

“What’s in A Word?”

**Introduction to “The Internment of Memory:
Forgetting and Remembering the Japanese American
Experience During World War II.”**

by

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Introduction: What's in a Word?

It seems to have become almost a prerequisite in histories dealing with the World War II Japanese American experience to define and defend one's choice of terminology. Some authors have written entire articles about terminology relating to the Japanese Americans, while others include a preface or appendix, or simply mention the subject in the course of their analysis.¹ As my dissertation title suggests, I am interested in the different ways in which the Japanese American WWII experience has been remembered, or not remembered; and I believe that the language used in books, movies, and at historic sites is an integral part of commemoration and therefore merits attention. While the subject of word choice and language will reappear throughout the text, I want to explain the debate and clarify my decisions at the beginning.

Undoubtedly the single most contentious word within this debate is "concentration camp," which is often used to describe the camps in which Japanese American citizens and first generation aliens, or *Issei*, were housed after removal from the West Coast in 1942. This wording has caused numerous debates at local, state, and even national levels in the decades since Executive Order 9066 called for the creation of military zones on the West Coast from which residents could be excluded. Most authors that choose to use this word quickly cite the unquestionable fact that President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself used this term in reference to the Japanese American camps, as did numerous other leaders.² However, historian Roger

¹ Roger Daniels, "Words do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans" in Louis Fiset and Gail M. Nomura, eds., *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 190-214; Deborah Schiffrin, "Language and Public Memorial: 'America's Concentration Camps,'" *Discourse and Society* 12, No. 4 (2001); Alice Yang Murray, *What did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).

² Daniels, "Words do matter," 201.

Daniels, who “believe[s] that it [concentration camp] is the most appropriate term,” also claims that he does not think that the word was extensively used during the war era.³

In the immediate aftermath of the war, many of the anthropological and sociological studies and memoirs that emerged from the camps addressed the term “concentration camp” only briefly, if at all, primarily to deny that this term was accurate. According to historian Alice Yang Murray, in the 1960s and 1970s, published histories and memoirs took a “revisionist” turn and began to reexamine the Japanese American experience through a more critical eye.⁴ These new histories particularly examined the motivations for and impact of protest movements, the existence of a history of racism in the United States, and the role of administrators within the camps.

One of the most significant contributions of these new publications was the debate over the terminology and euphemisms used by the US government, the military, and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) during the war. As books emerged with “concentration camp” in the title, historians, Japanese Americans, and former administrators alike were required to “come to terms” with their choice of words. Daniels has described how some reprints of earlier publications began to use “concentration camp” where they had not earlier and former administrators felt the need to defend the conditions in the camps.⁵ In 1971 as the debate over “concentration camp” heated up, former director of the WRA, Dillon Myer, wrote:

The WRA centers were all too often referred to as concentration camps, which in the minds of many carried the implication that the centers were similar to Hitler’s Dachau and other European prison camps. In truth, the relocation centers were just what the name implies; they were way-stations for persons willing to resettle in other parts of the

³ Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 205, 201.

⁴ Murray, *What did the Internment Mean*,” 20-21.

⁵ Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 202 – He specifically mentions Mine Okubo, *Citizen 13660* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946) and Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1953).

United States, or they served as temporary homes for those persons who wished to remain until they could return to their permanent homes.⁶

Sixteen years later, historian Richard Drinnon directly countered this generous claim with the publication of, *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism*, which portrayed Myer as a racist overseer of not only the Japanese Americans but also the Native Americans.

The heart of the debate over the use of “concentration camp” and the underlying motivation for such fervent argument lies not in the dictionary definition of the term, but in its connotation. While “concentration camp” may have been benign in 1900, the use of the term following the forced labor and extermination camps of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party is far more complex. Merriam Webster defines a concentration camp as “a camp where persons (as prisoners of war, political prisoners, or refugees) are detained or confined” and the Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “a camp for detaining political prisoners or persecuted minorities, especially in Nazi Germany.” On August 10, 1936, when President Roosevelt sent a memo to his staff requesting a list of Japanese in Hawaii that worked closely with naval traffic so they “would be the first to be placed in a concentration camp in the event of trouble,” it is doubtful he envisioned a “concentration camp” the likes of Treblinka.⁷ Eight years later when the full horror of Nazi extermination camps was known, the broad term “concentration camp” that had been applied to Hitler’s work camps and death camps took on new meanings. As the Oxford definition shows, the literal meaning may be broadly applicable, but the connotation is steadfastly rooted in the Nazi camps of WWII Germany.

⁶ Dillon Myer, *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority During World War II*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971), xiv.

⁷ Karen L. Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms: America’s Concentration Camps,” in Akemi Kikumura -Yano, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi, eds., *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 103.

