

***History and Memory: On Visual Media and the Collective Memory of the
Japanese American Internment***

by Deirdre Boyle

What is it to write a “history” of a people? Is it to gather up individual stories and fit them together into a logical, coherent structural whole? But what if the stories are lost, if those who tell them have been silenced? And no one actually lives a story; a story is a sequence of events which can be arranged as a romance, a tragedy, a comedy, depending upon the viewpoint of the teller, who is constricted and guided by a number of biases.

Is the story of the Japanese-Americans a comedy? A triumph? Does the reconciliation of the Nisei with America represent a romance? Or is it a tragedy, followed by a satire, where each identity is tinged with irony, the false fit?

--David Mura, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (cited in Hayashi, 1995)

I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images that I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember?

--Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1982)

Introduction

This presentation explores the formation of collective memory of the internment in the Japanese American community by focusing on the role of the visual media during the war years and more recently. I will discuss in detail a documentary released in 1991 by videomaker Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory (for Akiko and Takashige)*, which invites us to examine how mass media propaganda helped usurp the collective memory of internees and replaced it with official, government-sanctioned history, contributing to the suppression and distortion of internee memory. Tajiri's work demonstrates how independent media can challenge the dominant paradigm, serving as *lieux de mémoire* and sites of commemoration. Close analysis of Tajiri's video will demonstrate how visual media can serve to repress or restore the authority of collective memory.

There were no independent films made about the internment prior to the 1970s¹. Only three Japanese American films on the internment were made in the 1970s² and five in the 1980s.³ But this changed in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan signed HR 442 into law, providing redress payments to survivors and thereby signaling a shift in public acknowledgement of our government's unjust treatment of Japanese Americans during the war. Since 1988 there has been a rising tide of productions by Asian Americans (at least 20 were released in the 1990s).⁴ Their focus has been on the human and civil rights violations of the camps, the plight of renueces, major figures of resistance and camp leaders, the children of the camps, post-war reparations and apologies, and commemoration. A video critic and historian since the mid-70s, I never thought about

¹ Apart from propaganda films made by the government during the war, the one notable feature film—a Hollywood classic—made on this subject prior to the 1970s was John Sturges' *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) with Spencer Tracy, Lee Marvin, Robert Ryan, and Ernest Borgnine. Tajiri uses it to considerable effect in her analysis of media images.

² *Manzanar* (1971), an experimental documentary about the camp; *I Told You So* (1974), a portrait of an artist whose poetry recalls his camp experiences; and *Wataridori: Bird of Passage* (1976), a tribute to the Issei generation and their experiences in Manzanar.

³ *Nisei Soldier: Standard Bearer for an Exiled People* (1983), *Yuki Shimoda: Asian American Actor* (1985), *Unfinished Business* (1986), *Family Gathering* (1988), *The Color of Honor* (1988), and *Days of Waiting* (1988). *The Color of Honor* was screened in Congress during the debates before the final vote was taken on redress for internees, HR 422.

⁴ In 1990, the Hollywood melodrama *Come See The Paradise* turned the story of internees into a big box office hit. As was true of other Alan Parker films, this story of racial injustice is told from the viewpoint of a white man (Dennis Quaid) married to a Japanese American woman. Tajiri also tackles this film in her metacriticism of the media in *History and Memory*.

how these films figured as *lieux de mémoire* in the social construction of memory. Since many were personal explorations of family history, I attributed their production to the cultural upheavals of a decade in which identity politics and minority empowerment dictated that *everyone* was making documentaries about themselves and their community. Fifteen years later, as I look back on my naïve assessment of the forces of history at work at the time, I know better what stake these Japanese American media makers had in reconstructing the past and stabilizing collective memory about the internment.

On Collective Memory

Halbwachs tells us that memories, which are localized in space and in time, are always set in social frameworks and acquire their meaning from shared group experience. Recollecting is not a re-living but rather a re-constructing of the past, which always includes elements from the present. Groups select images that fit their present needs, and that selection is a function of social power and chains of judgments (Halbwachs, 1950). Visible facts are symbolic of invisible truths, and one might add, without “visible” facts, the invisible truth remains invisible. Because collective memory is an instrument of legitimation, collective memory is often a contested site: much is at stake in determining where collective memory is located, how it is stabilized, and whose images define its meaning. Film and video are *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), a site of commemoration, in which the past is reconstructed to fulfill the needs of the group in the present. The “visible” facts presented in documentaries and dramas produced by the *Sansei* generation symbolized the invisible truths that had been hidden, suppressed or “forgotten” by the *Issei* and *Nisei*.

