

Committed to Film: An Interview with Lina Hoshino

By Chiori Santiago



As the child of recent immigrants, Lina Hoshino knew of Japanese American internment only from the pages of a history textbook she read while attending an East Coast high school. "There were just one or two paragraphs and a photo of an old man wearing a tag, waiting to go to the camps," she recalls. "I noticed it because his was the only Asian face in the book. I really related to it personally, to being in exile, because I was one of the only Asians in the whole class."

In her half-hour documentary "Caught In Between: What to Call Home in Times of War," the insight garnered in her youth informs Hoshino's exploration of the shared experience of people marginalized and made foreign by war-related hysteria. The footage documents a moment when Japanese Americans stepped up to support their Arab, Muslim and South Asian neighbors in the wake of September 11, 2001. It premiered at San Francisco's Day of Remembrance event in 2004, and has been screened at churches, community events and mosques in the US and at 15 sites in Japan. Recently, she reflected on the film with *Nikkei Heritage*.

NH: What motivated you to make this film?

LH: After 9/11 happened, I was looking for leadership. It was so shocking and terrible, but I felt an absence of any kind of unified force bringing us together. Then I got an email from Nosei Network [a progressive Nikkei activist group] saying they were going to hold a peace vigil, so I went to a prep meeting. I had a feeling no one was going to bring a camera, so I volunteered to document the whole thing. I didn't intend to make a documentary, but I knew no one else was doing it. The mainstream media certainly wasn't there. I felt it was important because internees were speaking up about the need to remember civil rights struggles and it was important to record that.

I just followed events. I went to the Tule Lake Pilgrimage. Amjad Obeidat, a self-identified American Muslim, came along and spoke. The energy from that, his being at an internment site with former internees—for me the trip was a life-changing experience.

NH: And you found that sense of leadership?

LH: For me it was Yuri Kochiyama who contextualized the situation. She explained why she has a responsibility to speak against the detention of South Asians and Muslims and put it in a global human rights context. At that event I saw the internment experience was not about just Nikkei. It wasn't about this or that group of people, it was about all of us. I was so moved by that.

NH: Did you have an intended audience at that point?

LH: Well, looking back I think it's unfortunate the film wasn't shot with more intent. I just had all this footage, and it was important to get it pulled together into something watchable. Over time, I realized it could be more than just a record, it could carry a

message to the community.

At first I felt Japanese Americans were the most important audience. I wanted them to feel inspired to stand against human rights violations. When I'm screening it, I try to target the JA audience first; we're the ones who have this history and we're in a special position. When we speak up it means something.

Second was the American Muslim audience, South Asians and other folks impacted after 9/11. They've been more targeted for detention and deportation unjustly.

The third audience is Japanese people. I took the film to Japan this winter. I did a test screening the year before to see if people had a connection to the material, and they did. It's a great way to promote dialogue about war and immigration.

Japanese people were shocked at the numbers of Arab Americans detained or deported by the US, but they had their own post-9/11 fallout. Japan had a lot of immigrants from Iraq and Iran as migrant workers. They're pretty much gone now. I met ten people who were there because they had work injuries and had overstayed their visas. They were harassed on a daily basis because they're brown. Their mosques were raided; they would avoid the big train stations, which have more security, to avoid being harassed. They couldn't even stay to see my film because they had to go home early so they wouldn't be stopped after dark.

There are also a lot of Chinese and Korean immigrants in Japan, and there will be more immigrant workers in the future, because Japan suffers from a shortage of cheap labor. But they're not really dealing with a society with the issue of immigrants' rights. This was a way to promote dialogue, a friendly way to do it. The video provided JA images they can relate to. I'm not pointing fingers at the Japanese government, but there are parallels.

NH: Have the connections between JA and Muslim communities been maintained?

LH: There are ongoing relationships. To be honest, I would like to see stronger ties. There have been many events and dialogue. There was Pearl Harbor Day in Santa Clara last December. The Muslim community was very touched by that gesture. There's stuff happening nationwide—break-the-fast dinners after Ramadan, collaborative art and theater events. In the Bay area, people helped paint a mural on the wall of the San Francisco Islamic Society—they have suffered vandalism. JAs have reached out, but I feel there needs to be more in a real sense. It's important to strengthen those ties.

Japanese Americans were isolated during World War II, which made them an easy target for herding into camps. So the whole purpose of reaching out is so Muslims won't be isolated. We would know if something happened. We would know and would speak up.

NH: Ideally, what would you like the video to accomplish?

LH: I would hope the video makes people think about what it means to be Nikkei, that no matter how American we've become, many of us appear foreign. We need to understand internment as larger than a Japanese American experience. It's not just about the rights of Americans but our rights as people. If we understand it as such, it becomes something we all need to stand up for. You shouldn't be incarcerated for no reason, just because you look like the enemy. You can't just bundle people based on nationality or appearance.

We have a responsibility as a community whose experience includes internment and redress, to make sure our government holds to what it said it would. Internment was wrong then and it still is. Maybe it's not our turn now, but it could happen again. *

For more information about "Caught in Between," see www.caughtinbetween.org (or www.root-b.org for details in Japanese). Copies also are available through NJAHS.