Despite the connotations, many have chosen to rely on the factual meaning of “concentration camp” and to apply it to the Japanese American camps of the United States. Historically the most common words used to describe the camps were “internment,” “relocation,” and “concentration” camp or center. The first is perhaps the most common and is frequently considered the most acceptable, but in reality it is quite problematic. To rely again on the dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines an “internment camp” as “a detention camp for prisoners of war and aliens.” As hinted at earlier in FDR’s memo, prior to America’s entrance into WWII, the Department of Justice Aliens Division, the FBI, and military intelligence organizations had compiled a list of potential alien suspects from all anticipated enemy nations to be arrested upon the outbreak of war.⁸ In the week following the attack on Pearl Harbor 3,000 enemy aliens were interned, 1,500 of whom were Japanese Americans; and throughout the course of the war as many as 11,000 Japanese, Germans, and Italians were interned in camps and prisons across the country.⁹

This internment of enemy aliens, though perhaps unpleasant, was legal. According to the Alien Enemies Act of July 6, 1798, which is still in effect today, the President has the power to force non-citizens of a warring nation to be “apprehended, restrained, secured, and removed as alien enemies.”¹⁰ The internees had the right to a hearing, and though they could not have legal counsel present many still managed to gain their freedom.¹¹ In addition, internment camps were subject to the statutes of the Geneva Convention, and thus were frequently of a higher quality

⁸ Roger Daniels, *Prisoner Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 24.

⁹ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 26; Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 193. For more information on other enemy aliens interned during WWII, see Lawrence DiStasi, *Una Storia: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II* (Berkeley: Heydey Books, 2001) and Timothy J. Holian, *The German-Americans and World War II: An Ethnic Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

¹⁰ U.S. Code, Title 50, Chapter 3 – Alien Enemies, Section 21 – Restraint, Regulation, and Removal http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/50/usc_sec_50_00000021----000-.html.

¹¹ Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 194-195.

than other camps in the often futile hope that Axis nations would provide similar hospitable conditions for American prisoners overseas.¹²

While historians and linguists can, and have, argued over the connotations and implications of “concentration camp” for years, there is far less room for negotiation in the use of “internment camp.” As Daniels has pointed out, the use of “internment camp” in reference to the forced removal and mass confinement of over 100,000 citizens and non-citizens of Japanese descent from the West Coast is not only inaccurate, but also confusing.¹³ Regardless of this simple fact however, a quick look at your library shelves will tell you that the use of “internment” is still prevalent. In 2001, Greg Robinson published, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*, an in-depth analysis of the motivations and actions of FDR in the decision and application of Executive Order 9066. According to Robinson, he chose to use “internment” because “it is readily grasped and has been commonly employed in reference to the government’s policy,” although he acknowledges that it is not an accurate definition. He continues, “As a result of its association with the Holocaust and the sites of mass murder set up by Nazi Germany, the term ‘concentration camp’ evokes such powerful and emotional responses that its use obscures rather than clarifies the nature of the Japanese American camps.” Instead he uses simply “camp” or “internment camp.”¹⁴

It seems that “concentration camp” is by definition accurate but by connotation debatable, while “internment camp” is the opposite – a legal and accepted term that is by definition inaccurate when applied to the mass round-up of Japanese immigrants and US citizens in 1942. The heart of the debate over terminology lies in the belief that sugar-coated terms or

¹² Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 193-194.

¹³ Daniels, “Words do Matter,” 205.

¹⁴ Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, 261.

“euphemisms” are “semantics of suppression [which] shrouded the gross injustice of the incarceration and has effectively and methodically distanced the reality of the concentration camp experience from honest scrutiny.”¹⁵ The use of less meaning-laden words has even been used by some apologists to forward their own opposing arguments - to downplay the trauma of an event. In her book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, Deborah Lipstadt showed how some Holocaust deniers have referred to the “internment” of Jews in Europe and have even attempted to equate it to the “internment” of the Japanese Americans in the United States.¹⁶ In all the Japanese American literature pertaining to the terminology of the World War II experience, I have yet to find any reasonable attempt to equate the two experiences; however, the tactics remain the same. Historians and former detainees who prefer the use of “concentration camp” consider the use of “internment” to be an affront to their suffering just as it would be to refer to the death camps as “internment camps.”

“Relocation camp” is a word that many during the war and since have chosen to use as an alternative to both “concentration camp” and “internment camp.” The OED defines “relocation” as “the action of locating afresh; a new allocation,” and specifies that a “relocation centre” is “an internment camp to which persons of Japanese birth or origin were committed during the war of 1939-1945.” While the first definition is benign the second is far more complex. It includes the word “internment,” which carries its own distinct definition and by referring to “persons of Japanese birth or origin” it avoids explicitly stating that such camps detained American citizens. In fact, the definition of “relocation centre” could fit “internment camp” as well.

