ancestry slips their minds. Those who served in WWII in the Pacific Theater remember the Japanese as fierce and ruthless. Laura Hillebrand’s biography of Lt. Louis Zamperini in Unbroken (Hillebrand, 2010) shows the brutality of the Imperial Japanese as a potential reason for lingering hatred World War II veterans may have against people of Japanese descent. However, this sentiment is not dying with the men and women who fought in World War II; in too many of my experiences this prejudice seems to be handed down through generations like a favorite family recipe. Mentalities, perspectives, and beliefs shape family traditions and influence community values. Consider the similarity between the accusation Ginny’s classmate made and the ones leveled at my son nearly 80 years later in a different part of the country – Jap, you started the war.

By taking our children to the incarceration camps, we saw, learned, and talked about a broad scope of American
history as well as their experiences with racism. Neither the trips nor our conversations had a negative impact on them. These trips did not traumatize them, embitter them, or make them loathe our country. It helped all of us understand the past more accurately and to have empathy for those who have not had exposure to rich, diverse cultural experience. When racial incidents came up at school, Jon and I spoke to teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. We gave presentations in our children’s classes in elementary and middle school about this project, the value of reading, history, photography, and equality. My children have not suffered physical harm or legal injustice, but constant reminders and taunts about their race have made an indelible mark. When they were young, we were more aware of such encounters and better positioned to guide, assist, and intervene as needed. As teenagers, they did not always share their problems with us, opting to navigate by themselves barriers in institutions and systems not forged to consider, acknowledge, or include them. My children started talking about where they wanted to live when they grew up at an early age. They talked about places we visited like Chicago and Honolulu and even diverse, urban metropolises they had not yet visited, like New York City. The sentiment that they did not fit into the place we called home shaped their vision and goals for their future; it also deepened their love of travel and culture. Thankfully, my children’s experiences do not rise to the level of several national incidents of multiracial discrimination that occurred in the 1990s, the decade that I met and married Jon. In 1994, a high school principal in Alabama threatened to cancel the school’s annual prom to prevent interracial dating. Challenged by the biracial junior class president, the principal responded that her parents had made a mistake and he wanted to stop others from repeating it (Cruz & Berson, 2001). In 1996 in Georgia, a church governing body decided to disinter a mixed-race infant from the church’s all white cemetery. Nationwide public backlash resulted in a reversal of the decision, only to be followed by the church’s refusal to marry the infant’s interracial parents (Cruz and Berson).

Today, Lydia and Luke are thriving. They are thoughtful young adults with confidence in themselves and compassion for others. They are also able to challenge and correct their peers or decide to turn away from potential conflicts. Lydia’s priority as the President of the Panhellenic Association at her university is to focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. Luke has a strong desire to enter a helping profession though his major is undeclared after just one semester in college. During winter break of his freshman year, Luke sought an opportunity to volunteer in Zanzibar, Tanzania to experience a part of the world that was new to him and to make a positive contribution. A small point of contention that my children still face is the insistence that their hair is black. When Lydia was young, we showed her the nuance between very dark brown and black hair by comparing her hair to her father’s. My son observed these exchanges over the years. My children’s peers continue to needle them about their hair color. They tell their friends that they are not looking closely enough. My children understand that racial remarks are commonly couched in coded language that point to a lack of awareness or well-hidden, deep-seated racism. We talk often about racial discrimination and the general change from explicit racist language to implicit, coded language. For instance, the word “urban” can be used to imply urban black communities. Racial history is embedded in language like redlining, white flight, black flight, and reverse redlining, but is often not addressed. My children developed close friendships, but even those were marred by a steady stream of microaggressions. Initially, these came from their young classmates and, later, much more hurtfully, their friends in high school used racial slurs. My children were made to feel other than, less than. Lydia’s senior quote printed in the 2018 annual high school yearbook is a humble ricochet of Ginny’s mother’s advice: “I am only half”.

References to the corona virus as the “China virus” are at least partially responsible for the increased violence against the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community that are highlighted on the nightly news (Yam, 2021). My children have the knowledge and courage to talk about race and their own multiracial identities. As an art historian, I am trained to analyze art in appropriate contexts. The importance of considering what we see when we look, how we interpret what we see, and how we express these impressions brings the methodology of art history and the practice of racial-ethnic socialization to bear on my parenting. When we attempt to understand the past, part of the task is to create as complete a picture as possible. I recognize the strength and resilience of the persons of Japanese ancestry who suffered from this experience directly and indirectly. Eventually, all three branches of the U.S. government came to the consensus that the Japanese internment was wrong. Forty years after the war, President Reagan apologized to an entire generation of Japanese Americans for their unjust imprisonment during World War II. Shortly after the apology from the executive branch, Congress passed legislation to pay reparations to internees. In 2018, more than 70 years after WWII, the Supreme Court, overturned Korematsu v. United States 323 U.S. 214 (1944), the ruling that endorsed the internment. Traces from World War II – like the geographical locations of the camps, some ruins and monuments, as well as mindsets that support discrimination – are still alive and play an active role in shaping our identities, communities, and ideologies. We need to move beyond arbitrary categorization such as “more than half” or “only half” to see a whole person. I thank Jon, Lydia, and Luke for their collaboration examining a difficult part of our
nation’s history and our complex relationship to the physical world and each other. Had we been a family during World War II, Lydia, I would have kept my promise.

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