



AN ABSENT PRESENCE

Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945–1960

CAROLINE CHUNG SIMPSON

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NEW AMERICANISTS *A Series Edited by Donald E. Pease*

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Culture, 1945–1960

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*For my mother,  
Ann Marie Simpson,  
with love for the past  
and the daily struggles  
and*

*In memory of my father,  
Edward Glynn Simpson,  
whose struggles were not  
in vain*

. . .

“Homemade, homemade!

But aren’t we all?”

—ELIZABETH BISHOP,

“Crusoe in England”



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## INTRODUCTION

This book has what may at first appear a paradoxical ambition. It argues for the historical absence of an event that is perhaps the most widely reported and studied single episode in Asian American history: the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. For decades the debacle and devastation of internment have been known and written about by many scholars, who acknowledge that the internment of Japanese Americans remains an unparalleled act in the history of the nation. It was an act that involved the forced removal and imprisonment of almost 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry in the United States, two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth, under nothing more than a suspicion of what the U.S. government deemed “disloyalty.” What’s more, the record of the enduring interest in Japanese American internment crosses almost every imaginable disciplinary and genre boundary throughout the last fifty years of American culture.

Social scientists, both then and now, have remained intrigued by the so-called problem of Japanese American identity that became the dubious rationalization for internment. Many, although not all, of the social scientists who studied the effects of internment in the 1940s were white anthropologists who had never worked in Japanese or Japanese American cultures before taking part in the government analysis projects installed in the camps. Still, their numerous governmental reports and their scholarly articles based on observations of internment continue to offer a wealth of archival information for scholars. In response to residual public interest in the event, two major memoirs of the internment experience were published in the years immediately following the interment: Mine Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* in 1946, and Monica

Sone's *Nisei Daughter* in 1953. John Okada's *No-No Boy*, the most famous novel about the psychological aftermath of the internment, was published posthumously in 1959. During the same period, short story writer Hisaye Yamamoto emerged as a major young literary voice, one whose stories of intraracial conflict and women's struggles greatly complicated the portrait of Japanese Americans' experiences of the pre-war, wartime, and postwar years. The result of all this examination and retelling was that the mass removal and internment of Japanese Americans quickly went from being solely a topic of governmental and social scientific interest to becoming the most discussed area of Asian American history and culture. The much-lauded fictional accounts of Hisaye Yamamoto in the 1950s in effect completed the narrative circulation of the national or public chronicle of internment, and in just slightly more than ten years after the camps had been closed.

What is more, with the advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the liberation movements that followed it, legions of American intellectuals from subsequent generations who were developing the burgeoning field of Asian American studies began to try to go beyond analyses of the political and economic reasons for wartime internment to reveal its deeper socio-psychological ramifications for Japanese Americans.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, while Asian American literary scholars retrieved and took note of the work of Sone, Okubo, Okada, and Yamamoto, historians Michi Weglyn, Roger Daniels, Peter Irons, Yuji Ichioka, and social scientists Peter Suzuki and Richard Nishimoto contributed even more to outlining the impact of internment. In short, the collective corpus of work on the internment in the past fifty years seems to argue for the exhaustion of the political and cultural analyses of Japanese American internment.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the frequent visibility of the subject of internment in intellectual and cultural discourses, especially in the decade that followed the closure of the internment camps, along with the resulting sense of national reflection and recovery, belies a surprising lack of discussion of the function of the national remembering of that event, one that clearly repudiates the Foucauldian concept of discourse and historicity. My purpose here to explore the historical permutations in postwar national discourses about Japanese American internment obviously owes much to Michel Foucault's legendary thesis from the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. There he outlines his intention to analyze "the way in which sex is put into discourse":

To account for the fact that it [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said . . . to search . . . for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate); *I would like to write the history of these instances and their transformations.*<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

Foucault's pivotal argument regarding the "silencing" effects of some discourses (and national or official histories are prime examples of these) applies to popular American discourses on the internment, where the proliferation of information in the immediate postwar years ironically furthered the nation's avoidance of the deeper challenge of the role of internment in our understanding of postwar and cold war national history.<sup>4</sup>