The root of memory’s uncertainty lies in the necessary embodiment of collective memory as cultural form, in social acts of formal translation that capture events in the ever receding past of social time and cultural space (Wagner-Pacific, 1996). Memories come to us as narratives, pictorial images, textbooks, pamphlets, legal charters, wills, diaries, and statues. Collective memory is not a collection of individual memories or some reservoir of ideas and images, but a socially articulated and socially maintained “reality of the past.” (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Increasing with the years since the war

ended, there have been many efforts at representing the memories of the internees—oral history projects; anthropological, sociological and psychological studies of internees' experiences and subsequent responses to the ordeal; novels and other creative works (paintings, drawings, photographs, etc.) by internees; commemorations such as the creation of protected national landmark status for the concentration camps; reunions of internees and pilgrimages to the camps; and exceptional histories written by survivors, to name a few. Today there is a vast literature about the internment written for children as well as adults. I am not claiming that Japanese American films and videos supercede all these other forms, simply that they played an important role that is generally overlooked when considering the cultural forms of collective memory.

Remembering to Forget: Understanding the Generations and Traumatic Memory

To understand why silence and forgetting about the internment experiences was the norm in the Japanese American community for two decades after the war's end, several factors must be taken into account: generations, traumatic memory, and the socio-political events of the 1960s and 1970s. Generations are communities of memory, and for a community of memory in flux, generation becomes an anchor for self-definition (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Curtis Munson wrote the secret Munson Report which summarized for President Roosevelt the negligible risk posed by Japanese living on the west coast of the United States. The Munson Report offered key insights into the generations interned in the camps. The *Issei* were the first generation of immigrants; they arrived before the 1924 law forbade further Japanese immigration. Working hard and often waiting years to marry, most were much older than their *Nisei* children (aged 55-65). Munson deemed them "romantically loyal to Japan," but having brought up their children here and having worked hard to make their way, they were, according to Munson, as loyal as any citizen and would have become so if the law had allowed it. The *Nisei*,

(aged 1-30) who were born in America, identified themselves as Americans. Many were in their late teens and twenties when the war began. Most were still in school or heading off to college although some were married with *Sansei* babies. The second generation *Nisei*, in spite of discrimination and years of insults, were considered by Munson to be “pathetically eager” to be Americans and loyal to a fault.

Within the *Nisei* was a subgroup, the *Kibbei*, who had been born in America but educated in Japan. The *Kibbei* were further divided into two groups: those educated in Japan from early childhood to age 17, and those educated in the United States and then returned to Japan for four or five years of Japanese education. The *Kibbei* were considered the most dangerous element, especially those with an early Japanese education. In reality, the other *Kibbei* were more likely to be staunchly American, having been treated as foreigners in Japan. In the camps, however, those distinctions meant little; all were tarred with the same brush.

Generational difference is a hallmark of American immigrant life. Regardless of ethnic background, it seems universal that the second generation in its eagerness to become as fully Americanized as possible tends to reject the heritage of its fathers and mothers; whereas the third generation tends to reject the values and experiences of their own parents, to embrace some of the cultural values of their grandparents’ generation and tries to recapture some of the ethnic past (Daniels, 1986).⁵ The antagonism between first and second generations—a phenomenon otherwise predictable according to generational theory rather than attributable solely to the cultural attitudes of the Japanese—was further exacerbated by life in the camp, which broke down the authority and self-esteem of the older generation and traditional norms of behavior. The *Nisei*—uprooted from their American culture—gravitated to aspects of Japanese culture in order to find some ground on which to stand (Hayashi, 1995). Although attachment to Japanese folk traditions receded after the war, it contributed to identity confusion for many who questioned whether they were Japanese or American, unable to find what being Japanese American

⁵ Thoughts of Marcus Lee Hansen, Norwegian American historian considered the father of immigration history, as quoted by Daniels.

might be given the racism they had experienced. Faced with such identity dilemmas, silence was one way of handling their social trauma and inner confusion.

Despite the outward appearance of recovery and adjustment, the rejection and social isolation of the war years left scars which never entirely disappeared. Some Nisei refer to the psychic damage as “castration”: a deep consciousness of personal inferiority, a proclivity to noncommunication and inarticulateness, evidenced in a shying away from exposure which might subject them to further hurt. Internee Edison Uno summed it up thus: “We were like the victims of rape. We felt shamed.⁶ We could not bear to speak of the assault.” Released into society, internees sought to clear their name of insult and shame by becoming “better Americans than the regular ones because that’s the way it has to be when one looks Japanese.” They became known for their reticence, restraint, and desire to be inoffensive (called the “*enryo* syndrome”) (Weglyn, 1996c).

From a psychological perspective, traumatic internment experience became for some a “pathogenic secret,”⁷ an act of self-deception in which a person hides a memory of a disturbing event from herself. Although out of consciousness, the memory nevertheless continues to affect behavior and is a source of suffering (Young, 1997). We have seen this operate in Holocaust survivors, for example, who in post war life enacted camp behaviors (obsessive-compulsive hoarding, miserliness, inability to trust others, etc.) that offered testimony to the continuance of traumatic memory in unconscious actions.⁸

⁶ Ruth Benedict’s theories of shame and guilt cultures springs to mind when considering the Japanese American internees’ experience of shame. Though highly debated, Benedict’s theory offers insights into the Japanese culture as a shame culture, which is characterized by high and connected degrees of visibility and conformity. Benedict discusses the tradition of *on*, which can be roughly translated as obligation, and calls it more akin to debt than guilt. *On* is considered the glue of a social system dependent on the primacy of the homogeneous group. This places Japan at odds with Western culture whose morality is, according to Nietzsche, the transformation of debt into guilt (Olick & Coughlin, 2003).

