
“I was in my room studying when my friend L., burst in, told me the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and rushed out again to spread the news. Left alone, I was stunned, and all I could think of at the moment was that I didn’t know precisely where Pearl Harbor was,” said Mariko Ishiguro ‘42. That bombing occurred on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor Naval Base, on the island of Oahu, in the then U.S. territory of Hawaii. Approximately 2,500 people, mostly servicemen, were killed - and in that moment, the world changed. The U.S. officially declared war on Japan, and issei, Japanese immigrants in the U.S., and nisei, Americans born to Japanese immigrant parents, became targets of suspicion.

Fear that U.S. residents of Japanese ancestry were spies for Japan partially prompted President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to enact Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which allowed the Secretary of War to do any such action necessary to protect the United States including creating militarized zones. Over the next two and a half months, approximately 110,000 people of Japanese descent on the West Coast were subjected to increased restrictions culminating in removal from their homes to concentration camps, often called Japanese internment camps.

Though Wellesley College, a historically women’s college outside of Boston, Massachusetts, is over 2,000 miles away from the sites of most Japanese internment camps,

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1 Mariko Ishiguro, “December 7, 1941,” Wellesley Magazine (Fall 2000), 86.
Japanese-American students, in this war context, had a complex and delicate situation to contend with. At this time, Wellesley was generally a racially homogenous institution. Though the Wellesley Archives does not have racial and/or ethnic composition details of the college in the 1940s, in this research, only three Japanese-American students were discovered as having graduated Wellesley College while the U.S. was engaged in the war².

Sisters Mariko Ishiguro ‘42 and Emiko Ishiguro ‘45 are two of these students. Both women shared mostly positive recollections of their times at Wellesley College but noted hesitance and safety concerns. Mariko wrote in 2000 about the day she heard Pearl Harbor had been bombed by Japan saying in part, “I drew a sigh of relief as I realized (I should have had no doubts) that war or no war, the relationship with my friends at least, was not going to change. I questioned whether it was appropriate for me to go out, but S. came in shortly to get me, and nothing unforeseen happened.”³ Though she emphasizes the friendliness and respect given by her friends and peers at Wellesley, her initial belief that they may not have fully accepted her alludes to greater tensions at play.

Later, as winter break was approaching, several people voiced concerns about the sisters’ safety traveling back home to Pennsylvania from Wellesley due to fervent prejudice against ethnically Japanese people throughout the nation. At this time, signs such as “The only good J*p is a dead J*p” and “J*ps get out” were common and Mariko’s friend had “overheard not to let Japanese ride on the trains.” To keep the Ishiguro sisters safe, students across campus looked for rides home for them, but it was later decided they would remain on campus. Mariko said, “I

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² Another Japanese-American student from the 1940s was identified as Fumi Anraku Sugihara, however, she graduated in 1949 and did not spend any of her years at Wellesley while the war was active.
³ Mariko Ishiguro, “December 7, 1941.”
⁴ In this paper, Jap will only be referred to as J*p to emphasize the damage this language can (and did) cause.
cannot think of any other place we could have been that year where we would have experienced such caring and support and been made to feel not only secure but very much included.”

Emiko echoed similar sentiments and “recalled that her fellow students and the college administration ‘never made it an issue that I was Japanese.’” Lillian Ota ’43 seems to validate this through an article for Trek, a magazine written by and for internees of the Topaz camp. She wrote, “I haven’t noticed that my being a ‘J*p’ has made much difference on the campus itself.” However, Ota noted one prejudiced encounter with a student and other racially charged interactions in the surrounding areas. She continued, “One student accused practically all the Japanese in this country of being in some way connected with the ‘sabotage and espionage network.’” Her experiences outside Wellesley varied from being stared at to being told “it was a good thing the ‘dangerous Japanese’ in this country were ‘interned’” while taking a train to the college.

One potential reason for the difference in experience between Ota and the Ishiguro sisters is their background prior to arriving at Wellesley. Jim Kodera, Wellesley professor and friend of Emiko Ishiguro wrote, “[Emiko] was largely protected [from] the anti Japanese sentiments of the period because of her privileged background in her youth in [Pennsylvania] as well as her parents who had come to the [United States] from Kyoto where her father or grandfather was governor.” This was not the case for Ota as she had been living in California as a student at the University of California Berkeley when relocation began. She was forced into the Tanforan Assembly Center where she spent some months before moving to Wellesley in August of 1942.

