

Making Space for Silenced Histories

National History, Personal Archives, and the WWII Japanese American Internment

National archives, museums, and libraries function as social memory banks for national identity. What a nation preserves, where a nation preserves it, and how accessible it is, not only reveals what a nation values and how it sees itself, but it also reflects how a nation desires to be seen. The process of constructing a national identity, or what could also be called a national history, remains problematic, because it tends to conceal the privileging of certain records of memory over others in an effort to form a concise and cohesive linear narrative. The idea of a singular national history is by definition hegemonic history; it is a history that privileges, reflects, and justifies the social values of those in power through archival records. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook astutely connect archives, power, and collective social memory, “archives have their origins in the information needs and social values of the rulers, governments, businesses, and individuals who establish and maintain them” (12). As Schwartz and Cook point out, archives were founded by empowered institutions and individuals and consequently come to reflect the social values of the status quo. As archival records are the foundation on which a history is written, revised, and maintained, national history rests on records that not only constitute the national archive, but also are accessible to researchers and the public.

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Composition and access are two important dynamic aspects of the archive that change how national history is conceived and taught. Composition especially challenges the idea of a singular history. Questions about who composes and can contribute to the archive, as well as, who has access to those archival records reveals how archives are constructed not only by society, but also by time. Schwartz and Cook emphasize the importance of recognizing that archives are “socially constructed institutions” which “shape our notions of history, identity, and memory” (8). The construction facet of the archives enables that institution to adapt to shifts in power dynamics over time. This adaptability over time enables the archive to help revise, or possibly to expand, national history by collecting and preserving records from marginalized groups. A singular national history, then, is in effect false and porous, because it is always vulnerable to time, the relation of marginalized groups to political power over time, and the social histories of those marginalized groups.

However, a hegemonic national history, validated by national archival records, continues to influence how history is conceived of and taught. When marginalized groups have not been recognized by national history, the construction and maintenance of personal archives enables those groups to challenge the validity of, and possibly change, the taught hegemonic national history. In her article titled “Ethics and the Archive: ‘An Incessant Movement of Recontextualization,’” Verne Harris deconstructs the idea of the archive as a static institution of the empowered. Instead, Harris contends that the archive is an institution that calls for an ethics of social justice that involves:

a fundamental opening—an opening to the voice of ‘the other,’ to a haunting of context, to the knocking of the stranger, to Derrida’s ghosts that flit behind, through, and under the concrete presence of power. (352)

Here, Harris (a South African archivist) puts her own spin on Derrida’s ghosts; spirits that vocalize the suppressed histories of marginalized peoples. Through metaphor, she depicts the ghosts haunting the content of dominant historical narrative. She names the archive as the place of the haunting and asks the archivist to listen to the echoes of those voices who have not been, and are not, recognized in hegemonic history, and yet are felt in the silence that surrounds that historical narrative. Harris’ ethics of the archive focus on the intersection of archival record, social memory, and social justice. Her ethics of haunting bring to light how the privileged, recognized national archival record influences which personal archival record receives national recognition. Her archive theory can also account for the important role temporality plays in the opening of suppressed, and eventually recognized, marginalized histories. National archives are haunted by the silenced gaps of marginalized people;

gaps that can be filled out and reinterpreted through the ghosts that inhabit the personal archive of marginalized peoples.

While a hegemonic national history is at best an easy way of learning the dates and well-known political figures in a nation's history, that history becomes especially troubled when examining periods of social inequality and violence against marginalized minority groups. The Japanese-American internment during World War II is one such point of trouble in United States history. The personal archives and internees' testimonies exemplify the major role that social memory played in bringing about an apology and reparations from the United States Government for the Japanese-American Internment nearly forty years after the event. Moreover, after 1988 the personal archives of Japanese-American internees were included in the national archives and served as the foundation of scholarship and pedagogy about the internment. The lack of public awareness about access to archival record, that records the everyday lives of minority people living through a shameful period of time, skews the commemoration of that period through past and contemporary politics. The personal experience of marginalized people becomes represented by a singular historical figure, leaving other personal histories to haunt the background. How does national history record and depict a shameful historical period? How does the national archival record affect how the period is remembered? And how do personal archives open, change, and empower marginalized people in the face of the national historical narrative?

