4. UNCANNY MEMORIES

Post-Redress Media in Japanese American History

Our lives go on viscerally, austere, beneath our memories.

JANICE GOULD, Doves

From the early 1970s through the late 1980s, Japanese Americans successfully mobilized to seek redress and reparations for their wrongful internment in concentration camps during the Second World War.¹ Led by the Sansei, or third-generation Japanese Americans, who came to political consciousness during the antiracist and anti-imperialist struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the movement’s efforts culminated in the passing of the American Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Consequently, the U.S. government publicly recognized the injustice of its wartime incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese Americans, officially apologized for its wrongful actions, and promised $20,000 in reparations to every internee still living.²

In the latter years of this movement and its aftermath, several important media works have been produced, ranging from conventional documentaries to more experimental pieces, screened at venues from film festivals to classrooms to community centers, and broadcast nationally on public television. For analytical purposes, these works can be loosely divided into two categories, what I call Redress and post-Redress, a distinction that is less chronological than epistemological. The latter, post-Redress, set of works represents a shift in point of view inextricably bound up with formal and thematic concerns that stray, sometimes inadvertently, from those advanced by the former set. The redress-oriented media essentially participate, implicitly or explicitly, in the Redress and
Reparations movement, giving visual expression to its collective project of historical recovery. They are centrally concerned with broadening mainstream history, for example, by telling the story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed of Nisei (second-generation) men recruited out of the internment camps, which became one of the most highly decorated units in U.S. military history. The most notable are Loni Ding’s two films, Nisei Soldier: Standard Bearer for an Exiled People (1984) and The Color of Honor: The Japanese American Soldier in World War II (1988), and Katriel Schory’s Yankee Samurai (1985). All three depict the courage and sacrifices of the soldiers, despite their families’ incarceration at home and racial segregation in the Army. Complementing the moral direction of these works, Steven Okazaki’s Unfinished Business: The Japanese American Internment Cases (1988) foregrounds the struggle to seek justice through the courts—a theme revisited, with greater scope and detail, in Gayle Yamada’s Fighting for Justice: The Coram Nobis Cases (1999).

Two exceptional if controversial films released more recently, Emiko Omori’s Rabbit in the Moon (1999) and Frank Emi’s Conscience and the Constitution (2000), appear to depart sharply from the point of view of these earlier titles. Focusing on those who protested in the camps and resisted the draft, and casting a harsh light on the largely disavowed collaborationist activities of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), these two films have decisively reopened painful issues that were repressed by the mainstream Redress movement and, even today, remain deeply discomfiting for many older Japanese Americans. But in challenging the party-line Redress accounts so directly, Conscience and the Constitution and (to a lesser degree) Rabbit in the Moon adopt the epistemology and rhetoric of Americanism embraced by the mainstream movement they critique, albeit from a different point of view. At root, these films and their predecessors all grapple profoundly with the question “Who is an American?” and with what its response—caught up with issues of citizenship, loyalty, and betrayal—has meant for Japanese Americans.

The post-Redress works, in contrast, are more introspective and reflect on the continuing effects of the internment in daily life and personal history. This chapter explores the historical forces underlying the epistemological shift represented by these works, specifically Rea Tajiri’s History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige (1991), Lise Yasui’s A Family Gathering (1988), and Janice Tanaka’s Memories from the Department of Annessia (1990) and Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway? (1992). The works depart considerably from issues of nationality, Americanism, and public identity and constitute themselves, instead, around problems of memory—its absences, inconsistencies, revisions, repres- sions. Implicitly if not explicitly feminist, post-Redress media examine not manifest issues of gender per se but rather the ways in which dominance cuts across public and domestic spheres, exercises power silently and invisibly in the private dimensions of women’s, men’s, and children’s lives—issues typically neglected by other modes of cultural–political analysis and critique. While Redress media foreground the vexed relationship of Japanese Americans to the federal government (U.S. Army, War Relocation Authority, judicial system), these post-Redress works approach the trauma of the internment indirectly by discerning its oblique, intimate effects within family relations.

Tajiri’s History and Memory has received the greatest attention of the four titles, mostly for its wide-ranging critique of wartime and postwar racial discourse by recontextualizing and recoding borrowed images from mass media sources and War Relocation Authority (WRA) propaganda footage. However, Tajiri is centrally preoccupied with a nagging, indecipherable memory that haunts her, and with its intangible relationship to her mother’s inability to remember her life in the camp or the events leading up to it. Creatively recording Tajiri’s attempt to piece together these disparate details, History and Memory often feels like a detective story, following her search for clues through reels of found footage amid boxes of unsorted items in the National Archive, and finally en route to the derelict remains of the Poston Relocation Center on a road trip that retraces her mother’s train ride nearly fifty years earlier.

Lise Yasui’s A Family Gathering is, in many respects, a straightforward documentary. It narrates the experiences of three generations of the prestigious Yasui family whose founding patriarch, Masuo Yasui, settled before the war in Hood River, Oregon, opened a general goods store, prospered, and gained influence in the Japanese American community and even earned the respect of many in the local white community. During the years of internment that ruined the family’s hard-earned fortunes, the integrity of the Yasui name was upheld by Masuo’s oldest son, Minoru. His now-celebrated conscientious refusal to obey the early wartime curfew imposed on Japanese Americans, and the case that arose following his arrest, is regarded by many as the first explicit act of Japanese American resistance to U.S. wartime persecution. The availability
of such publicly recognized, well-documented elements of the family's history would not appear to require any special methodology to delineate its narrative progress from the celebrated career of its esteemed patriarch to his youngest granddaughter, Lise. However, in the course of her research, filmmaker Lise Yasui unravels a tragic secret: her grandfather Masuo, mythic self-made man and progenitor of the family line, had committed suicide soon after the war. This discovery profoundly affects Lise, and she begins to question and revise the uniformly cheerful account of her family's history. Consequently, the storytelling conventions that otherwise would have guided her film become objects of scrutiny themselves—unifying or homogenizing narrative devices that would have smoothed over contradictions in the family melodrama.

In contrast to Tajiri's underlying narrative and the complication of Yasui's overt narrative, the premises for Janice Tanaka's two videos are relatively simple: Memories from the Department of Amnesia represents Tanaka's attempt to make sense of her aloof, secretive mother's life, in the year following her death. This video is a poetic elegy to a woman the daughter hardly knew yet whose eccentric, unexplainable behavior profoundly shaped her own life. While making Memories, Tanaka, motivated by the emptiness left by her mother's death, decided to find her father, who was a stranger in the most literal sense: he vanished when she was three years old. Her mother gave no reason for his disappearance and, besides remarking that he was "crazy," said nothing about her husband. Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway? documents Tanaka's reunion with her father, recounts his painful history of mental illness and institutionalization, and follows their difficult struggle to create a meaningful relationship in the present. Interestingly, these two videos are as formally distinct as they are thematically related; Memories is densely constructed of styles and techniques derived from video art, while Donuts mostly relies on that ubiquitous, amateur form—home video footage. However, even these differences are finally complementary, as the distancing effect produced by the first video's surrealism is partly resolved by the second video's absorbing, intimate home movie rhetoric.

Made by daughters of internment survivors, these four works examine the ways in which state-sponsored racial violence extends beyond the lives of its original victims to haunt following generations. Together they pose a fundamental question: how does the legacy of mass incarceration, more than sixty years old, persist in the everyday experiences and memories of Japanese Americans, even among those born long after the event? Feminist in perspective if not content, these responses are concerned less with telling a story according to the existing terms of documentary authority, and more with the psychical experience of memories in the present, the traumas the women simultaneously hide and reveal. In the aftermath of the Redress and Reparations movement, their invocations of memory startlingly uncover unacknowledged yet deeply rooted family traumas, lingering injuries at the contradictory meeting ground of U.S. racism and democratic promise.

