

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Representations of Japanese American History at Rye Country Day School

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Abstract

This paper explores ways in which Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices at my high school, Rye Country Day School (RCDS), can be improved to recognize minority students, with a particular focus on Japanese and Japanese American students. RCDS is an affluent, private institution located in a suburban neighborhood in New York State, USA, where sixty-four percent of the student body identifies as white. RCDS offers an Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH), but the textbook it uses, *American History* by Alan Brinkley, barely touches on Japanese and Japanese American history outside of World War II. Through primary and secondary historical sources, the paper sets out to uncover the hidden stories in Japanese American history.

As an autoethnography, this research offers various constructive ideas for RCDS as an institution by looking into the current initiatives that the school has taken to create a more welcoming environment for minorities and identifying spaces for further support for the student body. Centering my research on RCDS comes with the hope that it will support my school in its efforts to ensure that students receive an education that allows them to explore beyond what is written on the surface of textbooks.

By considering RCDS as a case study, I hope to inspire similar institutions to re-examine their curriculum and put historical representation at the

forefront of their DEI initiatives. In an increasingly polarized political climate, the anti-racist work initiatives suggested can be applied more widely for the benefit of students everywhere.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); Japanese/Japanese American History; Autoethnography; anti-racism; American History; Case study

Introduction

In many United States history classes offered across secondary schools in the United States, Japanese and Japanese American history is often, at most, contained to World War II and related events. My experience taking Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH) at Rye Country Day School, a private institution located in an affluent neighborhood in New York State where sixty-four percent of the student body identifies as white (Rye Country Day School, n.d.), became my impetus to embark on this research. I was assigned an end-of-the-year project, in which the topic that I chose was the historiography of Japanese American internment during WWII. As I was researching, I discovered details that the APUSH exam excluded, and was eager to learn more. Japanese history in the U.S. extends beyond internment. By taking a close historical view into anti-Japanese sentiments and juxtaposing it with the current climate at RCDS, I hope to raise awareness in my school community about the importance of historical representation.

In doing so, I also hope to support my school in its efforts to ensure that students receive a comprehensive education that explores beneath the surface of texts and allows them to unfold the raw, collective memories of our nation's history. This paper first aims to chronologically examine the historical experiences of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans in the United States from the early 20th century to the developments of model minority narratives of Japanese and Japanese Americans during the mid-20th century. Then, this paper identifies the extent to which Japanese and Japanese Americans are described in the APUSH textbook at RCDS and identifies spaces where the school can improve as it carries on its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) mission. Finally, the paper seeks to connect the past to the present through contemplating the historical implications of occurrences affecting the larger Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in the United States with the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Representation of Japanese/Japanese American history in American History by Alan Brinkley
AMERICAN HISTORY by Alan Brinkley, the textbook used in the AP United States History course at RCDS, contains a two-page section for the "Internment of Japanese Americans" within a larger chapter about the Second World War (Brinkley, 2014).

The section starts with a comparison of the First World War with the second, claiming that the federal government violated fewer civil liberties in controlling seditious acts and that ethnic or cultural hostilities were less evident during the second war. However, the textbook explains that the greatest exception to the general societal atmosphere of tolerance to racial difference during WWII was the treatment of the "small, politically powerless group of Japanese Americans" (Brinkley, 2014 pg. 720). Brinkley's textbook describes in depth the various developments concerning Japanese Americans and their experiences during WWII but offers

limited glimpses into the experiences of Japanese and Japanese Americans prior to and following the historic internment.

