Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Post-Internment Japanese Diasporic Literature

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University, 2006.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signed:

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Abstract

The thesis examines the literary archive of the Japanese diaspora in North America and uncovers evidence of an intergenerational transmission of trauma after the internment of all peoples of Japanese descent in America during World War Two. Their experience of migration, discrimination and displacement was exacerbated by the internment, the single most influential episode in their history which had a profound effect on subsequent generations. It is argued the trauma of their experiences can be located in their writing and, drawing on the works of Freud and trauma theoreticians Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys in particular, the thesis constructs a theoretical framework which may be applied to post-internment Japanese diasporic writing to reveal the traces of trauma in all generations, traces that are linked to what Freud referred to as a posterior moment that triggered an earlier trauma which the subject may not have experienced personally but which may be lodged in his / her psyche. An examination of the literature of the Japanese diaspora shows that trauma is carried in the language itself and impacted upon the collective psyche of the entire community.

The theoretical model is used to read the tanka poetry written by the immigrant generation, a range of texts by the first American-born generation (including an in-depth analysis of four texts spanning several decades) and the texts written by the third-generation, many of whom did not experience the internment themselves so their motivation and the influence of the internment differed greatly from earlier generations. The thesis concludes with an analysis of David Mura’s identification of the link between identity, sexuality and the influence of the internment experience as transmitted by his parents. The future of the Japanese American community and their relationship with their past traumatic experience also makes its way into the conclusion.
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Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor, Vijay Mishra, whose careful guidance and wisdom steered me through three turbulent years of research and writing. His dedication to all of his students and his contribution to academic scholarship is inspirational and I am very grateful for his advice and tutelage. I am also extremely thankful for my fiancé Peter Haywood who has been a bastion of support and encouragement. He pulled me out of the inevitable troughs that accompany thesis writing and celebrated all the little victories and milestones. My parents Noriko and Peter Goudie created the opportunity for me to further my studies and for that I will be eternally grateful. They supported me from the other side of the world, contributed towards the essential research trips and their bribes kept my motivation high.

At Murdoch I would like to thank Georgina Wright for her invaluable support, Jenny De Reuck and Takeshi Moriyama for their enthusiasm and librarian Helen Gibson for her assistance. At the University of Hawaii at Manoa, I am very grateful to Dennis Ogawa and would also like to thank Joan Hori and Karen Peacock at their library. The Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii is staffed by a wonderful group of people who were very helpful indeed (and also gave me the most wonderful pineapple desserts). In Los Angeles, I am very appreciative of the staff at the Japanese American National Museum, especially Susan Fukushima at the Hirasaki National Resource Center. Judy Soo Hoo at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center Library, Misty Knight of the Manzanar National Historic Society and the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program must receive my thanks also. In San Francisco, JACL national director John Tateishi was especially helpful and I am also grateful to Eddie Wong at NAATA for his assistance. On the east coast, I owe a great deal to Yuichi Ozawa for his dedicated efforts to assist my research as well as to Hiro Nishikawa of the JACL and to John Fuyuume, director of the Seabrook Farms Cultural and Educational Center. I would like to acknowledge the wonderful resources available at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Japan Foundation in Toronto, the Fisher Library in Sydney and the East-West Center in Honolulu. Of course my sister and my friends have also been a wonderful source of support and enthusiasm and I am indebted to Peter Haywood (Snr) and Warwick Adderley for their assistance on the images and to Maria-Eva Haywood for keeping me well-fed throughout the course of the thesis!
A Note on Transliteration

Japanese names are written in the traditional order of family name first followed by the given name. For the names of Japanese immigrants and their descendants, the customary Western style is adopted where the family name follows the given name. Macrons for long vowels on Japanese names and words and all other accents on Japanese and Hawaiian words are not provided in order to preserve readability. Japanese words which are now part of general English discourse are given without diacritics.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the original Japanese texts are by me.
Introduction