Whither Analysis

Several critics have been attracted to the formal diversity and complex articulations of subject formation in these works. Tajiri's and Tanaka's videos have been lauded as mature demonstrations of postmodern or "hybrid" aesthetic strategies, apparent telltale signs of the fragmenting, pluralizing formations of contemporary culture generally. Laura Marks explains, "Theories of hybrid cinema argue that a hybrid form, in which autobiography mediates a mixture of documentary, fiction, and experimental genres, characterizes the film production of people in transition and cultures in the process of creating identities."33 Marks and similar critics are sensitive to the complexities of racial-ethnic difference, but their readings tend to approach any particular representation of ethnicity as a local variation of a more general pattern. Hence, Marks considers Tajiri's video alongside John Akomfrah's Who Needs a Heart? (1992) and Atom Egoyan's Calendar (1993), all as contemporaneous expressions of the "diffuse genre" she calls "experimental diasporic cinema."34

Certainly, Marks draws meaningful comparisons among works produced in widely disparate regional and historical conditions. However, such generalities also come at the expense of a richer understanding of any particular work's dialogical engagement with its immediate historical context. This chapter opts for the latter and redirects analysis of these works toward their relationship to the history of the interment and the Redress and Reparations movement. This approach also makes general, comparative assessments, but they remain inside the historical frame of reference closely shared by Tajiri, Yasui, and Tanaka. This analysis consequently illuminates their textual and stylistic features as responses not solely to dominant cultural forms but to the rhetorical strategies of the Redress and Reparations movement. This latter emphasis brings into
focus a less familiar portrait of the movement that foregrounds some of its limits and compromises, however historically determined or necessary. We know what was gained—politically, legally, financially, and even morally—but few have examined the movement’s costs. Did its political strategies privilege some experiences of agency and victimization at the expense or neglect of others?

To address these questions and move toward a critical appraisal of post-Redress media, the following sections provide a cultural–historical analysis of the Redress movement and the literature on the internment’s ongoing effects, and its implications for historical interpretation. As an antidote to some of the insularity of this research, I enlist some cultural studies insights on memory, informed, fittingly, by the kinds of reflection opened up by Tajiri, Yasui, and Tanaka.

Rhetorical Uses and Limits of Americanism

In terms of financial compensation and official recognition, the Redress and Reparations movement represents one of the most successful instances of organized protest in United States history. Beyond its gains for Japanese Americans, the movement has permanently qualified the popular, nostalgic view of the Second World War as a lost era when the nation came together to fight for a common cause. The restoration of the internment to the official record further challenges the uncritical, triumphant postwar narrative of a nation that led its wartime allies in the struggle for democracy against fascism, then for the next half-century, orchestrated the advanced industrial countries in the Cold War against Soviet communism. Against such mythical accounts, the movement brought to light stories of xenophobic nationalism mixing domestic policy with wartime paranoia: “disappearances” conducted by the FBI in broad daylight; confiscation of household items—maps, flashlights, books, radios, toys—as proof of enemy allegiance; arrests of citizens arbitrarily suspected of sedition; mass detention of a national minority including children, the elderly, the infirm—even in horse stables; swift removal by trains with blackened windows to unspecified destinations; mass incarceration in remote desert regions. These and other examples of state-sponsored violence have appeared in autobiographical accounts of the internment in the years following the war. But the federal government continued to justify the event as an alleged wartime necessity for decades, until such stories were systematically organized and publicized by the movement. The voices of survivors finally gained political credibility in testimonies before the 1981 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians hearings, held throughout the United States.6

In short, the Redress movement productively complicated the nation’s self-image. However, this scrutiny has not been reversed in sustained fashion onto the movement itself; yet, doing so can illuminate not only its oppositional dimension but also its partial mirroring of official political discourse. During the twilight years of the Cold War, seeking accountability for state-sanctioned atrocities, the movement itself took on the rhetoric of official nationalism, arguing that the government had betrayed its own principles and therefore must make amends—in essence, ironically appropriating the same political language that had authorized the mass evacuation and detention little more than thirty years before. This fact might not be curious were the movement led by former internees themselves, the vast majority of whom insisted on their rights as Americans and passionately demonstrated their loyalty in time of war. Instead, it was led by their children, whose political sensibilities matured during a complex period in which the moral authority and meaning of Americanism was deeply challenged.7 However, external forces were shifting the political climate: during the late 1970s oil crisis and 1980s ascendancy of Japanese economic power, nationalist sentiment rapidly consolidated, illustrated by the Buy American campaign and the rise of Japan-bashing. Consequently, much liberal and Left protest that might have assumed a more caustic, anti-American tone ten years earlier refashioned itself in Americanist rhetoric.8

The political and moral credibility gained by this rhetoric can be measured by the success of these movements of the 1970s and 1980s, including Japanese Americans’ mobilization for redress. Such political language provided a powerful tool for communication and persuasion but also reoriented the political project it was intended to express; the Redress movement largely inherited its epistemology. Of the internment’s countless experiences, scholarly accounts heavily foreground three: (1) the eminently American, redemptive character of the selfless, loyal Japanese American soldiers; (2) the actions of those who resisted in the camps or protested their constitutionality; and (3) to a lesser degree, the experiences of the conscientiously objecting No-No Boys.9 The two general syntheses of Asian American history, for example, Ronald Takaki’s Strangers from a Different Shore (1989) and Sucheng Chan’s Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (1991), both concentrate on these figures of
unrequited loyalty and conscientious resistance to animate their recountings of the internment drama. The painful yet dignified sacrifices of the soldiers are also patriotically affirmed in the very titles of the two most prominent internment documentaries of the 1980s, Katriel Schory's 
_Yankee Samurai_ (1985) and Loni Ding's _The Color of Honor_ (1988). Such exemplary stories have achieved visibility and prestige, no doubt, because the moral strength they illustrate so irreproachably appeals to popular democratic sentiment. They harness longstanding historical precedent beginning with the highly publicized news accounts of the all-Nisei 442nd Battalion, which appreciably softened wartime public opinion toward Japanese Americans. During the postwar years, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) recuperated the soldiers’ exploits “almost exclusively as tools of advocacy and public relations” in “overturning a number of longstanding anti-alien and anti-Japanese laws.” For later researchers, such stories have been simply easier to record, as they stood out from the more routine, everyday realities of camp life. The elevation of these figures was also fostered by the Sansei generation during the turbulent 1960s, although for different reasons. For example, Sansei activist Katy Fujita notes, “It bothered me, like the 442nd, for example, if I felt they were doing it for this country, for America first and foremost as good loyal Americans and it was the main reason, that wouldn’t sit well. But if I hear, maybe they’re doing it for their own people, then it has a lot of meaning to me.” Such perspective contradicted the JACL’s uncritical Americanism, but the Sansei’s rejection of then-prevailing accounts of cooperation and subsequent search for a more self-affirming legacy also privileged heroic, therapeutic stories.

Yet this point of view and its attendant rhetoric have scissored some of the most crucial issues from the fabric of history—the constellation of events that illuminate not only the causes but the less visible, ongoing effects of the internment. The viewpoint implies that, after the apologies have been made and the solemn ceremonies concluded, after the ink has dried and the repairation checks mailed, we can get on with our lives. However justly celebrated, the heroic stories of soldiers, protesters and No-No Boys have inadvertently displaced the more commonplace yet publicly disavowed experiences of madness, depression, alcoholism, suicide—the irrevocable damage caused by the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans. Psychological research into the internment has been more attentive to these issues, with varying degrees of success. But the scholarly difficulties encountered in assessing these enduring consequences ironically allegorize the elusive historical predicament that confronts the works by Tajiri, Yasui, and Tanaka.

Enduring Consequences

The psychological literature on effects comprises a small fraction of the research on the internment and its aftermath. The vast majority of scholarship investigates the causal factors leading to Executive Order 9066, the institutional conditions circumscribing life in the camps, or the court cases and their legal ramifications. The scant literature on long-term consequences for Japanese Americans explores primarily questions of economic impact and loss, which, however wildly speculative a numbers game these often boil down to, do not nearly approach the elusiveness plaguing research into the psychological effects. For example, Don Nakaniishi’s retrospective essay, “Surviving Democracy’s ‘Mistake’” (1993), commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the internment, offers an excellent interpretive sweep of the Redress movement, its historical origins, scope, and direction; however, while repeatedly proclaiming the need to address the internment’s “enduring psychological impact,” its “enduring consequences” in the “longitudinal development of the group,” Nakaniishi’s own essay does not elaborate on what it persistently invokes.