Through federal government records, personal archival records, and articles about a home movie titled *Topaz*, I will construct how personal archives occupied the silences in the hegemonic national history about the World War II Japanese-American internment. I contend that Verne Harris' ethics of social justice in the archive offers a helpful theory for an examination about the relationship between personal and national archives. As national history justifies its narrative through archival record, I will also argue that the relationship between personal and national archives transforms how researchers' conceive national history from a singular history to multiple histories. The story of Japanese-American redress for WWII speaks to Harris' ghosts in the archive and breaks open the old hegemonic history of the internment through the multiple voices of Japanese-American's personal archives.

Government Documents of the 1940's

Until the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, the history of the World War II Japanese-American internment was largely told from the easily accessible perspective of government officials and newspaper reporters. What was accessible to researchers was found in the national archives, which contained commissioned photographs and documents written by the War Relocation

Authority (WRA), the government organization in charge of setting policies and running the internment camps. Documents from the legislative and executive branches, and newspaper articles addressing the internment were also accessible through the national archives. These documents exemplify how hegemonic history privileges the perspective of empowered government officials and journalists and silence the lived personal accounts of marginalized communities through archival record. In her article “Revisiting Manzanar: A history of Japanese American internment camps as presented in selected federal government documents 1941-2002,” Kimberley Roberts Parks focuses on the how the tone of the War Relocation Authority’s documents about the internment changed over time (590). Parks’ article illuminates how the tone of governmental documents fluctuated due to mixed popular opinion about the internment:

The reader can also infer from these documents that both pro- and anti-internment camp advocates in Congress, the press, and the citizenry frequently attacked the agency [WRA] for either coddling or mistreating the evacuees. No direct charges or criticisms are quoted, but reasons for policies are presented in careful detail. (580-581)

It is important to note that the WRA documents were written with the current opinions of the general public, which obviously did not include the Japanese-American community, in mind. The documents Parks references here were the official governmental record of the policies and procedures of the Japanese-American internment during 1942, at the beginning of the internment. The government, and also the press, used euphemistic language to describe the entire internment that helped frame WRA’s policies and procedures in a less morally ambiguous light.¹ The government documents’ understated language also emphasizes the close scrutiny WRA received from elected officials, the press, and the public, because at that time the public did not know much about life inside of the internment camps. That language used by WRA also had dire consequences for the public’s conception and conversation about the internment. Not only did the American press use the same terms as the federal government, but in doing so it also helped lay the framework of the Japanese-American internment in a completely inaccurate way. Using a word such as “evacuee” instead of “internee” framed the WRA program in context of the Japanese-Americans fleeing towards something rather than being involuntarily incarcerated by their own government.

The softened language found in WRA documents tended to defend extremely ethically ambiguous WRA policies such as opening “Evacuee Property Offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle in order to assist with large item storage or serve as real estate agent for the evacuees” (580), as

well as the February 1943 policy that “required ‘registration’ of all Japanese American men over 17 years of age in the camps for either Army enlistment, relocation leave as a worker, or ‘segregation’” (581).² While documents from the legislative and executive branches of government at times critique certain WRA policies they continued to support the internment camps. Parks’ article shows the skewed perspective that federal governmental documents bring to the history of the Japanese-American internment. The language used in the government documents, such as referring to the Japanese-American internees as “evacuees,” distances and masks the civil liberties that were violated with the formation and execution of the camps. What official government records give researchers is a history of governmental support for the Japanese-American internment with some instances of contestation over policy in the camps. The government records shadow the emotional, material and physical consequences of WRA policies and decisions experienced by the Japanese-American internees.

