

Captive Bodies: Soldier and Civilian Internment in the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1942–1945¹

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Abstract

War forces people to live and die according to narrow ideas about wins or losses and enemies or allies. Yet the reality of war exposes the limitations of such distinctions. From 1942 to 1945, Japanese military leaders occupied several former British colonies across Southeast Asia. The soldiers who fought for the British Empire and became Prisoners of War included British, Australian, and Indian troops. Civilians held within Japanese internment camps were Asian, Eurasian, and European. Comparing soldiers' and civilians' experiences of internment shows how the body was a site of strict wartime and imperial policing across identity categories, remaking prewar understandings of difference and belonging.

Keywords: interment; Second World War; Malaya; Singapore; Japanese Empire; British Empire

From December 1941 to February 1942, Japanese military forces invaded Southeast Asia, resulting in the surrender and collapse of several European empires. Ultimately more than 200,000 allied POWs and at least 130,000 so-called “Western” civilians faced internment until 1945.² Among them were people like Sheila Allan,

¹ Material in this chapter also appears in “Dream Mother: Race, Gender, and Intimacy in Japanese-Occupied Singapore,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52:3, (September 2021): 464–491 and *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915–1960* (Stanford University Press, 2024).

² Key works on the British imperial experience of Japanese occupation include C.A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005); Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore, 1940–1942* (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Group, 2005); Patricia Pui Huen Lim and Diana Wong, *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000); Lachlan Grant, *Australian Soldiers in Asia-Pacific in World War II* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014); Ban Kah Choon and Yap Hong Kuan, *Rehearsal for War: The Underground War Against the Japanese* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2002); Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941–46* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2003); Karl Hack, *Defence and*

who was confined at Changi in Singapore from the ages of seventeen to twenty-one. There, she straddled the ambiguity of “girl”—as she framed herself in her memoir, *Diary of A Girl in Changi*—and woman, which subjected her to unwanted sexual advances before and during the occupation.³ Allan also had a white Australian father and Malay mother. Internment forced her to reconcile racial, gender, ethnic, and national identities in a context of strict gender segregation. Both Japanese and British leaders considered her “Eurasian” even though she did not identify this way and possessed no connection to Singapore’s Eurasian community. Japanese leaders even tried to separate her from her family, perceiving her as Chinese. While interned, some white European women used anti-Asian racial slurs against her. She coped with these tensions by rejecting her Siamese (Thai) stepmother and romanticizing Dr. Elinor Hopkins, the white British Camp Commandant for the women’s prison. Her descriptions of Hopkins alternated frequently between erotic, romantic desire and a longing for motherly intimacy.⁴ Allan’s experience suggests that internment exposed people’s bodies and minds to ways of seeing and being in the world that were impossible outside of wartime confinement. She was not alone.

Second World War internment offered military powers an illusion of certainty. Interned civilians had their own camps, while soldiers—as Prisoners of War—had others. Yet categories such as “European” or Asian, soldier or civilian, man, woman or child proved inadequate to reflect the intersecting and overlapping traumas experienced by many people across the conflict. By centering the experience of internment and its role in shaping identity, this chapter posits that wartime confinement embodied the violent consequences of binary thinking within and beyond colonial and wartime

Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1968 (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001); Catherine Kenny, *Captives: Australian Army Nurses in Japanese Prison Camps* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986); Christina Twomey, *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Yuki Tanka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in WWII* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad, eds., *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1994); Sarah Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire: POWs and Their Captors in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). For more on internment numbers see Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, “Japanese-occupied Asia from 1941 to 1945: One Occupier, Many Captivities and Memories,” in *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-occupied Asia*, ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4, 8, 11.

³ Sheila Allan, *Diary of A Girl in Changi* (Pymble, NSW: Kangaroo, 2004); Sheila Allan, “Journey to Changi and Down Under ... diary of events between 8th December, 1941 to 24th November, 1945, written by a seventeen year old girl,” unpublished manuscript, Private Papers, Australian War Memorial, PR00666 (1942–1992), henceforth Allan papers.

