

Introduction

Historians, Objectivity, and the Politics of Knowledge Production

In 1995, I was going through a box of letters from Japanese Americans to the Smithsonian's Tom Crouch, the man who curated the institution's 1987 exhibit *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution*. Many of these letters criticized early drafts of Crouch's exhibit script for emphasizing a history of Japanese American military heroism during World War II. Accusing Crouch of preparing a script that "borders on [the] thin edge of propaganda," one writer reminded him of a quote from Miguel de Cervantes: "Historians ought to be precise, faithful, and unprejudiced; and neither interest nor fear, hatred nor affection, should make them swerve from the way of truth."¹ If I'd read this quote in 1990 when I first began to explore the history of Japanese Americans, I would have agreed with the writer and Cervantes. But spending five years conducting archival research on and recording oral histories of Japanese American experiences during and after World War II exposed me to a very different view of "truth" and the role of historians.

Consequently, this book is quite different from the one I set out to write in 1990. I began my research convinced that I could be an objective scholar of the Japanese American redress movement. My scholarship would analyze the struggle for landmark legislation that held the United States government accountable for violating between 1941 and 1946 the civil rights of 110,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were American-born citizens. The facts were clear. Japanese Americans had mobilized a successful mass movement. During congressional hearings held throughout the country in 1981, more than five hundred Japanese American men and women

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expressed publicly—many for the first time—the pain and anger caused by the internment. By speaking about their experiences at community events, participating in letter-writing and petitioning campaigns, and lobbying politicians, Japanese Americans altered historic attitudes about internment and redress. This display of communal solidarity and grassroots activism contributed to the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which authorized a national apology and \$20,000 to each survivor of the wartime injustice.

With hindsight I realize that I wanted to document the inspiring story of how victims of racism won justice from the government. My study would join a growing list of books recounting a history of agency and resistance by people of color against racial oppression.² Like many of these scholars, I wanted my research to do more than simply shed light on groups ignored by earlier historians. I hoped to promote a history of protest that could empower Asian Americans today. The history of Japanese American redress activism might provide a model of how an ethnic community could come together to achieve important political change.

Of course I did not reflect on these issues when I began my research. I was forced to reconsider my scholarly agenda and interpretations by the very process of conducting research. It quickly became apparent that the battle for redress was not the product of a unified mass movement. Japanese Americans participated in three separate campaigns that were led by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), and the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR). I thought that interviewing activists in all three groups would allow me to understand the evolution of the goals and strategies of each campaign.

But as I conducted these interviews and became more familiar with the activists in each group, it became obvious that these three organizations disagreed about much more than just tactics. One might expect a bit of rivalry over the role played by each group in the movement. I never anticipated, however, that the history of internment would be such a major source of controversy between these groups. I assumed that Japanese Americans had been victims of wartime racism and had banded together in the 1980s to pursue redress. I couldn't see much conflict in this seemingly straightforward fact. But I learned that much of the rivalry between the groups during the redress movement was rooted in the different views of what actually

happened during the war, the impact of internment on the Japanese American community, and the lessons of internment for the rest of the nation.

In other words, I could not understand the redress movement without examining the development of these different histories of internment. Of course some activists belonged to more than one group, and not all members of one group always promoted the same history. In fact, many of the harshest critics of JACL accounts of internment were activists who joined the league in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet almost all of the activists associated each organization with a particular history of internment. The JACL was affiliated with a history of wartime cooperation and military service. Many JACL activists who had joined the organization in the 1940s and 1950s urged me to recognize that Japanese Americans who served in the military during the war were the true heroes of the community. They emphasized the importance of demonstrating Japanese American loyalty and patriotism to combat the racism that caused internment. They praised the record of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a Japanese American unit and the most decorated of all outfits for its size and length of service. The combat team helped Japanese Americans gain acceptance and repeal discriminatory legislation after the war. According to these activists, it was the history of military heroism that led the government to support the passage of redress legislation in 1988.

