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Erased:

An Exploration of Queer Japanese Americans' Experience During the Internment Period

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to uncover the forgotten and often hidden legacy of queer Japanese Americans who were imprisoned in internment camps during World War II as part of the wider internment of the West Coast's Japanese American community. The paper will explore two kinds of evidence that can be located within the historical record. First, it will examine available concrete evidence that proves the existence of queer folks within the camp setting. The paper will then utilize Hanna Kubowitz's concept of "queer textual structures" to explore other coded evidence of a queer Japanese American presence. Through an analysis of both types of evidence, the paper will conclude that queer Japanese Americans did indeed exist within the camps, and furthermore that they were able to express their queer identities and engage in queer behaviors with other internees. The paper will then question why more evidence of LGBTQ+ internees isn't available, concluding that two key groups of factors are responsible for the erasure of queerness from the historical record of internment. The first set of factors that contributed to this erasure are institutional, related to the way the camps' physical construction presented obstacles to queer behavior and the incentives camp administrators had to ignore or hide evidence of queerness. The second set of factors are sociocultural, related to the Japanese American community's attempts to shape the way they were viewed by outsiders. The paper will surmise that the community's desire to present themselves as mainstream Americans likely contributed to the difficulty queer community members found in expressing themselves and also influenced the lack of recorded evidence of queerness from within the community. The paper will conclude by acknowledging the limits of its research and calling for further exploration of this topic.

On February 18, 1942, following Japan's surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, condemning all peoples of Japanese descent on the West Coast to imprisonment for crimes they had never committed. Soon after, Japanese Americans were rounded up and placed in one of 10 prison camps scattered across the United States. By placing family units into close proximity, forcing activities like eating and bathing to be conducted communally, and providing independent leisure activities for different age groups, the structure of the camps scrambled the, in the words of author Richard Reeves, "hierarchical" structure of the Japanese family.¹ Thus, for the first time in many Japanese American families' lives, the bonds between parents and children and the structure of communal supervision was disrupted, providing opportunities, especially for young people, to escape the eyes of elders and interact with their peers with more independence.

One group this new arrangement may have particularly affected were LGBTQ+ internees. The internment experience may have brought queer Japanese Americans together who otherwise wouldn't have had any means of contact, and the camp environment itself may have provided new opportunities to engage in homosexual behavior, even as it presented substantial obstacles. This paper will attempt to locate a queer Japanese American internment experience through a careful examination of materials generated by both internees and camp administrators from before, during, and after the internment period. This paper will aim to bring the limited clues we have of such an experience to light, exploring primary source materials from the internment in conjunction with historical strategies developed in queer studies to parse out the often coded queerness we find in the historical record, while also exploring the institutional and social factors that explain why these clues can be so difficult to locate. In doing so, this paper will strive to

¹ Richard Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese American Internment in World War II* (New York: Picador, 2016), 115.

demonstrate the existence and resistance of queer people within the internment and the Japanese American community, while also bringing to light why this existence was ignored contemporaneously and scrubbed from history.

From the very beginning of the internment process, extensive photographic and written records were kept by both military and civilian agencies.² With the many thousands of pages of documentation generated during the internment period, one would expect to find relatively extensive archival evidence of a queer presence within the camps and the Japanese American community. However, this presence has proved difficult to find documented in any format. While this paper will later explore possible explanations for this lack of visible queerness within archival records, as well as materials which suggest queerness in a more coded manner, it will first examine the tantalizing concrete evidence we do have of an LGBTQ+ presence within the imprisoned Japanese American community.

When researching the topic of queer Japanese American individuals during the internment period, one of the names that frequently emerges is that of Jiro Onuma. Onuma immigrated from Japan to San Francisco in 1923 at the age of 19. During the internment, Onuma was imprisoned at the Topaz camp in Utah.³ Throughout his time in the United States, Onuma created a collection of materials currently held in the archives of the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. This collection, which contains a number of Onuma's papers and photo albums, is notable for containing material proof of Onuma's homosexuality, including images taken during his time in San Francisco and in camp. Much of the work of exploring Onuma's archival

² Dorothea Lange, Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 16-17.