The connotation of “relocation” is less debatable than “concentration camp,” but even it errs on the side of being more pleasant than the evacuation actually was. Typically a relocation

¹⁵ Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 103-104.

¹⁶ Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 213-214.

for a job for instance, does not involve a loss of personal property, ethnic discrimination, and loss of personal freedoms. Jeff Burton, the author of *Confinement and Ethnicity*, a comprehensive historical and archaeological study of sites related to the Japanese American WWII experience, used “relocation camp” despite its positive connotations because of its prevalence during the war. He claimed, “when discussing the relocation centers this report [*Confinement and Ethnicity*] to a great extent uses the terminology originally coined by the War Relocation Authority. The terms are not presumed to be an accurate definition of the events, attitudes, or facts of the relocation. They are used because they are most common in the historical records and may reflect the contemporary subjective context.”¹⁷ It becomes clear after reading even a few authors’ perspectives how contentious the debate over language truly is.

Robert Asahina, who recently published *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans Won a War at Home and Abroad*, put the debate into an entirely different perspective. According to Asahina, the debate is not over whether words such as “exclusion,” “evacuation,” “registration,” etc., were euphemisms. He argues that this is not nearly as significant as the fact that many of the terms that are still discussed today are common “military jargon.”¹⁸ He writes, “the terminology suggests how the whole process, from Executive Order 9066 on, authorized by the commander in chief and carried out by the Army, was actually a military campaign – though on American soil, directed against Japanese Americans who were mostly U.S. citizens.”¹⁹ He is also careful to clarify the difference between “internment” and the Executive Order that excluded large numbers of Japanese and Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Considering the

¹⁷ Jeff Burton, Mary Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord, *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (Arizona: Western Archeological and Conservation Center, 1999), 18.

¹⁸ Robert Asahina, *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans Won a War At Home and Abroad* (New York: Gotham Books, 2006) 263.

¹⁹ Asahina, *Just Americans*, 263.

common argument at the time that the mass relocation was based on military necessity, it is not surprising that the euphemisms most frequently used by the government were military in nature.

In the debate over terminology, it is important to look not only to scholars and journalists who are writing about the subject after the fact, but also to the survivors and detainees themselves. Unfortunately even this is unlikely to make the debate any clearer. In the preface to her classic memoir *Farewell to Manzanar*, former camp detainee Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston wrote that she and her husband wanted to write about life inside the camps because so few people knew what it was really like. They asked, “How many know what actually went on inside? If they think anything, they think concentration camps. But that conjures up Poland and Siberia. And these camps weren’t like that at all.”²⁰ She and her husband obviously did not want comparisons to the camps of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, yet “concentration camp” has still become one of the acceptable terms for the camps. In another instance, I requested an interview with former camp detainee Fred Hoshiyama and in my original correspondence I used the term “internment camp.” When he responded he used the term “concentration camp,” and pointed out that my use of “internment” was “polite” and therefore acceptable, but his preferred term was “concentration camp.”²¹ As I found in nearly every aspect of my research, the individual opinions regarding correct terminology varied greatly depending on personal experience and motivation.

While not nearly as contentious as “concentration camp,” other words have become debatable in reference to the persons within the camp and the method by which they arrived. After Executive Order 9066 permitted the creation of exclusionary zones along the West Coast, the Western Defense Command began posting notices of imminent removal of the Japanese and

²⁰ Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), ix.

²¹ Phone message, Fred Hoshiyama, November 2007.

Japanese Americans from the West Coast. This began the process of what is frequently called “evacuation.” According to the OED, “evacuation” has two definitions that are relevant here: “The action of emptying (a receptacle), or of removing (the contents of anything) so as to produce a vacancy,” and a military definition of “a. The clearing (a place) of troops (*obs.*) b. The withdrawal (by an army or commander) from occupation of a country, fortress, town, etc. c. The removal (of a garrison, the population of a place, etc.)” The goal was certainly to create a vacancy of Japanese Americans along the West Coast and it was carried out as a military operation, though not of troops but of enemy aliens and “non-aliens.”

The use of “non-alien” to refer to American citizens of Japanese Americans is perhaps one of the most obvious “euphemisms” used by the government to justify their actions. According to the final report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 70% of the people evacuated from the West Coast were American citizens.²² The Exclusion Orders issued from the Western Defense Command ordered “all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, be excluded....”²³ The use of “non-alien” as opposed to “citizen” maintained an illusion of justification by focusing on the Japanese heritage of a person rather than their American citizenship. The use of “alien” as applied to a first generation Japanese immigrant is accurate, but it is crucial to remember that any number of these “aliens” remained such not out of a lack of desire to become a citizen, but because they were denied the right of naturalization.²⁴

Following the Army’s orders, the Japanese and Japanese Americans of the West Coast were evacuated to one of fifteen temporary “assembly centers” in the western states. Many were

²² *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), 135.

