

Jennifer Rollins

Clashing Modernities: Comparing Treatment of Immigrants in Japanese Internment Camps to Potential Muslim Registry Using Toshio Mori's *The Brothers Murata*

Toshio Mori, the author of *The Brothers Murata*, was born in California and lived there until World War II, when he was forcibly interned in Topaz, a Japanese American internment camp in Utah. During his time at the camp, the draft was extended to Nisei (American-born children of Japanese immigrants), but they were kept in separate units as the regular white Americans. Bill Masaoka, National Secretary of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), argued that Nisei should fight to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States. He said, "Somewhere, on the field of battle, in a baptism of blood, we and our comrades must prove to all who question that we are ready and willing to die for the one country we know and pledge allegiance to" (qtd. in Muller 42–43). Mori decided not to fight in the war because he did not want to spill blood for a country that did not grant him his basic rights. Instead of fighting in the war, he became a writer and fought by writing in the camp magazine called *Trek*. However, his brother decided to fight in the war and was injured in combat. While taking care of his injured brother and living in Topaz, Mori wrote *The Brothers Murata*, a dark short novel about two brothers fighting over their patriotic duty, dedicated to his brother.

Suzanne Arakawa suggests that Japanese American writing was heavily censored during Toshio Mori's time. "Given the time period in which [Mori] lived, [he was] subject to cultural demands that he write . . . officially sanctioned [discourses]," she explains, meaning that Mori and the other authors would have had to veil any criticisms of the United States government (Arakawa 58). This censorship resulted in two styles of writing that came out of Japanese

internment camps: “optimistic” perspectives and “critical” perspectives (Arakawa 58).

According to Stan Yogi, “‘optimistic’ writing is characterized by admonitions not to be bitter and to believe in America” (132). In contrast, critical perspectives fought back against the United States government for the mistreatment of Japanese Americans, though they had to do so indirectly or else risk not getting published. Yogi, along with many other critics, claims that not only was Mori part of the “optimistic” writing, but that he was “the leading writer of this group”(132). Although I agree that most of Mori’s pieces can be classified as part of the “optimistic” movement, *The Brothers Murata* is darker and much more critical than his other pieces. In it, Mori talks about two brothers who are both Nisei, second-generation Japanese immigrants. Susan Friedman describes the term *modernity*, as having “no single meaning,” but it generally refers to modern civilization in the world (specifically the United States, though Americans were not the only people to respond to it). These brothers want to find their place within American modernity, but instead are isolated in Topaz, the same internment camp in the desert of Utah in which Mori was imprisoned. This isolation makes it impossible for the Nisei to fit in either with the lingering Japanese modernity of the Issei, the first-generation Japanese immigrants, or the American modernity that they were born into and then torn from. Each brother tries to adopt the American modernity and related modernism in different ways, but in they cannot properly integrate into society and turn on each other until one brother kills the other, showing that immigrants cannot properly integrate into American society if they are treated as the enemy, denied basic rights of citizenship, and isolated. President-elect Donald Trump’s own supporter has claimed a similarity between Japanese internment camps and the proposed Muslim registry. Based off the deductions of this paper, it can be concluded that othering and isolating Muslim immigrants is not allowing them to fit into American society,

which causes divisions to occur between everyone involved and ends with people turning on each other and failing to integrate.

The United States government isolated the Japanese Americans out of fear that they would work with the Japanese to undermine the American nation. They did this primarily by placing them in internment camps like the one at Topaz. Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Brown claimed, “right here in our own city are those who may spring to action at an appointed time in accordance with a prearranged plan wherein each of our little Japanese friends will know his part in the even of any possible attempted invasion or air raid . . . We cannot run the risk of another Pearl Harbor episode in Southern California” (qtd. in Dallek). Because non-Asian Americans were afraid, Asian-American citizens and Japanese citizens living in the United States were forced, some at gunpoint, to leave their homes and become isolated. As David Meyer put it, “Though there was not one single case of spying brought against the Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast, still the voices demanding removal won out” (Meyer 3).

No one would usually call the arid, land-locked city of Utah an island, but Topaz became an island, much like the island the Nisei’s parents immigrated from, isolating them from the rest of the American world. There was no easy way in or out of the camp. The fences might as well have been oceans, dividing the Japanese-Americans from the rest of the country. Not only were there literal divisions, but also the people were isolated from the rest of the American population by cultural fences and political barriers. This is evident in *The Brothers Murata*, when the two brothers visit Salt Lake City. Although they are old enough to get drafted, they have not yet seen this city because of how difficult it is to get out of the camp. They are being asked to fight for a country they haven’t seen. Even when Hiro and his friends come back from the military base

where they got their physical exams, they talk about how wonderful it was to leave the camp and how good it would be to fight and get out. They were so isolated that they would go to war to get out.