In an important essay, media critic Marita Sturken argues that "the forced internment of mainland Japanese American citizens after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 is an event for which history provides images primarily through their absence."<sup>5</sup> The internment exists everywhere in the immediate postwar as a vacated history, which Sturken likens to the "traces of events for which there have been no camera images" or narratives, because "the cultural mediation of memory" (693) that the event entailed was too disruptive to be borne by conventional historical accounts of the nation. The historical process of remembering by forgetting, of discursive inclusion that works to evade or displace, which Foucault enshrined as a peculiarly Western and modern defense, also characterizes the American recognition of the Japanese American experience in the 1940s and 1950s. In effect, Japanese American internment history is articulated within a simultaneous containment of its meaning, as an "absent presence," to cite Sturken's compelling term, which remains irretrievable. Although the present volume takes its title from Sturken's observations about the neglect of the memory of internment in histories of the national experience of the 1940s and 1950s, and admittedly builds on the by now familiar or, in some cases, disputed Foucauldian framework for approaching the study of historical discourses, it goes still further to try to understand more precisely how these elusive processes of history



and memory have allowed the internment and Japanese American identity to be remembered or reconstituted as an “absent presence” in successive national discourses. This book, then, attempts to “brush history against the grain,” to be compelled by Walter Benjamin’s famous observations on the need to “blast a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework” in order to see how the event is compelled by the conflicting and uneven interests of history and nation.<sup>6</sup>

Wary of simply viewing the generation of historical or public discourses about the internment as sufficient to define its full meaning or function, and equally cautious of assuming that the apparent “absence” of an event in historical narratives or visual media marks its irrelevance or denial, this study approaches the analysis of Japanese American internment as a project in understanding how history and memory are negotiated when the need to remember an event challenges the ideals of democratic nationalism and the narrative unity of nation that historical discourses ostensibly provide. Put another way, I do not ask what happened, which we know all too well as testified by the litany of published works mentioned above. Nor do I simply follow without question Sturken’s compelling assertion that to remember the internment we must do so “in the absence of history” about it, although it is true, as Sturken points out, that we have barely perceived the underlying ideological significance of the historical and cultural narratives we weave about the internment or about Japanese American identity. Instead, I attempt to draw on a series of discursive “instances” when the specter of internment became implicated, either by displacement or engagement, in the articulation of nationhood in the tumultuous postwar and cold war years. Thus, I ask equally how the centrality of internment in some discourses “screens” it from view and how the dismissal or diminution of internment’s importance in other cases may sometimes merely underscore its significance.

Although this project is certainly informed by Foucault’s genealogical method of attempting to disrupt the linearity and unity of historical discourses by conceiving of the past as a series of singular, incommensurable, and suspended events, I am ultimately seeking to reinvest the genealogical approach with a concern for the specific conditions of material struggle against dominant forces, keeping in mind that no events are truly “lost” to national or “statist” history, and that the means by which events are reincorporated is never stable or uniform. Perhaps

the only generalization to be drawn from a genealogical approach is that the disruptive events, or counter-histories, of any period are vital to the production and perpetuation of dominant national history, as Michel de Certeau observes in his essays on historiography. He points out that in the writing of national history “nothing must be lost in the process (exploitation by means of new methods),” a statement that aptly describes the national remembrance or recording of internment, which has been subtly—almost imperceptibly at times—and repeatedly recapitulated in important postwar national discourses.<sup>7</sup> Possibly the boldest claim of this book is that the U.S. postwar and later cold war nation is, in large measure, reproduced and renewed through the narrativity of the internment discourses, a narrativity that only *seems* to exclude what is “too disruptive to be borne by conventional historical narratives”: “Alphonse Dupront has said, ‘The sole quest for “meaning” remains indeed a quest for the Other,’ but, however contradictory it may be, this project aims at ‘understanding’ and, through ‘meaning,’ at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them *scriptural tombs*” (emphasis added) (2).

The “absent presence” of Japanese American internment in the postwar era, and the political and representational struggles that internment has created for Japanese Americans even today, may be another way of flagging the vicissitudes of maintaining such “scriptural tombs,” whether in the faint imprints of past moments or the salvaged personal memories of survivors. All of these, it must be acknowledged, share an unreliability inherent to representation, and as a consequence all resurface in a myriad of forms in the wide-ranging national debate about Japanese American identity and internment. In short, I do not wish to pose either ethnic memory or genealogy as the antithesis or corrective of national history, because to do so is to disregard the dynamic and mutable relationship between them and to replicate the binary of public/private. Any critique of the discursive networks producing national history is inevitably also a critique of the mediation of even the internees’ memories of their incarceration, a critique of that which is understood as the realm of personal or private recollection. These realms of personal memory must also be examined as vital areas in the construction of the history and, particularly in the tense years of the cold war, the urgent need to maintain the boundaries of the national. In the immediate postwar years the historical remembering of the relo-

cation and incarceration of Japanese Americans quickly became one of the most troubling accounts of wartime America, for it revealed “the fissure that opened up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation,” as national exigencies set about manipulating the “instability” of the collective memory of the internment to mark a new phase in the life of a nation’s history.<sup>8</sup>