²³ *Personal Justice Denied*, 112.

²⁴ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 88.

former fairgrounds and racetracks that had been outfitted with additional but still insufficient facilities to house thousands of displaced civilians. “Assembly,” which also has both civilian and military definitions, refers to the gathering or collection of the detainees that occurred at these centers as the US government considered its next course of action. While Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts referred to an “assembly center” as a “euphemism for a prison” in his dissenting opinion on the *Korematsu v. United States* case of 1944, the temporary camps are still most commonly referred to as “assembly centers.” It was within these improvised facilities that the Army “assembled” the civilians affected by the Exclusion Order until authority was transferred to the newly created WRA in late 1942.²⁵

According to historian Roger Daniels, the “assembly centers” were “prison-like,” and had insufficient facilities leading to unpleasant living conditions, poor sanitation, and widespread sickness.²⁶ While inhabitants were allowed to visit with friends through the barbed wire fences surrounding the facilities, they were not allowed to leave without military permission. As the detainees gradually moved into one of ten camps run by the WRA, conditions improved significantly, though they certainly never reached pre-war levels of freedom and quality of life. Communities developed within the camps providing many of the services that existed outside camp, such as hospitals, schools, newspapers, libraries, scout groups, clubs, and churches. Families lived together in partitioned barracks with only a semblance of privacy; and each barrack building had water, electricity, and a heating system, though there was very little furniture or luxury items provided and all meals were eaten in communal mess halls. Over the following years, conditions steadily improved as detainees attempted to make their conditions

²⁵ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 55, 65.

²⁶ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 66.

better by building furniture, ordering items from catalogues, and creating gardens within the camps.²⁷

Almost as soon as the camps were created, detainees began to leave. Over 4,300 students entered college from within the camps and 10,000 detainees left the camps in 1942 alone to assist local farmers with agricultural work due to the shortage of manpower brought on by the war effort. Another 5,000 left the camps to serve as linguist translators for the US Army in the Pacific and over 2,000 left the camps to return to Japan as prisoner exchanges. In September 1942 the WRA also instituted “leave clearance,” which began with the intention of being a controlled temporary release but in reality it was the first permanent resettlement program from the camps.²⁸ By December of 1944, 35,000 of the 110,000 relocated people had resettled outside the exclusion zones and on December 18, 1944, the exclusion orders were repealed allowing those released during the last year of the war to return to their West Coast homes if desired.²⁹

The loss of personal freedom and the accompanying loss of property was devastating for the Japanese Americans that were evacuated from the West Coast and conditions within the camps were frequently deplorable. In light of the military orders that confined them, the barbed wire that surrounded them, and the guard towers that faced into camp many have referred to those inside the camps as “prisoners.” “Prisoner,” defined as either “1. A person who has been captured or who has surrendered to an opponent in war; a captive” or “2. A person who is kept in prison or in custody; *spec.* one who is legally committed to prison as the result of a legal process, either as punishment for a crime committed, or while awaiting trial for an offence” is another word with complex implications. Certainly the detainees did not surrender, nor were they

²⁷ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 66-71.

²⁸ Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 72-78.

²⁹ *Personal Justice Denied*, 234-235.

captured in a military engagement; and while they were kept in custody, they were not being punished or awaiting a trial.

Although this subject will be addressed in much more detail throughout this study, it is interesting to consider the fact that many former detainees claim that part of the reason that they were reluctant to discuss their experiences was that they felt a sense of shame. Many felt that if they were locked up they *must* have done something wrong. This is obviously untrue as there were no sabotage or treason charges brought against the group or individuals prior to their relocation. The lack of charges, the fact that there was a constant stream of resettlers departing from the camps almost as soon as they arrived, the living conditions within the camp, and the numerous stories of picnicing, hunting, and fishing outside the boundaries of camp would imply that they were not up to “prison” standards. This is not to say that they were not largely forced to remain inside the fences while they were detained at the camps, but as “prisoner” carries the connotation of having committed a crime, it seems an injustice to label innocent people as “prisoners.” Ironically, this term is frequently used today for just that reason - it emphasizes the injustice of confining an ethnic group with no criminal charges, hearings, or proven guilt. Similarly, “incarcerate,” which means “to put in confinement” bears no legal or procedural definition, but is often heard in the context of criminal proceedings and therefore leads to an assumption of one having committed a crime.