In 2001 I visited the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and came across an exhibition entitled “Five Generations: Images of Japanese Canadians.” The exhibition traced the history of Japanese Canadians from their arrival in the late nineteenth century through their evacuation, internment and resettlement during the 1940s to their struggle for redress in the 1980s. I was shocked for even as a half-Japanese person with a vested interest in the Japanese diaspora, and as a former student of North American history, I had never heard of the internment before. When I learned that over 20,000 Japanese Canadians and approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans had been imprisoned by their governments during the Second World War, I decided to research this episode in Japanese diasporic history further. After reading texts by Joy Kogawa and David Mura, I realised that the internment did not just affect those who were imprisoned themselves, the effects were transferred to their descendants as well. This is an under-researched area of internment studies despite the abundance of proof available in the literature of the younger generations. Aware of the application of trauma theory to the descendants of Holocaust survivors, I decided to create a similar theoretical framework with which I could analyse the literature of the Japanese American diaspora.

Freud’s essays provide the foundation of a customised theory of trauma that enables an analysis of both the literature and the culturally-specific silences that characterised the Japanese American community. Cathy Caruth’s texts Trauma: Explorations in Memory and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History demonstrates the manner in which trauma is carried in language itself and Dori Laub’s recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors illustrates how the trauma is articulated is just as important as what is articulated. An appreciation of the culturally-specific duality of the elucidated and the obscured, the spoken word and the silent gestures, is crucial to an analysis of the literary archive of the Japanese American diaspora.

Equally crucial to the study of any diasporic community is an understanding of their culture, tradition and history. For example, one unique aspect of the Japanese compared to other immigrant groups in America lies in the name given to each generational group, underscoring the rigid hierarchy of their homeland which the immigrants brought with them. In terms of trauma theory, the history of the Japanese
diaspora in North America is characterised by repetitive acts of discriminatory and exclusionary acts from their arrival in the 1860s to contemporary revivals of racist behaviour. Using a variety of sources I briefly trace the history of the Japanese in America, Hawaii and Canada in Chapter Two so that the significance of the continuation and perpetuation of traumatic acts can be appreciated.

The attacks on Pearl Harbor mesmerised the American nation and challenged their deep-seated assumptions of western superiority. The reaction of the government, in accordance with racial hysteria and financial opportunism, was to intern all those of Japanese ancestry from the west coast. Economic rationalism prevented the same outcome for the Japanese Hawaiians and, as the wartime experiences of the Japanese American and the Japanese Hawaiians differed so greatly, I examine the factors responsible for this disparity in Chapter Three. Using Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* and John Kelly and Martha Kaplan’s comparative study, *Represented Communities: Fiji and World Decolonisation*, I argue that it was the overwhelming number of voluntary acts of blood-sacrifice and their non-(mass)internment that enabled the Japanese Hawaiians to accelerate their post-war progress in the social and political arena. Thus the literature of all generations of Japanese Hawaiians, presented in Chapter Four, is not necessarily characterised by the internment as it was on the mainland.

After a brief examination of the necessity of an intergenerational analysis of the trauma of internment inspired by the studies conducted by Donna Nagata and Gwenn Jensen in Chapter Five, Chapter Six uncovers the traumatic traces in the literature of the first and second generations of Japanese Americans on the mainland. It should become clear that the silence that characterised them was debilitating and perpetuated the insidious nature of their trauma. The poetry and stories of the second generation illustrate the repression of their shame and humiliation, none more so than the four texts that I use for close reading in Chapter Seven. These texts span a period of over fifty years and show the manner in which second generation Japanese Americans came to terms with both their initial sense of vulnerability and the impact of the cathartic experiences of the redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The redress movement gave them the opportunity to articulate their trauma so that they could begin to heal the deep wounds caused by the internment.
Chapter Eight is also concerned with the redress movement as it was spearheaded by the third generation who inherited the effects of the shame exhibited by their parents. An examination of a range of their literary and artistic productions illustrates the wide variety of reactions from anger to distress, from frustration to an overwhelming sense of responsibility, that characterised their generation. David Mura was particularly vocal in his expression of anger at the way the internment had affected his formation of identity and sexuality and voiced his concerns at how the trauma would be passed down to his own children. His texts form the basis of Chapter Nine and the future of the Japanese diaspora and the importance of maintaining an open forum of discussion are examined in the concluding chapter. The thesis demonstrates that the internment is not just an event in the distant past; the trauma is still very much alive in the descendants of those who suffered through evacuation, incarceration and relocation.