The manipulation of the United States’ internment of Japanese Americans was, while frequently blatantly racist, by no means uncomplicated by other issues. Although theorists of the nation have long conceded the pervasive connection between nationalism and racism, they are also quick to point out that the inflection of race in nation is, in the words of Etienne Balibar, “a question of historical articulation” that hinges on the recognition of the “polymorphism of racism.” A primary illustration of this polymorphism is the fact that “racism and sexism function together” and that “racism always presupposes the existence of sexism.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly the historical renarrativizations of the internment, or sometimes simply the casual references to it in the nervous decade (1945–1955) that followed, illustrate the “polymorphism” of the racial discourse about Japanese American internment, as the nation’s articulation of its meaning was simultaneously and unevenly affected by gender and class questions that loomed in the postwar or cold war nation and rendered the memory of the internment, if nothing else, “contingent and subject to change.”<sup>10</sup> As a form of remembrance, the internment was often reconstituted by its articulation through other sites of crises in which the memories of nationally sanctioned racial violence or women’s oppression threatened to overwhelm the nation’s need to inaugurate a renewed postwar or cold war present: the history of antiblack racism in the United States; the immediate postwar backlash against women’s visible economic independence during the war; the anxiety about middle-class white heteronormativity; the liberal dilemma of the U.S. decision to use the atomic bomb; and the paranoia of a fifth-column Japanese influence in the nation that forecast the coming excesses of McCarthyism. The inexhaustible reenactments and retellings of the internment have prolonged its suspension as an unfinished story; in the postwar era especially it hovers as an event at once safely postponed and dangerously mutable. In some instances, the merest allusion to internment, especially one that purported to deny its significance as a trauma, might be simultaneously threatened by the unanswered question of what it tries to exclude.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the complexity of internment narratives and their promise for revealing much about the processes of the making of postwar national history, only isolated attempts have been made to parse the formative effects of the politics of internment on the development of historical representations the postwar or cold war nation. The representation of the memory of that event in the 1950s has been obscured in both nostalgic constructions of and scholarly work on cold war America. Although the internment of Japanese Americans is widely known, the several superb accounts of the internment cited above have been generally passed over by historians and scholars of the period, who often fail even to mention it as a watershed event in America's war-time history. This is true even in the case of the historical critiques of the nostalgia of collective memories of the 1940s and 1950s that emerged first from revisionist historians and, in more recent years, from feminist historians as well.<sup>12</sup> Although the work of feminist scholars such as Elaine Tyler May, Joanne Meyerowitz, and Wendy Kozol has often been most successful in exposing the contradictions and foibles of cold war nationalism (offering in the process some of the most compelling interdisciplinary criticisms of U.S. postwar culture), their analyses of how gender politics informed concepts of the nation have focused, until very recently, on the dilemmas of white middle-class women. Elaine Tyler May's pioneering study of gender and U.S. nationalism, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, primarily addresses the popular perception and shaping of white middle-class domesticity. Although Joanne Meyerowitz and Wendy Kozol have since expanded the terms of May's influential approach to include the early postwar years, interjecting an important new focus on black femininity and national differences, respectively, nothing has yet emerged from feminist scholars to take up the central dilemma posed by Japanese American experience in the postwar and cold war periods.<sup>13</sup> This neglect has both typified and reinforced the neglect of internment as a factor in the shaping of the nation in the 1940s and 1950s.

This book calls for more attention with sharper focus on the circulation of the internment as a key part of the project of a critical historicism, as a vital opportunity for critiquing history as a deeply troubled exercise in both remembering and forgetting, particularly when the memory of internment emerges in narratives of postwar and cold war America. Given the general disregard for investigating the complex

politics of remembering and writing the history of internment, both then and now, what remains for most students of the postwar era is the merest vestige of the significance of the event. In the occasional allusion to or the footnoted reference on the internment that appear in most general histories of the period, we witness the scholarly reflection of the broader ongoing national struggle to come to terms with the meaning and function of Japanese American identity in the postwar years.