A similar word that is frequently used is “inmate.” Its definition is innocuous enough as it refers only to “an occupant along with others, one of the family or company who occupy a house or other abode.” “Detainee” is another term that is used based on its definition of “a person detained in custody, usually on political grounds and in an emergency, without or pending formal trial.” Amidst all the various words that have been used, “detainee” is one that is both

accurate by definition and seems to bear no false connotations, though this cannot be universally determined. It becomes clear after analyzing just these ten words that regardless of definition, connotation, or frequency of use, the semantics of the Japanese American World War II experience are incredibly complex and are frequently based on personal experience and understanding as much as dictionary definitions.

Museum Terminology

Given the extensive historiographical differences surrounding the terminology of the Japanese American experience, it is not surprising that the debate has also surfaced in the public arena as well. While the unique history of the Manzanar, California WRA camp will be discussed in more detail later, one aspect of its development can help shed light on the many facets of the terminology debate. On April 14, 1973, the site of Manzanar in the Owens Valley of California hosted over 1,500 people who had come to the remote location to celebrate the unveiling of a historic plaque designating Manzanar as the California Registered Historic Landmark Number 850. The California State Department of Parks and Recreation had agreed to designate a 4.33 acre area, including two rock sentry houses and the camp cemetery as a State Historic Landmark in January 1972. The designation resulted from the efforts of the Manzanar Committee founded with the dual purpose of educating the public as to the significance of the Manzanar site and of preserving Manzanar as a historic site. Led primarily by one former detainee, Sue Kunitomi Embrey, the Committee successfully won state and later national landmark status.³⁰

The state landmark plaque that was unveiled at the ceremony read:

³⁰ Harlan D. Unrau, *The Evacuation and Relocation of Persons of Japanese Ancestry During World War II: A Historical Study of the Manzanar War Relocation Center* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1996) .

In the early part of World War II, 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were interned in relocation centers by Executive Order No. 9066, issued on February 19, 1942. Manzanar, the first of ten such concentration camps, was bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons, the majority being American citizens. May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again.

The wording of the plaque was the result of a series of debates among the Manzanar Committee, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), numerous state and local officials, and the representatives of the California Department of Parks and Recreation. According to Embrey, the Manzanar Committee originally submitted a much longer text and they were told they would have to change not only its length but also its wording. The State Advisory Commission of the Department of Parks and Recreation opposed such words as “racism,” “economic greed,” and “concentration camp.” Embrey recalled a heated meeting with Department of Parks and Recreation Director William Penn-Mott in which he refused to allow the “negative words” originally penned by the Committee members. Warren Furutani, founding chair of the Manzanar Committee, called Penn-Mott a racist for his refusal to allow the preferred wording, and Assemblyman Alex Garcia, who represented the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles, threatened to take their argument to the Legislature, at which point Penn-Mott gave in to the demands of the Manzanar Committee and JACL representatives. According to the Manzanar Historic Resource Study, the final three sentences that appear on the plaque today are a compromise between the state and the committee. The state wrote the first sentence, the Committee wrote the second, and the third was a compromise between the two organizations.³¹

³¹ Sue Kunitomi Embrey, “From Manzanar to the Present: A Personal Journey,” in Erica Harth, ed., *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 179, 178; Unrau, *Evacuation and Relocation*, 2.



California Historical Landmark Plaque, Manzanar, California
Photo by author, April 2007

The debate over the wording of the Manzanar plaque may have been one of the first historic site or museum debates over the terminology of Executive Order 9066, but it was in no way the last. Twenty-five years after the dedication ceremony at Manzanar, the Japanese American National Museum in collaboration with the Ellis Island Immigration Museum hosted an exhibit at Ellis Island called “America’s Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience.” The original exhibit was staged at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in 1994 and was invited to New York by Steven Briganti, the executive director of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation.³² The curator of this exhibit, Karen Ishizuka, chose to use “concentration camp” in the title and throughout the exhibit and while she

³² Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 102 -103.

reported that museum staff did encounter some negative feedback, the exhibit had a largely successful display at the JANM.

After the invitation to Ellis Island, Ishizuka worked with the exhibit designer, Ralph Appelbaum Associates, the JANM art director Clement Hanami, and the Japanese American National Museum's New York Advisory Council to adapt the original exhibit to travel, while also integrating local New York history and artifacts into the redesigned exhibit. In the months leading up to the opening of the exhibit, National Park Service (NPS) representative Diane Dayson of the Statue of Liberty National Monument expressed concerns over the use of "concentration camp" in the title fearing that it would incite a negative reaction from the large Jewish community of New York. President and chief executive of the JANM, Irene Hirano, instructed Ishizuka to inform Dayson that she had communicated with members of the Jewish community and had been encouraged to continue with the exhibit and related programs as a means to create open dialogue on the subject and to oppose the "semantics of suppression." Even after further discussion between Hirano, Dayson, and Briganti, Hirano received notice from Dayson and the NPS that she must remove "concentration camp" from the title and that while the wording could be used throughout the exhibit as long as it included an explanation of its meaning, she must realize that there may be public pressure to remove that wording as well.³³