Supporters of the NCJAR often denounced the depiction of Japanese Americans as military heroes. Many attacked wartime JACL leaders who cooperated with the government as collaborators who usurped leadership of the community. Instead they promoted the history of Japanese Americans who protested against the government during the war. Individuals who refused to sign a loyalty questionnaire or comply with draft procedures were the true heroes of the community in the eyes of NCJAR activists. They based a redress campaign of confronting the government in court on this heritage of wartime resistance. Moreover, they accused JACL leaders of accommodating the government during the war and during the redress movement. They hoped I would help publicize a forgotten history of resistance during the war and during the redress movement.

Many NCRR activists were born after the war and were less likely to criticize internees for their conduct during it. In fact, the NCRR often paid tribute to all internees, regardless of their response to military service or the loyalty questionnaire. The organization did emphasize, however,

a particular interpretation of the history of internment. Its activists often linked the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans with the confinement of Native Americans on reservations, the enslavement of African Americans, and the economic exploitation of Asian immigrant laborers. That is, they emphasized the importance of viewing internment within the context of a long history of racial and economic oppression against people of color. Also, NCRR activists urged Japanese Americans to support other victims of discrimination. The NCRR's view of redress emphasized the mobilization of former internees and their children in grassroots campaigns and the creation of multiethnic and multiracial alliances. They hoped I would help them celebrate the "power of the people" in past and present struggles against injustice.

Moreover, the way in which I learned about this history of conflict between the groups forced me to reassess my assumptions about historical scholarship. I had to acknowledge that changes in my research agenda had elicited very different accounts of the history of internment and redress from my interviewees. In other words, I had never just recorded other people's histories but had played an active role in shaping their presentations of the past. It became clear that the larger historical context and my relationship with the people I interviewed affected my questions, their responses, and the information they gave me off the record. At the beginning of my research, I asked individuals to describe how they became activists and how redress affected the Japanese American community. Most of these interviews were spent discussing the suffering Japanese Americans experienced during the war, the reasons it took forty years for the community to support the struggle for redress, and the sense of power the community gained from the passage of redress legislation.

Two people I met with not only granted interviews but let me copy their extensive files of redress-organization literature. Thanks to William Hohri and Jim Matsuoka, I was able to read several years' worth of back issues of the *NCJAR Newsletter* and the *NCRR Banner*. Both collections either include or refer to many articles from the JACL's *Pacific Citizen* and several ethnic newspapers. This material made me curious about several articles that reveal impassioned debates about cooperation, military service, the loyalty questionnaire, and redress. Once my questions began addressing these issues, I began hearing stories of communal conflict during the war and during the redress movement.

Recognizing that these interviews were very different from the first interviews I had conducted, I was prompted to examine theories about oral history. Reflections by Akemi Kikumura and Valerie Matsumoto on conducting oral histories as both an insider and an outsider were quite helpful. Kikumura describes the process of interviewing her mother. Kikumura might be an insider as a family member, yet she was also an outsider because she was culturally remote from her mother's Japanese upbringing. Matsumoto, as well, recounts how her background gave her an outsider and insider status among the people she interviewed in a Japanese American agricultural community. Although she had not grown up in this community, she was a Sansei (third-generation Japanese American) woman whose parents had raised tomatoes in southern California and been interned during the war. Consequently, she was able to establish bonds of understanding, responsibility, and affection with the people she interviewed.³

At first I was much more of an outsider to the people I interviewed. Introducing myself as a graduate student of history at Stanford University, and then later as an assistant professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, people could tell from my name that I was not Japanese American. Sometimes they asked about my ethnicity and learned that I was a second-generation Korean American. Later I heard that some people assumed from my name that I was Chinese American. Frequently asked to explain my interest in the history of internment and redress, I often spent the first ten to fifteen minutes of an interview describing my views on the injustice of internment and the need for all Americans to know the history of racism and of social movements.

