

# SHIMPO



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## NCRR WORKSHOP TO EXAMINE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF CAMPS

One of the workshops at the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations' 10th Anniversary Conference will address some of the lingering psychological effects of the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. "Understanding and Coping with the Psychological Impact of the Camps" will be held on Saturday, Oct. 20, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at California State University at Long Beach.

The workshop will explore the problems the internment experience created not only for those interned, but for the generation that followed—in relationship to their level of self-esteem, positive sense of racial identity, and their attitudes towards assimilation.

"I feel that when Reagan signed the bill in 1988, a lot of former camp victims began to get back a bit of their dignity," says workshop coordinator Guy Aoki, a writer on Asian American issues and long-time member of NCRR. "Now with the issuing of the checks, they're beginning to reassert more pride in their racial identity, since it's not officially declared that they had done nothing to deserve their incarceration, and that it had really been the government's fault all along. But a lot of damage was done to these people, and there's still a need to work them out in a constructive way."

Panelists will include Dr. Mary Oda, a physician and surgeon who has served the San Fernando Valley

for the past 40 years; Lloyd Inui, vice-chair of the Asian American Studies Department at California State Long Beach; and Brian Niiya, of the Japanese American National Museum.

Dr. Oda was one of the most tragically affected by the camp experience. Due to the psychological traumas her family faced in camp and inadequate medical facilities, she lost her father, a sister, and a brother all within seven months of each other. During this time, the 70-year-old Nisei, born and raised in North Hollywood, struggled to get through medical school at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania.

Only in 1981, when she was persuaded to testify before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC)—did she finally confront her emotions regarding these tragedies. "I cried for the first time, when I spent three days writing my speech," she recalls. "I spent three nights crying. When they died, I could never cry at all. We couldn't afford emotion. But I used to get heart palpitations. I used to tell my mother [who died soon after leaving camp] that my heart beat so fast. Many years later, I realized that I was angry. And that's why I had all these palpitations. The camps just ruined everything. We didn't want to be Japanese."

Because of the insensitive and often racist treatment she received outside of camp, Oda, like many

others, never told her children about it, or about her camp experience.

"It was hard enough for me to grow up with that," she reasons. "I didn't want them to feel that stigma that I felt. One day, my second daughter, who was in her second year of law school, asked me 'Mom, were you in camp during the war? I said, 'Yes! How did you know!' She said, 'Well, I have some Sansei friends, and they told me that their parents were in camp. So I figured you must've been in camp.'"

"So I said, 'Yes, it's true!' And you know what she said to me?" she asked, laughing. "She said, 'Mom! Why did you let them do it to you? Why didn't you protest?' We were conditioned to this, because we were treated like inferior people. We somehow thought this was the way we were going to be treated [for the rest of our lives]! It didn't even occur to us to protest."

Although Oda says she now feels proud of being an American of Japanese ancestry, she took a long time to resolve these feelings.

Lloyd Inui, founder of the Asian American Studies program at Cal State Long Beach in the late sixties, points out that the camps didn't cause all of the internees' problems, with regard to their identity and feelings of inadequacy. Many of these feelings were already there before World War II, attributable to cultural traits.

"But it compounded them. It's kind of a Catch-22 situation. The

good thing about it is so many of the survivors persevered and became successful in their lives. They coped, rather than becoming (on the extreme) derelicts, too bitter about their experiences. The bad thing was that it reinforced the tendency not to deal with problems more directly."

Michael Yoshi, a Presbyterian minister in the Bay area, helped shape the understanding of the context of the workshop. "He's held a series of forums in the Bay area, regarding camp experiences," says Aoki. "He found that there was a lot of denial and bitterness among former internees. A lot of them don't even understand the reason for their anger.

"They also face the generational dilemma of being frustrated that their Sansei children don't understand enough about their history and heritage, yet also realize that they were partly to blame for not handing them down to them."

In conclusion, Aoki admits that he doesn't expect the workshop on Oct. 20 to be able to neatly resolve all of the psychological issues. "But I do hope that it can allow people to feel comfortable in trying to talk about how the camps affected their personal outlook, and their raising of their children."

For more information about the workshop, call (818)241-7817. For other information regarding the conference, call (818)282-8808, or Alan at (213)985-5149.