³ Tina Takemoto, "Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro," by Lj Roberts, *Hyphenmagazine.com*, May 14, 2012, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/magazine/issue-25-generation-spring-2012/online-exclusive-looking-jiro>.

collection has been done by historian Tina Takemoto. Takemoto concluded that the images of Onuma taken in the camps are perhaps the only confirmed photographs of a gay Japanese American person within an internment camp, remarkable for their candidness and visible male-on-male touch.⁴ By cross-referencing photos taken while living in San Francisco and those taken in the Topaz and Tule Lake camps, Takemoto further argues that one figure frequently depicted in proximity to Onuma, Ronald, is in fact Onuma's partner.⁵ If true, this would make Onuma's photos both the only concrete photographic example of an interned gay Japanese American man and the only example of a gay interned Japanese American couple (and one that is visibly affectionate). Onuma's collection is thus an immensely valuable resource in the search for a queer Japanese American internment experience. Onuma concretely proves that not only did gay individuals exist within the camps, but that, as Takemoto puts it, queer Japanese Americans were "adults deliberately seeking same-sex affection and living lives of their own making before and after internment," able to maintain romantic partnerships and even visibly exhibit same-sex physical attraction.⁶ Onuma's insistence on continuing his relationship with Ronald even as Ronald was moved to the Tule Lake camp, as evidenced by photos the two exchanged while separated, suggests that queer Japanese Americans were engaged in deeply committed partnerships, even in the face of the surveillance and stifling heteronormative environment of the camps.⁷ While a confirmation of queer existence within the internment setting, Onuma's photos should also make us ponder why more evidence like them doesn't exist. Onuma's collection thus serves as both a relieving confirmation of queerness and a reminder of the conspicuous absence of similar queer voices in the historical record.

⁴ Takemoto, "Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro."

⁵ Tina Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma: A Queer Meditation on the Incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 259-64. muse.jhu.edu/article/548460.

⁶ Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma," 248.

⁷ Takemoto, "Looking for Jiro Onuma," 261-62.

Besides the individual proof of queerness within the camps that Onuma's collection represents, concrete institutional proof of queerness can also be located in the historical record. Within the Bancroft Library's Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, very few direct references are made to homosexuality within a camp setting, with a few notable exceptions. The most interesting exception comprises a report of a 1943 meeting held by the social welfare office of the Poston internment camp in Arizona. The meeting regards the actions of a 14 year old girl who had reportedly "turned to homosexual practices" after facing rejection from male peers: "She is interested in all the little girls on the block and has given them sex information and has taught them masturbation. The problem is so acute that about 25 are involved."⁸ The report quickly moves on to a discussion of how to remedy this apparent outbreak of homosexual activity, attributing the cause of it to "the lack of playground equipment" and a dearth of parent-led conversations regarding sex.⁹ This document provides a number of important insights. First and most obviously, it provides tangible evidence verified by camp officials that homosexual behavior was occurring within the camps. That as many as 25 individuals may have been involved would seem to suggest that this behavior was somewhat widespread, although unfortunately there is little evidence elsewhere to corroborate such a claim. This document would also seem to add credence to the hypothesis that the environment of the camps and the respite they provided some (especially young people) from the watchful eyes of others may have allowed for queer behavior to occur. The fact that the participants in the meeting immediately identify a lack of activities as a primary reason for this behavior, and the fact that they recommend parents become more involved in pursuits like "telling stories in the recreation hall" as remedy, would appear to be an indirect acknowledgement on the part of parents that it was a

⁸ Cushman, text of meeting of Poston social welfare office, April 2, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁹ Cushman, text of meeting of Poston social welfare office.

lack of their own oversight that allowed this incident to occur.¹⁰ The decision by participants in the meeting to jump immediately to a solution of increased surveillance, both by organizing more adult-led events and by placing “someone...who might be able to see [her] regularly” with the girl at the heart of the complaint, also points to many of the institutional barriers that may have prevented queer Japanese Americans from engaging in similar behavior to these young people at Poston.¹¹