Realizing what little I knew about the community and wanting to show my gratitude for the assistance people gave me, I volunteered, as did my husband, for several activities around northern California; specifically, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. As I spent more time in the Japanese American community and individuals came to know I would never try to justify internment, they began to share accounts of the turmoil in the camps and the conflict during the redress movement. My being a sympathetic outsider may have made some people more comfortable discussing these topics with me. They did not have to worry that I had family members who had been in a camp or who had participated in the redress movement. Once people understood that I knew about this conflict but was not affiliated with any particular group, they often gave remarkably candid

comments about why different redress organizations presented the history in different ways. In fact, several activists not only criticized the strategies of other groups but also accused them of misrepresenting the history of internment.

My study of communal solidarity during the redress movement revealed multiple and conflicting views of the meaning of internment before, during, and after the redress movement. My research compared how representations of internment and redress by different groups of Japanese Americans, government officials, scholars, and the media had evolved over time. Trained as a social historian, I added an examination of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty aptly calls the “politics of knowledge production.”⁴ Cultural theory provides insights about the construction of history. Michel Foucault notes that “effective” history analyzes “the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power,” and “the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it.”⁵ My book also needed to examine the power dynamics that affects the construction of histories and counter-histories. Instead of trying to discover and record the facts of the past, I had to recognize that all facts are interpretations of the past.⁶ The truth of what happened in history is relative to the standpoint of the observer.

I myself was embedded in particular cultural and political perspectives that influenced my representation of the past. Nothing made this clearer to me than my decision to use the term *internment* to describe the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Ironically, I spend a lot of time in this book discussing debates from the 1970s to the 1990s about the language used to identify the wartime camps. Some groups, such as the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, used words like “relocation centers” and “evacuation” because they were the officially designated terms that appear most frequently in wartime government records. But as the commission recognized, these terms also reflected a deliberate government policy of using euphemisms to mask the reality of barbed wire compounds and armed guards. Denouncing this practice, scholars and activists declared that Japanese Americans were confined in “concentration camps” and cited evidence that wartime officials, Supreme Court justices, and members of the press had used the phrase. They noted that using the term *internment* to describe the ten camps administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) was technically incorrect. The Department of Justice ran specifically designated “internment camps” to confine “enemy aliens” in places like Crystal City, Texas, and Fort Missoula in

Montana. Finally, they argued that the WRA camps fulfilled the dictionary definition of a concentration camp.

Yet although I agree that places like Manzanar and Tule Lake in California fulfilled the dictionary definition of a concentration camp, I personally can't accept this designation. The term *concentration camp* may once have been a euphemism for a Nazi "extermination camp." Now the two kinds of camps are inextricably linked in the popular imagination. During World War II, officials and commentators could say Japanese Americans were confined in "concentration camps" without evoking images of Nazi atrocities. I don't think this is true today, and I think the scholars and activists who insist on using the term know it will inspire controversy because the public associates the term with the Nazi camps. Many people spend a lot of time explaining the distinctions between the American and German camps because they recognize this link and anticipate the strong reaction the term will arouse. Consciously or unconsciously, they perhaps welcome the controversy for providing a means to educate the public about the oppressive aspects of the American camps and to provoke reflection on the meaning of incarceration.

My book documents how these controversies have in fact drawn attention to the suffering of Japanese Americans during the war. Nevertheless, I would argue that for many Americans like me, *internment camp* has become associated with the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II in the same way that *concentration camp* has become associated with the Holocaust. I considered using the term "concentration camp" in the title of my book but then decided it might prevent me from reaching many potential readers. I want this book to be read by the very people who are alienated by the term "concentration camp" and would never pick up a book that promotes the term because they assume it reflects a particular bias. My hope is that after finishing my book readers will have a greater understanding of why people view history in such different ways and why the terminology has been so important to scholars and activists.

