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Japanese American history as evidenced by the 2008 Japanese American National Museum's National Conference "Whose America? Who's American? Diversity, Civil Liberties, and Social Justice" is deeply invested in the visibility of Japanese American experiences with the hopes of "inspir[ing] all to ensure that the lessons of the past are never forgotten"¹ However, much of the discourse around internment, redress and the call to action of never forgetting has remained the same as it had twenty years ago. The conference continued to remember internment by utilizing the same narratives about patriotism, loyalty, and masculinity as never-ending lessons of Americanism. But in the face of these celebratory narratives that establish bonds of community and national legitimacy, ghostly memories of trauma and loss are designated to the shadows, momentarily appearing but never quite able to be articulated. Critically examining the ways in which knowledge about internment has been produced highlights an epistemological violence within historical methods of certainty.

Japanese American cultural productions, particularly Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* and Janice Tanaka's *Whose Going to Pay for These Donuts Anyway?*, are documentary films that offer a particular feminist analytical lens of seeing loss, moments of violent erasure, and trauma that produce possibilities of remembering and forgetting outside the confines of liberalism and cultural nationalism. Using this same lens, I argue in this presentation the impossibility of reconstructing or recuperating a faithful sense of the past and how this feminist analytic and in particular women's narratives are helpful to re-think oral history.

¹ Japanese American National Museum, "Whose America? Who's American? Diversity, Civil Liberties, and Social Justice" Program. 2008.

This presentation is largely about an ongoing oral history project I am doing with Nisei women in my family and focuses on my grandmother and her sister. I examine different moments when my two interviewees could not or had difficulty fitting themselves and their experiences into the already existing narratives. The purpose of this is to show how they emerged—when and what questions prompted confusion, discomfort, or forgetting. I also show the ways in which I influenced this process, in constructing questions and my own reactions to their responses. This project is not about presenting a truer representation of the past, but the possibility of exploring “silences, inconsistencies, revelations and omissions” and realizing the ability to narrate is rife with erasures and what cannot be spoken.² My hope is that this critique and rearticulation of oral history remains respectful and faithful to the stories and intentions of my grandmother and her sister while making visible the ways in which conventional Japanese American historiography erases other kinds of memories.

The question, “What do you remember about December 7, 1941?” is frequently asked of Japanese Americans because it is an identifiable marker of time that situates experiences as either before or after Pearl Harbor. Focusing on this date establishes, “empty, homogenous time” which assumes that something has happened in a distinctly linear fashion, meaning that there is a “causal connection between various moments in history.”³ The use of the date itself is also one that establishes a sense of community amongst Japanese Americans who are constructed as experiencing this moment in a very particular way. Pearl Harbor is identified as a watershed event in Japanese American history, one that is a catalyst for wartime hysteria, culminating in the mass removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans on the mainland United States. In this

² Alice Yang Murray, “Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies,” *Amerasia Journal* 26:1 (2000), 114.

³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy” in *Illuminations*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 263.

way Pearl Harbor and internment are structured as anomalous, a moment of disruption that suddenly occurs but then eventually disappears. Furthermore, the construction of the before and after Pearl Harbor produces simplified accounts that often presume the before to be a nostalgic and fond remembering of the past while the after is one of resolution. This history is commemorated by the Japanese American community, reinforcing these linkages that simultaneously celebrate the nation and a particular cultural nationalism.

This construction of time and cultural nationalism is problematic and limiting because it inherently privileges memory and furthermore a particular masculinist, patriarchal remembering. More specifically, pre-Pearl Harbor narratives of internment remember functioning, nuclear family lives that are disrupted by the events that follow Pearl Harbor.⁴ Internment literature focuses on how changing family dynamics are a direct result of Pearl Harbor, presuming a specific construction of family as whole, nuclear, and happier. For example, when the FBI conducted sweeps of Japanese American communities it is argued that this disappearance of men had a direct affect on households where women “were left to manage the household if a grown Nisei was not present to take over.”⁵ In addition, scholars discuss how the gap between the first and second generations was enlarged during internment because of the disruption of family life that is attributed to the structure of internment (mess halls, no privacy, and the sharing of small spaces). Even the roles of Japanese American men and women are discussed as being switched because internment allowed women to work for pay resulting in men no longer being the family’s main source of income.⁶ In this way, Pearl Harbor not only establishes a historical timeline with which to understand the Japanese American experience but it also serves to

⁴ Grace Hong. Lecture . University of California Los Angeles. 21 Oct. 2008.

⁵ Mei Nakano, *Japanese American Women: Three Generations, 1890-1990*, (San Francisco; Min Publishing Press, 1990). 61.

⁶ Valerie Matsumoto, “Japanese American Women During World War II,” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, 1984, 3.

demonstrate the ways in which the nuclear, patriarchal family (and by extension community) move steadily down (or up) history.⁷

Applying this lens to the interview process allows me to see my grandmother's answer to this particular question differently and provides me with the possibility to seize "hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" that has the ability to narrate the "wreckage upon wreckage" without erasing barbarism for a history of civilization.⁸ When I asked my grandmother, "What do you remember about December 7, 1941?" she became momentarily flustered and eventually I discovered that she had not understood my question at all. She had thought I was asking her about when she heard that Japan had lost the war and proceeded to remember how her father was upset about this loss. When I asked her specifically about Pearl Harbor, she simply replied, "I don't remember."⁹ This confusion and inability to remember stunned me, Pearl Harbor is thought to be an event that all Japanese Americans could at least recognize. Perhaps it is because my grandmother was only ten years old at the time. But then, my grandmother says, "well, see, my mom passed away already at that time."¹⁰ My grandmother's inability to recognize December 7, 1941, as a significant date and moment in her life does not allow her to narrate herself within the dominant internment or community histories. Instead she chooses to narrate herself around a different moment of loss, the untimely death of her mother in 1940. This moment is her strongest memory from childhood, it is one that she can recall with clarity and it is this image of my grandmother as a child that I have always carried with me. When my grandmother was playing at her friend's house after school, the father who had just come home from shopping told her that there was a fire engine in front of her house and

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 26.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy" in *Illuminations*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 255, 257.