The staff and associates of the JANM immediately opened the question for discussion among their Board of Directors, museum colleagues, and community members. According to Ishizuka, the response was overwhelmingly in favor of maintaining the title citing censorship fears and academic accuracy. In an attempt to settle the matter, the chair of the JANM Board of Governors, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, wrote a letter directly to the Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt. Senator Inouye pointed out that "concentration camp" was clearly displayed in

³³ Ishizuka, "Coming to Terms," 107, 10 8.

the exhibit at the JANM prior to receiving the invitation from Ellis Island and that he had personally spoken with numerous Japanese Americans and Jewish community members regarding the text and had no concerns over its reception in New York. In the ensuing days a number of meetings were held with the organizations and people involved as they awaited the decisions of Secretary Babbitt and Dwight Pitcaithley, the chief historian of the NPS. On February 13, 1998 word was received from Dayson stating that the exhibit could proceed as planned, and the staff returned to their focus of finishing the exhibit and hosting informational programs prior to the grand opening.³⁴

Unfortunately, the JANM and Ellis Island staff soon hit another roadblock with the publication of an incendiary news article in Jewish newspapers across the country.³⁵ With the headline “Jews, Japanese Clash over Holocaust Language,” the article hinted at the existence of a far more negative and still-ongoing debate over the terminology of the upcoming exhibit. On March 8, 1998 the *New York Times* picked up the story and published, “What is a Concentration Camp? Ellis Island Exhibit Prompts a Debate.”³⁶ While this article was far more balanced, it served to heighten awareness of a March 9 meeting hosted by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) that included representatives of the American Jewish and Japanese American communities. At this meeting Senator Inouye spoke about his experiences as a member of the all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team and his discovery of camps in both the US and Germany. In response, the executive director of the AJC, David Harris, expressed his agreement regarding the injustices suffered by Japanese Americans during the war, but he still opposed the use of the term “concentration camp,” claiming it immediately reminded readers of the Holocaust. The meeting continued in a respectful manner as the various organizations

³⁴ Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 108 -110, 110-111, 112.

³⁵ Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 112.

³⁶ *New York Times*, “What is a Concentration Camp? Ellis Island Exhibit Prompts a Debate,” March 8, 1998.

discussed their shared concerns for teaching future generations about the past. According to Ishizuka, Benjamin Meed, president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, finally presented a solution. Knowing that the JANM was not trying to equate the Holocaust and the Japanese American relocation, he suggested that an explanation be placed at the beginning of the exhibit to inform the public of the differences between the two experiences and the reasoning for the word choice.³⁷ This brief explanation appeared as a footnote in the Ellis Island exhibit as well as all later destinations including the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, the California Historical Society in San Francisco, California, and the Little Rock Statehouse Convention Center in Little Rock, Arkansas.³⁸

In the aftermath of the debates, the JANM produced a “Question and Answer Fact Sheet for *America’s Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience*,” to answer such questions as “Why were they called concentration camps?” and “But didn’t the government also call them relocation centers?”³⁹ It explains the reasons for hosting the display at Ellis Island and the use of the site as an internment camp for Japanese, Germans, and Italians during the war. The document states, “‘Concentration Camps’ was the term used by U.S. officials at the time,” and cites Congressman John Rankin and Attorney General Francis Biddle to support this assertion. The answer concludes, “It is also critical not to use the governmental

³⁷ Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 114.

³⁸ Ishizuka, “Coming to Terms,” 103, 114-115. The footnote reads: “A concentration camp is a place where people are imprisoned not because of any crimes they have committed, but simply because of who they are. Although many groups have been singled out for such persecution throughout history, the term ‘concentration camp’ was first used at the turn of the century in the Spanish -American and Boer Wars. During World War II, America’s concentration camps were clearly distinguishable from Nazi Germany’s. Nazi camps were places of torture, barbarous medical experiments and summary executions; some were extermination centers with gas chambers. Six million Jews were slaughtered in the Holocaust. Many others, including Gypsies, Poles, Homosexuals and political dissidents were also victims of Nazi concentration camps. In recent years, concentration camps have existed in the former Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Bosnia. Despite the difference, all had one thing in common: the people in power removed a minority group from the general population and the rest of society let it happen.”

