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Manzanar Reflection

Four years ago, sitting outside dusty Lone Pine High School while listening to Marielle Tsukamoto talk about her internment experience, I could hear the shadow of my grandparents' untold stories. Although my grandfather and step-grandfather were both interned during World War II, they *never* speak of those three years, instead letting my sansei mother casually mention their internment while narrating the broader tale in an unspecific, more impersonal manner. My family's active involvement in the Bay Area Japanese American community ensured that I was always learning about Japanese American history, especially that of the internment camps, but in spite of my familiarity with the topic, I never thought deeply about what it meant in *my* life. For my final project for "Japanese and Japanese American Women Writers" course taught by Professor Lynne ^{Miyake} Mikaye I chose to organize a delegation of Claremont College students to attend the Pilgrimage to share those experiences with other students. Although it was my third time attending the Manzanar Pilgrimage it was just as inspiring as the first, for every aspect of the pilgrimage, from the snow on the Sierra Nevadas to my interactions with the other pilgrims, caused me to think critically about the importance of activism and social justice.

Our pilgrimage began at 8 am with a four-hour bus ride through central California. Familiar suburban landscapes gave way to dirt, shrubs and rocks as the roads we took gradually reduced from six lanes to two. Driving our Toyota Odyssey, it occurred to me that this route must have been very similar, if not the same, to the 220 miles that internees followed in much less comfortable buses back in 1942. While I was voluntarily exchanging my life at Pomona for a comfortable day trip, the internees who traveled the same road 67 years ago had to unwillingly leave almost everything they had behind in the midst of confusion, panic and uncertainty. I thought of how fortunate I was to be able to visit Manzanar on these terms as opposed to those that drove my grandparents to Heart Mountain and Tule Lake. Not only did I owe my pilgrimage experience to the former internees who relentlessly campaigned for the establishment of Manzanar as a National Historic Site, but also to my position of privilege that both allowed me to visit Manzanar in such nice conditions and gave me the time and space to attend a day-long event.

We reached Manzanar just in time for the opening of the Pilgrimage Ceremony, a performance by UCLA's Kyodo Taiko. The rich sounds of the drums resonated through the subtle breezes as we left the van to join the diverse crowd gathered outside. The event proceeded with a series of speakers, and singalongs, led by "Japan's Bob Dylan," that highlighted the continual need for remembrance and activism. Mitch Maki, in an impressively long and powerful speech, asserted that not only can Japanese Americans not forget Manzanar, but "American can not forget Manzanar."

As would only happen at a Japanese-American interfaith service, the religion that I follow, Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, was represented and a series of religious rituals that I had grown up with- chanting, incense burning and saying *gassho*- were responsible for the closing of the ceremony. Afterwards, people began to gather for traditional Ondo dancing to the sounds of Kyodo Taiko and traditional Japanese folk music. As the dancing of Tanko Bushii continued, I watched the circle quickly expand and became increasingly more diverse. Three teenage girls wearing the hijab followed an elderly Japanese-American woman in a hapi coat, a young child tentatively joined her mother into the circle only to get scared and run back to her father and even those on the sidelines seemed to be searching for the right moment to jump in. To me, it was through this Japanese-American cultural tradition that the feeling of solidarity really shined. I did not fully register the importance of the diverse crowd until that moment when, watching people of all colors, religions and generations dance together in a circle, I realized how significant our coming together at Manzanar truly was. For approximately 1,500 people to gather in remembrance of one of country's greatest injustices is truly inspiring for it is proof that there are many people out there who will never allow it be forgotten or repeated.

After tours of the Historical Site and exploration of the Interpretative Center, we piled back into our van and began the slow drive back to Claremont. Stopping at a Pho restaurant for dinner, a sense of community had developed between our small group of seven. Joking over boba and spring rolls, a hapa student who had not previously been involved in Asian Pacific Islander American events on campus said it was the "best pilgrimage he's ever been on." A first year student from Scripps explained how she called her grandmother from the site to say hi only to learn for the first time that her great-aunts were interned during World War II.

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Reflection on the Claremont Colleges' Trip to the Manzanar Pilgrimage

Overall, I thought that the Manzanar Pilgrimage went well. Leaving shortly after 8am we were able to make it to the site just in time for the afternoon program. The weather was perfect, the speakers dynamic and because, and because Professor Miyake was kind enough to purchase Costco-quantity snacks, even the two football players were well satiated the entire trip. Ultimately only four other students, one faculty member and one staff member attended the trip, slightly less than I had hoped to attract. However, our small number allowed the group to stay together for the entire Pilgrimage, having conversations and forming relationships. I was excited that Luke Sweeney, who I had never seen at other Asian Pacific Islander community events on campus, and Andres Garduno, a first year, attended the event. While we were a small group, I consider the "eclectic" nature of the group and the spontaneous sense of community that was created to be a great success. Similarly, I was happy with the effect that the Pilgrimage had on the students that attended, particularly the intergenerational conversation and sharing of family history it prompted between Marissa and her grandmother

If I were to "re-do" the Pilgrimage, I would definitely begin advertising earlier and reach out to more professors. I would have liked to see more students from other campuses, especially first year students. Although it was my third time at the Pilgrimage, I was still struck by the potency of the speakers and profound sense of community that can be created in an otherwise desolate space and I hope that Claremont College students will continue to attend the Pilgrimage in the future.