⁴ Allan papers, 21. For more on these dynamics, see Imy, “Dream Mother” and Imy, *Losing Hearts and Minds*.

society. As many scholars have explored, colonial rule relied on hierarchies of identity that were often unstable and ever-shifting, but nonetheless had violent consequences for those experiencing inclusion or marginalization.⁵ Wartime internment amplified experiences of everyday violence and trauma, as well as exceptional moments of solidarity, care, and comfort. For many soldiers and civilians, the experience of Japanese occupation simultaneously challenged and reinforced prewar identities and desires. People living and laboring under conflicting imperial regimes had to define and cultivate a place for themselves amidst extreme trauma, privation, and uncertainty. They redefined and rearticulated gender, racial, and ethnic identities—as well as simplistic binaries between soldier/civilian, combatant/non-combatant, prisoner/laborer, colonial subject/collaborator—during their confinement. The outer turmoil of a war-torn world profoundly shaped the inner turmoil of identity and belonging. Yet identity categories, and one's ability to perform expected codes associated with that identity, impacted the means and access to survival. This turned identity into a practice of survival, leaving profound consequences for the postwar world.

In some instances, internment created commonalities across ethnicity, combatant status, and gender. White Australian Jack Turner described several hardships that were regular features of POW and internment experiences, including the long march to Changi camp and shortages of food.⁶ Frequent relocation on trains and ships provided some of the most horrific conditions, forcing POWs and internees to experience food shortages, lack of water, and poor sanitation in cramped quarters. Living in difficult conditions also increased soldiers' dependence on civilians for survival. Turner and fellow Australian Jack Williams snuck out of internment camps in Burma to visit villages where a Thai gardener and a Burmese man provided bananas, cigarettes, breadfruit, coffee, and other relative wartime luxuries.⁷ Indian POW Chint Singh similarly recalled that in New Guinea, an Indigenous couple found him dying in the jungle and gave him pumpkin, fish, and bananas.⁸

⁵ Farish A. Noor and Peter Carey, eds. *Racial Difference and the Colonial Wars of 19th Century Southeast Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 9, 15; Ann Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 3 (July 1992): 514–551; Kristy Walker, "Intimate Interactions: Eurasian Family Histories in Colonial Penang," *Modern Asian Studies* 26, 2 (2012): 324; Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, 1 (Jan., 1989): 134–161, at 136–37.

⁶ Jack Wilfred Turner, "A True Autobiography of My Life as a Prisoner of War from 15 February 1942 till 12 September 1944. Also of My Experiences from 12 September 1944 till arrival in Australia," (henceforth Turner papers) PR00651, Australian War Memorial (henceforth AWM), 1–3.

⁷ Turner papers, 13, 87.

⁸ Chint Singh, "A Certified Copy of Story by Chint Singh: A Brief Sketch of the Fate of 3000 Indian P.O.W. in New Guinea." Wewack, New Guinea (4 November 1945), Micro-MS-Coll-08-1249, National Library of New Zealand, 17. Henceforth Singh papers.

They provided these amenities for weeks, at a time when others in his unit suffered greatly with food deprivation and supply shortages. Sometimes the dynamics were reversed—in Burma, civilians relied on Australian and American soldiers killing and selling them rats because Japanese forces took or destroyed so much food.⁹ Here, the soldier/civilian divide was complicated by POW's status as prisoners and their lack of access to the means of survival. At the same time, this extreme dependency on Asian civilians and Pacific Islanders rarely resulted in a long-term admiration, respect, or desire for inclusivity. Rather, it deepened soldiers' desire to regain personal autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Despite some common experiences, identity often shaped the flow of violence, including who was interned or imprisoned, and who did not survive. Turner recalled that one of the first duties Australian soldiers performed was burying a large number of Chinese civilians killed by Japanese soldiers.¹⁰ Japan's longer conflict with China, and Japanese leaders' fears of communism and suspicions about Chinese civilians, led Japanese military personnel to kill at least 30,000 Chinese civilians in Singapore by March 1942.¹¹ They forcibly conscripted many other Chinese civilians as laborers, along with other soldiers and civilians across Southeast Asia. Turner also recognized that Indian soldiers faced more difficult fates in Singapore than the average white POW. He described Indians being placed in a separate, fenced area, starved for a week, and then given the "choice" to either starve or join the anti-colonial Indian National Army as a Japanese ally. When men refused, Japanese leaders cut off fingers, filled their stomachs with water, and engaged in other torture. Those who survived became transport drivers and assured Turner that "When the time comes for the retaking of Singapore these Indians will give the British all the aid possible."¹² For Turner, Indian soldiers' perceived "loyalty" to the British Empire, and willingness to provide provisions for white POWs, was a prerequisite for perceiving their suffering as unjust.