This unintended problem—skirting is characteristic of the literature. In his contribution to a historic 1983 conference in Salt Lake City, eminent scholar Harry Kitano offers a provocative historical model of Japanese Americans’ psychosocial relations with dominant groups since the 1920s, but he too introduces the vexed question of the internment’s lasting effects only to explain how and why they are so difficult to measure. They are described in virtually every account in terms of shame, guilt, denial, resulting in the communicative abyss of “silence.” This silence results in a vague, catch-all language that forecloses rather than prompts analysis, and so pervasively neutralizes further inquiry that it resembles a symptom of the trauma it ostensibly names. Most of these studies draw important if unsurprising links between private responses and public events, but they stop there: irrational “guilt” over Pearl Harbor, “shame” due to public scapegoating, loss of authority in the face of one’s children, and so forth. Others illuminate the “intergenerational” distribution of “shame” from adult survivors to their children, and its subsequent effects on the younger generation’s attitudes and beliefs.
Assessing pre-Redress scholarship, Nakanishi notes, “Japanese Americans, to be sure, were portrayed as victims, but little was said about their victimization”; that is, Japanese Americans’ victimization was ceaselessly acknowledged but unexplored. Not much has changed, and the continuing inability to grasp these traumas beyond the two-dimensional language of shame and silence sometimes leads to the use of such charged metaphors as “rape victim” and “abused child.” They offer compelling analogies for understanding the self-blame and disavowal that followed, and that was initially met with anger and bewilderment by the Sansei raised amid the 1960s political culture. Yet the use of these metaphors also suggests the insufficiency of contemporary representations of the internment, or at least of popular awareness of it, to convey the severity and extent of its unique experience of violence; it is widely known yet poorly understood. Decontextualized, such metaphors risk generalizing and flattening out the abuse they are meant to express, potentially resulting in an oversimplified sense of victimization that obscures not only the pervasive expressions of direct and indirect resistance, but the specific manifestations of oppression and complicity, as well.

Research on mental illness and similarly adverse conditions, during resettlement and after, could help provide a more complex understanding of “victimization” beyond the restrictive vocabulary of shame and its attendant terms. In his 1969 study, Harry Kitano states that the postwar statistical incidence of mental illness, as well as “social deviance” or “delinquency,” among Japanese Americans were “among the lowest of all identifiable groups,” although he does note the possible inaccuracy of the available data. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the issue merits renewed attention. Family therapist Nobu Miyoshi writes, “In a recent conversation with a former Northwest Nisei resident, a question was raised over the large increase in the number of ‘nervous breakdowns’ that have occurred among the Issei [first or immigrant generation] and unheard of psychiatric casualties among the Nisei since their internment in camps. He was not speaking out of reference to any official record . . . but purely from his acquaintance of individuals who required treatment.” Likewise, underscoring the War Relocation Authority’s failed attempts at social engineering during resettlement, historian Roger Daniels notes:

While some of the returnees, particularly the younger and more aggressive Nisei, were able rather quickly to regain footholds in the booming postwar economy, many others were, by the end of the war, so scarred by their experiences and in some cases by their years that they became public charges. In January 1946 a Los Angeles supervisor reported that although even during the Depression very few Japanese had been on relief—he estimated the pre-Pearl Harbor county relief load as about 25 Japanese—the postwar relief load was about 4000 and rising. . . . Dillon Myer and the WRA were essentially annoyed that so many of their former charges were still causing them trouble.

Further, widespread economic duress was cause for far more injury than guilt or shame alone. An Issei farmer, for instance, lamented soon after the war: “Before war I had 20 acres in Berryessa. Good land, two good homes, one big. . . . Now I live in hostel. Work like when I first come to this country. Pick cherries, pick pears, pick apricots, pick tomatoes. . . . No use look back. Go crazy think about all lost.” His reflections powerfully dramatize his material loss and psychological devastation not as discretely analyzable “effects,” but as mutually implicating forms of suffering inextricable at the level of lived experience.

Literary sources also paint more riddled pictures of camp and postcamp life than those circulated by the War Relocation Authority, or by the Japanese American Citizens League, for that matter. In John Okada’s now-celebrated novel, No-No Boy (1957), the protagonist’s parents are consumed by alcoholism and madness after the war. Hisaye Yamamoto’s short story “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) poignantly examines the blurring of sanity and insanity caused by the traumatic routine of daily camp life. Janice Mirikitani’s first book, Awake in the River (1977), offers a poetic elegy to her aunt “Crazy Alice,” “victim of American concentration camps.” These stories find their uncanny refrain in the postwar psychological disintegrations suffered by Janice Tanaka’s father and Lise Yasui’s grandfather, hauntingly revisited through video and film. They resonate, as well, with Rea Tajiri’s video prodding her mother’s amnesia only to prompt her mother to remember, paradoxically, why she forgot about the camps in the first place: she recalls witnessing a woman in camp, obsessively railing against the internment, descend into madness.

The testimonies of survivors do not necessarily provide greater analysis of the internment’s continuing effects, but they at least deepen or supercede the insufficient scholarly language that presides over their experiences. In selected testimonies published by the journal Amerasia in 1981, many survivors give voice to their oppression for the first time—publicly, painfully, yet with dignity. Their accounts offer a far more
penetrating, complex language than the referential framework of silence and shame. Consider the following: struggling to prove her self-worth, majoring in biochemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, while supporting herself as a live-in maid, Yuji Ichioka’s sister “had a nervous breakdown, but straight As: Phi Beta Kappa, and right on time.” Mary Kurihara delivers the testimony of her husband, Albert Kurihara, who suffered a stroke the previous week as “a result of thinking about his camp experience.” Speaking of everyday camp life, Kinya Noguchi explains, “For so many of our Issei parents, who were used to being active, it was a slow process of deterioration, degeneration, and dying. It could be seen on their faces, the hopelessness, uncertainty. Many with only a few good years left lost their will to survive.” Violet K. de Cristoforo speaks of her father-in-law’s “untimely death” due to a “long and lingering illness” and “grief” from never having “recovered from the death of his beloved wife at Tule Lake.” Warren Furutani underscores the ambiguity and elusiveness of postinternment trauma:

In my eye it’s not been proven but will be in the future, that the Nisei that retire at sixty-two and suddenly die within ten years and are not enjoying the time of retirement that they worked so hard for because of failing health, because of getting diseases like cancer; all of this is a direct reaction to the stress and experience that perhaps started in the camps and continued throughout their lives.28

The unexpected resurfacing of these neglected or hidden abuses, in the lives of following generations is addressed only occasionally and indirectly in the testimonies, however. The post-Redress media by Tajiri, Yasui, and Tanaka poetically interrogate precisely these effects, what video artists Bruce and Norman Yonemoto call “second-hand experience.”29 All five of these artists screened their works, including the four considered in this chapter, at the important Relocations and Revisions exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art (California) in 1992, the event that artistically inaugurated this collective project.30 In a related context, Karen Higa notes: “The recurrence of the internment as an important theme for contemporary artists, many who were not interned themselves, suggests the serious place of the visual arts in helping to understand the war years and its continuing legacy.”31 Yasui, Tajiri, and Tanaka have turned to the more private, intimate languages available through autobiographical documentary film and experimental, or art, video. In his article on Tanaka and Tajiri, Robert Payne observes:

The medium of video art arrives as especially well-suited to occupy a space at the intersection of documentary and the avant-garde. Video equipment’s ease in portability and its reproduction of synchronous sound echo two hallmarks of cinema verite, making video a useful tool for the documentary. Meanwhile, video’s ability to be operated by one individual and its low cost relative to film permit an intimacy of vision and directness of voice most closely associated with the avant-garde.32

In contrast to Laura Marks’s “experimental diasporan cinema,” Payne defines these works according to the more established notion of avant-garde, but both contextualize the works in formal aesthetic terms. More important, the “intimacy of vision” and “directness of voice” that Payne identifies make possible a complex articulation of memory that revises and enlarges our understanding of the internment’s “enduring consequences,” and enables the epistemological shift from Redress to post-Redress.