This debate about the terms used to describe the wartime camps provides a perfect example of the importance of considering language, power, and politics in examining history. Yet although I appreciate cultural theorists' analysis of history as an ideological construction serving particular interests, I reject the way some scholars reduce history to nothing more than a series of linguistic practices. The phrases *relocation center*, *concentration camp*, and *internment camp* are important because they have such differ-

ent meanings for different groups of people. One can acknowledge that all perceptions of the social world are mediated by language and still believe in the merit of analyzing the relationship between a text and its context. I may no longer claim to be an objective scholar discovering the truth, but I can, as Gail Hershatter suggests, still try to “triangulate the shifting relationship between what was recorded, who was recording it,” and myself.⁷ Consequently, I agree with Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob when they declare that scholars “can admit their cultural fixity, their partial grasp of truth, and still think that in trying to know the world it’s best not to divert the lens from the object—as the relativist suggests—but to leave it on and keep trying to clean it.”⁸

Memory, History, and Identity

I would argue that oral history provides an invaluable tool for analyzing the construction of memories and narratives of history. Human memory is always the product of a collective context.⁹ Social psychologists have demonstrated that the process of remembering always involves an imaginative reconstruction that can be selective and distorted. Several studies have challenged the reliability of eyewitness testimony and repressed memory recovered by suggestive therapists.¹⁰ But oral history, as Alessandro Portelli notes, can shed light on how memory functions as “an active process” in the “creation of meanings.” The way an individual tries to “make sense of the past,” . . . “give a form to their lives,” and “set the interview and the narrative in their historical context” can become a subject of historical analysis.¹¹ The interview may not confirm what really “happened” in the past, but it can help us understand why people subscribe to a particular belief about the past and why they represent that belief in specific ways.

Oral history can help scholars explore how people “connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.”¹² Researchers can ask questions during an interview that address these complex interactions between memory and history and between history and narrative. Most scholars acknowledge the importance of contextualizing all sources, written as well as oral, in our research. We try to learn about the factors affecting the creation of a source—including the background of

the author, the author's possible motives, and the impact of the intended audience. Often, however, the documentary record is so fragmentary or so sparse that we have little choice but to speculate about how the larger historical context or the specific dynamics associated with the creation of that source might have influenced the way an individual or a group recounted an experience.

Scholars who study more recent history have the opportunity to use oral history to address these issues of contextualization. Moreover, using oral history in conjunction with written records allows researchers to compare representations of the past under different conditions. One can compare the memories and histories presented orally with representations in government records, memoirs, ethnic newspapers, organizational material, court documents, political speeches, and scholarship. One can ask former internees why they couldn't confront memories of the war until 1981, and why they now denounce the camps as concentration camps. I can ask lobbyists why there were differences in the ways they described the history of Japanese Americans in congressional testimony and in a community Day of Remembrance program. I can even ask someone interviewed for the second or third time to reflect on how my questions, their responses, our relationship, and our discussion of the past may have changed over time. In other words, one can combine methods from social, cultural, and political history to examine relationships among lived experience, representational practices, and political change.

Oral history can provide a vital resource for scholars interested in the interconnections between personal and collective memory. Scholarship on historical memory has proliferated in recent years. In a landmark multi-volume study, French historian Pierre Nora articulates the concept of *lieux de memoire*, or "sites of memory," which elicits diverse and changing interpretations of national identity and consciousness. Nora notes how periods of rapid change drive individuals, groups, and nations to want to preserve a connection to the past. The creation of sites of memory reflects the deliberate attempt to limit forgetfulness and to establish a sense of historical continuity, regardless of whether the continuity is real or imagined. Nora's definition of *lieux de memoire* thus includes not only archives, monuments, and historical scholarship but also legends, songs, and paintings.¹³

Whereas Nora draws our attention to the multiple manifestations of historical memory, scholars like David Thelen promote the value of analyzing

the interconnections between historical memory and constructions of identity. This research acknowledges that memories can be distorted by selective perception, intervening circumstance, and hindsight. Yet as Thelen points out, the study of how people construct and narrate memories can illuminate the process of shaping and reshaping identity.¹⁴ A study of historical memory can therefore provide new perspectives on the social, communal, and political contexts in which memories are created and modified to fulfill changing needs.