By trying to imagine a postwar America from the remembered realms of Japanese American experience and politics, the following analyses of key “instances” of discourse about the internment attempt to shed light on the mutually constitutive relationship of postwar national history to Japanese American memory. Inasmuch as internment apparently has been effaced from prominence in a variety of histories and depictions of the 1940s and 1950s, I argue that the national and historical experience and effects of internment remain considerable nonetheless. As the chapters to follow reveal, the processes of remembering any aspect of internment history are also often acts designed to demarcate the boundaries of the postwar nation. Clearly, Japanese Americans, and sometimes merely the emerging notion of Japanese American identity, were vital to the terms of the cultural politics of cold war America because of, as well as in spite of, our collective ignorance of the internment process and its subsequent fallout. The unaccounted, unstable presence of the memory of Japanese American internment in postwar history in fact provides for its formative function in the development of major debates and events of the period.

In recapturing and recasting a series of events and controversies in postwar culture, this volume attempts to fill a critical and historical void, both in postwar or cold war cultural studies and in Asian American cultural studies, by investigating the means by which the social and political disenfranchisement of Japanese Americans during the late 1940s and early 1950s shaped the expression of national identity and postwar history. A closer examination of the broad themes of most conventional histories of early postwar America—whether they include debates about the atomic bomb, the rages of McCarthyism, the crises of racial integration, or the widespread anxiety over middle-class gender roles—reveals that mainstream representations of and discourses about Japanese Americans’ place in the national order were pivotal to the nation’s attempts to negotiate these emergencies, even while the

shifting representations of Japanese American internment tended to obscure this fact.

During the remarkable period of internment, and despite the public's obvious awareness of internment and the major social scientific interest in it, little was written in the popular press about the mass movement of mainland Japanese Americans, primarily because it conflicted with the focus on the more positive and inspirational deeds and causes of the war. The war against the tyranny and oppression of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan often necessitated portraying the United States as a virtual paragon of democratic virtues. But when the internment did emerge as a topic of discussion it threatened to undermine the reputation of U.S. democracy because the internment exposed the arbitrariness of the very enterprise of national history and the myth of exceptionalism that history sustains. One of the few feature articles on the internment appeared toward the end of the war period in a March 1944 edition of *Life* magazine, and in it the emphasis was on the functional, normative aspects of camp life and the celebration of the spirit of many Japanese Americans' loyalty to the nation. Yet, as the inaugural moment of postwar visibility for Japanese Americans argues, even this article in *Life* inevitably could not avoid recognizing the contradictions and incommensurabilities of Japanese American internment; the article was perhaps a harbinger of the disturbing effects of the nation's engagement with the question of Japanese American identity that were to come in the decade ahead.

Although the varied dimensions of popular postwar discourse on Japanese American identity often shared the common purpose of denying the significance of the struggle to define Japanese Americans, the dilemma of what it meant to be Japanese American in an era marked by suspicion of citizens' loyalty, fears about national security, and violent reactions to the dismantling of racial privilege clearly touched a chord in the national psyche. Indeed, as I argue in chapter 2, the difficulty of Japanese American incarceration and relocation as a vital part of the war abroad ultimately left its mark on the formation of postwar policy in occupied Japan. Liberal anthropologists stationed in the internment camps to observe Japanese Americans were also instructed to use the opportunity to develop policies for administering the Japanese after the war. Because of their conflicted efforts both to help Japanese Americans and to use them to learn how to reform the Japanese after the war, the U.S. postwar view of Japan was significantly

affected by the administration of internment. Although there is now little evidence of this influence, it remains an important element of the politics of the U.S. occupation of Japan and, as a close examination reveals, of the politics of Japanese American postwar culture.

Indeed, the entanglement of concepts of Japanese and Japanese American identity was a constant part of the problem posed by the presence of Japanese Americans. Their lifelong ties to Japan and, in the case of the Issei and even certain Nisei individuals, their ambivalent national and cultural statuses often continued to exceed the bounds of national imagination during the years of the Red scare. Despite her contemporary erasure from the history of McCarthyism, Iva Toguri d'Aquino, a Nisei from Los Angeles, was, during the late 1940s, the most notorious target of anti-Communist hunters. She was tried, convicted, and imprisoned for being the legendary Tokyo Rose in the most expensive treason trial of the period, a trial that far exceeded the costs of the trials of either the Rosenbergs or Alger Hiss. While the Rosenberg and Hiss trials are certainly no less important than that of Tokyo Rose in the annals of McCarthyism, my analysis of the Tokyo Rose trial reveals the significance of a residual fear of a Japanese fifth column in the United States to the success of the hysteria of the midcentury Red scares. D'Aquino's story adds still another level of ethnic and gender anxiety to the complex cultural motivations and appeals of McCarthyism. She was punished for a range of political transgressions and feminine excesses, including her allegedly provocative radio transmissions, which provoked anxieties about women's roles and sexualities (both of which were rooted in fears about the subversiveness of popular culture and consumerism), as well as her elusive geopolitical placement, which fueled growing suspicions about national security. In both senses, d'Aquino disturbed ideological boundaries, whether between Japan and America or between traitor and patriot.