Rise of Anti-Japanese Sentiments in the Early 20th Century

Increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants entered California after the enactment of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which forced employers in the agricultural industry to suspend ready access to cheap labor. In ten years, the Japanese population in the state grew to exceed ten thousand (Molina, 2006, p. 50). Soon, with their arrival to the U.S., the Japanese replaced the positions of Chinese immigrants, inheriting much of the racism and exclusion that had devastated the Chinese community before Japanese entry. During the 1910s and 1920s, anti-Japanese sentiments rooted themselves in public health in the U.S. Specifically in Los Angeles, where the department of public health began blaming the Japanese for the spread of communicable diseases. Public health officials began stigmatizing Japanese as "unsanitary" and "ignorant classes" as they believed that Japanese presence led to the transmission of illnesses brought by them to whites (Molina, 2006, p. 53). Thus, in echoing the nation's agitation over the threat of cultural, political, and economic instability due to increasing Japanese immigration, the Los Angeles Health Department racialized public health to disadvantage Japanese immigrants while attempting to promote its reputation among the American public. Similarly, states such as Oregon and Washington learned of the prejudice and actively contributed to the nativistic attitude towards the Japanese residing there. As Kristofer Allerfeldt writes in his work *Race and Restriction: Anti-Asian Immigration Pressures in the Pacific North-west of America during the Progressive Era, 1885–1924* "prejudice is often more potent where the threat is perceived rather than actual. In this case, the imagined, bestial, 'Yellow Devil' could be made more threatening than the reality of a gang of submissive coolies" (Molina, 2006, p. 58). The

strong work ethic and generally acquiescent nature—as perceived by white employers—of Japanese workers may have allured ambitious employers. Yet, these exploited workers were compensated less by their employers than other workers merely for their racial background, elucidating one of the most pervasive forms of racism that the Japanese encountered upon their settlement. Thus, while California’s responsibility in the enactment of the 1924 Immigration Act, which banned entry of Japanese immigration, is undoubtable, the northwest must bear a large share of the responsibility for the exclusionary attitude towards the Japanese (Allerfeldt, 2003, p. 72).

Japanese American Citizens League leading up to and during World War II

The bombing of Pearl Harbor left a lasting mark within the Japanese American community in the U.S. as political authority shifted from the first-generation immigrants, the Issei, to its second generation, the Nisei. Combined with the Nisei’s vexation over their political and economic subordination was the increasingly visible cultural chasm between the two generations—the Issei, while choosing the U.S. as their permanent home, tended to “remain culturally more Japanese than American” whereas their children, while being exposed to the “Japanese language, tradition, and thought patterns at home or Japanese school, were nonetheless more American than Japanese” (Spickard, 1983, p. 150). Moreover, what distinguished and, at the same time, separated the Nisei apart from their older generation was their stronger desire to adopt an American middle-class lifestyle, their greater command of American skills, their lack of Japanese skills, and a “broader intellectual perspective” (p. 150). The Nisei slowly emerged as a legitimate political entity through the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), an organization founded in 1929 that claimed to represent the interests of Japanese Americans. The Nisei felt strongly that they were ‘more’ American than their parents’ generation. After the

attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI agents began interning “... all the Issei who looked like community leaders or had tangible connections with Japan (Spickard, 1983, p. 156).” Nisei officers of the JACL served as informants for the FBI. While leaders may have convinced several state and local officials of Nisei’s patriotism to the U.S., the detainment of the Issei and the ultimate internment of the Nisei eclipsed any hopes of political success that JACL leaders anticipated. When Japanese Americans most relied on the Nisei JACL, its leaders failed them. While hundreds of Japanese Americans living in LA lost their jobs in private businesses and local and state governments from 1941 to 1942, and others were physically beaten or extorted by thieves posing as government officials, the JACL did not respond. Most importantly, when faced with the unavoidable fate of internment, the JACL “did not make a sound other than to tell their constituents: ‘We are going into exile as a patriotic duty’” (Spickard, 1983, p. 169).

Until the end of World War II, the JACL did not reappear as a powerful entity in the Japanese American community. Some Japanese Americans began to protest, arguing that leaders of the JACL were simply pursuing their own personal glory through their obliging stance prior to and during internment. It is reasonable to acknowledge that JACL leaders decided to be complacent to keep away from literal bloodshed, but this does not exactly justify the lack of response to the persecution that many Japanese Americans faced before their forced removal.