While governmental documents gave historians and researchers a history of the internment from the perspective of governmental officials, what haunts the language of those documents are the silenced histories of the Japanese-American internees. Harris’ ethics of the archive comes into play within the detailed reasoning and soft language that defends WRA’s policies. The embodied experiences, letters, photographs, and films of the Japanese-American internees haunt the hegemonic history of the internment as written by the federal government documents. Harris calls for a social justice in the archives based on three imperatives (351). For the purposes of thinking about the how the call of social justice haunts the archive and the archivist, Harris’ second imperative is the most relevant when thinking about the composition of the national archive that automatically includes government documents and selects records from citizens’ personal archives:

Secondly, the structural pull in all recordmaking is toward the replication of existing relations of power, with the attendant exclusions, privilegings, and marginalisations. Archivists cannot avoid complicity, for institutionally (and often legally) they are positioned within structures of power. But we can work against its pull and for me it is a moral imperative to do so. (351-352)

Harris astutely points out that the archive and the archivist work within a power structure that tends to work toward maintaining and supporting current power relations. This power structure is apt to take the privileging and inclusion of certain records and exclusion of others as a given. While Harris acknowledges that the archivist cannot avoid some complicity with the status quo of the prevailing power structure, she also recognizes that the archivist

has some agency to work against those power dynamics due to their privileged position within the power structure. Harris calls archivists to use their agency within the archive to listen to the voices of the ghosts who have been left out of official records. In the face of the silence surrounding the Japanese-American internees experience in the internment camps, Harris' archival ethics calls for the archivist to include personal documents about the Japanese-American internment written and recorded by Japanese-American internees. It asks the archive to create a space for the voices of the Japanese-American internees and to allow those internees to reclaim the terms of the internment from the euphemistic language used by federal government documents.

Government Documents from the 1980's and the Redress Movement

With the rise of the Asian-American movement during the 1970's, the silent haunting of official government documents by the excluded voices of the Japanese-American internees came into full voice and visibility through the organization and involvement of a younger generation of Japanese-Americans. Beginning in the late 1970's, the two organizations, the Japanese-American Citizens League (JACL) and National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), started to campaign for redress (*Chronology of WWII Incarceration*). On July 31, 1980, Congress established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) to review the impact of the internment on Japanese-American internees (*Public Law 96-317*). CWRIC conducted 20 days of hearings all over the United States and heard testimony from 750 internees (Parks 586). In December 1982, the Commission brought the first half of its report titled *Personal Justice Denied—Part I* before Congress (*Personal Justice Denied—Part I*). As Parks explains in her article, the report compared the internment of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast “with the wartime treatment of Hawaiians, Germans and German Americans, and the Japanese in Latin America” (586). This comparison and the testimony of 750 internees helped reframed the dialog about the WWII internment of Japanese-American citizens and Japanese-American resident aliens.³

The internment was no longer told through the euphemistic language of governmental officials, but instead through the words of the internees remembering life in the camps. Unsurprisingly the evacuees' testimonies offer a very different perspective of the camps, differences that the Commission emphasized throughout *Personal Justice Denied—Part I*. For example the report emphasized how the process of “relocation” and “evacuation” dehumanized internees by literally labeling families along with their possessions:

Henry went to the Control Station to register the family. He came home with twenty tags, all numbered 10710, tags to be attached to each piece

of baggage, and one to hang from our coat lapels. From then on, we were known as Family #10710. (11)

The inclusion of this internee's testimony in the report not only gives voice to the dehumanizing effects of "relocation," but it also gave that internee the ability to put a human face on a dehumanizing process. The testimonies included in the Commission's report opened a space for the voices of the Japanese-American internees in the national archives through an official government document. Those long excluded voices appear in the archives through the hundreds of transcribed testimonies collected by CWRIC and included with the report. Nearly forty years after the WWII Japanese-American internment, the documented version of national history was making space for marginalized personal histories.