⁷ Kleinman and Kleinman caution us not to transform victims of injustice and violence into someone with a pathology. They ask, “what does it mean to give those traumatized by political violence the social status of a patient? And in what way does the imagery of victimization as the pathology of an individual alter the experience—collective as well as individual—so that its lived meaning as moral and political memory, perhaps even as resistance, is lost and is replaced by ‘guilt’ ‘paranoia,’ and a ‘failure to cope’?” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997)

⁸ Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* offers an opportunity to see what this might look like. (For a fine analysis of this work and the legitimacy of its breach of *Bilderverbot*, one that compliments Wagner-Pacifici’s remarks in “Memories in the Making,” see Andreas Huyssen’s essay: “Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno,” *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, 2003.)

Following this model, *Issei* and *Nisei* for the most part remained dissociated from their trauma, which allowed most of them to survive in the world beyond the war. Not until the *Sansei* reached majority would secret memories be exposed by a generation not directly affected by the internment.

Any psychological explanation is unlikely to satisfy a sociologist, however. Harry H.L. Kitano, an internee who became a social worker and sociologist of American racism, offers another explanation. In evaluating the effects of evacuation, he draws upon a theory of models of governance, in which the dominant society sets the parameters of ethnic group life through its ability to control the interaction between groups. Tracing the evolution of those models applied to Japanese Americans from 1920 to 1980, Kitano posits that domination, domestic colonialism, transition, and liberal pluralism characterized the relationship between the majority culture and the Japanese Americans. As the discriminatory and segregationist policies of the dominant culture began to change in the postwar years, internees began to react according to one or two positions: *presentism* and *pastism*. *Presentism* is the tendency to interpret other historical periods in terms of the concepts, values, and understanding of the present. This explains why *Sansei* growing up in an era of free speech, dissent, confrontation, and legal redress—in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and '70s—found it difficult to understand the behavior of elders from another era when interaction was based primarily on domination. *Pastism* refers to the tendency to interpret the present in terms of the concepts, values, and governance of the past. It sees yesterday's model as present-day reality. This explains why many *Nisei* found it difficult to talk about their wartime evacuation or call for financial redress, fearing that taking a stand on “unpopular issues” would be treated in the same manner that they had experienced in the 1930s (Hitano, 1986).

Whether this behavior is viewed from a psychological or sociological perspective, the lingering effects of internment had a profound effect upon the collective memory of *Issei* and *Nisei*. After the war, most internees—regardless of their generation—tried to put the past behind them and along with it, the sense of shame, loss, and bitterness at wrongs. But those more militant figures—draft resisters, those who tested the curfew laws, those who refused to sign the loyalty oath—tended to be the ones who remained

committed to working for redress, for setting the record straight about their loyalty. They were a minority of *Nisei*, but partnered with activist *Sansei*, they kept the community issues alive along with collective memory, helping to propel a successful redress movement. The majority—with good reason—chose to “forget to remember,” to avoid stirring up “old bad feelings.” It would take time for America to admit its errors and incorporate into public history the collective memory of internees and their descendants.

Why use images?

“Why does retrieving visual images tend to make us feel strongly that we are remembering a real event?” asks psychologist Daniel Schacter. The subjective sense of remembering almost invariably involves some sort of visual reexperiencing of an event because some of the same brain regions involved in remembering are involved in visual imagery and visual perception. Subjective experiences of remembering are enhanced by conjuring visual images (Schacter, 1996). This may help explain why film is an ideal medium for stimulating recollection of the buried traumas of the past. Compared with the different dictates of recent Holocaust discourse, which forbids the use of images in remembering the extermination of the Jews, recoiling as it does from the secondary objectification of the *Muselmann* through impersonal images of their degradation, the demands of collective memory for Japanese Americans are quite the reverse: given the silence around their suffering and the virtual invisibility of their trauma, a need for evidence of the assault on the humanity and citizenship of Japanese Americans was clear. Books and oral histories, and the like, reach out to only a fraction of the nation whereas mass media forms like film and video allow for a definition of “collective” that can include a multinational audience (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). “The media are the hidden veil through which I am looking at the problem of cultural memory” writes Andreas Huyssen. The effect of media on modern culture, specifically on the remembrances of the internees, is part of Tajiri’s subject in her tape. And it is for these reasons that the films and videos of Japanese Americans are so important in restoring the reality of what had occurred to 110,000 internees in America’s concentration camps in a culture of high tech amnesia about the past (Huyssen, 1994).

