

Keepers of the Flame Critique

For my final project, I participated in the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center oral history project, recording stories of one of its elderly member. My interviewee was a third-generation Japanese American who grew up in Southern California and a Vietnamese War veteran. For the most part, he talked about his experiences as an infantryman during the war and growing up in two completely different cultures, the American and the Japanese. His stories were so diverse and rich that only two interview sessions seemed too tight to pack up his entire life.

Although he never lacked material to offer, he kept himself at distance with his stories on an emotional level. This was especially evident in our first interview session when we spent most of the time talking about his experiences as a veteran infantryman in the Vietnamese War. The interviewee first talked about the horrible conditions he and his fellow infantrymen ran into in the rain forests of Vietnam. According to him, the rain forests were full of 18-inch jungle centipedes and spiders the size of a human face. At night, entire colonies of termites and army ants would start migrating and they would swipe away anything that was in their way. The interviewee said that if one did not have certain precautions during one's sleep at night, the termites and army ants would feast on one's flesh and bone. His fearlessly detailed description of these horrible natural conditions would be hard not to make any listener cringe, but he was not at all affected by the recollection of such memories and kept on with the storytelling. Later in the first session, he revisited an instance when one of his fellow infantrymen sacrificed his life to protect the other members in the unit. This recollection brought the entire interview to a much darker side, but he made a slight comment at the end the story, saying if he was put

on the spot to either save his fellow infantrymen or run away, he would choose to run away. The same thing happened when he talked about his injuries during the war. After he told me he was awarded two purple hearts for being wounded in the war, I asked him to elaborate on the instances when he was wounded. However, he light-heartedly answered that in both instances he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Furthermore, he made yet another slight comment that if he had run any faster, he would not be hit. These moments during the interview revealed that he had a hard time connecting with his memories on an emotional level. What others might deem difficult to recall was a lot easier for him to present in detail. His off-the-track comments was less serious in tone, making his recollections of the war carry much less weight than they should be.

After the first interview session with him, I tried to connect the dots. This distance between himself and his recollections of the war might result from the fact that he was actually in the war. Because the interviewee had to go through rigorous and uncomfortable situations every single day during the Vietnamese war, these situations built him up and set up a wall between his emotions and his memories. In other words, he was trained not to feel heavy emotions when he recalled disturbing instances from the war.

Another contributing factor to why the interviewee kept himself at a distance with his stories was his disconnection from Japanese culture while growing up in two completely different cultural settings. This disconnection was made evident during the follow-up interview. He confessed that because his mother was tired of people mispronouncing her Japanese name, she gave him and his two brothers biblical names so people would not mispronounce them. He grew up in Azusa, whose majority, during his childhood, was

Hispanic whites, so most of his friends at home were Hispanic. Although his weekends were spent with his grandparents, who were first-generation Japanese Americans and never let out a single word about their experiences during the internment, he spent his weekdays playing with his friends. He did not reach out to the Japanese community until later in his life when he became a member of the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center. These details in his stories revealed a disconnection from his Japanese heritage while growing up. This disconnection made him care less about his own personal history and runs parallel with the distance he kept with his memories from the Vietnamese war. Further to prove the point, in his early thirties, he saw a few plays put on by the East West Players that represented the daily struggles of Japanese Americans. He confessed he saw them only for their entertainment value and did not realize the messages behind the performances until many years later. He was not able to connect with the representation of Japanese Americans on an emotionally serious level because of his disconnection from his own Japanese heritage.

What made this interviewee stand out amongst the other interviewees was that he did not have stories about internment or immigration like people expected from Japanese American oral history. He grew up in a more assimilated cultural setting and shared experiences typically deemed American, for instance the Vietnamese War. Considering his experiences in such unique setting made me understand his stories better and in turn offered a lot his characteristics that he may not even know.

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