Through internee testimony and comparing the U.S. decision to incarcerate Japanese-American citizens and Japanese-American naturalized aliens with the decisions of countries in Latin America with similar populations, the Commission's report cast the justification for the WRA program and the reasoning behind Executive Order 9066⁴ in a dubious light. The second half of the Commission's report, *Personal Justice Denied—Part II: Recommendations*, was brought before Congress on July 16, 1983 (*Chronology of WWII Incarceration*). Along with a formal apology from the President on behalf of the nation to the Japanese-American community, the second half of the report suggested that Congress, not only give each of the surviving Japanese-American internees \$20,000 in reparations, but it also suggested that Congress create "a fund for educational and humanitarian purposes" (*Personal Justice Denied—Part II: Rec. 9*). The report expands upon the purpose of the recommended educational and research fund, which could include a foundation about civil liberties, with an eye on how the report changes the history of the internment:

The recommended foundation might appropriately fund comparative studies of similar civil liberties abuses or of the effect upon particular groups of racial prejudice embodied by government action in times of national stress; for example, the fund's public educational activity might include preparing and distributing the Commission's findings about these events to textbook publishers, educators and libraries. (9)

The last part of the Commission's recommendation acts as a reminder that the Japanese-American internees' stories had been left out of textbooks, history education and libraries. By including an educational component in their redress recommendation, the Commission was aware that their report contained important historical perspectives on the internment that had been ignored in the national historical narrative. While the existence of the report guaranteed

an official federal record of the Commissions “findings” about the internment, the educational recommendation also sought to give the American public easier access to the “findings” in the report as well. Though the report’s perspective also brought a biased point of view to the history of the Japanese-American internment, it helped open the door to redress and, with redress, the collection of and access to the personal histories of the internees.

The Civil Liberties Act of 1988

The recommendations in the Commission’s report heavily influenced the Act that gave redress to the Japanese-American internees. On August 10, 1988, President Ronald Regan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 that included most of the recommendations in CWRIC’s 1983 report. The Act included individual reparations of \$20,000 to each of the surviving internees or their descendants, a formal apology on behalf of the citizens of the United States to the Japanese-American community, and money donated to the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund (Parks 588). With the signing of the Act, the national archival record of the Japanese-American internment expanded beyond the boundaries of the federal government documents of the 1940’s and the physical space of the archive to include the sites of the internment. The money donated to the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund helped turn the internment camp sites into National Historical Landmarks where there were “several comprehensive studies of the internment camps conducted by government and academic historians (Parks 588). The Act also opened a space for the creation of a museum and archive solely dedicated to collecting and making the individual and communal histories of the Japanese-Americans accessible to the public. Founded in 1985 as a private, non-profit museum, the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) is “the first museum in the United States dedicated to sharing the experience of Americans of Japanese ancestry as an integral part of U.S. history” (*Hist. of the Japan. Amer. Nat’l. Museum*). The museum’s mission statement emphasizes the place of Japanese-Americans as a part of U.S. History; it is a statement that recognizes how national history contains many experiences that need to be told alongside each other. The museum contains collections that focus on individual internees as well as a main collection that reflects on the collective experience of the internment for Japanese-Americans (Hist. of the Japan. Amer. Nat’l. Museum). Not only does the museum maintain and make accessible several collections of personal documents from Japanese-American internees, but it also contains a moving image archive that helped a small film about the internment gain recognition in a prestigious national archive.