Forcing different modernities into an internment camp causes the community to divide. First there is the divide between the Issei and Nisei, the first-generation, Japanese-born immigrants and the second-generation American-born immigrants. The Issei still believe that Japan is home and generally hold firmly to Japanese traditions and culture. They are still holding on to their Japanese modernity they left behind. Many of them lost their positions of authority when they were moved into the camp and are instead seen as enemy aliens. When the draft is introduced, some of the Issei criticize Hiro's mother for being "weak" and allowing him to fight for a country that is not Japan. One unnamed critical character in the story says, "It is the duty of a parent to guide their children to right thoughts and action, and if a son should go wrong it is criminal that she does not reprimand him" (Mori 163). In her public reproof of the other Issei in the mess hall, Hiro's mother herself points out why the Issei are so against the Nisei accepting the draft. "Some of you cannot forget Japan," she says, "and here I mean the Japan of your childhood days—the cherry blossom festivals, the holidays, the beautiful lakes and mountainsides, the quiet villages, the dragonflies and the cicadas in the summer evenings" (Mori 167). In other words, the Issei have an idealistic patriotism for Japan even though they are living in the United States. The Issei have forgotten the conditions that led to them immigrating to the United States and would rather be loyal to the old Japan, where they at least had rights and were heard. Mrs. Murata carries on to say that the Nisei fight for the United States because they don't know any other country and have no allegiance for Japan. This difference might not have been so marked if the United States hadn't taken away the rights of the Issei, who weren't even allowed

to become U.S. citizens. However, the isolation didn't allow for breathing room between the two generations and the Issei became bitter after being treated badly by the United States.

The second division caused by the U.S. government's decision to put Japanese Americans in internment camps is a civil battle between the Nisei that are attempting to fit into American modernity in two different ways. The clash of what the American life should have been and what is was in the camp is shown in this experience by George Takei, a current celebrity that was also held in a Japanese American internment camp when he was younger. "It was normal to stand each day in our makeshift classroom, reciting the words to the Pledge of Allegiance, 'With liberty and justice for all,' as I looked past the U.S. flag out the window, the barbed wire of the camp just visible behind it" (Takei). Japanese Americans wanted to embrace American modernity, but instead were barred from it. They then coped with the isolation in two ways that are perfectly exemplified by Hiro and Frank. The reader is provided with insight into this conflict in Hiro's statement that if you volunteer for war, "You are hated and abused by the young who hate to go to war" (Mori 163). Hiro and his friends that volunteer for the draft want to fight because, as Mrs. Murata also says in her mess hall statement, "they want themselves to live; they want their families to live; they want their families' families to live" (Mori 168). Hiro believes that the life in the camps, as it is, isn't living, but if he and his friends fight for the country, then maybe they can earn a proper place in it. At one point Hiro says, "I can't see why a Nisei should refuse to fight for his country—unless he's a coward" (Mori 141). Because of the internment camps, Hiro feels a need to fight to prove he's American, as though his citizenship isn't just as valid as that of non-Japanese Americans. Frank, on the other hand, believes that "by fighting for our civil rights I show love for the American way of life, am I not?" (Mori 156). He holds that he is truly loving American way by standing for the constitutional rights promised to

its citizens rather than by fighting in a war. Frank does not believe in fighting, so one night at the beginning of the story he tries to come to an agreement to disagree peacefully with his brother. He tells his brother that he will respect him and not try to change him, but he asks the same and then asks to shake hands as friends. Hiro refuses. If the Japanese Americans were allowed rights, Frank would not have to fight for them and the other Nisei wouldn't have grounds to criticize those accepting the drafts. The mistreatment of the Japanese citizens and residents is shown as a main cause for this rift as well.

Along with this disconnect between communities and families, the clashing modernities and isolation also cause a third divide within individuals themselves. Both brothers try to find out exactly how they fit into a world of clashing modernities, where they don't fit in with the first generation Japanese immigrants and they have officially been told that they don't fit in with the rest of the United States America. Their generation is an island within an island, separated from the rest of the United States, but also isolated in their own communities because of their desire to adopt parts of the American culture. While this affects both brothers, Hiro is the narrator and the reader can more easily see substantial evidence of his cognitive dissonance caused by a double identity. Hiro's name is traditionally Japanese, but it resembles the English word "hero," which is exactly what he complains that other people accuse him of being. "You volunteer and . . . you are seeking personal glory and commissioned ranks; you are the patented hero, American made" (Mori 163-4). He decides to honor his late father by taking up a weapon and fighting for the United States, the country that his father loved and respected so much, reflecting the long-standing Japanese bushido traditions of honoring your family and your country by fighting and dying for them. However, he still wants to be a "G.I. wolf," and fight in the American tradition by joining the military like almost every other American young man at the time (Mori 139). He

feels that it is his patriotic duty and he simply can't understand why Frank and his group won't fight. Jean criticizes his patriotism because he has let his own brother work against him and steal away all of his friends that were going to join him in the segregated unit. He also feels criticized by the other Nisei, claiming that they think he is Satanic because he volunteered.

Frank has his own set of internal struggles, but they aren't as evident to the reader because he is not the one narrating. When General Mita claims that Frank has chosen Japan, because "she claims you but not America," Frank corrects him. "You're mistaken, General. My country is America but I am not fighting for any nation. . . . I fight for man and his rights" (Miro 193). Frank, the son with the American name, rather ironically supports the American ideals of peaceful protest and revolution against the United States itself, standing up against the violence of the war and the government that is fighting in it. However, in spite of Frank's pacifist campaign there are attacks on people who do not agree with his group and it is heavily implied that members of Frank's group are the attackers, which causes an internal battle within Frank.