Cultural Memory and Amnesia

Don Nakanishi suggests that amnesia might well have marked the internment’s fiftieth anniversary, and therefore is at pains to explain the factors that resulted in the otherwise unlikely circumstances of a fully developed Redress movement, Day of Remembrance events, pilgrimages to the derelict camps, and related activities.33 Marita Sturken suggests the significance of such commemoration: “Some anniversaries speak louder than others, and the fiftieth anniversary of an event perhaps most dramatically of all: fifty years, representing half a century, a time when, unlike the hundredth anniversary, many participants are still alive, reflecting on the meaning of their lives.”34 More important, Sturken’s work here (an essay “in dialogue” with Rea Tajiri’s History and Memory) and elsewhere approaches memory not in cognitive, individualized terms but as a cultural discourse.35 Rejecting the commonsense notion of memory as replica of experience, she examines how it is constructed—memory as a present-tense representation of the past and, increasingly since the Second World War, a representation rendered by technological means. In this context, Sturken’s essay ponders a prescient dilemma: in a culture immersed in images, how can we remember an event such as the internment that lacks readily available images with which to represent itself?

Sturken insists that memory is not a closed text but a process, ceaselessly narrated as we struggle to make sense of the past. Similarly, reflecting on oblique traces of Jewish memory in New York’s Lower East
Side, Jonathan Boyarin writes, "Forgetting seems ghostly, not because it has no force or weight (it presses against us heavily and constantly, and it may yet do us in), but because we are so unused to naming it that even those of us who realize its danger usually prefer to speak for memory." In other words, remembering and forgetting are inextricably tangled and perpetually struggling over the representation of the past, its content as well as its form.

As is now well documented, the federal government actively sought to cleanse the reality of mass detention from national memory. Seeking to bury the traumatic experience rather than suffer further abuse for its invocation, most Issei and Nisei refused to acknowledge this episode of their history, their collective disavowal thereby transforming it into a taboo, literally and symbolically unspeakable. Yet repression (psychical or political) invariably leaves traces, unintentional clues to that to which it attempts to extinguish. In the wake of the consciousness-raising politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the motif of silence in Japanese American history, and Asian American history generally, has come to represent the heavy force of forgetting, its cultural-symptomatic gesture. Powerfully defined in Asian American literature as an effect of racial and patriarchal oppression—censorship of the speech-acts that constitute identity—silence names not so much the objective or cognitive fact of irretrievable loss but rather the (detected) attempt to forget, to short-circuit collective memory.

This pernicious, internalized force is evident everywhere in the works in question, from the Yasui family’s disavowal of Lise’s grandfather’s suicide to the unconscious revisions or gaps in Tajiri’s mother’s memory. But these works are ultimately concerned with the operations of their makers’ memories, what they remember and how they come to know it. Such introspection leads us to a less familiar understanding of memory, and consequently some viewers may overlook this reflective activity, or assimilate these works to a more conventional interpretive framework. For example, at least two commentators (Abé Mark Nornes, Jun Xing) view History and Memory as advancing the positive and corrective powers of memory against the mythologizing nature of dominant national history. Xing even names memory “a subversive tool, challenging the dominant historical narrative and formulating a counter-cultural voice based on the memories of Japanese Americans.” The video does underscore the antagonistic, unequal relationship between communal or personal memories, on the one hand, and the displacing force of dominant cultural discourses, on the other. However, by centering the video’s strictly oppositional aspect, Xing presumes a coherent notion of memory that the video does not sustain. Tajiri’s deceptively simple title does frame two dialogically engaged terms, but not as dominant fiction versus subaltern truth, which would return the video to the epistemological fold of the Redress movement. Her title instead names two competing, narrativizing processes, neither of which discovers or recovers truth; rather, they make truth. In this respect, memory is not a repository of communal knowledge but a more fragile, nonlinear collage of associations whose coherence becomes less stable as it drifts farther from, or contradicts, the narrative pattern established by dominant national history. In its most extreme form, this understanding could be characterized as what Janice Tanaka, in her 1990 video, names the Department of Amnesia: a surreal assemblage of hermetic fragments representing the past—photographs, passports, medical records, anecdotes, dreams—that refuse easy identification or meaningful connections. Their fragmentary nature scatters memory, breaks up its narrative coherence. To the degree that the connections among these fragments remain unknowable or unverifiable, the process of recovery cannot simply be an act of summoning “what actually happened” versus the inauthenticity of mainstream or dominant accounts; remembering is itself a generative, creative, fictionalizing act.

Postmodernism and “Germinal Images”

As noted earlier, certain stylistic features of the ‘texts I examine invariably draw comparisons to postmodernism. With all their formal fragmentations and rhetorical diversities, refusals of conventional narrative and preoccupations with the power of the image, they (especially Tajiri’s) may seem altogether exemplary. Yet rival critics also warn against the blanket authority of such definitions, cautioning that some (mostly white male) commentators universalize the flattening-out of subjectivity and temporality characteristic of Euro-American postmodernism, ironically just as diasporic communities are as committed today as ever to historical consciousness. Hence, Paul Gilroy argues that Fredric Jameson “views post-modernism as ‘the cultural dominant.’ However, all the constitutive features of the post-modern that he identifies—the new depthlessness, the weakening of historicity, the waning of affect—are not merely absent from black expressive cultures but are explicitly contradicted by
their repertoire of complete ‘hermeneutic gestures.’” Although Jameson qualifies his position, like many other Euro-American thinkers he does not see beyond its orbit: his analysis seeks the utopian moments of contradiction within dominant postmodernism itself, and neglects cultural forms that do not readily exhibit its features. This approach, argues Gilroy, ultimately reproduces the model of Eurocentric thought that evicts race from its purview—a historical experience whose consideration would “require all simple periodisations of the modern and postmodern to be drastically rethought.”

Clearing the ground for a specifically black counter-narrative, however, Gilroy’s polemic nearly disqualifies all of the diagnoses of the “modern and postmodern” issued by Jameson, Habermas, Lyotard, and their interlocutors. He dismissively suggests, for example, “What is increasingly perceived as the crisis of modernity and modern values [represented by the postmodern] is perhaps better understood as the crisis of the intellectual whose self-consciousness was once served by these terms.”

But the works by Tajiri and Tanaka (and to a lesser degree Yasui) give evidence of a much broader reach by postmodernism than Gilroy’s limiting scope allows: their attempts to reconstruct family histories are profoundly caught up with the “weakening of historicity” that characterizes, for Jameson, the dominant cultural climate in the overdeveloped countries. Their formal hybridity re-composes the widely dispersed, racialized discourse that represses or censors the familial transmission of cultural memory: their juxtaposition of contradictory images—public and private, governmental and mass cultural—allegorizes the accumulating historical forces that frustrate the artists’ access to the past. In this respect, the post-Redress works show that the dehistoricizing symptoms of postmodernism were already active in the racial discourse presiding over Japanese Americans since the Second World War. The fragmentation and hybridity exhibited by the post-Redress media exemplify simultaneously postmodernism and its critique to the degree that the “weakening of historicity” experienced by Japanese Americans since the war anticipates its arrival generally in the overdeveloped countries by the late 1960s. These works therefore rejoin and productively complicate the vexed debate on postmodernism and race: although Gilroy rejects Jameson’s account in re-centering a black counter-narrative, post-Redress media confirm and even expand Jameson’s notion of postmodernism in articulating (alongside Gilroy) the continuing trauma of the internment’s “racial terror.” More intimately tied to the cultural dominant, the collective project of these works may be called a critical postmodernism: they confirm and critique with a vengeance the emergent reality that Jameson describes, and ironically use its own styles and methods to re-investigate its eviction of the moral, political, and historical significance of the internment.

Abé Mark Nornes describes this deconstructive gesture in his essay, “Our Presence Is Our Absence: History and Memory.” Reading the video as a postmodern text, he insists, “[Tajiri] argues that our conception of history—indeed our very memory—has become deeply dependent upon the image at the expense of those people excluded from the viewfinder”:

One of the most spectacular sequences in the tape brings this point home by creating a montage of images that have mediated our historical conception of the attack on Pearl Harbor. . . . Unlike other parts of her tape, these disparate clips are edited together for a perfectly seamless reconstruction of the event, affording the shots the same one-to-one relationship to the historical event regardless of whether they are fictional or documentary (or Japanese or American) images. To encourage us to ponder the implications of these relationships, Tajiri superimposes the word “HISTORY” over the middle of the screen.