³⁹ “Question and Answer Fact Sheet for *America’s Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience*,” Japanese American National Museum, Hirasaki National Resources Center, 2.

euphemisms in order to understand the magnitude of the occurrence.” The second question regarding “relocation centers” states,

The U.S. government quickly shrouded the incarceration in euphemistic terminology to make the incarceration more acceptable...The detention orders were called “civilian exclusion orders,” and American citizens were referred to as “non-alien.” This extensive and persistent use of euphemisms not only worked to sidetrack legal and constitutional challenges but, more insidiously, functioned to gain the cooperation of its victims as well as deceive the American and worldwide public.⁴⁰

Manzanar also produced their own response to the “concentration camp” debate in the form of a lesson plan titled, “Loaded Words,” which aimed to teach tenth graders the differences between denotation, connotation, and euphemisms as well as how connotations can change over time.⁴¹ This lesson plan is distributed to teachers as part of Manzanar’s educational materials that were developed to assist educators in teaching the Japanese American experience through a variety of subjects,. Interestingly, the final page of the lesson plan is a disclaimer of sorts. Written by Gordon Chappel, Regional Historian for the NPS, the letter states, “A lot has been made of the use of the terms “concentration camp” and “internment camp.” I have recommended that the National Park Service not use the term “concentration camp” in its interpretation because the term has become inextricably associated with Nazi death camps of World War II.”⁴² He goes on to discuss the origins and definitions of the word but concludes that when “concentration camp” was used most frequently in reference to the Japanese American camps the extent of the Nazi programs was not yet well known to the US. This letter and the concerns raised at Ellis Island clearly reveal that the NPS, the JANM, and the Manzanar Committee were at odds over the use of such a meaning-laden description as “concentration camp.”

⁴⁰ “Question and Answer Fact Sheet,” 2.

⁴¹ Secondary Lesson Plan: Loaded Words, Manzanar National Historic Site, Teacher’s Packet.

⁴² Secondary Lesson Plan: Loaded Words, Manzanar National Historic Site, Teacher’s Packet.

Though the organizations involved had reached an accord, the debate over the Ellis Island terminology continued to rage in the newspapers. On March 10, 1998 the *New York Times* reported that there was “Accord on Term ‘Concentration Camp,’” and explained that the new text to be added to the exhibit would not only define “concentration camp,” but also it would explain the difference between the Japanese American camps and the Jewish Holocaust camps and provide the history of similar camps in the Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Bosnia.⁴³ That same day, a letter to the editor appeared in the *Times* pointing to the wartime use of “concentration camp” in regards to the Japanese camps, which the author claimed refuted any objection that the Jewish Community might have towards the use of that term.⁴⁴ Another letter to the editor that day voiced a different opinion. Linda Goetz Holmes wrote, “The confinement of Japanese-American civilians in this country from 1942 to 1945 cannot compare, even in semantics, with the experience of civilians interned by the Nazis or the 130,000 white civilians held by the Japanese, including more than 14,000 Americans.”⁴⁵ She argues that, “Ellis Island officials and the American Jewish Committee are correct to dispute the use of the term “concentration camps” by Japanese-Americans to describe their experiences of relocation during World War II.”⁴⁶ Ironically, in her anger over the use of “concentration camp” for the Japanese Americans she also seems to condone the use of “interned” for Nazi camps.

A particularly interesting article appeared on March 13, 1998 entitled, “Defending Jews’ Lexicon of Anguish.”⁴⁷ Written by columnist Clyde Haberman the article claims that terms once reserved for the horrors of the World War II Jewish Holocaust are slowly being usurped by others for their shock value. He cites the examples of “ghetto,” “genocide,” “diaspora,” and

⁴³ *New York Times*, “Accord on Term ‘Concentration Camp,’” March 10, 1998.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, “Debate on Camps Goes Back to War,” March 10, 1998.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, “Japanese Atrocities,” March 10, 1998.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, “Japanese Atrocities,” March 10, 1998.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, “Defending Jews Lexicon of Anguish,” March 13, 1998.

even “holocaust,” all of which he argues have been “appropriated by others, notably American blacks, who have recognized the sheer force of this vocabulary and have harnessed it to describe their own history of suffering and bloodshed.” Haberman acknowledges that no one ethnic group owns the dictionary, but he still argues that there is a sense of watering down history when terms such as “holocaust” and “genocide” are used for less intense circumstances. Similarly he claims that labeling people as “Nazis,” “Gestapo,” or “Fuhrer’s” as has been done in popular and political arenas serves to “trivialize the evils of Hitler and his Gestapo.” In contrast, Rebecca Silber wrote a letter to the editor on March 15, 1998 claiming, “That such terminology [concentration camp] should refer only to the Holocaust degrades its tragedy by forgetting what we should have learned: that genocide and mass racial and ethnic cleansing are things we must all band together against.”⁴⁸ Obviously the compromise of an explanatory paragraph at the Ellis Island Exhibit may have satisfied the leaders, but it left much to be debated in the public arena.