Despite Turner's association of suffering with loyalty, it did not secure acceptance. As Anne Spry Rush and others have argued, many people across the British Empire understood and defined British identity as inclusive of all subjects across the empire. This was especially true for soldiers. For example, Major Naranjan Singh Gill received his education in India at the Chiefs' College at Lahore and the Royal Indian Military Colleges, both of which emphasized English-language

⁹ Turner papers, 51–52.

¹⁰ Turner papers, 3.

¹¹ Hack and Blackburn, "Japanese-occupied Asia from 1941 to 1945," 10, 13–14. See for example Lim Chuan Kim, letter to Bell (8 Jan. 1946), Private papers of Lim Bee Giok (henceforth Lim Bee Giok papers), 3DRL/74157, AWM.

¹² Turner papers, 8.

education and loyalty to the British Empire. He even gained a King's Commission from the British Military Academy at Sandhurst, earning him rank and status equal to a British officer. As a result, he described himself as possessing a "British background." Yet this promise of inclusion immediately crumbled with the Japanese occupation. Gill found that the "British did not care what happened to us, once the battle was lost. Instead of taking care of us, they said, 'All right, we will give them to you, the Japanese.'"¹³ He lost his identity as a "British" officer by becoming just another Indian prisoner of the Japanese military.

For the tens of thousands of colonial soldiers and officers, like Gill, who became Japanese prisoners, surrender meant an immediate loss of a British identity and their claims to exalted masculinity. Indian soldiers and officers enjoyed the relative privileges of being considered and categorized as "martial races." This gave them a position higher than non-combatant followers who endured frequent demasculinization and fewer benefits from their service.¹⁴ Yet surrender and internment denied Indians access to these colonial masculinities as well as the strong, masculine physiques that facilitated their service. Recruitment required them to meet strict requirements based on height and weight. They participated in rigorous physical training, and received rations, to make and keep their bodies strong and fortify a particular martial masculinity. Building their bodies gave them the power to inflict, rather than receive, the most brutal violence of the colonial state. Internment did the opposite. It forced soldiers to live in privation. It subjected them to the violent disciplinary methods deemed necessary by their captors. It made them powerless. It also transformed them into vulnerable laborers lacking any chance of upward mobility. Most even lived in former colonial prisons or so-called "coolie" lines, turning them into the marginalized underclass against which they previously defined themselves. It also led to criticisms of their previously exalted physicality. When Indian soldiers worked slowly due to malnutrition and eighteen-hour workdays in New Guinea, Japanese officials criticized them as inferior to Indigenous populations. One suggested, according to Indian soldier Chint Singh, "You India work no good, slowly slowly. Kanakas work very good hurry." When Chint Singh retorted that Kanakas had more food and Indians had malaria, the Japanese official beat him with a piece of wood.¹⁵ Internment experience not only exposed the muddy distinctions between soldier, prisoner, and laborer, but also the fragility of martial status and masculinity.

¹³ Transcript of an oral history interview with Shri Naranjan Singh Gill, interviewed by Shri S.L. Manchanda for The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (11 April 1972), Mss Eur F729/7/1, British Library, 29. Henceforth Gill papers.

¹⁴ Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921* (London: Hurst, 2020).

¹⁵ Singh papers, 25–26.