Precisely—although one might wonder who the generic we (“us,” “our”) of this passage includes, and to what degree some viewers experience the force of these images differently than others. The video itself specifies the unique and irrevocable consequences of these images for Japanese Americans; when Tajiri says, “Our presence was our absence,” her we does not include everyone. But Nornes’s essay offers the key out of this interpretive dilemma, even if it does not ultimately push its own insight toward its furthest theoretical implications: “The centrifugal force of so many competing texts would threaten to fly into confusion, except, for all its heterogeneity, the tape still centers around a germinal image: Tajiri’s mother as a young woman splashing water on her face in a desert place (performed by the director herself).” For Nornes, this image figures primarily as a formal device, providing visual punctuation as it repeats throughout the video. However, more important is that this “germinal image” hints at the less obvious but profoundly constitutive force of memory. A mental image that has haunted Tajiri since she was a young girl, its insertion into the video situates the artist’s own subjectivity amid the proliferation of newsreels, press photos, and family photos, movie clips and government propaganda. It does structure the
apparent chaos of images, as Nornes notes, but its repetition and indecipherability for Tajiri also richly suggests the return of a repressed memory or experience. While Tajiri searches for the past, ironically, the past has found her.

Similarly inexplicable memories structure Lise Yasui’s *A Family Gathering* and Janice Tanaka’s *Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* What do these all have in common? In themselves, the memories represent sources of lasting pain across generations, referring back to devastating experiences in the family histories of the artists. Each memory is first experienced by its subject as a sometimes dull, sometimes visceral feeling of *unknowing*—as a psychical lack. Tellingly, each artist had created a germinal image that revises the not-known into something less disturbing and more edifying for its subject, an acceptable fiction that covers over the black hole in memory, but that also invariably returns, slowly gnaws at its subject’s psychical coherence. In this respect, the germinal images correspond to the concept of screen memory, explained by psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis as “[a] childhood memory characterised both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content.” The analysis of such memories leads back to indelible childhood experiences and to unconscious phantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence.”

The significance of these images in each of the works under discussion will be explored below, but it is worth noting their simplicity and “apparent insignificance” here. Rea Tajiri is obsessed by the recurring image of her mother filling a canteen in the desert—an obvious reference to the internment. However, it isn’t a memory in the literal sense; born after the war, Tajiri is “remembering” an event that she could not have witnessed. Lise Yasui, conversely, is partly motivated to document her family’s history by her fondest childhood memory: she remembers the time her grandparents visited and warmly recalls hearing her grandfather, Masuo, speak with her parents long into the night; later, as a film student, wanting to learn more about her family’s great patriarch, Lise uncovers disturbing stories of her family’s wartime experience. Janice Tanaka met her paternal Uncle Togo only once, when she was twelve; but his friendly, reassuring, “normal” demeanor left a lasting imprint on her memory. A mediating figure between the mysterious life of her mother and the haunting absence of her father, Togo would become the initial guide into her family’s painful history. In each case, something about the germinal image compels its beholder toward questions that revisit the family stories, their inconsistencies and omissions. Each artist’s work therefore reconstructs, bears witness to, her difficult adventure of recovery—an act simultaneously of discovery and of invention.

**History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige**

Here is Tajiri’s account—enunciating slowly, in clips, at the start of *History and Memory* (1991), speaking over the image she describes:

> I don’t know where this comes from, but I just had this fragment, this picture that’s always been in my mind. My mother, she’s standing at a faucet and it’s really hot outside. And she’s filling this canteen and the water’s really cold and it feels really good. And outside the sun’s just so hot, it’s just beating down. And there’s this dust that gets in everywhere and they’re always sweeping the floors.

The following thirty-five minutes take us through sequences of still and moving images and reflective, autobiographical voice-overs. Where no images exist in history or appear on the screen, words move up the
blank screen-space, alternately meditating on the nature of images or verbally rendering a nonexistent image, exercising a creative license normally excluded from the rhetorical options available to documentary but found everywhere in fiction and poetry. After one such description (starting “View from 100 feet above ground”), we read: “(The spirit of my / grandfather witnesses / my father and mother as / they have an / argument / about the unexplained / nightmares their / daughter has been having / on the 20th anniversary of / the bombing of / Pearl Harbor, the day that / changed the lives of 110,000 / Japanese-Americans)” (italicized in original).

These words cast starkly onto the screen spar with, stand in contrast to, the visualizations of official history everywhere, and textually demonstrate Tajiri’s assertion, “Our absence was our presence”; they signify the metonymic “surface” war over historical representation, by undermining the authority of the images flowing ceaselessly throughout the circuits of mass culture. But the making of the video is most crucially a journey for Tajiri, even a sort of pilgrimage, to find explanations for those uncanny nightmares that drew together a private family concern with a larger historical moment (the bombing of Pearl Harbor), and its associations with other half-recollections scattered throughout the text—all somehow vaguely spidering out from that germinal image. After retracing the places of her mother’s detention, ending at the concentration camp at Poston, Arizona, Tajiri closes her video, speaking over the recurring image not finally of her mother—we now clearly see the kneeling figure’s young face—but of the artist herself reenacting the scene:

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 the picture will return without the story. I’ve been carrying around this picture with me for years. It’s the one memory I have of my mother speaking of camp while we grew up. I overhear her describing to my sister this simple action: her hands filling a canteen out in the middle of the desert. For years I’ve been living with this picture without the story, feeling a lot of pain, not knowing how they fit together. But now I’ve found I could connect the picture to the story. I could forgive my mother her loss of memory, and could make this image for her.

This conclusion enacts a profound reversal. The video image is no longer the germinal (starting) image but is instead an image of closure, literally for the text and symbolically for Tajiri’s own odyssey. It is the daughter’s gift to her mother, a symbolic reconciliation that imaginatively restores the history of the internment to the narrative structure of personal memory and family history. The germinal image (generative, starting-point image) was a mental picture visible only to her mind’s eye that she had been “carrying around . . . for years.” It signified the psychical lack that inexorably elicited its subject’s desire (“I don’t know where this comes from,” said Tajiri at the beginning her video), a desire that achieved imaginative expression and fulfillment through the willful retracing of her mother’s forced journey. Through the making of the video, she completed the process that “could connect the picture to the story.”

How does this process begin for Tajiri? Why does she begin to question in the first place, and how does this initial questioning become a personal quest? One of the video’s most vivid images is a painted wooden bird she once came across among her mother’s belongings. “No, no, no—grandma gave me that,” she was told, “put that back.” An innocent enough childhood memory except that, several years later, while digging through materials at the National Archives, she finds a photo of her grandmother in (what else?) a bird-carving class. This new fact stimulates old or forgotten suspicions, saturates with doubt everything she’s learned: “I began searching for a history—my own history—because I had known all along that the stories I had heard were not true, and parts had been left out”:

I remember having this feeling growing up, that I was haunted by something, that I was living within a family full of ghosts. There was this place that they knew about. I had never been there, yet I had a memory for it. I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born. We had been moved, uprooted; we had lived with a lot of pain. I had no idea where these memories came from; yet I knew the place.

This extraordinary spoken passage follows the bird image, is spoken over Tajiri’s germinal image, and trails into home-movie images of camp life at Topaz, Utah, secretly taken by inmate Dave Tatsuno.47 She begins searching for her own history and remembers haunting feelings: that her family knew a place, then that they “had lived with a lot of pain,” and then that she herself “knew the place.” This hopscotching, imaginative will-to-power extends across the topography of Tajiri’s memory and beyond, the generative energy of that “compromise-formation,” the image of her mother filling the canteen. Where her radical doubt negates (the protective lies, denials, silence), her imagination props up disturbing ghost images, stand-ins for the stories that “were not true,” and the
“parts [that] had been left out.” Finally, “I began searching because I felt lost, ungrounded, somewhat like a ghost that floats over terrain, witnessing others living their lives and yet not having one of its own.” Tajiri’s quest across the landscape of her mother’s detention is finally an act of self-recovery. By imaginatively restoring the unspoken history her mother sought to disavow, Tajiri releases them both by creating her image-gift, externalized and rendered visible in video.

A Family Gathering

Lise Yasui’s A Family Gathering (1988) is formally less experimental, more conventional than Tajiri’s video. Yet it strikingly resembles History and Memory in terms of the relationship it constitutes between Yasui as subject (the film, among other things, documents her making the film) and the instability of memory. My analysis examines the fifty-seven-minute version of her film that was produced in 1988 for the PBS series The American Experience, sponsored and funded by Boston’s WGBH-TV and subsequently nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Subject. This version expands upon Lise Yasui’s thirty-minute original, initially made for Temple University’s graduate program in film production. Prior to its PBS national broadcast, the shorter 1987 original had already won awards and critical acclaim on the festival circuit, including a Golden Globe at the San Francisco International Film Festival, a Golden Hugo in Chicago, and an invitation to the first international film festival ever held in Leningrad. Such accolades and institutional support reflect the film’s affecting story and its ability to speak to broad and diverse audiences.