The evidence presented by the photos of Jiro Onuma and the report from Poston provide scholars with a glimpse into a largely erased past, material proof from both an individual and camp administration that definitively provides evidence of queer presence and expression amongst Japanese Americans within the internment camps. Unfortunately, evidence of this kind is extremely hard to come by. Tens of thousands of documents are present in the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, yet a search of these records reveals a paltry 14 results containing the word “homosexual,” with only one instance (the Poston account) appearing on a camp administration-generated document. Fortunately, these evidentiary fragments don’t exist alone. If one is willing to read between the lines of the historical record, many more documents can be identified that suggest the presence and behavior of queer individuals within the camp setting. Reading this evidence can be difficult, however, as, due to the repressive environment they were produced in, these instances of queerness appear as coded rather than materially provable. Theories developed in the field of queer studies, however, can help us to locate such coded evidence, identify the repression that resulted in its obscured portrayal, and read through the coding to see the queerness embedded within. Writing for the

¹⁰ Cushman, text of meeting of Poston social welfare office.

¹¹ Cushman, text of meeting of Poston social welfare office.

journal *Style*, Hanna Kubowitz lays out a strategy for the reading of queerness in coded literature. Although developed to be applied to artistic works of literature, I argue that Kubowitz's strategies can be just as effectively applied to nonfiction pieces of historical text. Kubowitz argues that textual media is often produced by authors who employ certain writing strategies in order to signal to audiences in-the-know that their text, even if on the surface presenting as heteronormative, is in fact open to alternative readings that reveal its hidden queer themes: "I would strongly argue that under certain conditions it does make sense to speculate about potential writing strategies and author's intentions. This is definitely the case when dealing with texts produced under repressive circumstances."¹² Although the texts Kubowitz is referencing are British dramas produced before the decriminalization of homosexual conduct, her invitation to investigate the hidden queer content of texts, especially those produced under repressive circumstances, applies just as aptly to texts produced under the stifling heteronormative conditions of the internment camps. Kubowitz writes that readers may choose to read texts that are ambiguously queer using strategies that focus on either "downplaying queerness" or "foregrounding queerness."¹³ Acknowledging the repressive environment that might have resulted in expressions of queerness by Japanese Americans being left implied, but looking to foreground the queerness of these expressions and thus further identify a queer presence within the internment camps, this paper will now utilize the strategies laid out by Kubowitz to examine a variety of primary sources produced by Japanese Americans and reveal the hidden queerness they contain.

The first and perhaps most evocative piece of coded queer evidence produced by a Japanese American living in the camps is the extensive journal of a teenager named Stanley

¹² Hanna Kubowitz, "The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies Or: Obituary for the Implied Reader," *Style* 46, no. 2 (2012): 214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.46.2.201>.

¹³ Kubowitz, "The Default Reader," 213.

Hayami. Hayami was born and raised in Los Angeles, but was moved to the Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming after the passage of Executive Order 9066.¹⁴ Kept over the course of a few years until his release from camp in 1944 to join the military, Hayami's diary provides an intimate look into the daily life of a young Japanese American teenager forced to live within the camp system. The diary contains a wealth of materials, including musings on politics, anxieties about school, and even a number of drawings made by the budding artist. The diary is notable, however, because when examined with the lens of Kubowitz's queer reading strategies, the queer subtext of Hayami's writings and drawings becomes increasingly apparent. Kubowitz identifies a catalogue of what she terms "queer textual structures," certain techniques of coded language authors utilize which invite a queer reading of their texts.¹⁵ These structures are present throughout Hayami's writings. The first comes from Hayami's diary entries themselves. One of the textual structures Kubowitz identifies as evidence of queer coding is an author's employment of what Kubowitz calls "queer cliches and stereotypes."¹⁶ Although what constitutes a queer cliché is perhaps subjective, Hayami's writings contain a number of clichés that were familiar to me as a gay man and which are common in media depicting queer folk, especially those depicting individuals struggling with their own identity. Hayami opens one diary entry in which he expresses his feelings about camp life with a startling admission: "I don't tell this to anyone because they'll figure I'm a queer (maybe I am)."¹⁷ Here, Hayami openly admits that the thoughts he is about to express would be branded by others as the clichéd thoughts of a gay man, and yet makes no attempt whatsoever to distance himself from such a label. Hayami goes on to write that he feels stifled in camp, unable to avoid constant social interaction with others and

