

Broderick Fox

Home Movies and Historiography

Amateur Film's Re-Vision of Japanese-American Internment

*"To me it was just a home movie. I mostly filmed everyday life. Church on Sunday. A dust storm. The snow in the desert. Very peaceful scenes. Nothing very dangerous. I wasn't trying to spy."*¹

David Tatsuno
*Amateur Filmmaker and
Topaz Internment Camp Prisoner*

*"Finding documents isn't everything. It can be a basis of work but to produce what? If it functions purely and simply as a guarantee, it may even be dangerous. No referent can guarantee a discourse."*²

André Téchiné
Filmmaker

In 1988, the U.S. Library of Congress established the National Film Preservation Board to preserve film deemed "culturally, historically, or esthetically important." Since then, each year, the board selects 25 films to add to what is now termed the *National Film Registry*, consisting of an actual archive of physical film prints, in Washington D.C., but manifested more powerfully and materially in public consciousness simply as a list of titles—works of film popularly equated with more abstract concepts of nationalism, American history, nostalgia, and popular memory.

Of the some three hundred works inducted since 1988, two, in particular, stand out as anomalies. Both are home movies, produced by nonprofessionals with amateur technologies. One is Abraham Zapruder's *Footage of President Kennedy's assassination*, seen, or known of, by

nearly every member of American society in some form. The other, is forty-eight minutes of edited home movie footage of the Topaz Relocation Center, shot with a smuggled 8mm home movie camera by Japanese-American David Tatsuno, during his three years of World War II interment.

The complicated nature of the National Film Registry as a site of official history is indicated simply through the process of locating these two works within the other twenty-four selected in their respective years of inclusion. The *Zapruder Footage* and its "real" presidential assassination was inducted in 1994, along with Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Tatsuno's *Topaz Footage* made the list in 1996, alongside Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, a work most likely inducted for its "aesthetic significance" and not for its "historical insight" into early twentieth century Orientalism.

Incorporation of the *Zapruder Footage* into the official historical record and into popular memory, is remarkable and unique, in that its transformation from amateur film to national object occurred in a matter of hours. Tatsuno's *Topaz Footage* is equally remarkable for the half century gap between its creation and its incorporation into the official historical record, and for the fact that despite its inclusion in the National Film Registry, it is a work which still remains largely outside of popular memory.

Historiography and the practice of "writing" history is a complex and contentious process. Amateur film scholar Patricia Zimmermann gets right to the point in *Reel Families: A Social History*

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of *Amateur Film*, charging that amateur film history has long been relegated to “the garbage dump of film and cultural studies.”³ The fact that only a handful of home movies (four, to date)⁴ have been entered into the National Archives is a strong statement on the extent to which home movies have been systematically pushed to the margins of popular memory—relegated to the basements and attics of the depoliticized private sphere.

The induction of Tatsuno’s internment footage into the National Registry therefore evokes a utopian possibility of amateur filmmaking and its technologies democratizing the inscription of history. Yet to argue there is some inherent, singular historical meaning to be gleaned from the Tatsuno footage, would be naïve at best. This paper will focus on Tatsuno’s Topaz footage as a case study, examining the context of its creation and the range of discrepant ends, towards which his images have been appropriated and given “meaning.” Such an examination raises tensions between “official” and invisible media, private and public spheres, family history and popular memory, the enduring and the ephemeral—asking all the while what place Tatsuno as the producing “I/eye” behind these shadow images is afforded in the mix.

Tatsuno, Amateur Filmmaker

Dave Tatsuno was born in San Francisco in 1913, to Japanese parents who ran the Nichi Bei Bussan, a family owned department store which originally sold western clothing, ranging from jeans to ostrich feather hats, to the immigrant population of San Francisco attempting assimilation.⁵ Working in the family business and an active member of the Christ United Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, Tatsuno attended a screening of home movies at the church in 1936, during which footage of himself and his recently deceased best friend appeared onscreen, taken by an amateur at a prior church conference. The experience prompted his nostalgic response, “Gee... What a wonderful thing a movie is.”⁶ Soon after in 1936, notably the same year Kodak introduced 8mm-gauge Kodachrome color stock,⁷ Tatsuno, then twenty-five years old, purchased his first 8mm movie camera.