Of all the many strengths of A Family Gathering, perhaps most interesting and provocative is the ironic distance it often takes—is forced to take, contrary to Yasui’s original intentions—from formal conventions. Initially planning to fulfill her master’s degree requirements by making the “definitive documentary on internment” from an impersonal standpoint, the burgeoning filmmaker reluctantly began to interview her familial relations only after much insistence by her teachers and classmates. “I hated personal films,” she later explains; “To me they were therapy films, touchy-feely—and I just didn’t want to do that.” Puzzled by inconsistencies in the stories related by her elders, however, Yasui found her seemingly simple exercise in fact-finding slowly becoming detective work to uncover a family secret—then finally, irrevocably, a soul-searching reflection on identity as she unraveled the trauma underlying the warm
innocence of her childhood memories. Compelled by her materials, Yasui “realized she had little choice. This would have to be her film,” as the historian Kessler notes, “a film not about the past but about her discovery of the past.”

A Family Gathering, in this respect, represents the unusual instance in which a filmmaker doesn’t impose a form upon her content so much as the content structures the form through which it achieves expression. In doing so, the film exposes the insufficiencies of the conventional approaches it employs. In Tajiri’s and Tanaka’s videos, formal experimentation is deliberate, predicated on the makers’ erotic distrust of formal conventions from the start. Here, in contrast, Yasui realizes the limits of her filmic language during the creative process itself, as she is prompted unexpectedly by the painful, sobering turns that she encounters in researching her family history. Without the sustaining force of this seemingly accidental moment of recognition, the film might lose its distinguishing critical edge and become simply “conventional,” which is how Robert Payne misreads it in an otherwise engaging essay. His criticism may suggest why media studies has embraced the experimentalist virtues of Tajiri’s and Tanaka’s works (as Payne himself does) but has largely ignored Yasui’s:

A Family Gathering falls firmly into the tradition of the “talking head” documentary. The film interviews witnesses to past events . . . and illustrates their commentary with stills and stock footage. Words and images validate each other: words provide a narrative/historical context for the images, as images provide the historical veracity of what the voice is saying. Skillfully blended together, sound and image usually combine to close off interrogation into the ontology of the history being narrated.

Payne’s commentary exhibits its bias against “traditional documentary” without carefully examining the film’s ultimately skeptical relationship to its formal devices. Considering this matter would produce a strikingly different reading, one that would affirm not the authority of filmic convention and the reliability of memory, but the opposite: their ultimate instability and ambivalence.

Like Tajiri’s History and Memory, Lise Yasui’s film is organized around a seemingly innocuous, germinal image. Unlike Tajiri, however, whose image of her mother in the desert was devoid of any particular emotional content or attachment, Yasui affectionately cherished her memory of her grandparents, did not question its verisimilitude, and securely fixed its origins in her early childhood. Yasui introduces her germinal image early on:

I had a favorite memory when I was young. My grandparents came to visit. My grandmother laughed a lot to herself and spoke to me in Japanese, as if I could understand. One evening I stayed up late, listening to my grandfather as he talked into the night. He seemed tired, and every now and then he’d look at me and smile. Later, I learned that my grandparents never made such a visit, that I never met my grandfather at all. The memory was one I’d made up, a creation drawn from all the stories I’d heard, and the images on my father’s movie screen.

Uncanny in its nostalgic innocence, the memory was “made up,” a synthesis and condensation of cheerful family stories and Yasui’s father’s movies. Fittingly, as Richard Challen notes, amateur home movies do not faithfully and objectively document daily family relations; rather, they record idealized images. Hence, one is far less likely to film familial conflicts or tragedies than such positive moments as birthdays, graduations, and visits by extended family. This early voice-over ironically underscores the idyllic image of the “family gathering” invoked by Yasui’s title, ritual bringing together of the living generations to reaffirm the integrity of kinship.

Other aspects distinguish the two artists’ psychological journeys. Tajiri’s personal search is sparked by the discovery of a government photograph of her grandmother (in a wood-carving class in camp) that not only gives meaning to her mother’s mysterious wooden bird but resurrects muted suspicions she half-sensed just below the surface throughout her life. In an early scene, Tajiri speculates on the causes of her sister’s obsessive interest in photographic images. Later, she wonders about her mother’s amnesia, its possible connection to her sister’s obsession, and then to her own memory image of her mother filling water in the desert.

Yasui’s arrival at a similarly radical, generative doubt, however, could not be further removed. Unquestioningly believing the glowing chronicles of her family’s history, as a child she yearned to revisit the “better days” before her own birth, to jealously cherish “glimpses of the past I wanted to feel part of.” The patriarch of this mythic lost world was her grandfather, in the classic American tale of a young man who arrived with nothing yet achieved wealth and status through sheer determination and hard work. So tangible was her grandfather that Lise contrived a rich memory of a visit that never happened; convincingly and imaginatively, she
“remembers” into her late twenties seeing her grandfather’s fatigued figure through the kitchen door, smiling at her every so often from the center of the universe of her childhood memories. Ironically, it was the seamless perfection of the family myth that fueled her desire to know more.

Pursuing that desire as an adult, through the process of making a film, would yield startlingly different results. Speaking over a dignified photographic portrait of her grandfather, Lise’s voice opens *A Family Gathering* with this sobering discovery: “This is my grandfather, Masuo Yasui. Through my father’s stories I knew him as a patriotic American and a self-made man. What my father didn’t tell me was that in 1941, five days after Pearl Harbor, my grandfather was arrested and taken away by the FBI. When I discovered this, I wondered what else I didn’t know.” Contrary to Robert Payne’s contention—that the words and images mutually validate each other, thereby reproducing traditional documentary authority—throughout the film these two registers of its discourse remain persistently at odds. To return to the dilemma that Marita Sturken interrogates, the wartime detention of Japanese Americans is significantly characterized by the relative absence of iconic images, specific and widely recognized images in the archive of national memory, that could readily represent the internment. From the start, we are told that the dignified image of the filmmaker’s grandfather is deceptively incomplete. And so too is the wholesome family life represented in excerpts from her father’s home movies dispersed throughout *A Family Gathering*, evidence not of the truth of the Yasui family history but of its self-perpetuating myth. Refuting Payne’s reading, the film destabilizes the mutually confirming relationship between the camera images and the edifying stories that conjoin to produce a sanitized version of family history.

Perhaps most unexpectedly, the film itself participates in the transformation of the family story, beyond simply “documenting” it. Far from delivering a typically linear development of events, Lise’s narration instead gives voice to her anxieties and reservations in making the film, in broaching sensitive subjects with her older relations. Her narration constantly gives expression to her internal struggle to make sense of her own identity as she increasingly questions the reliability of the images and stories she has inherited. “A year after I started this film,” she says, late in *A Family Gathering*, “my father told me the following story, and his silences began to make sense”: 
The trust and respect my grandfather worked so hard for disappeared with Pearl Harbor. For many former friends and neighbors, the length of his sentence was an indication that he’d been disloyal to his country. As my grandfather got older, he grew anxious and fearful, always worried that he’d done something wrong, sure that the FBI was coming once again to arrest him. After too many years of suffering these fears, my grandfather committed suicide at the age of seventy-one. It took my father twenty-eight years to tell me this.

How is one to make sense of such tragedy, and its painful erasure of the scenes of domestic tranquility so achingly yearned for in childhood? What kind of filmic closure can Yasui fashion in the aftermath of such a discovery? She must work with what she has inherited, attempting to revise those private, intimate images and stories that have been violently drained of their prior meanings. Speaking over home movie clips, Yasui offers this story in closing:

The night my father told me about my grandfather’s suicide, we were alone in the kitchen. I was asking about my grandfather’s life after the war, when my dad suddenly grew quiet and said, “Don’t you know how he died?” And when he said that, somehow I knew. I cried because I could see my father’s pain. And I cried because, in that instant, my grandfather seemed more real to me than ever before.