¹⁴ "Stanley Hayami Diary," Japanese American National Museum, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://www.janm.org/collections/stanley-hayami-diary>.

¹⁵ Kubowitz, "The Default Reader," 216.

¹⁶ Kubowitz, "The Default Reader," 217.

¹⁷ Stanley Hayami, diary entry, June 27, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

have time to think without risking being labeled “stuck up” by his fellow internees.¹⁸ Hayami expresses his desire to escape into the worlds of the wilderness tales he has been reading: “The places they live in are places were [sic] other people do not govern their lives but where they can lead their own life.”¹⁹ This sentiment, a feeling of separation from those around you and a deep desire to be apart from others (especially in a natural space) in order to express one’s truest feelings, is quite the stereotypical experience of many queer youth who find themselves growing up in a repressive environment (not to mention an integral aspect of queer media like *Brokeback Mountain*). Combined with Hayami’s non-rejection of the label of queer, this passage seems to be a clear example of one of Kubowitz’s queer textual structures and thus invites a reading of the passage as evidence of Hayami’s angst about his own queerness. In addition to the coded queerness of Hayami’s writings, his drawings also fulfill Kubowitz’s structures. Hayami’s diary is peppered with drawings he created of everyday camp life and scenes he imagined. The content of some of these drawings is notable and perhaps quite telling. Most of the images in the diary contain depictions of human figures, but the vast majority of these figures are male. In fact, of the dozen or so drawings featured in Hayami’s diary, only a single female figure, a mother, is ever depicted.²⁰ Even then, the figure is depicted in the background of the scene, is not drawn with much detail, and is explicitly desexualized by being shown in long sleeves, a full dress, and by being placed in a maternal position. By contrast, Hayami portrayed numerous male figures throughout the diary, including an especially intriguing portrait of a nude male.²¹ In this drawing, a man is sketched from the side, bending over so as to strategically cover his genitals while also exposing the viewer to a glimpse of his body, a body that Hayami has taken care to depict as

¹⁸ Hayami, diary entry, June 27, 1943.

¹⁹ Hayami, diary entry, June 27, 1943.

²⁰ Stanley Hayami, diary entry, November 12, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²¹ Stanley Hayami, diary entry, March 5, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

quite muscular and athletic. Hayami has drawn the body using a series of swirls, showing the care he put into crafting the figure and allowing him to accentuate the man's muscular legs, biceps, and especially abs. This image is far and away the most detailed and intricate depiction of a human body anywhere in the diary, comparable to the elaborate landscape images Hayami created elsewhere. While this image could certainly be read as simply a young artist attempting to perfect his drawing of the male form, the other contents of the diary suggest that this reading may not be accurate. As Kubowitz herself states: "If we know...that a particular author was gay...I fail to see what is so very wrong about speculating if the author in question did not intend his work to be readable in this way."²² While we indeed have no way of definitively knowing if Hayami was gay, him having died at just 19, based on Hayami's other queer coded writings I argue it is fair to at the very least speculate that this may have been the case, and thus to read Hayami's drawings as a sly way for the young man to express his sexual feelings towards and appreciation of other men while also having the plausible deniability of artistic practice. Thus, employing Kubowitz's tools of analysis and noting the diary's distinct absences (such as a lack of discussion of romantic feelings, especially unusual for a teenage boy), one can quickly come to read Hayami's diary as the coded expression, angst, and longing of a queer teen who felt unable to fully act on his identity and feelings. Hayami's diary, then, serves as yet more evidence of both a queer presence within the camps and the way queerness had to be suppressed and hidden.

