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# Japanese North Americans, War, and Communal Healing through Literature: Internment Memory as an Ascent in Meaning and Beauty

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To define ourselves as Americans, we often like to invoke the still-potent idea, inherited from the Puritans, of a "city upon a hill." Steeped in a mythic discourse on our earliest conception of America as an elect nation, this phrase envisions the community at large as "the pilot society for the world" engaged in a noble experiment of innocence, consensus, justice, and freedom for all, while driving to achieve myriad forms of greatness (Appleby 426). But when this community at large is found fallen from the ideal conception of itself and conducts itself contrarily to its communal responsibilities towards its smaller communities of citizens – for instance, in the form of the forced removal, resettlement, confinement, or migration of these citizens from their own native soil - how do the members of that smaller community endure and survive such a lapse before they can re-form and finally heal themselves?

Yaron Ezrahi has defined the attestive gaze as an act of epistemology "by showing and observing examples in a world of public facts" (73). The attestive gaze questions what kinds of experience and whose knowledge can claim witness to objectivity and universality, and what evidence and testimonials count as poetic truths. As a form of generating knowledge, this gaze allows our ascent to a new meaning and a truth that will redefine both individual and particular community's experiences and memories. Moreover, this ascent allows us to open up what Michel Foucault calls "local criticism" that lead to fresh ways to remember and write about our past (81). In Foucault's terms, "local" does not mean geography but a designation of a particular collective memory of the past that once awakened forces a readjustment in how we write about and remember our past (97-98).

With special focus on the Japanese North American community and its lives during WWII, I propose that Ezrahi's and Foucault's critical views help to lift this community's wartime memory from the narrow confines of race, ethnicity, and politics to a rich epistemological and aesthetic realm, and attests to this community as actively engaged in the communal healing through creating its own literature. Internment literature, composed of short fiction, memoirs, novels,

and haiku poems, memorializes not an "official history" of the wartime era. Instead, it measures the frissons of truths behind the creative energies released from the Japanese North Americans' convulsed wartime lives that took place in the hastily built government detention camps throughout the USA and Canada, due to racism and injustice, the primary causes of the internment. It is my hope to show that, reconceived as a literature of communal healing, Internment Literature will freshen the ways of remembering and writing about burdens of the past and will prove the theoretical point that Alessandro Portellis expressed in 1991: "Memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active creation of meanings" and beauty (52).

A critical rereading of Internment Literature provides this twofold attestive gaze of epistemology and aesthetics as the writers' vision moves from one "interned" in loss and doubt to one awakened to knowledge, truth, and beauty. Such movements are established in the anonymous haiku poet anthologized in May Sky, There Is Always Tomorrow. The poem powerfully conveys the central tenor of Internment Literature in which the poet encapsulates the gift of recognition that is conferred after one has endured violent, convulsive experiences:

Through the mist of the surging seas has emerged a beacon to help us recall our past and guide us on our course. (281)

Harkening back to the Homeric "cloud of war," the poet achieves meaning through the deft use of kinetic seafaring tropes of mist and surging seas. Evoking not only the brutal and uncontrollable forces of war, these tropes also are figures of a human understanding that gets lost under such forces because tears of grief and sorrow prevent people from seeing clearly. Yet, immediately counterpoised with this loss of mental sight is the act of overcoming those forces (suggested by the prepositional "through"). This act then is rewarded with a welcome sighting of a beacon that both warns and guides. As an image of light emerging from

darkness, the beacon is associated with truth and even hope. The poem's rhetorical orientation therefore culminates in its moving out of the external world of violence to the internal one where a cognitive transformation occurs. By calling up the burdens of the past, the poem intimates that remembrance of things past is knowledge, which in turn will shape the purpose of future existence. Scaffolded on contrasting images of agitation and calm, trouble and hope, the poem thus orders intellectually incomprehensible upheavals of war into the lyrically convincing aesthetic discipline of the haiku language in which a collective voice of a community is actively engaged in a discourse of war while uniquely contributing to the field of literature.