History and Memory—a Summary

In the mid-1980s Rea Tajiri, a Japanese American independent media maker, began work on a video documentary about her family's experience of the internment. It took her several years to complete the research into existing visual archives of the internment experience and considerable time and patience interviewing her relatives. Equally arduous for Tajiri was inventing a form that would allow her to integrate the images she found with all the images that did not exist. She had to confront the absence of visible witness—since cameras and recording equipment were prohibited to internees. What images were taken either were made clandestinely or were official images by the War Relocation Office or by government-sponsored artists like Dorothea Lang and Ansel Adams. Tajiri also had to confront the absence of witness in her own family whose members were still reluctant to speak about experiences they had chosen to forget. It took years for her to secure the funding needed to produce a tape that has been hailed for its formal innovations and powerful content. Begun before HR 442 was signed and completed soon after the first redress payments were made, *History and Memory* was a labor of love and *giri*⁹ from a *Sansei* daughter whose contribution to collective memory of the internment is considerable. It is dedicated to her *Issei* grandparents.

History and Memory is demanding viewing because Tajiri layers images, sounds, spoken words, and texts that crawl down the screen. Naficy (19xx) identifies this as a form of Derridian double writing or reading. This multilayered, dense method of presentation, a “calligraphic strategy” that challenges the “cinematic state,” is daunting yet admirably suited to the task at hand: re-constructing the multiple reasons why it was that her mother forgot to remember her internment experience. Tajiri is particularly interested in the role the media played—newsreels, government propaganda films, Hollywood movies, popular music, photographs and snapshots, 8mm home movies, letters, audio interviews—in shaping (or distorting) the collective memory of these events.

⁹ Munson explained *giri* in his report: “The nearest approach to an understanding of the term is our word “obligation,” is very inadequate and altogether too weak. Favors or kindnesses done to a Japanese are never forgotten but stored up in memory and in due time adequate quid pro quo must be rendered in return. ‘Giri’ is the great political tool. To understand ‘giri’ is to understand the Japanese.” (Weglyn, 1996a)

The tape begins with reference to her sister's preference for taking pictures over talking, which Tajiri somehow attributes to her sister's possession of her aunt's wartime photos of movie stars (couples like Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift and Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone). When her sister had a crush on a boy, instead of talking to him, she asked if she could take his picture, and then she proceeded to pose him as he sullenly complained "I can't believe I'm doing this." With this establishing sequence, Tajiri introduces the invasiveness of the (media) culture (notably, the War Relocation Office's film units). Distant images of celebrities (all of them Caucasian) were more real than a boy you had a crush on. Throughout this sequence a jazz rendition of a pop tune of the war years is played in a minor key, ominously questioning what it meant to be in a state of constant surveillance, to "only have eyes for you." Tajiri comments that she had always wondered how movies had influenced our lives and where her sister's habit of observing others from a distance had come from.

A man's voice observes that he never understood what happened, what you (Tajiri) knew, what grandma and grandfather talked about, but here the voice trails off. It is a disembodied voice that seems as isolated as Tajiri's sister with her camera. She then expresses curiosity about the things that have happened when cameras were not there as we see the first appearance of a scene that will recur throughout the tape—a young Japanese American woman, first seen from the back, collecting water in a canteen in the desert. This reference to the one memory of camp shared by Tajiri's mother will thread through the tape, as Tajiri performs her mother's memory. This introduces the next sequence in the tape, a montage of wartime newsreel images of the attack on Pearl Harbor, images that include captured enemy footage, government released reconnaissance images, as well as scenes from the 1953 movie, *From Here to Eternity*. [Show clip or continue to read] Over all is superimposed the title "History," as Tajiri begs the question of how combat images merge with fictional reconstructions of events that occurred when cameras were not there to observe them. Reenactment footage shot by John Ford in 1943 for a film titled "December 7th" (on the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941) seems indistinguishable from the newsreel films, further blurring the line between fact and fiction. Overheard is the line "it certainly looks real."

Tajiri runs a text that speculates about the images that exist only in the minds of the observers or, if there were no observers, then only in the spirits of the dead. In so doing, she tackles a core problem of representation when images were never made and witnesses were silenced, leaving—in effect—only the dead to witness what occurred. Throughout the tape we hear (and rarely see for very long) her family members—mother, father, aunts and uncles, nephew. Their visible absence serves to underscore the invisible record of their experiences.

From the vantage of 1990, her father tells how his mother bought the family house in his name. While he was stationed at Camp Shelby, a member of the famed 442 Division, he learned the Navy had condemned their home through eminent domain. He explains both he and his sister were denied permission to visit it and make arrangements for its relocation. Their home disappeared over night with all their possession never recovered. As he tells the story we see a black-and-white snapshot of him and his parents standing in front of their vanished home.