Apart from Hayami's diary, another obscured piece of evidence that would seem to hint at the existence of queerness within the camps can be found in the writings of author Karon Kehoe. In an entry in the *Densho Encyclopedia*, historian Greg Robinson describes Kehoe as a white author who moved into the Gila River internment camp along with her Japanese American

²² Kubowitz, "The Default Reader," 214.

romantic partner by posing as her half-sister.²³ In 1945, just after her release from the camp, Kehoe wrote a fictionalized account of camp life called *City in the Sun*. The novel follows the Matsuki family as they adjust to their imprisonment. One portion of the work follows the experience of Coke, the Matsuki's only child. Coke engages in a number of scenes that contain incredibly thinly veiled language alluding to acts of queer intercourse, a textual structure Kubowitz would term under the category of either "queer cliches and stereotypes" or "allusions to queer culture."²⁴ Both of these structures are present in an extended scene in the middle of the novel in which Coke is invited to join a group of older boys in the camp shower one night. Coke is depicted as being surprised and overwhelmed at what he encounters in the showers, although Kehoe never explicitly reveals what it is the boys are doing: "Coke swallowed...His thoughts blurred. Lots of words swirled around in his mind, words he'd seen on fences and on the walls of toilets."²⁵ While Coke is perhaps initially confused at what he has wandered into, Kehoe quickly makes clear in not-so-coded language why Coke has been brought to the showers: "'I can see peaches here seems to need a lot of teaching—about a lot of things.' [Tosh's] eyes dropped suggestively and his mouth twisted in a sly, mocking sneer."²⁶ These brief exchanges perfectly align with two of Kubowitz's queer textual structures, suggesting the barely coded queer content of this interaction. The setting of the scene itself, a public shower at night, clearly fulfills Kubowitz's structure of "allusions to queer culture," as the space of the public shower figures prominently in queer sexual experience as a stereotypical location in which men have clandestine sexual liaisons. Furthermore, Coke's mention of "words he'd seen on fences and on the walls of toilets" is likely an allusion to the phone numbers and obscenities often plastered on the surfaces

²³ Greg Robinson, "City in the Sun (book)," Densho Encyclopedia, accessed December 9, 2022, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/City_in_the_Sun_\(book\)/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/City_in_the_Sun_(book)/).

²⁴ Kubowitz, "The Default Reader," 216.

²⁵ Karon Kehoe, *City in the Sun* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1946), 124.

²⁶ Kehoe, *City in the Sun*, 125.

of spaces frequented by men looking for sex. Finally, the power dynamic of the interaction itself is an example of “queer cliches and stereotypes.” The invitation of a younger, less experienced man to have sex with older, more sexually mature men is a common trope that has appeared throughout queer history and text (see: the history of pederasty). Especially with one of the older characters calling Coke pet names like “peaches” and asserting that Coke needs “teaching” while clearly leering at his body, Kehoe makes this dynamic quite explicit. Multiple elements of Kehoe’s passage clearly fulfill Kubowitz’s queer textual structures, heavily suggesting that Coke’s shower experience wasn’t simply an initiation ritual, but was instead a rather stereotypical covert gay male hookup in a public shower, even if never explicitly stated. Later in the novel, Kehoe would seem to further confirm the queerness of Coke’s initial interaction, as Coke continues to see Joe, one of the boys from the shower: “Joe waited for [Coke] in the night to take him to the shower rooms... There were a few bad times—that first night had been the worst. Shame... had alternated with frozen numbness in dread of discovery.”²⁷ Once again, this scene clearly fulfills Kubowitz’s textual structures, as Coke’s mix of both shame and excitement at continuing to see Joe is a cliched feeling amongst gay men experimenting with their sexuality while still newly coming to grips with their identity. Furthermore, considering the unsubtle sexual coding of Coke’s initial shower room experience, Joe’s frequent beckoning of Coke back into that space would seem to imply that the two boys have developed some sort of queer relationship with one another. At the time of *City in the Sun*’s release, according to Greg Robinson, Kehoe’s book “attracted an enthusiastic response from Japanese American reviewers,” with contemporaries of Kehoe like fellow artist Miné Okubo remarking on the novel’s accuracy and familiarity: “Parts of the story made me cry, parts made me chuckle, and parts made me