So now I watch these movies and everything looks a little different. I’m aware of the history that lies behind these images, and the moments of togetherness recorded here I no longer take for granted. It’s a past my family made for themselves, and it’s a past they gave to me.

This is what I’ll remember. My grandmother came to see us when I was young. It was the first time we’d met. She laughed a lot to herself and spoke to me in Japanese, as though I could understand. And although my grandfather died before I had the chance to meet him, I’ll always remember that one evening I stayed up late listening to him talk into the night.

Tajiri’s video enacts its closure by imaginatively reconstructing a private narrative where none had previously existed, in which to meaningfully place her own surrogate memory and her mother’s amnesia. For Yasui, utopian versions of her family’s past already crowded her memory, blocked out other accounts. Yet in closing her film, she willfully refuses to allow one story to displace its predecessors—refuses to reproduce the censoring authority that would repress all other voices in the interest of advancing its own unitary truth. In doing so, she inscribes in her own account the actively shaping force and effects of familial silence, itself a disavowal of the effects of the internment. Abandoning narrative coherence, Yasui’s act of closure instead embraces the contradictory nature of memory, honoring “a past my family made for themselves, gave to me,” the “togetherness recorded here [that] I no longer take for granted,” even as she now understands it differently. Nor does the older, mature Lise dismiss the lucid warmth of her childhood reflections, affirming instead the fictive, creative activity of memory—remembering her grandfather, indeed, “that one evening I stayed up late listening to him talk into the night.” It is an epistemological gesture that brings together the critical distance of irony with the compassionate intimacy of familial storytelling, renarrating the past for current and future generations—and also, as a film, for a public audience. Postmodern irony and traditional storytelling: this unlikely, paradoxical mixture seems most appropriate, and necessary, for a work that remains profoundly skeptical of narrative forms yet cannot forsake the edifying power of family history.

Mother’s Memories, Father’s Donuts

Of the works of the three media artists discussed here, Janice Tanaka’s videos bear witness to perhaps the most fragile, immediate stories of trauma and loss. Older than Tajiri and Yasui, Tanaka is the mother of two children, a daughter and a son, yet through her videos, Memories from the Department of Amnesia (1990) and Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway? (1992), she revisits her own relations and status as a child by poetically investigating her parents’ biographies. Although the two titles use strikingly different experimental forms, they can be viewed as integrally related aspects of a shared project: to understand the trauma of her parents’ lives in the aftermath of the internment.

Memories is a thirteen-minute elegiac video composed of three seemingly unrelated movements, which Tanaka made following her mother’s death. Most of its first half is an extended sequence that closely follows a child tricycling around inside a diner. Rendered through a grainy, off-color tinted filter and accompanied by an amplified, ceaseless grating on the soundtrack, the otherwise innocent scene is recast in the visual rhetoric of a dream or distant memory. The circling tricycle and sheer duration of the scene (over six minutes long) doesn’t introduce anything so much as it visually and audibly expresses a feeling of repetition, perhaps of a memory caught in a loop, unable to connect to a narrative and move forward. Flashes from the second movement increasingly punctuate
the latter part of this long initial sequence: lucid images of a surgeon (or coroner?) in green medical robe walking and working against a crisp white backdrop—less a memory than a fantastical apparition or allegory of death. Eventually eclipsing the first movement, the bright, still, antiseptic colors contrast the ceaseless looping that preceded them with an image of stasis, finality, narrative stoppage or closure. Ending abruptly, the scene gives way to the third movement of this video triptych, a closing sequence equally indirect yet clearer in its meaning. A pastiche of recognizable images—family pictures, birth certificate, passport and other documents—this final section offers a reflection on the life of the artist's mother, an attempt to literally and symbolically bring together the pieces of this mother's mysterious life. Christine Tamblyn explains this movement concisely as an ordinary biography set against the extraordinary historical backdrop of the internment:

Tanaka discloses (her mother's biography) in a matter-of-fact way that foregrounds its horrifying implications. As a series of family snapshots appear onscreen, Tanaka reminisces with her daughter Becky about their recently deceased relative. The presence of the video camera as a silent witness provides a suitable occasion for memorializing the dead. The women's warmly intimate conversation on the sound track is augmented by text describing milestones in Yuriko Yanate's life. Thus, the still photographs, audio recording,

and written inscriptions convey three different aspects of a complex video portrait. Whereas the images depict an unremarkable middle-class woman, the text chronicles her physical and mental illnesses, as well as the injustices done to her by her husband and the U.S. government. But the dialogue between Tanaka and her daughter ameliorates the bleakness of these misfortunes as the women fondly remember Grandma's reckless driving style and eccentric eating habits.35

Most striking about the video is the fundamental contradiction between its obsessively ordering structure—triptich form, dense intertextuality, carefully interwoven registers of representation—and the mystery of the deceased mother's life, the randomness of the facts she left behind, pieced together by the video artist Tanaka and her daughter Rebecca into a permanently incomplete portrait. Instead of offering any coherent meaning, the dreamlike images allegorize by their very inaccessibility the impenetrability of Yuriko Yanate's life story. In doing so, the video imaginatively renders the ceaseless struggle between remembering and forgetting, as its surreal title suggests. It thereby participates alongside Tajiri and Yasui in engaging the dilemma that Marita Sturken poses—how to represent memory in the absence of images, or with images that say deceptively little.
In *Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?*, Tanaka rejoinces this problem from a different angle. The work employs a formal repertoire similar to Tajiri’s *History and Memory* (various wartime audiovisual references, a scrolling text across the screen), but its key representational device is closer to Yasui’s rhetorical use of home movies. Yasui’s film essentially quotes traditional home movies, which, like family albums, mostly record for posterity the *pleasant* moments of domestic life: smiles, casual visits with the in-laws, Sunday drives, baby pictures, and the like. The film gains its most poignant edge by digging up, almost inadvertently, the secret that betrays the groomed reality recorded by the amateur camera. However, while Yasui’s irony underscores the deceptive innocence of the family portrait by exposing its exclusions, Tanaka brings the buried trauma of her lost father’s experience into view through the use of home video. That is, she records the kind of story that usually falls outside the representational boundaries of home movies and family albums: she records her attempt to rebuild her relationship with her recently found father, Jack, who is suffering from mental illness and years of institutionalization (and she is provocatively exploring, as well, the issue of which came first).

Tanaka begins *Donuts* by explaining her desire to belatedly search for the father she did not know:

After the death of my mother in 1988, I began looking for my father, whom I hadn’t seen since I was three. The few sparse memories I have of him were torn by confusion and what I believed had become an opaque feeling of loss. I’d hoped to restore family history, and through that process, perhaps a part of myself. On a deeper level, unconscious to me then, I thought by finding him, I’d find parental comfort, and the key to making sense of my own life. Instead, a murky distance separated me from the man I met and the man I wished would be.

Surprisingly, Tanaka appears to have encountered little difficulty in finding him. Pursuing contacts provided by her newly reacquainted uncle, she recounts early on, with no further explanation: “In 1989, I found my father in a halfway house for the chronically–mentally ill, in the Skid Row section of Los Angeles.” But finding her father offers no resolution; rather, it marks the beginning of a new struggle with no guarantee of success, which continues through and beyond the video.

Yet discovery of her father also occasions Tanaka’s reacquaintance with other lapsed family relations, most significantly her Uncle Togo.

Although she recalls meeting him only once, when she was twelve, Togo’s presence weighed heavily on her consciousness, in contrast to her feeling of near-total disconnection from family history: “As a child, I was often confused, and thought my uncle, Togo, was my father. I didn’t know if my father’s name was Koto Tanaka, or Jack Koto Tanaka, or Togo Tanaka; when or where my parents were married; or the name of my paternal grandparents, or maternal grandmother. Silence was the keeper of memories.” In another powerfully reflective moment, she realizes:

I felt like a ball rebounding between two canyons, my father and my uncle who, because of their non-presence, had become larger-than-life mythological figures. My father, whose name engendered such hurt and pain for my mother; and my uncle, who seemed to represent some kind of comfort for her—my uncle’s image became the stabilizing factor in my own life.