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5 Mariko Ishiguro, “December 7, 1941.”
7 Lillian Ota, “Campus Report,” Trek 1, no. 2 (February, 1943), 33.
8 Ota, 33-34.
9 Email to Author from Jim Kodera, December 15, 2022.
10 Tanforan Assembly Center was a center in San Francisco where many Japanese-Americans were detained before being moved to other camps long-term.
to attend her senior year of university with help from The National Japanese American Student Relocation Council (NJASRC). The written accounts of these women reflect a tension at Wellesley College as prejudice and progress were in conflict.

In 1938, Wellesley College President Mildred McAfee wrote to alumnae about the college’s diversity and ability to control prejudice on campus as conflict in Europe was brewing. “Wellesley students are associated with widely varied elements in a closely-knit community. We have on the campus a few Nazi sympathizers, a few Spanish loyalists, some pro- and some anti-Mussolini, many Republicans, a few Democrats, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, [and] two Negroes.” In this sense, Ota and the Ishiguro sisters were simply just a part of the diversity McAfee promoted, as having a few POC students was valuable for the college’s image. In this letter, McAfee continued, “When ideas rub against each other they often ignite old prejudices. We run the risk here of inflaming emotions destroying peace of mind. However, if we are playing with fire we are doing it in a laboratory equipped to experiment with the control of prejudice.”

Though McAfee seemed to believe, or at least wanted the alumnae to believe, that prejudice was under control, this doesn’t appear to be the case in various sources. Prejudice in the student body was evident through the use of the word J*p in several student publications. Shosuke Sasaki, an activist and former internee of the Minidoka camp, said, “The term ‘J*p’ is regarded by the Japanese as an epithet of derision. Its use is resented by all Japanese and persons of Japanese ancestry.” During the U.S. involvement in WWII, at least 8 articles in various Wellesley publications used the word J*p prominently in the piece. This

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includes at least 4 Wellesley College News articles\textsuperscript{14}, 3 The Last Word pieces\textsuperscript{15}, and 1 WE article\textsuperscript{16}. The use of the word J*p in The Last Word often appeared in the section “College Victory Campaign” which featured various forms of government propaganda. This may have indicated to readers that hatred and prejudice for Japanese people was patriotic and that J*p was an appropriate word to use as the government was using it. One The Last Word article in particular uses much offensive language and is titled with the ethnic slur in question. For 25 cents, less than $5 in 2022, a Wellesley student could buy The Last Word and read this propaganda which includes phrasing such as, “My J*p is a young almond-eyed V-7 who enlisted about the same time I did. He is a dogged, persistent little Oriental.”\textsuperscript{17} Racist depictions were also used in fictional writing by Wellesley students at the time, when depicting those of Japanese ancestry. One ethnically Japanese Hawaiian character created by a student was written saying, “Hawaii no can be in war. Whassa mattah everybody speak war! war! War! Why not eat own rice and shut up. I no scared war,”\textsuperscript{18} This language can be dehumanizing and assumes that either Hawaiian or ethnically Japanese people are incompetent, or both.

However, not all potential prejudice and racism was that overt. Ota wrote to future Japanese-American students going back to campus saying, “probably you’ll be invited to join a Cosmopolitan club or some such “international” club on the campus.” The idea that Japanese-Americans were of a different nationality brings up concerns of increasing divisions, and the assumption their ethnicity makes them less American and by extension more Japanese.

\textsuperscript{15} “Honor Roll,” The Last Word 17, no. 3 (November 1942); “Honor Roll,” The Last Word 17, no. 3 (December 1943); H.W., “My J*p,” The Last Word 17, no. 5 (February 1943).
\textsuperscript{16} “Home from Tarawa,” WE 1, no. 3 (March 1944).
\textsuperscript{17} H.W., “My J*p.”
\textsuperscript{18} Dorothy Schenck, “Ima-san and the Crisis,” The Wellesley Review, March 1942.
Another Wellesley student wrote about men in the army canteen saying she saw “men from all parts of the country (in fact all parts of the globe, for there were Britishers, Dutch, Frenchmen, Russians, and Japanese Americans among them).” This again illustrates an assumption that Japanese-Americans were not truly American.