Additional readings of the haiku in the above-noted anthology support that while constructed on the meaning-yielding tension between disciplined form and emotional content, many of the collected poems foreground the ironic dilemma of their uprooted internment life: Being born on American soil, yet they were considered unworthy of citizenship by their own government. The poets' attestive gaze therefore is often on images of the subdued, the misunderstood, the gentle, the exiled, and the disempowered, but is also made sentient and cathartic and, thus knowing, by their rational impulse which clarifies the gazer's intuition into its hidden meaning. One such attestive gaze records the detained life at the Justice Department Detention Center in Missoula, Montana: "Pathetic – / cowboys' boots are lopsided/ cattle being dehorned." The poet's dramatic center is a violent confrontation between cowboys and cattle and its destructive aftermath hinted at by the poet's gaze squarely on the cowboy's lopsided boots and dehorned cattle. Read in the historical wartime context of Japanese-Americans, however, the poet's choice of cowboys and cattle as protagonists becomes more than a fitting reflection of familiar scenes in the cattle country where the detention center is located. Just as the cowboys dehorn cattle to make them less dangerous, the American justice system rounds up Japanese Americans like cattle and corrals them in a governmental detention center, thus rendering them powerless and manageable. But read from the perspective of

Foucault's local criticism, while both boots and horns symbolize the masculine self and potency of the cowboys and the cattle, the now-bent boots as a result of unnatural blunting of the animals' horns is a projection of the poet's acquired knowledge that something ontologically essential has been lost on both sides during the commission of an unnatural, emasculating act. Thus, the exclamation with which the poem begins is one of cognition as well as pain and compassion aimed at both the violators and the violated.

While the above-noted anthology poems were composed by both male and female detainees whose voices are characterized by their moral toughness as the basis of their stoic epistemology, another distinctive community voice can be heard from Nisei women (Nisei being the second generation of Japanese North Americans) who were among the 120,000 Japanese North American internees and whose poems are informed by the special authority of the female gaze. Collected in Susan Schweik's title A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War, many poets engage in extending their gaze to attest to the various manifestations of the cognitive ruptures that engulf them. Their gaze is thus sharpened, especially as it disconfirms the encouragement and freedom given to any discourse in the camps as long as gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, loyalty, and patriotism are defined by the WRA (War Relocation Authority) guidelines.

One such poem is "Et Ego in America Vixi" by Hisaye Yamamoto written in June 1941:

My skin is sun-gold
My cheekbones are proud
My eyes slant darkly
And my hair is touched
With the dusky bloom of purple plums.
The soul of me is enrapt
To see the wisteria in blue-violet cluster,
The heart of me breathless
At the fragile beauty of an ageless vase.
But my heart flows over

My throat chokes in reverent wonder At the unfurled glory of a flag Red as the sun White as the almond blossom Blue as the clear summer sky.

Yamamoto's poem is built on an intertextual reading of the familiar colors of red, white, and blue, which she observes in nature and in man-made things and the American flag. Its thematic thrust is the nature of loyalty in a true American citizen which is explored by comparing her perceived racial colors (her skin, hair, cheekbones, eye shape - the very base of the government's justification for internment) to a more significant, inherent capacity of her mind that sees the equivalents in nature: the beauties of the white wisteria dense in blue-violet shades that is preserved in an exquisite man-made vase. In so juxtaposing the real, interned self and its introjections in the ideal, immortal world of art, the poet reaches an almost spiritual synthesis as she begins to see behind the beauty of the colors of the national flag the beauty of the ideas – freedom, equality, democracy, tolerance, the tradition of the higher law, and pluralism – that are impregnated in the flag.