²⁷ Kehoe, *City in the Sun*, 132.

howl with delighted recognition of center types and parallel situations.’’²⁸ Considering the fact that Japanese Americans at the time of the book’s release were quite positive about the novel and even took time to comment on its accuracy, and considering that Kehoe herself was queer, I would argue that it is quite likely that Coke’s scenes and the type of relationship he was in must have occurred in the camps or at least had some parallel upon which Kehoe based this portion of her novel. If my analysis of Kehoe’s coded queer writing using Kubowitz’s analytical structures is accurate, and Kehoe did indeed base her writing on real life experiences, then *City in the Sun* would further suggest the existence of queer people and relationships within the camps. It would also seem to suggest that my hypothesis about the structures of the camps creating opportunities for queer expression is correct, as clearly a lack of oversight and the existence of public facilities allowed for the occurrence of queer liaisons.

Having researched the archives and found both explicit and coded evidence, I feel I can firmly conclude that queer Japanese Americans not only existed within the internment camps, but in fact were able to act on their queerness and perhaps even pursue and maintain sexual and romantic relationships. While illuminating in its own right, my search for this evidence constantly pointed to a glaring question: why isn’t there more? In my research, I believe I have identified a number of factors that might have contributed to the erasure of queer experience within the historical record of the internment. The first set of factors are institutional and attributable to the unique environment of the camps themselves and the incentives camp administrators had to conceal certain information. The second set are cultural reasons that are attributable to the social environment and cultural values of the Japanese American community

²⁸ Robinson, “City in the Sun (book).”

itself. In the remainder of this paper, I will explore these factors and begin to uncover why queerness is so absent in the internment's historical record.

The first set of factors that likely contributed to the lack of evidence of interned queer Japanese Americans was the structure of the camps themselves and the nature of the administration that ran them. The very environment of the camps, while creating some opportunities for queer behavior, was largely uncondusive to queer expression. As Tina Takemoto explained in an interview with Hyphen Magazine, the camps had an “atypical structure” from most prisons, “organiz[ing] inmates by family unit” instead of segregating them by gender.²⁹ This meant that although many younger inmates especially faced a lessening of familial surveillance due to the camps providing a variety of independent activities specifically for different age groups, community surveillance was still an everyday fact of life. Unlike traditional prisons, where the prevalence of homosexual conduct has become a stereotype, the internment camps reproduced the heteronormative structure of the family, likely forcing queer people to carry out homosexual conduct in secrecy, if at all. We see as much in Kehoe's novel, in which Coke's queer experience must happen under cover of darkness.³⁰

Besides the ways in which the physical environment of the camps may have impeded queer conduct and thus lessened its presence in the historical record, camp administrators themselves likely also contributed to the historical erasure, refusing to record queer conduct even if it did occur. As much is evident in one exchange recorded at the Poston camp between an individual who appears to be a camp administrator and a visiting Dr. Bartlett. The administrator pushes back on a statement Bartlett makes regarding queer people in the camps: “Dr. Bartlett of the hospital believed that there is a normal number of homosexuals here as found in any typical

²⁹ Takemoto, “Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro.”