Topaz

The story of *Topaz*' rise to national recognition emphasizes the important role personal records can play in opening national history to include silenced histories. *Topaz* is a home video composed of video clips illegally shot by Dave Tatsuno during and after his incarceration at the Topaz, Utah internment camp (Means "Film Shot by WWII Internee..."). Told through Tatsuno's voiceover, the *Topaz* footage depicts life in the Topaz internment camp through the everyday events of Tatsuno's family and friends (Means "Film Shot by WWII Internee..."). Tatsuno's video footage is a rare and valuable record of Japanese-American life inside the internment camps. Many Japanese-American internee records contain objects from, and letters written in, the camps. Few of those records include photographs of the camps taken by internees, because as Ishizuka and Zimmerman explain, "cameras, as well as radios, were considered contraband and were to be turned into the authorities" (129). Ishizuka and Zimmermann contextualize the uniqueness and importance of the *Topaz* footage:

Tatsuno's footage is especially poignant and historically significant, since the very act of shooting in the camps defied this government-sanctioned embargo and gave voice and image to the silenced and the absent. (129)

The very existence of Tatsuno's footage is a statement of empowerment not only for Tatsuno, but also for the Japanese-American internees who appear in his footage. Tatsuno's footage of the internees in the camps offers a perspective in direct contrast to the federal government documents found in the national archives. Until the 1990's when Karen Ishizuka and Robert Nakamura, the co-founders of the JANM's Moving Image Archive, contacted Tatsuno, the presence of internee footage of the internment in research accessible archives was non-existent (Ishizuka and Zimmermann 129). Ishizuka and Nakamura's efforts to preserve and screen all of Tatsuno's footage of the Topaz internment camp at the JANM's Moving Image Archive led to wider recognition and use of the footage (Ishizuka and Zimmerman 132). Ishizuka especially promoted the film through film festivals and speaking to the National Film Preservation board about the importance of preserving home videos for film and national history (Ishizuka and Zimmerman 135). While the participation of JANM and the testimonies of Ishizuka helped gain much needed attention for *Topaz*' which helped bring about its induction into the National Film Registry, there were important technological and communal factors that also made *Topaz*' induction possible.

Without the technological advancements in photography and home videos during the 1920's, as well as Tatsuno's decision to share his home videos with members of the Japanese-American community, the story of *Topaz* would not exist. From Katz and Gandel's technological perspective, *Topaz* was also able to exist, because it occurred during the development of photography when the amount of information being produced was shifting from scarcity to abundance (223).⁵ In his newspaper article about the induction of *Topaz* into the 1996 National Film Registry, Sean P. Means perceptively notes that "home-movie equipment was first marketed in 1924" and it was a means for "Japanese-Americans to send their recorded images to their relatives in the old country" ("Film Shot by WWII Internee..."). The development and cheaper production of cameras and film enabled Tatsuno to shoot and develop his film despite being incarcerated. Even though home video equipment and film was even less expensive by the beginning by the 1940's, it became difficult for Tatsuno to buy and develop footage once he was inside of the internment camp during wartime. After a WRA friend helped sneak Tatsuno's camera into the internment camp, Tatsuno notes:

"So I had my camera—but how about movie film and color film—when films were so scarce because of wartime shortages? As a buyer for the Topaz Co-op I made three buying trips back East [...] once I got the rolls into camp, processing was a problem [...] I had the films mailed outside the camp from Salt Lake City and returned to my brother [...] he would then give the processed films to someone coming into camp. (Ishizuka and Zimmermann 130)

Tatsuno's film stock story attests to the communal effort that went into the acquisition and development of Tatsuno's footage inside the Topaz internment camp. The road to recognition of that footage was also large paved by the communal effort of several Japanese-American organizations. Tatsuno shared some footage, which would become part of *Topaz*, at his local JAACL and YMCA meetings during the rise of the Asian-American movement in the late 1970's to early 1980's (Ishizuka and Zimmerman 132). The recognition, collection, and preservation of *Topaz* might not have happened without those communal screenings for that was how Ishizuka and Nakamura learned about Tatsuno's footage (133). The rise of the cheaper camera and the communal promotion of the *Topaz* footage helped the footage get attention and recognition from the JANM's Moving Image Archive that, in turn, campaigned for the home video's recognition in the national film cannon.