Five years later, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the ensuing xenophobic fallout,

cameras were deemed contraband for Japanese Americans, and therefore certainly not permitted into the internment camps where west-coast individuals of Japanese ancestry were quarantined. Tatsuno therefore entrusted his camera to the care of a white friend in Oakland before his family’s deportation in 1942 to the Topaz Relocation Center just outside of Delta, Utah. At Topaz, Tatsuno worked at the camp’s dry goods co-op, under a white supervisor, War Relocation Authority staff member Walter Honderick. As Tatsuno recounts it, Honderick was filming with his own amateur camera one day in the co-op, prompting Tatsuno to remark, “I’d give my right arm to have my camera here.”⁸ The two conspired to have Tatsuno’s camera sent to the camp in Honderick’s name, under the provision that Tatsuno be discreet and not take the camera near the camp’s fence where the guard outpost was located.

As this article’s opening quote attests, however, Tatsuno’s motivations for filming in the camp stemmed more from his amateur hobbying than any real subversive political aims. After the war, he took the 75 minutes of footage and edited a 48 minute piece, distinctly coded by conventional home movie ideology. The first images—the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle, headline blaring “WAR! Japan Attacks U.S.” and a shot of “Evacuation Sale” signs on the front of the family store—lead immediately into the camp. The footage is silent, people are anonymous; smiles, waves, and mugging for the camera lack context or connection with specific identities. The piece is organized around holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and the christening of Tatsuno’s third child—each sequence ending with a shot of sunset over the desert or across the camp barrack rooftops.

In *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, Michelle Citron writes, “The meaning of home movies is in constant flux. This is due, in part, to the fact that we provide a second track, either stories or memories, at the moment of viewing.”⁹ Screened in this original silent form, with no supplemental information or context, and without Tatsuno beside us to explain, the footage (though inducted into the National Archive and proffered as a document significant to American History and culture at large) is, in fact, largely inaccessible.

Unlike the Zapruder footage, its meanings remain trapped in the realm of fleeting, private memory. For the unimplicated viewer, camp life would most likely read as cheerful, scenic, and for lack of a connection to the internees depicted, dare I say it, boring.

Tatsuno himself seems to be aware of this disparity between his images and the experience of camp life. In a statement entitled “Background to Topaz Films” written for the Japanese American National Museum archives, he attempts to provide Citron’s “second track”:

When viewing these homemovies, there are several things to keep in mind. 1) these films were taken secretly. Since I was afraid to take many shots in fear of being discovered, you will not see scenes of the guards and sentry at the gate, the barbed wire fences, sentry watchtowers, etc. 2) These films are in color. They tend to make the scene more colorful than the bleak, dusty and arid wasteland it actually was. 3) These are homemovies. As I was merely a hobbyist who enjoyed taking homemovies, these films were taken without the intent of being documentaries. As a result, I focused on family and friends. Most of the shots look peaceful and almost happy because whenever I took shots of evacuees, they would “ham it up” and smile as you might do today. I did not get candid shots of evacuees in a pensive and dejected mood. The camera shots, thus, do not fathom the emotions hidden within the evacuees: the fear, the loneliness, the despair and the bitterness that we felt.¹⁰

Marita Sturken warns, “The camera image produces memories, yet in offering itself as a material fragment of the past it can also produce a kind of forgetting.”¹¹ In entering the Topaz footage into popular memory as a visual representation of the Japanese-American internment experience, without Tatsuno’s second-track explication of the private memories contained therein, there is a serious risk of the material being reduced to the

status of “screen memories”¹² in the Freudian sense of the term—concealing and screening out painful actualities Tatsuno could not capture on film. The silent text’s surface images are then proffered up to the National Registry, and to popular memory, as a visual representation of the Japanese-American experience, at large.

Two ruptures of significance do occur in the footage. Tatsuno’s younger brother Masateru arrives at the camp in full U.S. Army issue uniform, on leave for his niece’s christening. In a 1997 interview just after the film’s induction to the National Registry, Tatsuno acknowledges the sequence’s irony:

Here we are behind the barbed wire and my brother comes in wearing an American Army uniform, with a guard, to visit his family in a concentration camp. At that time, I didn’t think about it. But it’s a very important shot.¹³

This comment, made by an eighty-three year old Tatsuno, over half a century after shooting the footage in question, underscores that perceptions and contextualizations of a specific text’s meaning may vary not only among the different sites of its appropriation, but also that such meanings are temporally mutable within a single site—here, in Tatsuno, himself.