³⁰ Kehoe, *City in the Sun*, 126.

community. I took an exception to this statement and stated that although there maybe [sic] as many persons of homosexual tendency here as found in a normal community they are not practicing it here.”³¹ Bartlett proceeds to push back against this assertion, at which point the administrator points out that there had “been no violent crimes such as rapes,” as though the lack of sex crimes proves an absence of queer behavior.³² This source is quite telling of the attitude camp administrators held towards queer individuals. The fact that the administrator pushes back on the very idea that queer people and behavior might have existed in the camps at all, even as the record of the teenage girl confirms that administrators at the very same Poston camp had dealt with instances of queer conduct before, suggests that camp administrators were hesitant to acknowledge the existence of queerness in official documentation. Camp officials would likely have been loathe to admit that something as taboo and deviant as queer people (and worse, queer behavior) might exist within their camps for fear of losing public support and of potential consequences from a government who likely wouldn’t have been pleased to know that they were unintentionally facilitating homosexual contact. Thus, the institution of the camps themselves provided a throttle on the ability for queerness to enter into the historical record by both physically restricting the ability of Japanese Americans to engage in homosexual conduct and by providing administrators with concrete incentives to ignore and deny the existence of LGBTQ+ internees.

Apart from institutional factors related to the camps and their administrators, cultural and social factors within the Japanese American community likely also contributed to the silence of queer voices in the internment story. Specifically, the community’s desire to shape the way they were perceived by the outside world likely played a major role. The internment of Japanese

³¹ Description of interaction between Dr. Bartlett and camp administrator, August 22, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³² Description of interaction between Dr. Bartlett and camp administrator.

Americans was based on the racist premise that the community was in some way fundamentally foreign. Japanese Americans were incredibly concerned with projecting an image of themselves as loyal and mainstream Americans; they hoped that by doing so, they could combat the assumptions that had led to their internment in the first place. Tina Takemoto writes that this desire for American identity often led to expressions of homophobia in a bid to be seen as firmly within the American cultural mainstream: “In the context of incarceration camps, the pressure to conform dominant codes of heterosexuality was heightened especially among...men, who sought to prove their masculinity and American citizenship by policing sexual behavior [and] disavowing homosexuality.”³³ By distancing themselves from the deviant subject of queerness and denying its existence within their own community, Japanese Americans hoped to provide themselves with a defense against the racism they faced. This defensive posturing can even be seen today. As part of her research on Jiro Onuma, Takemoto made a public request for information on the queer internment experience in a Japanese American paper called the *Nichi Bei Weekly*. Takemoto received a number of angry messages from former internees: “Gays in Topaz?...Are you serious? Life in camp was tough enough to put up with such nonsense. Besides the Issei would not have tolerated such abnormal behavior.”³⁴ This message is illustrative of the attitude many Japanese Americans likely held. As Takemoto writes, this demonstrated vehemence towards the idea of queerness within the Japanese American community was likely part of an attempt on the commenter’s part to “maintain...the normalcy and morality of innocent Japanese Americans who were unjustly imprisoned.”³⁵ For a community treated as out of step with the rest of American society, the suggestion of something as seemingly abnormal as queerness residing within the group would have been treated as dangerous. Thus, it makes a kind

³³ Takemoto, “Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro.”

³⁴ Takemoto, “Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro.”

³⁵ Takemoto, “Online Exclusive: Looking for Jiro.”

of sense to refuse to record the elements of said group that could open it up to attack by others or be seen as out of line with the mainstream. For this reason and a set of other complex cultural factors, the Japanese American community's own internal attempts at policing likely led queer Japanese Americans to either hide their identity or see their experience erased from their community's history.

The internment of hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese Americans on the basis of their racial identity alone will go down in history as one of America's darkest moments, made darker by the lack of knowledge most Americans have of this fundamentally unjust event. Within the internment scholarship that does exist, much still remains to be uncovered, especially the stories of those who experienced compounding marginalizations like queer Japanese Americans. I hope that with this paper I have been able to shine a spotlight on the lives of individuals who weathered the racism of American society broadly and the silencing of their experiences within the camps and within their own communities. The experience of queer Japanese Americans and their lack of record deserves study as an example of how modern scholars can read historical evidence of queerness and understand how social, cultural, and institutional factors have all contributed to a historical erasure of the queer experience both within the United States and around the world. This paper has only scratched the surface, merely presenting the limited evidence I could uncover and hypothesizing on why I couldn't find more. Still, I hope this piece will serve as an illumination of a forgotten history and serve as a jumping off point for a more complete exploration of a community that deserves our attention and study.

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