Post War Racial Liberalism and the Model Minority Myth

The last Japanese American internment camp officially closed in March 1946. However, the plight of the Issei and Nisei did not end. With the conclusion of internment, the JACL sought to rebound its reputation among the American public by focusing considerable attention on obtaining citizenship for its people. JACL leaders resolved to write about the Issei and their crucial contribution to the U.S. In 1948, the JACL

launched the Issei Story Project (ISP), which involved oral history interviews and the collection of important documents, photographs, and artifacts. As a final product, the JACL leaders hoped to form an accurate history of Japanese Americans, an examination of Nikkei–Japanese immigrants and their descendants in the U.S.–life experiences, and a widely-known account prepared for an unacquainted audience (Wu, 2014, pg. 150). With the project's chauvinism, JACL leaders underscored the project's global value considering America's involvement in another geopolitical conflict, the Cold War. "The recent 'setback in Japan' had reignited Asians' 'bad image' of the United States." And a narrative of Issei success in the U.S., particularly their resettlement to cities after internment, and a demonstration that "American democracy benefited all its people, including those of Asiatic ancestry," would elevate America's image (Wu, 2014, pg. 151). Thus, with the Cold War, the positive depictions developed more out of a geopolitical incentive to promote America's reputation after its damage during internment, than from a genuine admiration towards the resettlement efforts of Japanese Americans.

Assimilationists hold a paternalistic belief that a racial group is behaviorally or culturally, thus temporarily, inferior to whites and that they can be developed by instructing them on how they should act (KENDI, n.d.). They possess ideas that are "more subtle, seductive and coded" than those held by blatant racists. In this respect, the JACL, media, government, and other involved parties in the development of success narratives were all extensions of assimilationists in exploiting Japanese cultural values and success narratives to conform Japanese Americans to the world views and norms shared by the white American populace. Many assimilationists fail to be acutely aware of their internalized racism because "You can be someone who has no intention to be racist,' who believes in and fights for equality, 'but because you're conditioned in a world that is racist and a country that is structured in anti-black

[or of any other kind] racism, you yourself can perpetuate those ideas'" (O'Neal, 2017).

Ironically, the very belief, held by promoters of resettlement and assimilation, of Japanese Americans being the model for other minority groups, reveals that Japanese Americans were never societally accepted as "full Americans." Therefore, in considering the historical instance of Japanese Americans and the narratives that had spotlighted them, it is worth questioning, more broadly, whether assimilation has ever been, including the present, an achievable concept for marginalized groups in the U.S.

The Model Minority in the Japanese Agricultural Workers' Program

The prevalence of racial liberalism in the U.S. during the Cold War era had not only involved Japanese Americans, but also Japanese nationals from mainland Japan who brought with them their aspirations of farming on U.S. soil. Given the possibility of the Bracero Program coming to an end, in the early 1950s, farmers in California were concerned over the looming labor shortage. To maintain a stable source for cheap and accessible labor, growers began to explore new mechanisms and ultimately arranged another program, the Japanese Agricultural Workers' Program (JAWP), in which Japanese farmers residing in mainland Japan would temporarily migrate to the U.S. as guest workers and work in fields owned by Californian growers.

On September 22, 1956, sixty-two Japanese men arrived at the Sacramento Municipal Airport, with the media characterizing them as model students to "grow into productive adulthood." Growers reported to journalists of the new guestworkers being abstinent and "fundamentally clean" as they kept their quarters "tidied up" (MIREYA, 2017, pg. 672). It is staggering to observe such stark contradictions between these comments and the nativistic portrayals of Japanese immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s in the West Coast. The Japanese, who were once described as being unsanitary, growing produce that spread disease, and living in squalid or inferior conditions than

their neighbors, were now heralded as young model students of minorities in the U.S.

