



## Our Presence Is Our Absence: History and Memory

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*In this great future you can't forget your past. - Bob Marley*

This morning's newspaper contained a short article that caught my eye. It announced the plan of 100 citizens of Orange County to visit a patch of Arizona desert called Poston. It was there, some 50 years ago, that they were imprisoned with 19,000 other Americans for the duration of World War II. The organizer of the visit to the remains of the camp was quoted as saying, "People want to see Poston again for the sake of memory, even though there is nothing left of the camp there." There are exceedingly high stakes in that memory, for this stain on America's commitment to democracy and freedom has all but disappeared from the memory of most Americans. Czelaw Milosz, a Nobel laureate for literature, has described a "refusal to remember" as the characteristic vice of our time. The wartime experience of Japanese Americans looms over the present like so many others of our monstrosities that it is far easier to ignore its insistent memory than shoulder its responsibility. This is how events like the American concentration camps recede from history, and it's this fading that is at the center of the impressive video tape, *History and Memory* (1991) by Rea Tajiri - whose family was also placed in Poston.

Tajiri's tape draws on an enormous variety of materials, including Hollywood war films, Super 8 reenactments, U.S. government propaganda films, newsreels, Japanese fascist spectacles, home video, 16mm reportage, audio recordings, still photographs, voice-over narration, and super-imposed text on the screen. All these elements are massaged into a quilt-like textual patchwork that often opens several competing channels of information demanding our attention. It easily exceeds our ability to master and understand, in any comprehensive sense, an approach quite at odds with the images and sounds that constitute official history which are designed for easy consumption. It could be said that this process undermines the ontological stability of historical "images" and mimics the structure of memory itself, with constantly shifting tenses, multiple points of view, and secondary revision. 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).

We see this image in the opening sequence, when Tajiri explains, "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." In the course of the tape, we discover that this haunting fragment of memory is all that her mother gave her regarding her experience at the World War II concentration camp. At one point in the tape, her mother fends off Tajiri's questions about the camps while Tajiri's own commentary simultaneously crawls across the screen in written form.

The details of her mother's experience are missing, but the inertia of the emotional force of that pain has continued into the next generation. Tajiri felt she has a memory for this place she had never been to, thus the making of *History and Memory* becomes a way to fill in the missing memory and explore the gaping hole in the history of her family and her country. It could be said that the impulse behind this tape is a negotiation of "ethnic" and "American" identities, for while searching for one roots is very American, visiting the places one's parents have been is probably very Japanese.

This negotiation between who we are (Americans) and where we came from (Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, North America, and so forth) is a process common to most Americans, and watching *History and Memory* encouraged me to consider my own ethnicity and compare it to Tajiri's experience. My family, for example, is 100% Norwegian and when my great grandparents came to America (to escape poverty and/or pursue adventure) they tried hard to cover up their ethnicity and be "American." Subsequent generations have sought to recover that identity and create a memory for it, mostly by isolating, idealizing and annually performing a 19th century Norwegian Christmas. A similar negotiation between ethnic and generic American identities is played out in *History and Memory*, but for Japanese Americans it's considerably more complex. The dominant culture continually reminds them of their ethnicity while excluding them from the

collective memory that constitutes the American heritage.

Before coming to North America, our families experienced a common heritage intimately connected to a sense of place. Our ethnic identity and collective memory were difficult to separate because they were handed down from generation to generation. Now we experience a common history primarily through images and other mass representations; we share a heritage with people we've never met. Memories of events are acquired with no geographic or biological connection. With local oral traditions displaced by national networks of television and publishing, a shared media environment has become intimately tied to nation building (certainly a worldwide phenomenon). While this condition would seem to hold enormous potential for overcoming the inertia of oppressive traditions, it is also frightening for the way it puts us at the mercy of images in this age of mass, immediate media.

In *History and Memory* Tajiri examines these images of history and interrogates their seamless perfection, contrasting it with the messy, sliding instability of memory and privileging the latter through her own heterogeneous construction. At one point she offers a clip from *Japanese Relocation* (1943), the United States government propaganda film in which Milton Eisenhower (Dwight's brother) justified her family's imprisonment by saying, "We are setting a standard for the rest of the world in the treatment of people who may have loyalties to an enemy nation. We are protecting ourselves without violating the principles of Christian decency." Tajiri follows this clip with a string of shots that the filmmakers of *Japanese Relocation* didn't use - the interstices of the image history - and on the soundtrack we hear the comments of her family as they watch the same footage and question its truthfulness: "Canteen. They didn't have a canteen in Salinas Assembly Center. . . . I don't remember this. . . . My goodness, I don't know this." However, *History and Memory* doesn't simply dredge up the old, obvious arguments about the relationship between history and its filmic representation, that images can lie. Part of Tajiri's achievement is that she 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. Tajiri draws on a wide variety of sources: American *Universal News* newsreels (1941), Japanese *Nihon News* newsreels (1941), John Ford's semi-documentary *December 7* (1943), Yamamoto Kajiro's *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya* (*Hawaii, mare okikaisen*, 1942), Fred Zinneman's *From Here to Eternity* (1953), and on-the-spot reportage shot during the attack. Unlike the 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. At the same time, above the din of the soundtrack's gunfire and explosions, Tajiri's own voice offers the following observation:

There were things that happened in the world while there were cameras watching; things we have images for. There were other things which have happened while there were no cameras watching which we restage in front of cameras to have images of. There are things which have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of the observers present at the time, while there are things which have happened for which there were no observers except the spirits of the dead.

Suddenly the images of Pearl Harbor are replaced with a black (empty) screen; the word "HISTORY" is replaced by the word "MEMORY," and Tajiri's voice is replaced by her father, who tells a story about how one day their house simply disappeared. This is one of the events for which there were no cameras present, and that makes all the difference. While the telling of this story ensures it remains in the collective memory of Tajiri's family, it remains outside of history because there are no images to remind us of its occurrence. It's as though it never existed in the first place, and this exclusion from history is very real. At a screening of *History and Memory* in Japan, an elderly (white) American man told me, "It was a fine work but you know no one ever stole their belongings. *That never happened.*" I, for one, was not taught this sad chapter in American history in either high school or

college. I stumbled upon a newspaper article about a gathering at a camp site called Manzanar not unlike the one in Poston this week. I was shocked, not only that Americans were treated that way, but also that no one ever told me. This has implications for Americans on the margins of the dominant white culture, whose condition Tajiri sums up succinctly: "Our presence was our absence."

The memory of the Japanese American war-time experience can be a reservoir of power that can be tapped into in times of stress and contradiction. When, for example, the FBI began questioning and harassing Americans of Arab descent during the Gulf War, citizens criticizing these efforts and asserting their rights drew upon the memory of the American concentration camps of WWII. They were able to do this only because some people have worked actively to make the affair an undeniable and unfortunate part of our American heritage. If only for this potential, a work like *History and Memory* is a precious effort to push the experience of the Japanese Americans into our collective memory - into history.