Yet, prejudice around campus was acknowledged, and some actively fought against it. One teacher said, “every group which is devoted to attempting to destroy race prejudice needs more support now than ever before because of the recent growth of intolerance.” Various lectures and group discussions were created to discuss combating prejudice at Wellesley. The Interfaith Council held discussions in both 1943 and 1944, and in 1946, attorney Carey McWilliams came to Wellesley to lecture on racism, specifically against Japanese-Americans. He said in part, “No other question so seriously threatens American unity as that of racism, and the same issue threatens the solidarity of the United Nations. Race prejudice is a Hitler's weapon; it is our danger.”

Though in these situations, faculty and visiting educators were the proponents of anti-prejudice mindsets and measures, oftentimes it was the student body taking it upon themselves to do what they thought was right. The Wellesley College Service Fund allotted $350 in 1943, the equivalent of about $6,000 in 2022, to “help free Japanese students from internment camps to continue their education.” One of the members of the Service Fund’s allocation committee said, “I wonder why the Germans have not been interned. It seems to me that this

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19 Marian Kerr, “Army Canteen,” *The Last Word* 17, no. 6 (March 1943).
22 “Second Freedom,” *WE* 1, no. 10 (October 1944).
fact alone indicates that this interning of Japanese citizens and aliens is a radical discrimination rather than a war measure."

Another group wrote to the *Wellesley College News* to emphasize the injustice of the concentration camps. “Barbed wire, armed guards, extremely limited visits, appalling scarcity of needles…we want to point out these conditions because the newspapers and magazines neglect to tell us of them—and the issues are so vital!...The suspicion with which American citizens of alien nationality are being regarded is hardly excusable.” This suspicion, suspicion of Japanese-Americans, was quickly dismissed by one student from Hawaii through the newspaper only four short days after Pearl Harbor: “The possible fifth column activity of the Japanese, naturalized American citizens who make up the majority of the civilians in Hawaii, is not imminent, Nancy Cameron commented. Most of the non-nationalists returned to Japan last summer, and those who remain are well established and respected businessmen or, in the lower classes, domestic servants and laborers.” This emphasizes that even at a time when American discourse was rife with paranoia and government propaganda, there was still a strong progressive coalition at Wellesley.

However, personal comments of support towards Japanese-Americans and against racial prejudice did not necessarily mean the institution itself was racially progressive. In 1947, McAfee announced that Wellesley’s Board of Trustees voted to oppose the Massachusetts Fair Educational Practices Act which says in part, that institutions may not, “exclude or limit or otherwise discriminate against any United States citizen or citizens seeking admission as students to such institution because of race, religion, creed, color or national origin.” This act would

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mean the quota system, which Wellesley College had been using, would no longer be allowed. McAfee explained the college’s reasoning to oppose the act by saying, “‘The quota system…apparently keeps the numbers of minority group students small enough for them to be assimilated into the community and so have a real opportunity to contribute,’” and that minority groups, if large enough, would “segregate themselves, rather than mix fully in the life of the college community and thus contribute to anti-prejudice education.”28 Thus, progress and prejudice were again at odds in Wellesley College.

In these difficult years for Wellesley College and the world, students of Japanese descent were placed in a position where they were safe from internment unlike many of their counterparts, yet were still grappling with racial tensions felt throughout the college and the surrounding area. The written accounts and recollections of their experiences, though in most circumstances positive towards Wellesley, indicate conflict along racial, ethnic, and even national lines. One singular opinion from those at Wellesley towards Japanese and Japanese-American people cannot be clearly derived; however, it appears that the presence of Japanese-American students on campus was generally welcomed, or at least tolerated, as per the women’s writings. It is possible that due to the general acceptance of ethnically Japanese students on campus, microaggressions and less intense (or simply more common) forms of prejudice felt comparatively small and less problematic to Ota and the Ishiguro sisters. They could have also felt uncomfortable bringing issues up, so they would not be judged any further. Although there may not be one simple story or explanation of these women’s journeys at Wellesley, it is evident that the college and its population were grappling with a changing world in which some rejected prejudice and others embraced or allowed it.

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