Official images of the “relocation” by the Department of War Information show a man sitting at a desk explaining that two-thirds of all Japanese Americans are citizens. As he speaks we see a crawl of text that asks over his authoritative narration: “Who chose what story to tell?” Next is a long sequence that uses excerpts from the 1942 jingoistic wartime movie, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, that patriotic crowd pleaser featuring James Cagney; the scene we view incrementally is the musical number “We’re one for all and all for one!” Juxtaposed onto this is an audio memory told by Aunt Betsy who remembers an elder telling her son before leaving for the theater of war, “be strong, and you’ll be alright.”

This song haunts the following scenes of outtakes of propaganda films shot by the Signal Corps in Salinas, one of the assembly centers. Clearly rehearsed, these scenes of a woman seated at a vanity and her female companions perched on comfy, plush cots suggest a picture of domestic comfort that flies in the face of internment reality. The images of a “Canteen” occasion bewildered comments from Tajiri’s mother who keeps repeating, “I don’t remember this.” A stirring rendition of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” (from *Yankee Doodle Dandy*) is heard behind Aunt Yoshiko’s description of the propaganda tales told of wartime hysteria accusing Japanese Americans of espionage.

Although cameras were forbidden in the camps, we see three clandestine photos: of Tajiri's mother with friends in Poston in 1942, of her uncle's drawing of his brother, and of her grandma with visitors. Tajiri next zooms in on a small carved bird lying on black velvet, a bird she wanted to play with as a child but her mother always said "No, grandma gave me that." As she explains how she found out about the bird, we see alien ID photos of her grandmother and grandfather and finally the photo in the National Archive that shows her grandmother in a bird painting class in Poston.

"I began by searching for a history, my own history..." Tajiri says as we see 8mm movies, shot by David Tatsuno in Topaz sometime between 1942 and 1945, images smuggled out of the camp that show poignant everyday moments—a grandmother sweeping snow, a handsome sailor in a pea coat surrounded by laughing young women, and a lone girl skating on a deserted desert pond. Tajiri continues: "Because I had known all along that the stories I had heard were not true and parts had been left out. I began searching because I felt lost, ungrounded. Somewhat like a ghost that floats over a terrain, witnessing others living their lives and yet not having one of its own." Haunted by ghosts of places she had never been to yet somehow remembered, she concludes: "I remembered a time of sadness before I was born."

Introduced are scenes from the 1955 Hollywood film *Bad Day at Black Rock*. [show clip or read on] We see Spencer Tracy as a one-armed army officer returning from war in search of the father of a man who died bravely in battle. He wants to give Kimoko his son's medal, but Tracy's character can't find him. He is told lies by frightened townspeople who say Kimoko was shipped to a relocation center when in fact he was killed two days after Pearl Harbor. Threaded here is Tajiri's mother's voice explaining "I've forgotten...all I remember was I saw a woman who lost her mind. She was a beautiful young woman, just...I put those things out of my mind. Surely you start thinking..." A solarized image of a traditional Japanese beauty is seen, then flowers, and over this sequence is a crawl explaining that some people received a threatening letter stating "you and your family may be eligible for repatriation to Japan..." At the end, we see wildflowers with a legend "In mother's yard" as we hear, then see, Tracy saying "wildflowers means a grave, something's been buried here." This amazingly complex sequence alludes to all that has been buried for the internees and their families.

Tajiri describes her mother's removal from Salinas, California, to Poston, Arizona, this 20-year-old woman with her family, each carrying one suitcase. Tajiri's father's family went to Santa Anita, where they lived, five persons in a stall that once housed a horse. Her mother explains she doesn't know how we got there as we see the opening images of *Bad Day at Black Rock* with the train racing through the desert. Tajiri retraces her mother's journey, driving with a camera so she can make images of the journey her mother never saw because curtains were drawn so as to keep their location secret. Tajiri explains she began searching for her mother's story--and for her own--amid all the stories that were not true with parts left out. She wanders over the ruins of the camp built on the Colorado tribal reservation, describing barracks built of unseasoned pine and tar paper, feeling like a ghost. Interspersed in this monologue are more scenes from *Bad Day at Black Rock* as Tajiri identifies with Tracy's quest to find out what happened to Kimoko. And like the residents in Black Rock, she finds the residents of the neighboring town of Parker are made uncomfortable by her presence with its reminders of a past they too wish to forget.

The haunting image of the young Japanese American woman, dressed in a tailored blue suit, hair tightly coifed, kneeling as she splashes water on her face, eyes closed, smiling, reappears as we hear Walter Brennan's character explain how the Japanese Americans made the land flourish and found water in the desert, angering local residents who resented their prowess. Intercut are propaganda films of an internee in a garden, the Parker irrigation project, and a photo of a flourishing Date Palm Grove planted by internees at Poston. Tajiri searches for her mother's barracks and gravitates to it as if drawn by a memory, a barrack divided into four living quarters, Block 213 Unit 11A in Poston 2. Over a picture of her father in his army uniform, Tajiri speaks of her search for an absent presence, an ever absent image, and of her desire to create an image where there are so few. Over this, is a crawl of a news item from *The New York Times* dated August 1990—"Assemblyman Gil Ferguson, Republican—Orange County, California, seeks to have children taught that Japanese Americans were not interned in 'concentration camps' but rather were held in 'relocation centers' justified by military necessity."