Much of the scholarship on historical memory examines the role of the nation-state in perpetuating versions of the past that affirm dominant institutions and values. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, has delineated how historical traditions were invented to serve the interests of national leaders. He provides many examples of how national leaders invented traditions to “give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history.” Hobsbawm thus emphasizes the powerful role of traditions in establishing social cohesion, institutional authority, and the inculcation of value systems and conventions of behavior.¹⁵

Other researchers note that the presentations of historical memory by national leaders are often contested by other groups and individuals. This seems particularly true for memories of war and other traumatic events. *Commemorations*, edited by John R. Gillis, provides many articles on memories of war and wars over memories in several countries.¹⁶ Henry Rousso documents ongoing controversies among politicians, political parties, historians, and filmmakers over interpretations of the Vichy government in postwar France.¹⁷ There is a veritable industry of studies on memories and representations of the Holocaust by scholars such as Saul Friedlander, Lawrence Langer, Dominick LaCapra, and numerous others.¹⁸

Studies in American history also have explored how different groups select and interpret particular memories of war to serve changing needs. There have been struggles over how to commemorate battlefields as sacred ground.¹⁹ War monuments have spawned debates about heroism and honor.²⁰ The participants, events, and places associated with the Civil War or the War between the States have evoked battles over the meaning of union, emancipation, freedom, race, citizenship, and reconciliation.²¹ Abraham Lincoln, for example, has been reinvented by different groups in different generations as a hero, tyrant, emancipator, racist, and pragmatist.²²

Conflicting interpretations of the end of World War II were spotlighted by the very public battle among veterans, historians, curators, and politicians over the Smithsonian Institution's proposal for an exhibit on the atomic bomb.²³ The tumultuous era of the 1960s and 1970s has received comparatively less attention. But studies on the 1968 Democratic Convention, the Vietnam War, and Watergate also demonstrate the promise of examining how people remember, forget, and commemorate this period of turmoil in American history.²⁴

Several scholars also have shed light on the impact of historical memory on constructions of racial, ethnic, class, and gender identities.²⁵ Many groups have developed traditions that challenge national myths of consensus and assert alternative perspectives. As Stephen Cornell observes, the relational ordering and framing of events and experiences in these narratives

situates groups among events and situates events in larger matrices of relations. Not only does it give coherence and meaning to what might otherwise seem isolated episodes; it places the group at the center of the tale. It specifies the group's relationship to those events, and in so doing it not only makes sense of events; it makes sense of the group itself.²⁶

Researchers have shown how people have used particular narratives of the past to present an oppositional history of the nation. Slave testimonials, stories of the violation of Indian treaties, and accounts of workers' strikes can preserve memories of injustice and resistance.²⁷ Community rituals, such as celebrations of Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, and Norway's "discovery" of America, can provide occasions to redefine national culture and assert pride in an ancestral heritage.²⁸ The very process of reclaiming a history that has been ignored or suppressed by dominant groups can be empowering. Alternative histories can even serve as catalysts for social movements.²⁹

The most ambitious scholarship analyzes multiple depictions of historical memory over a broad span of time. James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* shows how the 1931 trial of nine young black men accused of raping two white women generated a variety of interpretations of race, class, gender, and justice. Comparing the accounts of the alleged rape and trial by the plaintiffs, accusers, lawyers, journalists, white Southerners, and the Communist Party, Goodman is able to explore how white and black groups in the South and North constructed and reconstructed the events over six decades.³⁰ John Bodnar's examination of communal, regional, and national

examples of public commemoration throughout the twentieth century suggests how patriotic values can be reinforced and revised by different groups. Leaders might try to use monuments, landmark designations, reunions, and centennials to foster ideals of social unity or civic duty, but ordinary people could accept, reformulate, and ignore such messages. This research leads Bodnar to call for more studies of the role of public discourse and exchange in the creation of traditions and more analysis of the “multivocal quality of such inventions.” Bodnar urges scholars to investigate how different communities are able to maintain what he calls a “vernacular memory” that reinforces individual sentiments and local concerns against the “official memory” promoted by powerful institutions.³¹