When *Topaz* was inducted into the National Film Registry on December 11, 1996 not only did it become the second home video to be selected for that honor, but it also became the first film created by a member of an ethnic minority and

promoted by a grassroots movement to be accepted into the Registry (126). The selection of *Topaz*, and the press generated by that selection, exemplified not only the lack of films in the Registry by ethnic minorities, but also the disparity in budgets and promotional power between *Topaz* and the commercial studio productions also selected by the Registry.⁶ The video's selection also throws light on the important differences in content between big budget fictional commercial films and personal home videos. As Ishizuka sharply notes, "*Topaz* provides an antidote to the glorification of World War II as the last great, honorable war fought on distant shores, as found in movies like *Pearl Harbor* and *Saving Private Ryan*" (137). Tatsuno's home video not only helps encourage a shift in historic narrative from a picture U.S.'s heroic international involvement in WWII to the problematic effect of the war on civil liberties during wartime, but it also turns the spotlight on the disproportionate number of historic fictional films created by commercial studios that promote a singular national narrative about WWII and receive national recognition for that hegemonic narrative.

The induction and recognition of *Topaz* in the National Film Registry opens the door for more historically marginalized narratives to enter and fill out the silenced spaces of national history. The home video's induction is important not only because it speaks from a historically silenced space, but—in doing so—it also sheds light on other gaps of silence in national history. *Topaz*'s road to national recognition speaks to the important and privileged role the archivist plays in bringing out individual narratives that shape national history. *Topaz*' induction into the National Film Registry asks archivists to continue to listen to Derrida's archival ghosts. For the voices of the historically silenced often tell some of the most important histories of a nation.

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NOTES

- 1 It should be noted that the language used to describe the internment has been a highly contested subject for scholars writing about the internment. Government documents about the Japanese-American internment used the terms "evacuation centers," "evacuees," and "relocation" to describe Japanese-American internees and WRA policies and procedures. I chose to follow Japanese-American scholars and internees who have written about the internment and use the terms: "Internment camp" and "internees" (see article by Ishizuka and Zimmerman and *Topaz* by Dave Tatsuno). Parks uses the government terms and the Japanese-American terms interchangeably in her article.
- 2 Part of the registration policy required internees to give an oath of loyalty to the United States of America. If internees refused to give a loyalty oath they were segregated from the other evacuees to a camp in Tule Lake that was surrounded by a line of tanks (Parks 581).
- 3 It should be noted that at the time of the internment immigrants from Japan were banned from citizenship. Thus, first generation Japanese-Americans, called the Issei, were considered resident aliens. Their children, second generation Japanese-Americans called the Nisei, were American citizens.

- 4 Executive Order 9066 was the order signed by President Roosevelt that allowed the Secretary of State and military the ability to exclude resident aliens and citizens from “designated areas” to “provide security against sabotage, espionage and fifth column activity” (*Personal Justice Denied—Part I: Summary 2*). The fear of fifth column activity was used as justification for the internment.
- 5 Richard N. Katz and Paul B. Gandel explain how information technology changed the very nature of the archive in their article, “The Tower, the Cloud, and Posterity: Documenting in a Digital World.” Katz and Gandel name the shift from an era of information scarcity to an era of information abundance, “Archivy 3.0” (221). For Katz and Gandel, “Archivy 3.0” is defined by the rise of photography and xerography that “made it possible for an enormous number of people to share identical knowledge in different places at roughly the same time” (223). The possibilities that Katz and Gandel mention also made it possible for ordinary people to create and collect their own photographs and written material. The creation and preservation of the home video footage that would become *Topaz* can partly be attributed to the changes in information technology that account for cheaper cameras and film in the 1940’s.
- 6 Some of the other films inducted into the National Film Registry in 1996 included: *M*A*S*H*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *The Graduate*.