The second rupture comes at the close of Tatsuno’s edited piece. The film ends its wartime narrative with Tatsuno’s wife and other family members going back up the front steps of their San Francisco home in 1945. But then suddenly, we are back in the Utah town of Delta, just outside the camp. The town looks the same as it did at an earlier point in the footage—train station, main street, movie theater—but a second look at the theater’s marquis reveals the title *Blackboard Jungle*, a Richard Brooks film from 1955, *ten years after* the closing of the internment camps. The film cuts to the familiar desertscape outside the camp. And sure enough, there’s the family station wagon parked in the middle of a desolate dirt road. Tatsuno’s wife and children traipse across the foundations of the now-gone barracks, dressed in summer outfits, mugging and posing for the camera, back at Topaz ten years after the camp’s liquidation.

Tatsuno films the situation as though

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this were a traditional family vacation footage. The playful mood renders this coda somewhat disturbing, for it simultaneously collides two opposing readings—private and historical. The Super-8 grain and smiling family members inspire powerful foreground nostalgia, but the location’s specificity refuses to be relegated to the background, competing for historical dominance in the frame. Yet without Tatsuno to contextualize the images, to provide a “second track,” the sequence remains ambiguous. Rather than spurring political inquiry, the cheerful faces and coded home movie nostalgia threaten to tip the scales, eliciting a powerful and thus disturbing sense of “no real harm done” closure. This coda is not mentioned in any of the supplemental material at the Japanese American National Museum associated with Tatsuno’s footage, nor in any of the popular press coverage at the time of the National Registry induction. Certainly Tatsuno *remembers* the purpose of his family’s return and the memories it elicited in his children and in himself. The problem, as Sturken reminds us in her discussion of memory politics, lies in the fact that, as a nation, we often *forget*.

Ishizuka and the Ethnographic Record

The transformation of Tatsuno’s footage into anything beyond private family document is in large part credited to Karen Ishizuka, third-generation Japanese American, and senior curator of the Japanese American National Museum in downtown Los Angeles. In the early nineties, she began archiving and restoring home movies by Japanese Americans under the auspices of the new museum, positing that scenes from the lives of people of color were rendered invisible by early newsreels and other forms of official visual record and that, in many cases, home movies serve as the only moving visual documentation of how they lived. Home movies such as *Topaz*, she says, “document and present a complex time in history from the point of view of those who lived it. They remind us of the important part everyday people play in the making of America.”¹⁴

The museum’s collection of amateur images dates back to the early 1920’s, many entries accompanied by oral testimonies by the filmmakers. *Moving Memories*, a video produced by Ishizuka



A typical Tatsuno image.

and collaborator Robert Nakamura in 1993 for the museum, profiles and displays the footage of eight such amateur filmmakers from the twenties and thirties. *Something Strong Within: Home Movies From America’s Concentration Camps*, a second tape put out in 1994 (directed by Nakamura and produced by Ishizuka) focuses specifically on amateur Japanese American footage of the WWII internment period. Astonishing footage from another eight amateurs besides Tatsuno is included—in all, depicting daily life in six different internment centers from the Japanese American perspective.

Recontextualized in *Something Strong Within*, the selected amateur camp footage is no longer silent; ambient music by composer Dan Kuramoto plays for the duration, an addition which does not provide explicit information, but certainly supplies a mood, best described as haunting. But more significantly, each segment of footage is linked to its subjective “I/eye” via subtitles which



One of Tatsuno’s sunset codas.

identify both the camp location in question and the identity of the filmmaker capturing each set of images. Intermittently, entries from camp memoirs and diaries are superimposed onscreen, allowing fragmented first person testimonies to evoke a sense of the camps rather than relying on a seamless, totalizing treatment of the Japanese American internment experience. The last such superimposition comes from Tatsuno:

Despite the loneliness and despair that enveloped us, we made the best we could with the situation. I hope that when you look at these [movies] you see the spirit of the people; people trying to reconstruct a community despite overwhelming obstacles. This, I feel, is the essence of these home movies.

Such first person excerpts, the rightful attribution of footage collections to their amateur makers, and even the choice of *concentration camp* rather than *internment camp* in the film's full title, go a long way toward distinguishing *Something Strong Within* from official historical accounts. Yet several of the other internment camp footage collections presented seem more extensive and of more diverse content than Tatsuno's. Working in 8mm Kodachrome, Tatsuno's footage is comprised almost entirely of exterior scenes. There is, in fact, only one interior shot of a classroom, underexposed and on the verge of indecipherability. Some of these other internee filmmakers, using faster black and white stock or 16mm film, managed to obtain interior and exterior scenes of life in the camps, and it is this *life* that is foregrounded over Tatsuno's penchant for nature photography. My point here is not to devalue Tatsuno's footage, but rather to ask why it was his that was nominated to the National Registry. Perhaps the selection of the Topaz Footage was not so much a matter of choosing the most comprehensive amateur image collection, as it was a matter of choosing the best Japanese American *spokesman*.