Despite what they were promised, the reality was that once guestworkers arrived at their destination, they immediately faced a series of injustices. To account for their transportation costs and the JAWP's budget, Japanese workers were forced to subsidize money out of their own earnings to repay the cost for their travels to the U.S., leaving little to themselves.

Hearing about the labor conditions of Japanese guest workers, it was, once again, Japanese Americans, who questioned the positive illustrations of the JAWP and protested the JACL which endorsed the Program. The JACL patriotically claimed that welcoming Japanese guest workers would epitomize racial equality in the U.S. and that the Japanese guest workers would become "ambassadors of democracy that were so desperately needed following World War II and the U.S. occupation of Japan" (MIREYA, 2017, pg. 662).

In preserving the model minority image of Japanese guest workers, proponents of the JAWP not only argued for the political and diplomatic benefits of the JAWP, but also believed that the opposition to the JAWP was rooted in xenophobia. The multiple parties involved with the JAWP, from growers to the JACL, were so preoccupied with their own political and economic objectives in supporting or objecting to the JAWP that they failed to express genuine concern for the experiences and well-being of Japanese guest workers who had left their homeland to pursue the "American Dream" just as the first Japanese immigrants had done half-a-century earlier.

Larger DEI efforts involving AAPI students at RCDS

In the same way that there are countless histories silenced by textbooks like Brinkley's, there are also diverse avenues to incorporate such relevant subjects in a school setting. I have identified five effective and distinct methods in which the RCDS community—and similar institutions—could accomplish this goal. Considering the

impracticalities of methods such as modifying the content in textbooks or the topics covered in the APUSH course, I have proposed multiple approaches that my school can choose from to navigate a polarized climate surrounding how history should be taught. The plans outlined below provide a range of learning opportunities for students and faculty in and outside of the classroom experience:

Interactive Notebook

This notebook will be a Google Slides presentation containing, in each slide, a historical theme that is either missing or misrepresented in Brinkley's textbook. Each slide will have links to specific sections of this paper so that students will be able to select a specific segment of this paper to read. The notebook is designed to be accessible and engaging and will be shared with members of the AAPI club in the hopes that this tool will serve as one of many means to encourage AAPI students to learn more about each other's history.

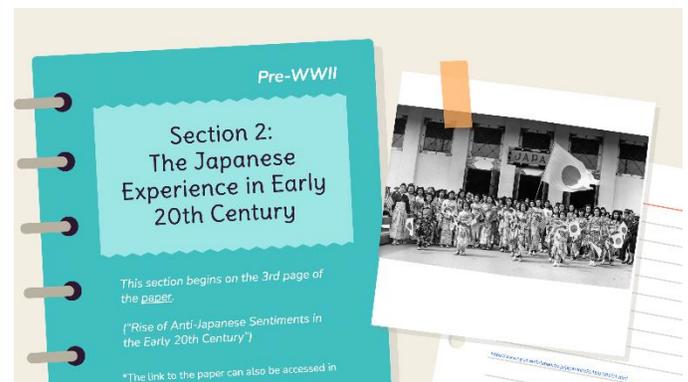


FIGURE 1: Representative slide from the Interactive Notebook

Underrepresented Groups in United States History

Underrepresented Groups in U.S. History is an elective course offered at RCDS and is taught through focusing on historical figures representing various marginalized populations in the U.S. and their perspectives. This would be a great space to present my research and discuss

it with my peers. The Director of DEI, who also teaches the course, agrees with this idea and I will be able to collaborate with him to discuss how I could contribute to the making of the topics covered in the course.

Reading Recommendation for Anti-Racist Books
These books—including the books that the school has already listed as optional community resources—can be added in the annual RCDS Summer Reading list to allow members of the community to further their knowledge. Books like *This Book Is Anti-Racist* by Tiffany Jewell, *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi, and *Start Here, Start Now* by Liz Kleinrock are all rich in history and anti-racist, anti-bias practices for teachers, students, and staff alike. These books can also be read by students through a Book Club with monthly meetings to discuss the relevant themes and ideas of each book.