Tajiri's nephew reads his review of the Hollywood movie, *Come See the Paradise*. The review is witty, ironic, and devastating in its analysis of the inevitable "white point of view" that governs a story more notable for its mushy sentimentality and interracial romance than its insights into discriminatory racist policies. He says, "I thought of titling this 'Come See the Parasites,' but felt I didn't have the moral authority..." Tajiri reads a letter from a relative who was repatriated; he writes how he lost faith in the American constitution. "My sister used to say how funny it was when someone tells you a story, you create a picture of it in your mind. Sometimes that picture will return but without the story," Tajiri says over the recurring image of the woman with the water canteen. [\[show clip or read on\]](#) "I've been carrying around a picture. It's of a memory of my mother speaking to my sister about the camp when we were growing up. I overheard her describing this simple action—of her hands filling a canteen with water. For years I've been living with that picture without a story, feeling a lot of pain and not knowing how they fit together. Now I could connect the picture to the story. I could forgive my mother her loss of memory and make this image for her." Images of the ruins of Poston and the distant desert are seen as Tajiri speaks this conclusion, accompanied by the sound of wind and distant birds.

Analyzing *History and Memory*

It is interesting to examine how other media critics have "read" Tajiri's work. Jim Lane understandably looks at it as an autobiographical text and gives relatively little attention to its position within a wider discourse on Japanese American collective memory. Perhaps because his context is the oft-contested family sites of filmmakers as diverse as African American Camille Billops and Jewish American Maxi Cohen, Lane stresses the discord between mother and daughter, which seems exaggerated as does his juxtapositioning of Tajiri's mother's "vagueness" with her father and uncle's "anger." (Lane, 2002) The frame of autobiography hardly begins to encompass all that this work holds. By contrast, Marita Sturken offers a thorough analysis of the politics of memory in Tajiri's tape. Differentiating it from television, she acknowledges it nonetheless

participates in an electronic flow that necessarily foregrounds the present over the past. Arguing with Jameson, she asserts that memory is not dead in a postmodern context, that the stakes in memory and history are ever present in electronic media and postmodernism. She claims that television-video is a primary site of history and cultural memory where memories—both individual and collective—are produced and claimed (Sturken, 1996)

It is remarkable how much historical material Tajiri manages to pack into just 32 minutes. For example, she incorporates the generational divisions described by Marcus Lee Hansen: she identifies with her dead grandparents, the ghosts who float overhead observing the theft of their vanished house and the nightmares of their granddaughter, when she claims to be equally ungrounded like a ghost witnessing others lives without having one of her own. Tajiri's struggles to get her mother to recall her past are ultimately rewarded when her visit to Poston jogs her mother's memory of the barracks where she lived, a recovery that is both personally and socially significant. What Tajiri enacts in relationship to her mother is not simply a personal struggle between mother and daughter but the *Sansei*'s historic struggle to retrieve the buried memories of their ancestors' troubled past. By documenting the dilapidated camp of Poston, she provides viewers with images to help them envision the past. Ultimately, the video becomes a corrective to revisionist forces cited in *The New York Times*' article on Ferguson's campaign to euphemize the internment and justify it despite all evidence to the contrary. Thus *History and Memory* serves as a polemic countering persistent racist or jingoistic views that would exonerate the United States' violation of the rights of its citizens..

History and Memory offers a fruitful instance of collective memorization in which there is an interaction between "vernacular" and "official" voices: the sites are located in the mass media of popular entertainment and government-sponsorship and the more selective, alternative arena of independent film and video. "[Collective memory] lives with greatest strength in those forms that bring public event-memories and private memories together." (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996). Tajiri's effectiveness relies, in part, on her hybridizing the documentary genre such that it no longer is simply a documentary but also a memoir and an allegory and a commentary. Much as Art Spiegelman's comic book memoir of the Holocaust, *Maus*, employs diverse elements—comics, photos, narrative and testimony—Tajiri's *History and Memory* juxtaposes diverse elements to

produce what Wagner-Pacifici calls “a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of...representation and definitively eradicate any clear-cut distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic,” a process of cross-fertilization in which serious content is inserted into the popular mind through a backdoor genre (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996).