The category of “officer” also revealed how intersecting British and Japanese colonial racisms shaped soldiers’ experiences. When Australian soldier Turner worked on the Thai-Burma railway, he observed that Australian and British officers did not have to do work.¹⁶ Indian officers, by contrast, lost such protection. Indian officer Gill recalled “Indian officers and men would be separated from the British; instead of the normal rule that officers of all nationalities are put in one camp, men of all nationalities are put in other camp.”¹⁷ Indian men’s hard-earned officer commissions were useless in the face of British and Japanese racialization. According to Indian soldier Jemadar Chint Singh, soldiers petitioned their Japanese captors for humane treatment early in the war, requesting among other things that officers be treated as officers and not forced to work.¹⁸ However, officers only gained special notice from Japanese leaders for punishment. When food went missing, Japanese guards called the Indian Officers and “beat them severely,” threatening them with the death penalty. When Japanese soldiers tried to instruct Indians in drill or the Japanese language, soldiers intentionally refused to learn. As a result, “We were severely beaten, especially the officers.” In New Guinea one Japanese nursing orderly, Pte. Maida, suffered from dysentery and ordered an officer, Kitial Singh, to clean his boots. Singh did so but left a little dirt so Pte. Maida took a big stick and beat him. Kitial Singh remained injured for a month before dying. Indian soldier Chint Singh eulogized another officer, Captain Nirpal Chand, when Japanese leaders executed him after he organized food-stealing campaigns to address starvation. Chand had also protested when Japanese leaders forced them to march despite fatigue and illness. Chint Singh explained that the Captain’s “loss is irreparable to us. He has guided us through many dangers of life and used to encourage us.”¹⁹ This trauma endeared Indian officers to Indian soldiers, alienating them both from Japanese captors and the British leaders who abandoned them. It solidified their shared suffering as Indians, while also giving them greater deference for how officers should behave and be treated. The everyday hardships of imprisonment and forced labor for Indian prisoners, meant that officer/soldier distinctions became almost meaningless.

Another commonality between Indian soldiers and officers was that both struggled to find justice for their suffering after the war ended. In early 1946, British Major and Barrister P.R. Mursell defended Japanese soldiers from accusations of War Crimes by insisting that Indian soldiers’ testimonies were unreliable. The problem, in his view, was that Indian soldiers’ statements were written before

¹⁶ Turner papers, 27.

¹⁷ Gill papers, 29.

¹⁸ Singh papers, 3.

¹⁹ Singh papers, 4, 7, 9, 24–25, 29.

they returned home to India, leaving no witnesses to take the stand in Singapore. By using such “dangerous” evidence, he contended, the court failed to “produce witnesses to testify against a man to his face in open court.” He asked the court if they were truly willing to accept the account from “an Indian whom you have never seen, in flat contradiction to all that is just and fair?” In Mursell’s view, Indian soldiers’ absence meant that the court “cannot accuse” Japanese soldiers “of a crime at all, for it is obvious how gross is the injustice of such an accusation, where the victim cannot confront his accuser, and give him the lie to his face.”²⁰ By Mursell’s account, Indian soldiers who were unwilling or unable to confront their former prison guards after four years of traumatic treatment must be lying about what they experienced. For many former prisoners of war, facing and recounting the trauma of imprisonment, forced labor, extreme violence, and starvation was too much to bear. They endured shame, anxiety and humiliation from which they wanted to move on as quickly as possible. Even more striking is the fact that Mursell’s swift condemnation occurred in a trial concerning a Japanese officer who beheaded an Indian soldier, Ghafoor, for stealing food. Mursell did not dispute that this occurred. Instead, he found it “the just penalty for a mean and detestable act of knavery.” Beheading an Indian soldier, in his view, was “just.” Stealing food while starving was the “detestable act of knavery.” Mursell’s response revealed how racialized codes of military masculinity were both reinforced and undermined by soldiers’ experiences as prisoners of war. After all, white British or Australian testimonies did not engender such skepticism. Yet Indian soldiers could no longer claim either their exalted masculinity as “martial races” or the status of victims to either war and colonialism. Any sense of belonging within the British Empire was destroyed by fighting and suffering for it.

Compared to Indian soldiers, white Australians resented the reversals in colonial racial hierarchies that internment and imprisonment promised. Turner noted that in Burma he helped construct the Thai-Burma railway and worked in a camp previously used by Tamil Indians on a rubber plantation.²¹ When relocated back to Singapore, white Australian men worked on an island off of Singapore’s west coast alongside “many hundreds of natives.” Those who worked on the railways faced maladies such as cholera, malnutrition, beri beri, malaria, and dysentery. Beatings increased over time, as did demands to work while sick or wounded. Turner hated it when Korean guards came into the camps, because, he speculated, they had been treated badly by the Japanese and now relished the opportunity to have control and power. He did not make a similar assumption about British

²⁰ Major P.R. Mursell, “Defence Counsel’s Address,” War Crimes Case Files, Defendant: Okamura Hideo, (c. 8 February 1946). WO 235/820, National Archives of Singapore (henceforth NAS).

