

From OSU to Amsterdam: Transformative Learning through Community-Based Multi-Media Research

JUDY WU, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
College of Humanities

In March of 2006, I traveled to Amsterdam with a team of Ohio State University students and faculty to attend the European Social Science History Association Conference. For all of us, it was our first time attending and presenting at the conference. For many of us, it was the first time we were in Europe. We all came as a direct result of our involvement with the Japanese American Oral History/Documentary Project that was sponsored by the OSU Asian American Studies (AAS) program during Winter 2005. I had served as the coordinator for AAS and for the oral history project. In Amsterdam, I had the opportunity to introduce and hear six of the 42 students who participated in the oral history project, as they gave scholarly presentations about the significance of their research and filmmaking. During our stay, I gained an even deeper appreciation of the fulfillment that is possible as a teacher and mentor.

The idea for the Japanese American oral history/documentary project came from an effort to commemorate the World War II incarceration of nearly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast

of the United States by the American government. Two-thirds of these individuals were born in the United States and hence American citizens. One-third were Issei, or Japanese immigrants, who were legally ineligible to become U.S. citizens due to racial restrictions in naturalization. All of these individuals, regardless of actual behavior or political conviction, were suspected of harboring loyalty to Japan and forced to relocate from their homes and communities on the West Coast. Almost all of them spent the duration of the war behind barbed wire, surrounded by guard towers, in government-sponsored "camps" located on some of the most remote and desolate regions of the country. Although internment was justified at the time based on an argument of "military necessity," the American government itself subsequently acknowledged that the actual historical causes were "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership. . . . A grave injustice was done to American citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry who, without individual review or any probative evidence against them, were excluded, removed and detained by the United States during World War II." (Personal Justice Denied: Report on the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1982.) Because Japanese American internment is such a historically significant event and serves as a catalyst for raising discussions about war, racial profiling and civil liberties (topics that are of particular relevance in the post-9/11 era), the Asian American Studies Program at OSU sought to organize an educational event around the theme of "Day of Remembrance." The day in question is February 19, 1942, the date that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized internment. However, there were so many good ideas generated by a committee of interested faculty, staff, students, and community members that our "Day of Remembrance" soon became a "Month of Remembrance." Through the generous support provided by nearly 50 co-sponsors and through the dedication of a large number of volunteers, we were able to invite historian Art Hansen, performance artist Denise Uyehara, and photographer Masumi Hayashi to central Ohio to share their intellectual and artistic interpretations of internment.

However, what really made our month-long commemoration exciting and innovative were our efforts to involve OSU students in interviewing

former internees and to offer resources to help them to create their own historical documentaries or performance art about internment. Forty-two OSU students (ranging from doctoral students in History to finance and engineering students to undeclared sophomores) signed on to participate in the Japanese American internment oral history project. They worked in groups of four to eight and in a relatively short amount of time learned new and challenging skills. They also committed their time and energies to capture the lives of Japanese Americans who were so profoundly shaped by wartime internment.

While the Asian American Studies Program could play a central role in attracting students to the oral history/performance art project, it was our community partners who recruited the interview subjects. Karen Jiobu, one of the crucial members of our "Month of Remembrance" Organizing Committee, enlisted the help of the Dayton/Cleveland Japanese American Citizens League to identify individuals who would be willing to share their time, experiences, and personal memories. They graciously allowed our students into their homes and work places and into their lives. As a result of this wonderful collaboration between students and community members, we had the opportunity to get to know 10 people, 10 out of a total of 120,000 Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. Many of the interviewees, along with their family members, even made the trip from Cleveland and Cincinnati to be at the "premiere" of the documentaries on the OSU campus. Although the event was far from free of technical glitches, it was an honor for all of us to meet the students' interview subjects and research collaborators both on video and in person.

In a wrap-up session following the conclusion of the Japanese American oral history/documentary film project, the students commented on what they found most meaningful about their experience. One graduating senior, who would receive a Fulbright to study in Germany and whose documentary making team was featured on a WOSU radio story about the project, stated that the experience allowed her to do something unique. For whatever reason, she was unable to write an honors thesis in her major. However, the oral history project allowed her to do something worthwhile with her

intellectual and creative energies. Others discussed the challenges and rewards of working within a group. The teams were expected to develop interview questions together, conduct and film the oral histories, and construct a compelling historical and visual narrative based on selective excerpts from the interviews. As a result, the students gained a sense of the power that historians had in selecting and representing evidence. They also learned how to negotiate each others' personalities as well as work habits. While some of the teams were more "homogenous" in their composition, others had greater diversity in terms of racial/cultural background, gender mixture, disciplinary interests, and educational rank.

A number of the students also expressed interest in continuing the oral history project in one form or another. Several volunteered to share the lessons that they learned to help the developing Native American Oral History Project. We also discussed the possibility of presenting about the oral history project at an academic conference, like the one in Amsterdam. Another student planned to pursue an honors thesis on the resettlement of Japanese American in the Midwest following their years in internment camps. While he previously conducted textual research about internment, the oral history project allowed him to gain more personal insight into history by connecting with an individual who lived through the events he had read about in books and documents. And, finally, one student, Genna Duberstein, expressed a desire to bring together all of the interviews and footage to give the individual internees' experiences greater visibility and coherence. Genna had been involved in the project early on, volunteering her artistic skills to draw individual portraits of the interview subjects. These portraits were subsequently presented to our community collaborators as gifts. It was due to Genna's interest in portraiture that our "Month of Remembrance" and oral history project was named "Faces from the Past, Voices of the Present." Genna eventually received a TELR research-on-research grant for the summer of 2005. With the resources and support of the OSU Digital Union, she produced an hour-length documentary based on the original interviews and footage, and she also created a multi-media website about the overall project.

While I always knew that the Japanese American oral history/documentary project was special, I gained an even greater understanding of how much this experience had changed the lives of the students involved when a group of us traveled to Amsterdam. At the European Social Science History Association, I listened with great pride, emotion, and admiration to their academic presentations, which analyzed the meaning of internment, their roles in documenting and reconstructing historical narratives of the lives of former internees, and the impact of the students' participation in this project on their personal and professional identities. I realized that for these students, the oral history project is and will continue to be a defining moment in their lives; this experience of learning about internment helped to transform them into filmmakers, scholars, and public educators. They offered compelling arguments and insights about the value of oral history but also engaged in provocative and difficult discussions about the performative and mediated nature of memories.

I was particularly moved by the personal connections that all of these students had to internment. None of the students who traveled to Amsterdam were Japanese American. In fact, only two students of Japanese ancestry participated in the oral history project. Some of the students could even recount family memories of war-time atrocities committed by the Japanese military in China, Korea, Malaysia, and even Dutch Indonesia. However, in contrast to some individuals who evoke historical crimes to justify mass incarceration, these students insisted on their empathy with people who experienced persecution due to their group affiliation and insisted on the necessity for social justice and reconciliation.

In Amsterdam, I learned what it means to be a teacher. I cannot take credit for the brilliance and sensitivity of the students who chose to participate in the Japanese American oral history project or traveled to Europe to present their work. I only helped to provide some opportunities, guidance, and encouragement for their intellectual journeys, not all of which I could even anticipate. But, I now have the incredible satisfaction of learning from their insights and analyses. I know that they will go on to even more wonderful accomplishments, whether as academics, artists, or as citizens of the world.