Distilling A Romantic National Narrative

Is there a link between Tatsuno's exportability as "model American immigrant" and the reclamation of his footage from the realms of the private and



Sakayuke shows what happened to conscientious objectors.

discarded into the National Registry? Tatsuno's footage focuses primarily on the landscape, not on scenes such as Eric Sakayuke's filming of Heart Mountain internees, who refused to sign statements of American loyalty, being segregated and boarded onto trains for the Tule Lake maximum security center.

Tatsuno's footage shows smiling faces of Japanese Americans in Western dress leaving a camp church service, not Akira and Yoshio Hayashi's scenes of Rohwer, Arkansas internees carrying paper parasols and suitcases in a subversive parody re-enactment scene entitled "Leaving for the Camps."

When Steve Legett, spokesman for the National Film Preservation Board, speaks of the *Topaz Footage*, noting that "It's a fairly riveting story,"¹⁵ it is unclear whether he is referring to the "story" told by the footage's silent, uncontextualized images, or the context which Ishizuka supplied on the nomination form—a story of cooperation and kindness of a white camp staffer towards one of his internee employees. Such questions speak to



The Hayashis document a deportation parody.

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the third discursive context under scrutiny here—that of Tatsuno’s footage inscribed within “official American history” and a romantically-plotted national narrative of popular memory.

This narrative is one that foregrounds normalcy, integration, and overt manifestations of patriotism on the part of Japanese Americans over any accounts of disenchantment or resistance. The movement for legislative redress in the late eighties embraced this strategy of appealing to patriotism, naming the proposed reparations bill H.R. 442 in honor of the 442nd regiment of Japanese Americans, who emerged from the war as the army’s most highly decorated unit.¹⁶ Such honor of service, the emphasis upon “loyalty” and “national contribution,” has become the dominant form of emplotment for mainstream accounts of internment and redress, though such a trope only speaks to a portion of the Japanese American wartime community, creating a false homogeneity and unity of purpose amongst Japanese Americans who are and were, in fact, largely fractured over internment.

Hollywood representations of Japanese Internment foreground righteous, white Spencer Tracy and Dennis Quaid figures (*Bad Day at Black Rock*, 1955, and *Come See the Paradise*, 1991, respectively), rather than Japanese American conscientious objectors, many of whom were jailed during the war for refusing the draft. Whether it be Hollywood or the Library of Congress, such mainstream entries are not so much about history and remembrance as they are about the *present*—a construction of contemporary popular memory through a practice reminiscent of the British National Heritage campaign described by Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright:

National Heritage appears to involve nothing less than the abolition of all contradiction in the name of a national culture: the installation of a spectacular display in which ‘the past’ enters everyday life, closing time down to the perpetual ‘extension’ of an immobilized but resonantly ‘historical’ national present.¹⁷

Though Tatsuno was quoted in popular press articles at the time of the *Topaz Footage* induction, reservations and qualifications the likes of those

voiced in his “Background” statement cited earlier never made it to the papers. The popular press articles on Tatsuno, coming out in 1997 at the time of the Registry selection, all underscore similar character points. They speak of Tatsuno’s father coming to San Francisco at the turn of the century “in search of the American Dream,”¹⁸ underscoring that Tatsuno himself was an American-born citizen and second generation Japanese American. They stress his brother Masateru’s decision to leave the University of Utah to enlist and serve in the army. And perhaps the most repeated and underscored refrain on Tatsuno concerns his status as a good Christian. In a 1994 article entitled, “The Star Still Shines,” the *San Jose Mercury* reprinted a Christmas letter Tatsuno and his wife, Alice, wrote from Topaz in 1943 and sent to their white, Christian friends back in California:

Inside the seemingly lifeless barracks, children are happily playing with gifts sent from thousands of loving but unknown friends scattered all over the United States. Here is a little doll sent from a Sunday school class in Iowa. The family next door has received a dozen eggs from another Sunday school class in Salt Lake City. A little tot clutches joyfully at parts of a Tinker Toy set from another little tot in far-off Massachusetts. Here is stationery from a 17-year-old girl in Ohio, and already a thank-you letter is being written with it by a grateful nisei lass of the same age—a correspondence which may ripen into a lifelong friendship...Multiply these Christmas scenes a thousand times, for such touching scenes took place in almost every barrack of the 10 War Relocation Centers scattered throughout the United States...The Star of Bethlehem still shines 2,000 years after through the Christ-like love of Christians all over America. “Peace on Earth” seems a mockery but “goodwill to men” exists because of these people who follow Christ unselfishly giving and sharing. Truly, inside and outside the barracks, a “white Christmas.” Wishing you a

meaningful Christmas, The Tatsunos¹⁹

This may have been Tatsuno's Christmas camp experience, but his conjecture about similar scenarios in all relocation camps and the idea of a shared love of Christ eliding difference between whites and Americans of Japanese ancestry would most likely not sit well with the hundreds of Shinto and Buddhist internees relocated for a *second time* to maximum security centers because of their non-participation in such "white Christmas" scenes.²⁰ The Tatsuno Christmas letter, both in its original 1943 mailing, and more distinctly, in its introduction to popular memory half a century later in the *San Jose Mercury* pushes the social and political reality of internment to the margins, eliding tension and difference and offering instead, a powerful "screen memory" of integration.

Video Counter-memory

"I began searching for a history--my own history. Because I had known all along that the stories I'd heard were not true and that parts had been left out. I remember having this feeling as I was 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."

Rea Tajiri

History and Memory

Perhaps the most significant efforts to counteract such mainstream narratives—to bring amateur footage out of the ephemeral and invisible and into popular discourse—come in the form of autobiographical videos by second and third generation internee descendants struggling to fill the gaps in their family narratives and private image collections. Video works by Rea Tajiri (*History and Memory*, 1991), Ruth Ozeki-Loundsbury (*Halving the Bones*, 1995), and Emiko Omori (*Rabbit in the Moon*, 1999) all focus on the personal, specifically structuring themselves around engagement with an absent or reticent mother figure. Each decries the lack of family documents or footage of their own from the wartime period, and each actively



Tatsuno's images, voiced by Tajiri.

utilizes amateur footage as a central fixture to their formal approach. Their use of amateur footage serves as a site of counter-memory formation and resistance to aforementioned official histories and acts of hegemony.

How does one filmically represent a historical event still outside of popular comprehension, or a family history comprised of fragmented stories, told in snatches by various relatives, for which there are, for the most part, no documented images? In *History and Memory*, Tajiri gathers every image she can find—Hollywood films (*From Here to Eternity*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*);

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newsreel footage (Captain Eric Hakansson's footage of the actual Pearl Harbor attack and captured Japanese footage taken from an airplane); and War Department-sponsored propaganda (John Ford's *December 7th*, Salinas relocation center footage, Office of War Information films such as *Japanese Relocation*).

To such "official" and popular images she adds the few photos her family has (cameras were confiscated in the camps), family possessions (drawings by her uncle, a wooden bird carved by her grandmother, a box of white movie star pictures belonging to her sister, and her grandparents' camp identification cards), and finally, excerpts from David Tatsuno's *Topaz Footage* (though her own family was actually interned in Poston, Arizona).

However, Tatsuno's footage is not divorced from its historical referent in *History and Memory*. As his image of a young girl in a red sweater, skating alone in circles on a small patch of frozen water is played, step printed, and repeated, a subtitle identifies the footage as Tatsuno's and reveals the circumstances/context of its shooting. Even if we have forgotten that Tajiri's family was interned at Poston, and not Topaz, we cannot possibly mistake the footage as Tajiri's own family's private images. Tajiri tells us repeatedly in the video that it is the absence of such family images depicting an experience she, herself, was not alive to remember, but which lives on in a tangible silence amongst her relatives, that has propelled her to make *History and Memory*. But in the context of the video, Tatsuno's images are not only permitted to speak his I/eye but also take on a slew of possible second-order significations, the most prominent being a metaphorical association to Tajiri's own I/eye—a lone daughter skating in circles on the surface of public and private camp memory.