In the end, Hiro kills Frank and the idea that Nisei can possibly fit into American modernity while being isolated from America is proven impossible. At one point Hiro complains that the other Nisei think that "You volunteer and . . . you've become a man-killer," which is exactly what his internal struggle leads him to be in the end (Mori 163). Because he couldn't find his place in a society that rejected him, rather than becoming a war hero, he becomes his brother's murderer. Mayer points out that, "since this violent ending is so uncharacteristic of Mori, I can only explain it as a rejection of Hiro's kind of patriotism and support for Frank's" (17). Japanese and American modernities and cultures that could have come together instead were pulled apart just enough to grind, destroying those caught in the middle of the Venn

diagram, the Japanese Americans. This divisions and destruction in this novel show that when the United States others and isolates immigrants, it widens rifts that make it all the more difficult for those immigrants to fully embrace American modernities, and leads to both inner and outer turmoil for the immigrant group.

On November 8, 2016, the votes were cast and Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America. During his campaign and since his election, Trump has called for a Muslim registry in reaction to terrorist bombings by Muslim extremists. The fear-mongering rhetoric echoes that of Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Brown in regards to the Japanese-Americans during WWII, as quoted earlier. This registry would require that any Muslim immigrants coming into the country be officially registered with the United States government. On November 17, 2016, Carl Higbie, a prominent Trump supporter, attempted to back up the Constitutionality of the Muslim registry by saying, “We’ve done it based on race, we’ve done it based on religion, we’ve done it based on region, we’ve done it with Iran back—back a while ago. We did it during World War II with Japanese” (qtd. in Hawkins). When host Megyn Kelly asked Bigbie if he was suggesting internment camps for Muslims he said no, but then cited the internment camps as “historical, factual precedent to do things that are not politically popular and sometimes not right, in the interest of national security” (qtd. in Hawkins). Many prominent activists in the Muslim and the Japanese American societies asked for Trump to denounce this follower’s citation of one of the darkest chapters of American history as precedent for Muslim registry. When asked if he agreed with Japanese interment camps back in December 2015, Donald Trump stated, “I would have had to be there at the time to tell you, to give you a proper answer. I certainly hate the concept of it. But I would have had to be there at the time to give you a proper answer” (Scherer). In other words, the President-elect of the United States is not sure of his stand on

Japanese Internment camps even though the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, issued the Civil Liberties Act, a formal apology to the Japanese Americans interned in the camps and passed legislation compensating them for their internment. Robert S. McCaw, speaking for the Council on American-Islamic Relations cited this apology saying that, “I can’t see how it would now be right to do the same thing to Muslims.” McCaw continued, “I really do feel as though the prospect of internment is always tied to registries of people” (Hawkins).

In *The Brother Murata*, Frank asks a poignant question: “If individuals can comply to the national laws, why cannot nations comply with universal laws?” (Mori 157). The information above shows that even Trump’s followers see the obvious connection between Muslim registry and Japanese American internment camps. After examining this text, it is apparent that isolating and othering immigrants makes it impossible for them to properly integrate into our society and that this will apply to incoming Muslim immigrants as well, if they are isolated. Treating Muslim immigrants the same way that the Japanese Americans were treated is simply regressing back past an official American apology and demonstrating that the American people are not learning from the past. Studying literature like Morio’s *The Brother Murata* is one way of reminding society of what happened and recognizing similar signs that society is moving to repeat the darker chapters of history.

Works Cited

- Arakawa, Suzanne. "Internment-Themed Narratives of John Okada and Toshio Mori. *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature*, edited by Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung, Temple UP, 2005, 58.
- Brennan, Christopher. "Hate Crimes Against Muslim Up by 67% Last Year." *NY Daily News*, 16 November 2016, 1-3.
- Dallek, Matthew. "Japanese Internment vs. a Muslim Registry: Why This Time Will Almost Certainly Be Different." *NY Daily News*. 17 November 2016.
- Hawkins, Derek. "Japanese American Internment Is 'Precedent' for National Muslim Registry, Prominent Trump Backer Says." *The Washington Post*. 17 November 2016.
- Mayer, David R. "Courage for Peace: Toshio Mori's *The Brothers Murata* Not 'Might Makes Right' but 'Right Makes Might.'" *CiteSeerX*. 28 January 2006. Web. 5 December 2016, 1-20.
- Mori, Toshio. *The Brothers Murata. Unfinished Message: Selected Works of Toshio Mori*. Berkeley, 2000.
- Muller, Eric. *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II*. U of Chicago P, 2001, 42-43.
- Scherer, Michael. "Exclusive: Donald Trump Says He Might Have Supported Japanese Internment." *Time Magazine*. 8 December 2015.

Takei, George. "George Takei: They Interned My Family. Don't Let Them Do It to Muslims."

Washington Post. 18 November 2016.

Yogi, Stan. "Japanese American Literature." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American*

Literature, edited by King-Kok Cheung, Cambridge UP, 1997, 132–133.