Rea Tajiri grew up hearing relatively little about her family’s internment history. She set out to break the silence in her own family, a silence situated within the clamorous sounds and pervasive images of official history writ large in the mass media made during and after the war. Tajiri’s original research added to the historical record, and her revealing portrait of her own family’s suffering gave eloquent expression to those voices otherwise unheard. Her media analysis and innovative documentary form had a pronounced impact on film and video makers who followed in her wake. Unlike the often trite and self-serving media images produced by official sources and Hollywood entertainers, Tajiri’s documentary communicated powerfully and with an insider’s authority the complex toll the internment had taken on Japanese Americans. Congressional hearings on redress for Japanese Americans interned during World War II stimulated a reappraisal of the internment, as many internees came to Washington to provide testimonies of their experiences. Within this movement other, independent filmmakers (such as Loni Ding, *The Color of Honor, Nisei Soldier*) played an active role (Chin, 1992). Films like Tajiri’s *History and Memory* proved instrumental in turning the tide of public opinion about redress and have made important contributions to the reconstruction of collective memory from Japanese American perspectives.

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Appendix

(For readers unfamiliar with the history of the Japanese-American internment, this brief summary of the racist context of the internment, which time precluded from being included in the presentation, is attached.)

The racist context of internment history

Racial hatred of Asian Americans predated Pearl Harbor by several centuries: In 1790 Congress decreed that “any alien, being *a free white person* who shall have resided within the limits...of the United States for a term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof.” It was not until 1873 that “persons of African nativity or descent” were added; citizenship would be denied to Japanese and other Asian immigrants until 1952. For the most part, the presence of Asians was tolerated only as a form of cheap labor. In 1905 the Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in San Francisco, announcing the beginning of an overt anti-Japanese movement along the West Coast, where aliens ineligible for citizenship were prohibited from owning land. Armed white raiders deported Japanese laborers from California in the early 1920s and similar events occurred in Oregon and Arizona. In 1924 Coolidge signed an immigration law effectively ending Japanese immigration to the United States. Anti-Asian prejudices were reinforced by negative stereotypes and proscriptive laws.¹⁰ The sundering of the constitutional rights of the Japanese minority during World War II had its origins in three centuries of American racial nativism (which also included the forced relocations of Native Americans and African blacks). “In the case of the Japanese, as with other minorities, legal status was defined by the dynamic of Caucasian hegemony interacting with expectant capitalism.” (Smith, 1986)

Despite entrenched racism, hardworking Japanese immigrants thrived in their adopted country, finding loopholes around the constraints placed upon their ability to own land and prosper. Forbidden to buy up choice lands, through their citizen offspring the *Issei* bought land deemed valueless—strips of land alongside railroads, beneath electrical wires, around harbors, and other out of the way places—and turned this into

productive farms or fishing sites. Their remarkable ability to transform barren land into thriving farms won them the envy of neighbors eager to seize their property when the war allowed. The Japanese Americans would suffer the loss of their land twice over, because those patches of neglected land they had made to flourish would be cited as evidence against them, their marginal properties wrongly accused of being suspicious sites for enemy surveillance of power plants, transportation routes, and other strategic utilities. Racist hatred, envy, and covetousness of property and goods were some of the powerful incentives for the wholesale persecution of Japanese Americans at the outbreak of World War II.

Months before Pearl Harbor, with signs pointing to the rapid approach of war and Hawaii identified as the probable target, President Roosevelt authorized a secret intelligence gathering mission to determine the degree of loyalty of residents of Japanese descent both on the West Coast of the United States and Hawaii (Weglyn, 1996a).¹¹ Despite the assurances of the secret Munson Report, which “certified a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group,” Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9102 establishing the War Relocation Authority on March 18, 1942. Within 48-hours the first group of Japanese American “volunteers” arrived at Manzanar, the first and largest concentration camp formed in a hastily prepared network of camps.¹² The first to go were community leaders, business owners, and heads of organizations and households, leaving those who remained in chaos trying to prepare to leave their familiar lives for unknown places for an indefinite length of time.

A government hoax was foisted on the public justifying the relocation of 110,000 Japanese Americans to concentration camps scattered throughout the West and as far east

¹⁰ Chronology of World War II Incarceration, Japanese American National Museum, <http://www.janm.org/nrc/internch.html>.

¹¹ In 1941, the total number of Japanese Americans living in the continental United States totaled 127,000; over 112,000 lived in the three Pacific coast states with 80 percent (93,000) residing in California.

¹² “Manzanar was the first of ten camps, bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons, the majority being American citizens.” (From a commemorative plaque at Manzanar, dated April 14, 1973). The other concentration camps, dubbed “relocation centers,” were: Tule Lake, CA; Poston, AZ; Gila, AZ; Minidoka, IA; Heart Mountain, WY; Granada, CO; Topaz, UT; Rohwer, AK; Jerome, AK. Assembly Centers where Japanese Americans were sent prior to routing to the camps were in: Puyallup, WA; Portland, OR; Marysville, CA; Sacramento, CA; Tanforan, CA; Stockton, CA; Turlock, CA; Merced, CA; Pinedale, CA; Salinas, CA; Fresno, CA; Tulare, CA; Santa Anita, CA; Pomona, CA; and Mayer, AZ. Prisoners sent to internment camps for disciplinary actions went to: Santa Fe, NM; Bismarck, ND; Crystal

as Alabama. The rationale given to justify sending men, women, and children into concentrations camps was that an “unknown” number of them presented a potential threat to national security, that it would be difficult to sort out the dangerous ones, and so to play it safe, all should be locked up (Weglyn, 1996a). Nativists ascribed to the Japanese Americans a tightly knit organization that didn’t exist, a nonexistent incredible fecundity, an imaginary economic rapacity, and an unwillingness to become “Americanized,” which existed because the white majority deemed that it should (Smith, 1986).