The resulting mix of aforementioned image sources, combined with voice-overs from various relatives, her own present-day video footage revisiting the remnants of the Poston camp, and scrolling text excerpts from a variety of official and private sources serves as a formal actualization of metahistorian Hayden White's "unruly modernist event":

Any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details

or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the "context" of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable.²¹

The result is an inversion (and thus, a subversion) of historical emplotment where, traditionally, an absent "I" shapes a deceptively clear, single line of events out of the infinite details. Tajiri hurls details at us from the gamut of evidentiary perspectives—at a dizzying pace in multiple, often, simultaneous layers—and although Tajiri, herself, is not imaged on screen, her I/eye is clearly enunciated, identified, and ever-present (most tangibly through her voice-over throughout), her personal search serving as the work's unifying property.²² What emerges is a new form of "historical truth" for which subjectivity is not a liability, but rather a foregrounded and pivotal necessity.

Though *History and Memory* could not be said to have pervaded popular culture at large, the impact of Tajiri's video has been noteworthy, resonating world-wide at film festivals and in scholarly circles and leading to great acclaim in such realms for Tajiri, who, among other accolades, received a Rockefeller fellowship soon afterwards. The international visibility afforded to Tatsuno's footage within such circles, thanks to Tajiri and her video, should therefore not be discounted when considering why it was Tatsuno's collection that was nominated over others. Perhaps contrary to dystopian assessments, independent revisionist video *can* have measurable impact upon popular culture and memory.

In *Rabbit in the Moon*, Emiko Omori does not directly credit the amateur filmmakers she appropriates, blending Naokichi's footage of the Heart Mountain, Wyoming camp and the Hayashi brother's images of Rohwer, Arkansas without any clear distinction from other images of the camps appropriated from "official" War Relocation Authority newsreels and propaganda films. And yet testimonial I/eyes are foregrounded, not only through Omori's own search for family memories, but also, and perhaps most significantly, via on-camera interviews with some thirteen different



“Official” emplotment of relocation.

Japanese American internees. The resultant range of personal/political reflections on the camp experience presented by these witnesses mitigates against the very notion that “a” collective camp experience exists.

At one point in the video, Omori plays a clip from a 1942 War Relocation Authority film featuring images of Japanese-Americans getting off a bus at one of the internment camps. (Tajiri also appropriates this same piece of footage in her layers). On the soundtrack, a disembodied male voice intones, “Naturally the newcomers looked about with some curiosity. They were in a new area, on land that was raw, untamed, but full of opportunity...” Omori then cuts to Akio Yoshinaga-Herzig, a Nisei (second generation) Japanese-American woman, now in her seventies. As this former internee speaks from a position of *embodied* subjectivity, the identical sequence of WRA documentary images play once again across the screen, this time, informed by her words:



Yoshinaga-Herzig

We got off the bus, lined up, and we were told which barrack we should go to, to leave our suitcases. Then told to go to a certain area where we were issued a sack, which served as a mattress cover. Told to fill it with hay, which served as our mattress. . . It was very difficult to have my honeymoon under those conditions.

In *Representing Reality* in which Bill Nichols warns: “Subjectivity, rather than enhancing the impact of a documentary, may actually jeopardize its credibility and shift the focus of attention to the fictional representation of an actual person or event.”²³ Rather than “enhancing the impact” of the official WRA documentary, Yoshinaga-Herzig’s subjectivity certainly *does* “jeopardize its credibility.” Yet sixty years after its making (and I would argue, precisely *because of* repeated autobiographical testimonies such as the ones featured in Omori’s *Rabbit in the Moon*) it is the “official” WRA film that would most likely be popularly deemed a “fictional representation.”

By not distinguishing between amateur footage, shot with hidden cameras by Japanese American internees, and “official footage” staged for use in propagandistic government-released works, Omori’s video argues that it is not camp *images* themselves that hold any communicable meaning. For her, it is the mutable contextualization of such images (the “second track” described by Michelle Citron) that becomes the site of subjective power, allowing for new forms of imaged “truth” through subversion, reclamation, and revision.

In *Halving the Bones*, Ruth Ozeki-Loundsbury does not appropriate from any of the amateur camp

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Omori freeze-frames a young boy returning the gaze of (and thus indentifying the absent presence of) an anonymous War Relocation Authority photographer.