Linguist Deborah Schiffrin was called upon by CNN to give a Jewish linguist’s perspective on the Ellis Island “concentration camp” debate, which eventually led to the article “Language and Public Memorial: ‘America’s Concentration Camps.’”⁴⁹ Her initial reaction was that “the term ‘concentration camps’ had been ‘appropriated’ by the organizers of the exhibit in order to draw attention to what had really been a very different type of subjugation. . . .”⁵⁰

Throughout her ensuing article she presented a brief history of European Jews and Japanese Americans during the war, an analysis of the varying meanings of “concentration camp,” a linguistic examination of the terminology of the explanatory footnote, and a discussion of how language can help or hinder efforts to present history, particularly in public memorials. She

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, “Lexicon of Genocide,” March 15, 1998.

⁴⁹ Schiffrin, “Language,” 506.

⁵⁰ Schiffrin, “Language,” 506.

concluded in part that the use of terms such as “concentration camp” did equate to the usurpation of terminology, but as she explained,

Using language that already had a place in a general American national schema about a well-known historical tragedy situated the exhibit in a larger symbolic domain, providing a link to the many other symbolic resources (museums, monuments, ceremonies, videos, conferences) commemorating other concentration camp victims. The title ‘America’s Concentration Camps’ thus compensated for Americans’ misinformation (or ignorance) of their own tragedy by lexically embedding the exhibit in a larger, and more familiar, symbolic domain.⁵¹

While she acknowledged Jewish fears over the borrowing of their history, Schiffrin also understood that there were “clear advantages” to using the title that the JANM choose. She pointed out that while these fears were increased due to the rate of death among Holocaust survivors as well as the increasingly common use of traditionally Jewish terminology, the normalization of the Holocaust was also accomplished through the seemingly positive increases in US Holocaust museums and academic classes on the subject.⁵² Amidst her complex analysis she seemed to accept the more common use of such terms with all the advantages and disadvantages that come along with it. She wrote, “what happened during WWII is over: it cannot change or be changed. But just as new data – documents, witnesses, artefacts – lead historians to revise their earlier accounts, so too, the world in which we live leads to revisions of our own personal and collective narratives.”⁵³

Curator Ishizuka reached a similar conclusion after the Ellis Island debates. She later wrote that the real issue was not terminology but perspective. Who decides what is history, who writes it, and from whose point of view is it written? For former detainees and Holocaust survivors the word “concentration camp” evokes a particular memory, while younger generations

⁵¹ Schiffrin, “Language,” 525.

⁵² Schiffrin, “Language,” 527.

⁵³ Schiffrin, “Language,” 528.

have yet another understanding of the term. Individual experience, age, education, and numerous other factors affect one's understanding of history and the words used to present history become important factors in preserving and passing on a particular narrative of history. As Ishizuka concluded, "the exhibition process was an exercise in the study and presentation of history and culture, a study in the contrast and connectedness between official history and community memory, the interrelationship between public and private, political and personal."⁵⁴ Perhaps the single most contested question in museums and memorials is "who writes history?" But within this question is the fundamental issue of what words will be used to write history. How these questions are answered dictates the interpretation of history that is presented to the public and is therefore critical to an understanding of the development of public memory.

Terminology Choices

Somewhere amidst the decades-long debate, I must come to terms regarding the word choice to be used in my dissertation. For the purpose of objectivity and accuracy, I will primarily rely on definitions and avoid loaded words. "Camp," "detention center," or "relocation camp" will be used in reference to the ten camps created and maintained by the War Relocation Authority in response to the Executive Order 9066. The fairgrounds and racetracks where Japanese Americans were initially held in temporary facilities will be referred to as "assembly centers," and the process of moving the West Coast populations will be referred to as the "evacuation" or "relocation." Any Japanese Americans inside these camps are "inmates," "detainees," or "camp inhabitants," and the process of putting them into camps is also "evacuation" or "relocation." "Japanese American" refers to both American citizens and the long-term Japanese aliens, while "Japanese" or "Issei" refers specifically to the first generation

⁵⁴ Ishizuka, "Coming to Terms," 118 .

immigrants that were denied naturalization. The Department of Justice, FBI, and Army facilities that held primarily Japanese immigrants following the arrests of “suspect” enemy aliens after Pearl Harbor will be “internment camps,” and their inhabitants are “internees.”

By using what may be considered to be “euphemisms,” I am in no way trying to diminish the injustice suffered by Japanese immigrants during the Second World War. The disregard for constitutional law, the loss of personal freedom and property, and the deplorable conditions of the camps are undeniable and inexcusable. It is not my intent to either justify the government’s decision or villify the political leaders involved in those decisions. I only hope to provide an understandable differentiation between camps and people and to present an objective analysis of how history remembers the WWII Japanese American experience.