²¹ Turner papers, 24.

treatment when Indian soldiers became their guards. In some camps, such as River Valley Road Camp in Singapore, British, Americans, Australians, Dutch, and Indians were housed together. This, he found, was the worst camp he lived in during the war. It had been constructed by the British for evacuees from Malaya during the invasion, and quickly fell into disrepair.²² In reality, many of the Japanese camps in which white prisoners resided reflected the prewar racial hierarchies of labor and confinement. White soldiers and civilians had to inhabit refugee camps, prisons, and plantation labor lines constructed for those who experienced racial and class marginalization under British leadership. Only during the war, while living within them, did white people confront the inadequacy of these conditions.

Compared to the powerlessness of laboring under Indian, Korean, and Japanese guards, Turner noted some positive encounters with German officers in Singapore. One officer spoke fluent English and asked Turner how he was being treated. When told the truth, the German “expressed his sorrow and told us the Germans had no time for the Japanese.” He also gave several men tins of bully beef and some bread and sausage sandwiches. When cars with Japanese officers passed the work party officer, a non-commissioned officer was supposed to call men to attention to salute. On one occasion the sergeant did not see the flags denoting the car and so a Japanese officer “smacked our POW Sergeant across the face.” One of the German sailors from the submarine saw this and “wasted no time in arriving on the scene and landing a beautiful punch on the chin of the Japanese officer knocking him on the ground.”²³ The Japanese officer just got back in the car and left. Despite some common experiences among internees and POWs across ethnicity, whiteness still carried currency during the Japanese occupation.

Among civilian internees, racial hierarchy exacerbated stressors and vulnerabilities. Shortly after the surrender, Sheila Allan learned that “Europeans mean ‘married to one’—‘children from such union’—or if you profess to be a ‘British subject!’”²⁴ In fact, British internees proved to be just as invested in strict identity categories as their captors. Nominal rolls at Changi had over a dozen categories.²⁵ Many internees condemned the diversity of the camps generally and the presence of Eurasians specifically. White Australian nurse Veronica Clancy resented living beside “yellow half casts [sic]” and wondered “how far these girls could be trusted?”²⁶ Constance Sleep, interned in Changi and Sime Road alongside Allan, alleged

²² Turner papers, 25, 31, 35, 78, 83.

²³ Turner papers, 83.

²⁴ Allan papers, p. 16.

²⁵ “Changi and Sime Road Civilian Internment Camps: Nominal rolls of internees,” Cambridge University Archives, RCMS 103/12/22 (1942–1967), 11.

²⁶ Private Papers of Veronica Ann Turner (nee Clancy), Australian War Memorial, MSS1086 (1940–45), p. 103, henceforth Clancy papers.

that “the native and Eurasian women” were disloyal, due to their apparent willingness to sew or work in match factories for the Japanese. While she conceded that white women took the work as well, she singled-out Asian and Eurasian women as the problem. She resented Eurasians in the camp because “Our funds have to pay for milk, eggs and fruit provided for these people.” This made her feel “bitter about it, and about the men in the camp who are the begetters of these Eurasian children.”²⁷ Many white European women resented the presence of Asian and Eurasian mistresses, referred to as “Mrs” and the last names of well-known British officials.²⁸ Others treated Eurasians as a burden and a nuisance in camps to deflect the humiliation of surrender. Many resented and condemned Asian and Eurasian civilians’ perceived ability to win favors from “both sides.”²⁹ In some cases, Asian and Eurasian internees did enjoy relatively better access to food through their connections with family and friends in occupied towns, inverting power dynamics and prewar access to material resources. In response, many white British women fought to regain power by alleging that the true origins of these luxuries were sexual relationships with Japanese guards.³⁰ Competition for access to resources—and survival—both amplified pre-war biases and revealed the shifting and relational access to privilege.