So, too, the presence of Japanese American women in the debates about the atomic bomb bothered the distinctions between the United States as a benevolent democracy and the world of the Japanese victims of the bomb. When liberal factions in the United States organized the Hiroshima Maidens Project to bring young, female victims of the atomic bombings to America for corrective surgery, they hoped for a mission of peace that would enshrine the nation as a force for moral good despite the overwhelming threat of the bomb's past use and future hazards. In an era marked by increasing anxieties about American

motherhood and femininity, attributing the recovery of the “maidens” to the influence of the numerous “white American mommies” who boarded them after their surgeries offered a means to restore faith both in the state of the nation and its domestic hierarchies. But the participation of Helen Yokoyama and Mary Kochiyama—two Japanese American women who had been forced from their homes and had seen them turned into political battlefronts—in the Hiroshima Maidens Project clearly upset the notion of American domesticity as a privileged arena of national life. By highlighting Yokoyama and Kochiyama’s participation and subsequent political activism, chapter 4 reveals how the myth of American exceptionalism depended on and was serviced by the management of the postwar concept of middle-class white domesticity.

In the final chapter, I confront the little-discussed relevance of Japanese war brides to the transformations in the popular representations of Japanese American identity. Although prestigious cultural critics such as Horace Kallen debated the crisis posed by the Brown decision in 1954, Japanese war brides experienced a brief and intense “instant” of cultural visibility. As white Americans tried to contain the threat posed by black integration and, less obvious, to overlook the failed terms of Japanese American resettlement, they turned to the story of the Japanese war bride married to the white soldier as the site of the regeneration of belief in cultural pluralism. In doing so, white liberals provided an “obscure place” out of which the illusion of white innocence and democratic ideals could be safely revived. Almost overnight, the coverage of Japanese war brides transformed what were viewed as opportunistic aliens into gracious and hard-working traditional housewives fully accepted by white America. The radical shift in their representation signaled the need of white Americans for a story of racial harmony and domestic success that was obviously difficult to extract from the national histories of either African Americans or Japanese Americans.

Throughout the postwar years, the potential of interned Japanese Americans’ presence in the body politic to disturb the problems of American identity remained a perpetual threat, an irrepressible part of the negotiation between the needs of national history and the “incommensurabilities” of racial memory. What follows, then, is an accounting of the Japanese American presence through its absence, for it is ironically that very absent presence—unseen but nonetheless felt—that made Japanese American experience and identity a powerful force in postwar American history and culture.



## ONE

### “That Faint and Elusive Insinuation”: Remembering Internment and the Dawn of the Postwar

He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart.—John Okada, *No-No Boy*

This epigraph, the closing line of John Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy*, may ironically serve as an apt beginning for the exploration of the discursive production of internment in the postwar period, asserting as it does the uncertain or transitional status of Japanese Americans in those years. The story of Ichiro Yamada, a Nisei whose desperate efforts to avoid the oblivion of history, to keep merely the “faint insinuation” of an American promise in his ken, expresses faith in the dream of America even as it indicts the miserable terms of a dream viewed from “the darkness of the alley.” Yamada, the main character of the novel, returns home to Seattle and a bleak and hopeless situation from a federal prison where he has served out the last years of the war as a “no-no boy”; that is, as one who answered “no” and “no” to questions 27 and 28 on a loyalty questionnaire administered to Japanese Americans in the internment camps. The questionnaire, no less than the initial act of relocation, was a watershed event in the wartime experience of all Japanese Americans. More importantly, however, its use and the responses to it reveal the ambiguous terms and, for Japanese Americans answering the questionnaire, potentially dangerous stakes of the government's attempts to regulate and redefine what it perceived as the “problem” of Japanese American identity.