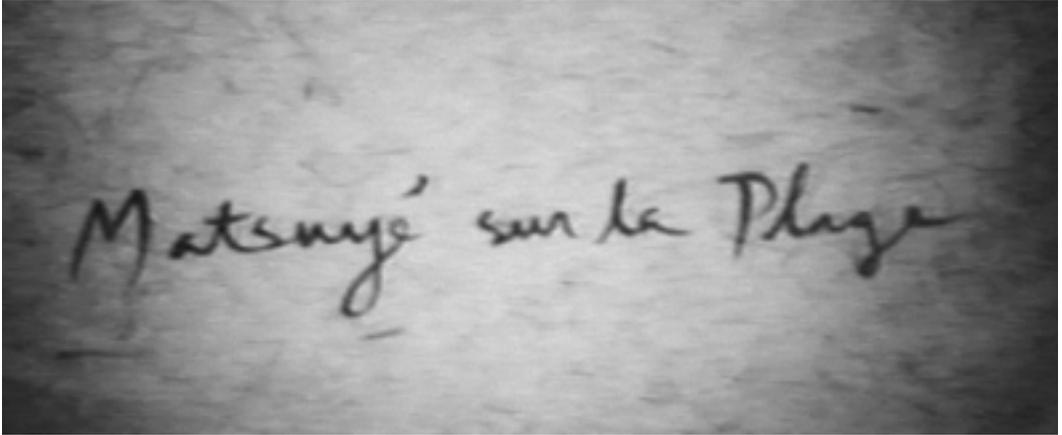
footage collections under investigation here, but her work is very much about home movies. Ozeki-Loundsbury films her own trip to Japan to visit her Grandmother Mitsuye's grave on black and white Super-8 film which she screens for her mother during a subsequent visit to Connecticut. She also includes home movie excerpts from her own childhood years. Ozeki-Loundsbury is a Sansei (third generation) Japanese-American, whose father is Caucasian and whose mother refuses to discuss her Japanese ancestry. Though Ruth speaks little to no Japanese and is far removed from her relatives in Japan, she "looks" Asian, and thus represents an interesting autobiographical case of one whose interior identity and exterior physicality clash. As she tells us, her Japanese relatives, unable to pronounce the "th" sound, call her "Rusu," which in Japanese, ironically, means "not at home."

Ozeki-Loundsbury feels a deep connection to her grandparents, both deceased, despite her mother's refusal to tell her about them. Her knowledge of them thus comes from two sources of subjective historical evidence: a series of home movies, shot by her grandfather, an avid amateur filmmaker, and a written memoir, penned by Grandma Mitsuye before her death. We are drawn into Grandpa Mitsuye's home movie images, as Ruth's voice-over and excerpts from Grandmother Mitsuye's memoir (we assume the second is a performed rendering by an actress) discuss the family history on the soundtrack. Yet midway through the video, we are suddenly wrenched

out of the narrative by a startling revelation from Ruth:

There's something I have to say. Up until now I haven't been 100% accurate. There are a couple of things I made up. . . Like my grandmother's autobiography for example; she never really wrote one, so I made it up from the real family stories I'd heard from her and also my other relatives. I did sort of the same thing with these home movies. I've seen a photo of my grandfather holding a movie camera, so I know he really did make movies. But his cameras and films were all confiscated after Pearl Harbor. I made up these things because I never really knew my grandparents and now they're dead and I didn't have very much to go on. I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them.

Ozeki-Loundsbury's fabrication of Grandfather Mitsuye's home movies may at first seem a blow to any effort to bring amateur footage out of the margins and into popular and critical esteem. Yet in doing so, Ruth reveals several powerful "truths" about the challenges of representing, or even knowing, a past for which there are no records. Grandfather Mitsuye survived the camps but his home movies did not;



Ozeki-Loundsbury's "fake" home movies.

the absence of such evidentiary documents reveals the very historical circumstances which led to their confiscation and silencing. In perpetrating such an act, Ruth not only makes her point about the void in her family history but also questions the notion that absolute "truth" be the end goal when invoking amateur footage. Ozeki-Loundsbury's approach towards amateur footage resonates closely with Annette Kuhn's "memory work" on equally invisible media—family photographs—described by Kuhn in *Family Secrets* as:

Unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work. These are the lives of those whose ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expressions of a hegemonic culture.²⁴

Constituting a sort of "memory work" in its own right, Ozeki-Loundsbury's recruitment of her own childhood images alongside recreations of her grandfather's lost home movies, serves as a point of departure for a journey, embarked upon by both producer and viewer, the end goal of which is not "ultimate truth" but rather the pursuit of "greater knowledge."²⁵

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Do home movies have a place in the historical record? Certainly, as do chewing gum wrappers, depending on the history being told and the methodologies employed by the teller. In *Home Movies and other Necessary Fictions*, Michelle Citron characterizes home movies as *ambivalent*:

They stand in for what is there and what is not there. In their ambivalence they both confess and hide. The home movies are simultaneously acts of self-revelation, self-deception, and self-conception.²⁶

The video works of Tajiri, Omori, and Ozeki-Loundsbury are at once historical, political, genealogical, and autobiographical. They are texts that attempt to grasp the unwieldy history of a "modernist event" while formally mimicking the



Ozeki-Loundsbury's "fake" home movies.