⁹ Mae Kanamori. Personal Interview. 1 Nov. 2009.

¹⁰ Mae Kanamori. Personal Interview. 1 Nov. 2009.

that she better go home because something was happening. And so she ran through the ditch that connected the small farms to find out that her mother had passed away. She tells me, “and in that field, that’s what I remember the most, I went running home.”¹¹

The concept of home is itself troubling for my grandmother and her family, and it is this statement and accompanying image of a traumatic moment of loss that unspools a family history of dislocation and dispossession. The family constantly moved from place to place that it is difficult for my grandmother to remember exactly where she was, for how long, and why. In the beginning of the interview I try to place the family’s movements in Los Angeles, following the death of their mother, and discover that they moved three times before being forcibly moved to the Santa Anita Assembly Center. My grandmother tells me, “see I might be wrong because we went to Hawthorne too. But I don’t remember if it was Hawthorne, [that was] the first place we went, or Inglewood to farm, both places we farmed.”¹² I attempt to similarly understand the family’s movements in Colorado, but when I ask for clarification my grandmother becomes unsure and says, “we lived in three different places. It could even be four, I don’t remember, but we moved so much over there.”¹³ And even though her sister can recall these multiple moments more clearly, it is still difficult to map out their movements in a particularly linear way. My grandmother premises her own memories with the death of her mother and then moves to a discussion of her life in Colorado, without focusing on internment. Despite the questions themselves moving in a linear fashion from pre-war, internment, Colorado, and post-war, my grandmother is unable to stay within this structure. Even in the moment when she is unable to recognize December 7, 1941 she immediately identifies her mother’s death as more important which flows into a recognition of how that loss determined her place in the family as caretaker.

¹¹ Mae Kanamori. Personal Interview. 1 Nov. 2009.

¹² Mae Kanamori. Personal Interview. 1 Nov. 2009.

¹³ Mae Kanamori. Personal Interview. 1 Nov. 2009.

It is only when I specifically start to ask her questions about Santa Anita Assembly Center does she delve into her own memories of internment.

My grandmother's sister, Lily can place the movements of the family more clearly because these moves often revolved around farming, a labor she performed from a child to an adult. When I ask her "what was your relationship like with your dad?" she responds that because she was willing to work beside her brothers and older sisters in the field rather than stay at home, he praised her.¹⁴ This validation of her labor seems to establish her sense of place and importance within the family that intimately connects farming with family. Unlike my grandmother who was unable to remember if she moved from Inglewood to Hawthorne or vice versa, Lily can remember because in Inglewood the family grew celery and cauliflower but in Hawthorne the family expanded their crops to also include spinach and green onions.¹⁵ Her position within the family is defined by her labor in the fields that not only structures the dislocation of her family but also her day, forcing her to work from sunrise to sundown. But in Colorado, even the winter and darkness could not provide her with a break from working because her father had a greenhouse where he grew celery plants and she describes how she would have to come home from school and continue to work until nine in the evening.¹⁶ In this way, farming is repressive for my grandmother's sister, so much so that she even remembers not wanting to leave the Santa Anita Assembly Center for Colorado. This statement shocks me and is even upsetting, and then she says: "when they said work, I knew it was going to be hard."¹⁷ Her memories depict a different narrative of farming and family that is not always a nostalgic remembering of the past. Instead it is one that is rife with complicated family roles and

¹⁴ Lily Sawai. Personal Interview. 22 Nov. 2009.

¹⁵ Lily Sawai. Personal Interview. 22 Nov. 2009.

¹⁶ Lily Sawai. Personal Interview. 22 Nov. 2009.

¹⁷ Lily Sawai. Personal Interview. 22 Nov. 2009.

dynamics where they are denied the ability to locate a physical representation of home. Even in the postwar period where family and notions of home are documented as being reestablished for Japanese Americans, my grandmother and her family continue to move. These continuous movements demonstrate the ways in which internment is not *the* only moment of rupture, but how the family is never quite safe from dislocation and dispossession before or after.

Two years ago, I planned and conducted interviews with a few of the Nisei women in my family as a part of an undergraduate thesis project. I remember feeling nervous but also somewhat excited to learn about my family's own history and experiences with internment—something that had been so strategically hidden in the background of our lives. But as I sat opposite my grandfather's older sister, I felt discouraged because she could only answer my questions with an uncomfortable, "I cannot remember." In the end, my adviser and I decided not to use any of the information from the oral histories because there was not enough to analyze. We both could not understand what had transpired during the interviews and decided to take it as a learning experience. And yet, the disappointment I felt troubled me. Why could she not remember? Why did I so desperately want her to remember? What had I wanted to hear? This project is very much a reexamination of my expectations of oral history as a particular rendering of truth, my own desire for memory, and the ways in which the discipline of history could not provide me with the language to discuss my family's experiences. My project is deeply invested in the ways in which the inability to locate and articulate one's experiences within the existing narratives is a type of violence itself, and it is my hope that we continue these types of discussions and reexaminations of our own work.