In some cases, white women avoided violence by increasing the sexual danger for Asian and Eurasian women by mobilizing prewar ideas about the prestige, vulnerability, and honor of white womanhood. White Australian nurses held at Palembang protested sexual coercion by suggesting that there were “a number of Eurasian girls in the camp” who were “more than willing to fill the part.”³¹ In contrast to this belief, teenager Betty Kenneison, a Eurasian girl with a convent education, remembered the trauma of her teenaged friend agreeing to work in the Japanese club in exchange for food and clothing. This could hardly be considered “more than willing.”³² Yet some white nurses were ready to offer-up Eurasian women as sexual sacrifices, believing that Eurasian women were a byproduct of sin and illegitimacy and therefore predisposed to sexual laxity.³³ Sleep understood

²⁷ Private Papers of Constance Sleep and Arthur Sleep, MSS. Ind. Ocn. S. 127–133, ff. 29–39, Bodleian Library, Oxford University Archives, 4, henceforth Sleep papers.

²⁸ Felicia Yap, “Sex and Stereotypes: Eurasians, Jews and the Politics of Race and Religion in British Asia during the Second World War,” *Social Scientist* 38, 3/4 (March–April 2010): 74–93, 83–4.

²⁹ Felicia Yap, “Eurasians in British Asia during the Second World War,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* S3, 21, 4 (2011): 501.

³⁰ Yap, “Sex and Stereotypes,” 86.

³¹ Clancy papers, 115.

³² Rebecca Kenneison, *Playing for Malaya: A Eurasian Family in the Pacific War*, (Singapore: Memoir NUS Press, 2012), 102–4.

³³ Yap, “Eurasians in British Asia,” 489.

things in these terms in Changi, when she noted that there were “quite a number” of “Eurasian and native girl friends” of Japanese guards.³⁴ White women claimed to have autonomy and rights over their bodies, while insisting that Asian or Eurasian women were outlets for men’s sexual needs. They framed this as a reflection of the “degraded” or “willing” nature of Asian women. This helped them maintain their own place in both British and Japanese racial and gender hierarchies and the prestige of white womanhood. Many white women had not experienced the gendered and racialized violence of colonialism until the occupation. Their status as white civilians protected them from the sexual brutality that many believed was natural for Asian and Eurasian women to endure. It is little wonder, then, why Sheila Allan exalted and emulated camp commandant Dr. Hopkins, not only in her personal admiration and desire for her, but by following her into the medical profession. The performance of white womanhood offered protection.

While condemning Asian women, some white women “tried on” and mocked various “ethnic” identities during internment, dressing up as Indian, Chinese, and Javanese women during theatrical performances.³⁵ White women condemned Eurasians as a threat to white prestige while also claiming the ability to play with racial boundaries for their own amusement.³⁶ This racial drag, which often relied on broad Asian stereotypes, imitated and mocked not only many of their fellow prisoners and former British subjects living outside the camps—but their captors as well. This made both Asian captors and Asian captives on the same “side”—the butt of the joke and the method through which white people found a way to “escape” and reassert power. Despite such realities, some white internees, such as Constance Sleep, felt that the war and occupation created interracial solidarity because “The natives...had a bad time” including “hunger, degradation, and often torture.”³⁷ However, this sense of “shared suffering” proved illusory as it did not extend to the postwar period. Sleep returned home to England by the October of 1945. By contrast, Sheila Allan described how Eurasians had “more or less got forgotten, put aside for the time being” because “they were busy repatriating, transporting all of the others first.”³⁸ Racial hierarchies returned to British colonial Singapore with even greater force after “liberation.” Sheila Allan looked back on Changi as a time that she endured *less* discrimination than when she moved to Australia after

³⁴ Sleep papers, 13, 17.

³⁵ Allan papers, 33.

³⁶ Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 2013).

³⁷ Sleep Papers, p. 23.

