Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women

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Abstract

The story of internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II has become part of the collective memory of most Canadians of Japanese descent. Promoted as part of the community’s efforts to seek redress for wartime losses, the collective narrative has centred around loss of property, the indignities of detainment in Vancouver, expulsion to ghost towns, and violation of human rights and principles of democracy. The Redress Settlement with the Canadian government in 1988 has prompted a further unearthing of personal memoirs, in a conscious effort of Japanese Canadians to recover their history. The individual experiences examined here, through the author’s personal memories, from private letters written during the war by Japanese Canadian women and intercepted by the Canadian government, and from recent interviews with second-generation Japanese Canadian women, reveal diverse experiences within the collective story. In particular, these accounts challenge the image of the silent, unresisting, and uncritical Japanese Canadian woman.
At that time, the school we went to, there were not a lot of minorities. So, I think some of the teachers and some of the students weren’t sure how to get accustomed to us, and we weren’t sure what to expect either. But everyone tried their best and we flourished. And I went on to high school and then to university. And one of the things was having my teachers—like we were talking about before, recognized the potential in me and my sisters and really encouraging us, and being with my classmates and making friends and having fun with them. And during that time, it was the late ’90s, and there “Japanese Canadians lost almost all of their possessions during World War II. All boats, that belonged to Japanese Canadians were impounded. In 1941, around 1,200 fishing boats were impounded by the Japanese Fishing Vessel Disposal Committee (Masako Fukawa). There the living conditions were so poor that the citizens of wartime Japan even sent supplemental food shipments through the Red Cross. (Linda Di Biase). Japanese Canadians were also put into work camps, the conditions were equally as bad and they were treated like animals.”