This book explores the interaction of official and vernacular memories of Japanese American internment over a sixty-year period. However, I also try to show the variability within these categories. Different groups of government officials and Japanese Americans presented multiple interpretations of Japanese American history and the meaning of internment. For example, internment advocate Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt and WRA head Dillon S. Myer each gave very different accounts of the history of Japanese American assimilation before the war. DeWitt insisted that Japanese Americans could never be assimilated, and Myer, frequently paternalistic and off-point throughout the war years, believed that they could prove themselves “good” Americans. Myer worked with JACL leaders like Mike Masaoka to push depictions of internee loyalty and patriotism. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars and Japanese American activists criticized WRA and JACL histories of internment and presented new accounts of internee suffering and protest. Multiple and often conflicting histories of internee responses were advanced by different groups of Japanese Americans during and after the redress movement. Moreover, these portrayals were validated, revised, and rejected by various public officials. In other words, there were not always clear-cut distinctions between official and vernacular memories.

Consequently, I analyze how groups claiming to represent the government and the ethnic community constructed and represented histories of internment within specific “memory arenas.” I examine the role of the larger historical context, the particular dynamics of each arena, the backgrounds of the arena participants, and the impact of these presentations of history. In some arenas there were battles between different representatives of the government. In 1984, for example, conservative members of a congressional

subcommittee rejected the report and testimony of representatives of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. There were also numerous debates among Japanese Americans over who had the authority to represent the history of internment. Different groups of activists emphasized particular interpretations of the causes and consequences of internment before representatives of the government, the ethnic community, and the general public. There were times when the history of internment presented within the ethnic community differed from that presented before particular government officials. Finally, I explore how struggles to control depictions of the history of internment affected political activism in the 1970s, the passage of redress legislation in the 1980s, and the creation of exhibits, monuments, and films in the 1990s.

After studying how historical representations change over time and vary according to the audience, I have no illusions that this is a definitive book on the historical memory of internment or redress. On the contrary, this book intends to suggest promising lines of inquiry for other scholars interested in memory, history, internment, and redress. One could have devoted an entire book to a more detailed examination of how one individual's memories and representations of internment evolved over time. There is more than enough material to complete a fascinating biography of individuals as different as JACL leader Mike Masaoka, social scientist Rosalie Hankey Wax, lawsuit plaintiff William Hohri, Congressman Norman Mineta, and redress opponent Lillian Baker. I also could have spent more time comparing the diverse depictions of internment history during a single period of time. One could easily write an entire book comparing the depictions of internment in WRA analyst reports and official publications or the multiple narratives of internment presented during the 1981 commission hearings.

Instead my book explores how particular individuals and groups presented the history of internment in front of specific audiences over six decades. I selected government officials, activists, and scholars who presented influential interpretations that affected perceptions of the history of internment or redress. Of course many individuals and groups were neglected or ignored. For example, this book focuses on the experiences and perspectives of Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans, who were active in the redress movement. I found it quite daunting to try and do justice to the diversity and historical changes in the presentations of even this small but important segment of the community. I hope others will analyze representations of

internment from the perspective of the Issei, the first generation.³² I include some discussion of Sansei activists, scholars, curators, and filmmakers, and I fully recognize that they merit much more consideration than they receive here.³³ However, I do not regret my decision to analyze the memories and views of former internees and redress activists while I still had the chance to interview them. The fact that several of the seventy-seven individuals I spoke with have since passed away convinces me I made the right choice.