³⁸ Interview with Sheila Bruhn, Australians at War Film Archive number 1998, University of New South Wales (2004), part 7, 38:30. Henceforth UNSW interview.

the war. She recalled that in the camps, “Anybody that the Japanese considered not Japanese was interned, they were all alien.”³⁹

After the war, newspapers filled with tales of white husbands, wives, and children reuniting after suffering the indignities of captivity.⁴⁰ Endless films, articles, and memoirs emphasized the brutality of Japanese guards towards captives—including beatings, food shortages, and disease.⁴¹ These tended to overlook or exclude that Japanese guards themselves lived in such conditions, and that allied attacks on shipping exacerbated shortages. Those that mentioned that Asian women had been in camps—and vastly outnumbered white women—still exclusively included white women in the visual accompaniments. Especially worthy of comment was the outrage of white women doing manual labor in Asia. Betty Jeffry, a white Australian nurse, wrote a famous novel entitled *White Coolies*—which emphasized the upheaval of racialized labor during the Japanese Occupation.⁴² “Coolies,” in the minds of most white Europeans, meant Asian labor. Foregrounding whiteness underlined that “White Coolies” were against the “natural” imperial order of British colonialism. Photographs and newspaper articles frequently depicted white women’s experiences in prison camps after liberation to emphasize that servility—especially in the service of an Asian “enemy”—were at odds with white femininity.⁴³ White imperial subjects frequently evoked coercive, racialized systems of repression closely associated with British imperial history, including slavery, to describe their confinement.⁴⁴ This left little space for depictions of women who were not white enough.

The perceived incompatibility of white femininity with manual labor influenced Sheila Allan’s treatment in the camps. She admitted that she took some undesirable jobs like sweeping the kitchen and cleaning drains in the early years of the occupation. She later maintained that racism did not play a large factor in her treatment. The only people who were not treated well, in her view, were those “who wouldn’t work or tried to get out of work.”⁴⁵ The situation often was more complex. Allan sometimes took jobs that other women did not want—and clearly

³⁹ UNSW interview, part 4, 22:30.

⁴⁰ See for example the numerous newspaper clippings in the C.A. Harness Papers, MSS. Ind. Ocn. S. 25., Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

⁴¹ See for example films such as Bruce Beresford, *Paradise Road* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1997); Jonathan Teplitzky, *The Railway Man* (Lionsgate, 2013); Angelina Jolie, *Unbroken* (Universal Pictures, 2014).

⁴² Betty Jeffry, *White Coolies* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954).

⁴³ See Harness papers.

⁴⁴ Clancy noted that white women “were put in the coolie lines” and would no longer “retain their former prestige.” Clancy papers, wallet 2 of 3, 360. Constance Sleep complained about doing “heavy work usually done by coolies.” Her husband, Arthur Sleep, claimed that those in the men’s camp were “treated worse than slaves.” Sleep papers, 3, 16.

⁴⁵ UNSW interview, part 3, 32:00 and part 4, 19:45.

felt that they should have—to do. Despite Allan's optimistic belief that her hard work prevented her from facing discrimination, many white women used racial difference to explain inherent value. Constance Sleep was certain that Eurasians were “liabilities in the Camp. They either won't or can't take their share of running of the Camp.”⁴⁶ This marked Allan as lazy by default and compelled her to perform “coolie” labor to prove that she deserved access to European space and the social inclusion so necessary for survival. This earned her relative exemption from the abuse that other Eurasian women faced at the hands of white prisoners. Even after the war she worked hard to become a nurse so that she would not become a “burden to anyone.” This did not save her from being told to “go back to Japan” by the former Australian servicemen she nursed.

The glorification of white womanhood as a non-laboring identity shows how racial and gender binaries gained new meaning and devotion following internment. After interpersonal battles and accusations about theft in Changi, Allan decried “What a bitchy lot of females we have become!!!”⁴⁷ Constance Sleep expressed a similar sentiment: “I regret to say that I'm beginning to hate my own sex living for years in such close proximity to them...It is appalling!” She speculated that “the men on the other side of the Camp are feeling just the same about their sex.”⁴⁸ The lack of gender diversity in camps caused reverence and even nostalgia for prewar gender order. Veronica Clancy noted that changing gender norms shocked many of the internees. Throughout the occupation, clothing shortages were endemic. Constance Sleep observed that women had to work “in the blazing sun, many of them wearing hardly any clothes.”⁴⁹ Women had no privacy because frail undergarments could only be “discreetly veiled” which proved difficult “when doing chores.” As a result, when Clancy heard postwar news of “A nudist colony near Sydney” it was “staggering. After living in what was practically a nudist colony for so long we couldnt [sic] understand ‘Why’ anyone would voluntarily go around in their birthday suits.”⁵⁰ Interned women, according to Clancy, craved the opportunity to cover up. Internment meant that internees missed subtle shifts in gender norms. Upon liberation, Clancy even recalled seeing a strange sight: “two figures in grey...what ever is the uniform?” Before long they recognized a fellow nurse, and were “dumfounded, [sic] what on earth had happened to everything, fancy sisters in pants!”⁵¹ Nurses in wartime represented an idealized professional

⁴⁶ Sleep papers, 4.