HOME MOVIES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

fragmented, tangential process of memory. Drawing amateur images out of invisibility and privileging them alongside those of Hollywood fiction and government propaganda these three women create works that neither flee from truth nor essentialize meaning. *History and Memory*, *Rabbit in the Moon*, and *Halving the Bones* are texts that defy narrative

closure. They require more than a single position of identification to be understood and more than a single amateur collection's induction into the National Registry to be silenced.

David Tatsuno died January 26, 2006, in San Jose, California. He was 92.

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Notes

1. Dave Tatsuno, quoted in Maki Becker's "Homemade History." *Los Angeles Times* 3 April 1997, B4.
2. André Téchiné quoted in Stephen Heath's "Contexts," *Edinburgh Magazine* no. 2, 1977, 41.
3. Patricia Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xv.
4. *Multiple Sclerosis* (1966), a film by San Diego amateur film club member Sid Laverents, was inducted in 2001. A former vaudeville performer turned aeronautical engineer, Laverents, aged ninety-two when his film was inducted into the Registry, builds his own cameras, is a trick photography buff, and is also an amateur musician and composer. Most recently, 2002 saw the induction of *From Stump to Ship*, an edited amateur work dating back to 1930, comprised entirely of footage recorded by amateur enthusiast Alfred Ames, president of the Machias Lumber Company of Washington County, Maine.
5. Yumi Wilson, "Closing Doors on Tradition: Purveyors of Authentic Japanese Items Call it Quits after 95 Years," *San Francisco Chronicle* 29 March 1997, NEWS: A13.
6. J.K. Yamamoto, "Once Secret Footage of Topaz Now Nationally Recognized," *Hokubei Mainichi* 26 June 1997.
7. More information on the history of amateur stocks and technologies can be found in Alan D. Kattelle's "The Evolution of Amateur Motion Picture Equipment 1895-1965," *Journal of Film and Video* 38.3-4 (1986): 4.
8. Becker, B-4.
9. Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 23.
10. Tatsuno, 2.
11. Marita Sturken, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions," *Resolutions*, ed. Michael Renov and Erica Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1.
12. Ibid.
13. Becker, B-4.
14. Karen Ishizuka, quoted in the program for *Topaz Footage* and *Something Strong Within* screening, Japan America Theater, Los Angeles, 3 April 1997.
15. Becker, B-4.
16. The central argument in Hon. Robert Matsui of California's "Redress for Japanese Americans" statement, delivered on the floor of the House of Representatives January 3, 1985. *Congressional Record*, 99th Congress, 1st Session, 131 Cong Rec E 54, Vol. 131, No. 1.
17. Bomes and Wright "Charms of Residence: The Public and the Past," printed in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, and David Sutton (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 264.
18. Wilson, A-13.
19. Reprinted in the *San Jose Mercury News*, Christmas Day, December 25, 1994.
20. Religious affiliation was a criterion considered on the "Loyalty Questionnaire" first distributed to all draft-age male internees in 1943, and then subsequently to all internees. Those who "failed" were relocated yet again to the Tule Lake maximum security facility on the California/Oregon border. For a concise discussion of such matters, refer to Donald and Nadine Hata's *Japanese Americans and World War II: Exclusion, Internment, and Redress* 2nd ed. (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1995).

21. Hayden White. "The Modernist Event," *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modernist Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchak (New York: Routledge, 1996), 22.
22. Tajiri's visual absence from the work is with one distinct exception. Tajiri has a mental image fragment of her mother stooping to fill a canteen at a water pump in the camp—an image she could not possibly have seen firsthand. A reenactment of this image recurs throughout the video, and Tajiri makes the compelling choice to cast herself as her mother, underscoring the fact that the holes in her mother's memory are also very much her own. At the video's end, she offers up this image as a gift to her mother—a gift of memory.
23. Though Nichols, himself, may have expanded his perceptions on subjectivity (in *Blurred Boundaries* and other subsequent works) I believe this quote is still representative of a pervasive sentiment held amongst film critics, and certainly amongst historians. Quoted from *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 29-30.
24. Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), 5.
25. *Ibid*, 8.
26. Citron, 19.