Forced to give up their homes, businesses, and personal effects, with little time to recoup their losses or prepare for the journey, Japanese Americans were shipped to the interior, corralled into living conditions that were primitive at best with barbed wire fences and guard towers surrounding them. They were stripped of their constitutional rights, supervised by “overzealous” guards, housed in former horse stalls and jerry-rigged barracks, deprived of privacy, and given inadequate food. Their way of living was so disrupted that traditional family ties were broken, destabilizing authority within the community, which only further aggravated problems within the camps. And all of this was done without sufficient cause.

The potential threat of fifth column peril to national security was never proven. Despite lies told by key governmental figures like Secretary of War Stimson,¹³ Secretary of Navy Knox, and Colonel Karl Bendetsen¹⁴ (architect of the internment plan), no evidence was ever shown that Japanese Americans were involved in espionage activities in Pearl Harbor or on the mainland throughout the war. Arguably the worst offender was Secretary Knox who told the Tolan Committee in March 1942 a tissue of lies¹⁵ designed,

City, TX; Missoula, MT. There were also two citizen isolation camps in Moab, UT and Leupp, AZ (Weglyn, 1996).

¹³ Stimson: “Their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese.” (Weglyn, 1996b).

¹⁴ Bendetsen remained convinced of the necessity of evacuation and internment, of the inherent loyalty of Japanese Americans to Japan, and he testified against redress in the hearings in 1984. He adamantly rejected the use of the word “internment,” insisting that Japanese Americans were free to move into the interior, and those who stayed in the “relocation centers” did so freely. (Letters from Bendetsen to Jane B. Kaihatsu and Sandra C. Taylor, Bendetsen, 1986)

¹⁵Knox wrote Tolan:

There was a considerable amount of evidence of subversive activity on the part of the Japanese prior to the attack [on Pearl Harbor]. This consisted of providing the enemy with the most exact possible kind of information as an aid to them in locating their objectives, and also creating a great deal of confusion in the air following the attack by the use of radio sets which successfully prevented the commander in chief of the fleet

it is surmised, to take the “heat” off of him and the Administration for the humiliation that Pearl Harbor represented. The actions of men like these along with the wartime suppression of the Munson report—like the Pentagon Papers—made it clear how an Administration can mislead the public by keeping hidden facts that contradict the propaganda message.

It has been argued that one “legitimate” reason for the roundup of Japanese Americans was preemptive—we needed a body of hostages who could be exchanged for POWs or otherwise leverage influence with the Japanese in the event of war on the mainland. Anticipating reprisals, a pool of internees offered the government a way of negotiating for what it wanted. These citizens were expendable, in the government’s eyes. Also, it was an election year, and exacting revenge for Pearl Harbor was expected of all politicians, especially west coast Democrats in need of a boost at the ballot box.

The abuses to constitutional rights and human rights occasioned by the camps were too numerous to chronicle here. But the losses go way beyond the millions of dollars demanded in redress hearings. *Issei* took their lives or lost their minds confronted with the humiliation of their unjust incarceration. Families were separated—husbands from wives, brothers from sisters—and even orphan children were sent off to the camps. Two thirds of all detainees were citizens, most of them women and children. Threatened with deportation, aliens were sent to Japan and even *Nisei* citizens, who had been persuaded to renounce their citizenship in protest against their treatment, were also deported. Those who weren’t, were imprisoned, and the *Kibbei* (those *Nisei* who had spent some time in Japan and were among the most militant protestors) received the worst treatment of all: they were kept in detention after the war ended, either in Crystal City, Texas, or in a forced labor camp run by Seabrook Farms in New Jersey. The latter’s “relaxed internment” required them to labor all day for pennies doing assembly-line work, until their release in 1947 when a U.S. District Judge ruled that native-born American citizens could not be converted into enemy aliens, imprisoned or deported to Japan on the basis of renunciation.¹⁶

from determining in what direction the attackers had withdrawn and in locating the position of the covering fleet, including the carriers... (Weglyn, 1996b.)
¹⁶ Japanese American National Museum chronology.

Determined to prove their loyalty, a higher percentage of Americans of Japanese ancestry ended up serving in the U.S. Army during the war than any other racial group and they endured the highest casualties and fatalities of any other group (Weglyn, 1996b). The loss of lives by Japanese American soldiers fighting to insure the rights denied them and their families at home is perhaps the worst tragedy in this sad history.