Utilizing community-wide communication tools and Advisory meetings
During the months celebrating and acknowledging the contributions of various marginalized groups in American history, students and faculty can select a figure belonging to any marginalized groups and explain what makes them special, an expansion of student and faculty efforts during the 2020-2021 school year. This information can be shared through daily postings on community-wide communication tools, such as RCDS News. Alternatively, one of the two cyclical Advisory meetings can be devoted for students and advisors in a House to take turns and share their findings within the House.

Involvement of guest speakers
There are numerous nonprofit organizations working under a shared mission to ensure inclusivity, equality, and justice in society. For instance, Hollaback! offers programs to raise awareness about harassment and ways to combat them. Through inviting guest speakers of these organizations to the school during Community Meeting, students and faculty will gain

exposure to professional insights that they may not be able to obtain in a classroom setting. It is important to note that the RCDS community has been conscientiously supporting AAPI students. In alignment with these efforts, the action plans that I have identified come with the hope that through actively encouraging my school community to learn and refine our understanding of minority groups in the U.S., such individuals will be further uplifted, and that we will continue our work towards being an anti-racist, anti-bias space.

Final Words

The ongoing Coronavirus pandemic has infected the country in many ways, exposing deep-seated hatred against the AAPI community in the U.S. The appearance of political figures, such as former President Donald Trump, bellowing discriminatory rhetoric to marginalize AAPIs within the country, and the alarming proliferation of anti-Asian bias incidents as byproducts of the pandemic unfortunately confirm the reality that inequality and injustice continue to affect AAPIs to this day. Moreover, a recent statistic indicates that the victims of violence after the outbreak of the pandemic has not been limited to a specific ethnicity: people of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other ethnic descent have been victims of violence (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021, pg. 8). This data re-establishes the delusion which singularly characterizes AAPIs as "Asians," disregarding the diverse population that the term reflects.

In a generally chronological fashion, this paper explored the history of Japanese and Japanese American people in the United States from the early to mid-20th century, focusing on nativistic sentiments during the early 20th century, the developments of the model minority myth, and the experiences of guest workers in the JAWP program after the war.

However, as observed in the early portions of this paper, Alan Brinkley's *American History* fixates upon the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II, particularly in the context of

internment, showing a general curricular disregard for this history. The action plans identified in the earlier sections of this paper take this actuality into consideration by outlining ways in which my school community can address the lack of historical representation of Japanese and Japanese Americans and, even broadly, foster awareness for the history of many other racial, ethnic, and marginalized groups.

The ongoing Coronavirus pandemic has infected the country in many ways, exposing deep-seated hatred against the AAPI community in the U.S. The appearance of political figures, such as former President Donald Trump, bellowing discriminatory rhetoric to marginalize AAPIs within the country, and the alarming proliferation of anti-Asian bias incidents as byproducts of the pandemic unfortunately confirm the reality that inequality and injustice continue to affect AAPIs to this day. Moreover, a recent statistic indicates that the victims of violence after the outbreak of the pandemic has not been limited to a specific ethnicity: people of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other ethnic descent have been victims of violence (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021, pg. 8). This data re-establishes the delusion which singularly characterizes AAPIs as "Asians," disregarding the diverse population that the term reflects.

Despite these challenging circumstances, in July 2021, at a time when racial history and how it should be taught was under intense debate, Democratic Governor JB Pritzker of Illinois signed a bill mandating government-run schools to teach students about the contributions of Asian Americans in the economic, cultural, social, and political development of the United States. Pritzker commented, "It's a new standard that helps us understand one another" during a time when AAPIs are suffering from unfounded stereotypes and bigotry (BBC, 2021, par. 4). Such historic and contemporary stories inspire and give us hope for the future even during times of hardship while reminding us of the profound implications that America's past has to offer to the present.

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