⁴⁷ Allan papers, 123.

⁴⁸ Sleep papers, 14.

⁴⁹ Sleep papers, 15.

⁵⁰ Clancy papers, 85/625.

⁵¹ Clancy papers, 110/651.

status for women that enabled them, through delicate uniforms and gentle care, to emphasize norms of femininity and even protect themselves from sexual violence. The shift to more practical wartime attire came as a shock to those who felt deprived of the opportunity to perform prewar norms. Disgust at British and Australian culture enabling women to nurse without feminine codes represented another, if less pronounced, trauma.

For many former captives, the journey home intensified the desire to return to normal—which many cast as a return to the binaries and hierarchies that they felt eluded them in the camps. For Clancy this not only meant a desire for prewar gender norms, but a newfound confidence in prewar racial politics, such as the “White Australia” policy. She wrote: “According to Educationalists all races are equal. I do not know, but we always said that we would be prepared to do almost anything if it would help to keep Australia White. We all endorsed the Japanese idea of Asia for the Asiatics. One girl remarked, ‘Who would want to live with them, anyway’. So why not Australia for the Australians?”⁵² The surrender enabled white people who had previously occupied territory in Asia without reflection to see the potential loss of these colonies as a triumph of white solidarity instead of a humiliation. The commitment to “White Australia” after the war also meant that many who longed to flee Southeast Asia after the Occupation were unable to do so. Eurasians who tried to evacuate were often turned away even before the Occupation, and continued to face difficulties migrating after the war.⁵³ Eurasian veteran George Hess’e was refused entry to Australia, despite his service resisting the Japanese behind enemy lines in Force 136, because he was “dark skinned.” Eurasian women such as Esme Kenneison gained entry only after invasive physical inspections and her ability to “pass” as white.⁵⁴ Migration bars exposed the limitations of “shared suffering” for inclusion within the empire.

For many white soldiers and civilians, Japanese internment signified a temporary loss of status. It emboldened their feelings that if whiteness fell from its exalted status as a mark of rule, then the alternative of Black, brown, Asian, or Indigenous leadership would be even more brutal and exclusionary than European colonialism. Returning to societies marked by white supremacy, they came “home” to spaces in which whiteness offered status, inclusion, and citizenship. Memories of living beside Asian and Eurasian colonial subjects in filthy, traumatic conditions conflated these two realities—making them crave pristinely clean, and exclusively white, spaces. Internment amplified gender binaries by segregating men and women who in turn craved a return to gender diversity—if not a recognition of

⁵² Clancy papers, 6/544.

⁵³ Yap, “Sex and stereotypes,” 78.

⁵⁴ Kenneison, *Playing for Malaya*, 216, 218.

diverse genders. Asian and Eurasian subjects, meanwhile, reconciled the trauma of their experiences with memories of temporary inclusion. Chint Singh wrote from an Australian hospital upon his rescue that Australians who liberated their camp armed with much needed food and medical provisions, represented, in Chint Singh's view, their transition from "hell" to "heaven."⁵⁵ This delirious enthusiasm proved to be short lived, as colonial subjects encountered the postwar realities of delayed repatriation, migration bars, and turbulent transitions to post-colonial nation states. The Second World War offered a moment where prewar binaries felt almost meaningless. At the same time, wartime internment made alternatives to the prewar colonial world order seem even worse. Experiencing a prolonged, traumatic war created false memories, and nostalgia, for the prewar world and what it represented. Yet people like Chint Singh, who praised Australia, or Sheila Allan, who moved there, kept their dreams alive of a better tomorrow. They hoped and believed that peace would, and could, bring them a sense of inclusion without brutality, a place in the sun without suffering.

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⁵⁵ Singh papers, 61.

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