Robert Payne notes of their contrasting, onscreen representations, “Jack is as rambling and incoherent as Togo is concise and articulate.” Togo’s image does not function in Tanaka’s life similarly to the germinal images that mobilize Tajiri’s and Yasui’s investigations: it isn’t a fiction that

*Janice Tanaka’s father, Jack, gets a physical exam before his discharge from a halfway home, in *Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* (1992)*
unravels to reveal something unexpected, but it offers a structural starting point for Tanaka’s journey. It anchors Tanaka’s life in the present and provides a symbolic bridge to her father’s life, and to the past: Togo can speak across the temporal abyss represented by her mother’s death and the incoherence created by her father’s mental illness. Her uncle bears witness to the past and the present.

More than Tajiri’s and Yasui’s works, Tanaka’s *Donuts* is explicitly, even wrenchingly, self-analytical, tenuously introspective, therapeutic. *History and Memory* and *A Family Gathering* work to expose the painful, ironic distance between images (propagandistic, mass cultural, private) and historical trauma. They generate intimate languages with which to challenge the rhetoric of existing images and to carefully examine trauma. Both speak with confidence and some fair measure of resolve, of personal closure. Tanaka’s project is a different matter, however. She labors to create a mutually affirming, reciprocating relationship between words and images, not to advance a totalizing discourse that would displace other discourses but to give expression to her father’s private, physical, and mental suffering in the present, a suffering not restricted to the past. Not strictly or even primarily retrospective, Tanaka’s “family project” therefore creates video images and forms of communication that can bear witness to the miracle of Jack’s continuing daily survival as well as to the trauma of past experiences.

Yet *Donuts* must come to an end, necessarily offer some form of closure, however provisional. Here is Tanaka’s voice, speaking over scenes of her daughter’s wedding:

As a child, we never kept souvenirs or memorabilia of any kind. Likewise, people seemed to come and go out of our lives, like disposable paper cups. The trauma of having lost everything made my mother too fearful to trust again. Unconsciously inheriting that fear, I had little faith that family or friends would remain constant, and consequently lived on a precarious edge of persistent dread of loss. I was overcome by what appeared to be an unreasonable sense of loneliness when my daughter announced her engagement. Finding my father, and reestablishing contact with my uncle, aunt, and cousins, has since given me renewed faith that relatives and friends don’t necessarily disappear into a dark void, that people do survive, and it is possible to do so with a modicum of joy and pleasure. Over the past two years, my children and I working together on this project have perhaps not so ironically learned that, when you have a past, it is easier to believe the present has a reason, and that perhaps with this insight, one may begin to look to the future with hope.
Resolution through her daughter Becky’s wedding? In one sense, it is a reversal of Yasui’s relationship to images. Like Tajiri, Tanaka grew up with only scant recollections of inherited stories with which to situate herself in the larger family drama. In contrast to Yasui’s, the video ends here with a genuinely happy, non-ironic resolution, a quintessential image of the heteronormative family album and home movie, three generations celebrating together: Tanaka’s father, uncle, and aunt, herself and her cousins, and her children, all celebrating her daughter’s wedding. The video narrates Jack’s life, Janice’s struggles to make space for (and sense of) their renewed relationship, and the stories of the other participants. As viewers, we arrive at this final affirming image fully aware of the devastating history that precedes and underwrites it. It represents a fragile moment, therefore, not of false or deceptive happiness but of a hard-earned “renewed faith that relatives and friends don’t necessarily disappear into a dark void,” an achieved “modicum of joy and pleasure.”

The Return of History?

In an essay rich with insights grounded in nearly two decades’ worth of experience in media arts and activism, filmmaker Renee Tajima levels a peculiar, thinly veiled critique of internment-related works:

Japanese American filmmakers, in particular, seem stuck in reverse. Perhaps it is a function of catharsis, as the Nikkei assemble the various pieces of the story in order to release itself of the whole. . . . But by relegating Japanese American life to historical artifact, we are not confronting racism today; and we are failing to confront the tremendous changes in our own cultural identity. 55

Tajima’s essay arguably remains the best assessment to date of Asian American cinema in the post–Civil Rights era, and her concern that contemporary stories may be displaced or neglected by longstanding concerns merits attention. But the leap in logic from her speculative observations (“seem,” “Perhaps”) to her resolute response (“But”) reproduces the very “loss of historicity” that, Fredric Jameson argues, characterizes postmodernism. Contrary to Tajima’s assumption that the past is a dead letter that no longer exercises its influence over the present, the works examined here illuminate how the effects of traumatic events can erupt, painfully, unpredictably, in the lives of those even a generation removed from the experience.

So history (or more precisely, historical violence) repeats itself not in the form of decisive, apocalyptic events so much as in the often undetectable return of the repressed in the routine patterns of daily life: this is the most basic lesson offered by the inquiry prompted by Rea Tajiri, Janice Tanaka, and Lise Yasui. Their concerns remain intimately tied to the private dramas of their family histories and relations; as post-Redress media, however, these women’s creative expressions of memory bear significantly on the broader issues of historical representation elaborated in the first half of this chapter. Shifting away from the remarkable exploits of the Nisei soldiers and the public legal battles in the courtroom, these works redirect our attention to the less exceptional, more pervasive struggles over the meaning and consequences of the internment in ordinary experience. In doing so, post-Redress media ironically recuperate concerns and perspectives expressed prior to the mature development of the Redress movement, then subsequently displaced by it. To better situate the relevance of Tajiri’s, Yasui’s, and Tanaka’s works for the present and future, it is worth revisiting a neglected 1972 essay by historian Gary Okihiro, “Japanese Resistance in the Camps: A Re-evaluation.”56

Against the backdrop of 1960s–1970s political struggles, Okihiro assesses the scholarly views that had shaped interpretations of the internment since the end of the Second World War, and argues for an as yet undeveloped perspective centering on an expansive notion of resistance. Anticipating the critique made earlier in this chapter, Okihiro shows how the main scholarly tendencies colluded in their praise for Nisei patriotism and cooperation. This emphasis not only reproduced the false dichotomy of loyal versus disloyal Japanese Americans enacted by the internment, but also obscured the internal structure and dynamics of the Japanese American community. Japanese Americans’ relationships among themselves were insignificant for liberal scholarship, relative to their relationship to the state. Informed by the then-current literature on colonialism and racism, Okihiro proposes the concept of resistance to refocus attention on Japanese American community building, and struggles to establish political autonomy within the camps as the structural basis for a continuum of resistance in a hostile environment. In this framework, explicit forms of protest would be viewed not as unique or aberrant behaviors, but as more visible responses to oppression alongside more routine activities (for example, schooling, cooking, providing assistance to the young and elderly) that maintained
the community in the face of systematic domination. Equally, participation in the U.S. Army could be grasped not simply as a demonstration of national loyalty but as an attempt to gain greater freedoms for family and friends who remained in the camps—an interpretation that accurately reflects the documented views of young Nisei men at the time of their conscription.

Published in 1972, during the nascent formation of the drive for redress and for reparations, Okihiro’s inclusive view represents an epistemological road not taken by the movement, which took instead the liberal nationalism whose restricted political vision Okihiro warned against. In contrast to the movement’s privileging of heroic actions over ordinary experience, Okihiro’s essay argues for a framework in which all Japanese American activities could be measured by their benefit to the community as passive or active forms of resistance to systematic racial oppression. While demonstrating this framework’s value for revising internment scholarship, he also implies its usefulness more generally for the study of Japanese American and Asian American histories. His valorization of the role of ordinary experience and routine activity in resisting dominance offers a better context than the Redress movement for understanding the significance of post-Redress media. In closing his essay, Okihiro underscores the importance of the “persistence of the traditional matrices of Japanese institutions, values and relationships. Beyond the visible forms of resistance, between the occasional petition, strike or riot, is the true nature of Japanese resistance to white control.”

The works by Tajiri, Yasui, and Tanaka usefully revise and extend Okihiro’s thesis from a feminist, diasporic perspective. The corrosive effects of the internment on familial and communal relations provide a sobering antidote to Okihiro’s optimistic, even uncritical faith in the “persistence of the traditional matrices of Japanese institutions, values and relationships” in the face of historical trauma. Rather than bracket off kinship and community institutions and relations from the dominant society, post-Redress media expose the extension of historical oppression into the very structure of the family. Yet they also expand Okihiro’s continuum of resistance; to the ordinary social and informal political activities he encompasses, the post-Redress works contribute a richly cultural and psychological dimension. By refusing the censoring power of the internment in recovering and renarrating their personal histories, and in naming the disavowed forms of trauma that haunt their families,