The poem's cognitive urgency becomes even more poignant when its subtext is considered. In 1943, the U.S. loyalty questionnaire was suddenly sprung on the internees. In particular the government considered its questions 27 and 28 most important during the war hysteria: "Are you willing to serve in the Armed Forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered? Answer Yes or No" (or, in the case of women, the Women's Army Corps); "Do you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America . . . and foreswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization? Answer Yes or No." Yamamoto's reply is subtle yet un-ambivalent, as her title confidently asserts: by deliberately expressing her ontological thesis in the once-universal language of Latin, she recognizes and accepts the ideal world of the flag that keeps her alive

("vixi") and shielded as citizen though her loyalty is paid for with heavy costs. The forging of a voice re-consecrated to American ideals enables her the individual (the "Ego" in the title) to cross over political, cultural, ethnic and gender demarcations and restore her to a larger community of "America."

Mitsue Yamada's lyric sequence entitled Camp Notes similarly pivots on a series of stereoscopic attestive gazes on her camp life in the Minidoka Relocation Center, Idaho. More pungent in her reflections on her convulsed life in Minidoka than those documented in the previous anthologies, Yamada's epistemological journey turns on what Lawson Inada calls internees' "double war" that was being waged within and without, accentuated by an acute awareness of their displaced membership in the personal, familial, social, racial, and political communities (260). The tragic learning from this double war is embodied in a poem "The Question of Loyalty." In it, one Issei mother (first generation North American) must come to know the enormity of the exacting loss of selfhood, as she fills out the loyalty questionnaire that requires her to forswear allegiance to the Japanese emperor: "If I sign this/ What will I be?/ I am doubly loyal/ to my American children/ also to my own people./ How can double mean nothing?/ I wish no one to lose this war./ Everyone does"(29). In another poem, "Recruiting Team," Yamada's learning is embodied in the inescapable irony of the reality of draft age Nisei males who must fight twofold enemies when they are asked to exercise their duty to bear arms against America's enemies as an affirmation of citizenship and loyalty, and this after they have already been classified and interned as government's enemy aliens: "Why should I volunteer?/ I'm an American/ I have a right to be / drafted" (23). Yamada's Camp Notes concludes with "Cincinnati," which records the narrator's exiting from the camp and re-entering into "a real city/ where/ no one knew me." The ensuing reconstruction of herself as an individual American citizen on the promise of her democratic right to freedom, however, culminates in her being spit upon as a "dirty jap" (32-33). Her spittled face, reflected on a bookstore glass window, is the speaker's visual projection of her cognition that the double war continues as long as her imagining herself as a

true American collides impedingly with one burdened by popular racialist views of what a true American means.

These various poetic expressions of urges for epistemological and aesthetic sublimation also form the aesthetic spine upon which fiction and memoirs about the internment are developed. Indeed, the imaginative worlds of Hisaye Yamamoto, Toshio Mori, John Okada, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and Joy Kogawa, for instance, are preeminently in the interrogative mood, gazing on the dialectic of the authentic self and citizenship in a country that disowns them. Underlying their narratives of the shock, dispersal, and ruination of private lives, families, and the community of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians, however, is the critical cognizance that war and internment propel to crisis dimensions the conflicts and tensions already existing in the family and community. That is, war and internment act as disruptive epistemological agents provoking painful individual and communal self-examination modifying the moral structure of the knower. When re-visioned as an intrinsic part of the cognitive process whereby the knowledge necessary for right action is obtained or clarified, the internment heightens the burdens of the past and provides Japanese North American writers with a rhetorical and narrative frame and challenge the conventional acceptance of internment fiction and memoirs as simply a part of American historiography. A careful look will reveal a compelling aesthetic discourse by the writers of these genres whose gazes move towards a stance of knowledge-building that is both emancipatory and salvific.

Okada's No-No Boy is a novel narrating the struggles of the American-born Ichiro whose epistemological dissent from his Issei parents and the Japanese American community forms its discursive core. The title derives from the fact that Ichiro had said no when his draft number came up and he became a despised "no-no boy," an appellation of community ostracism, when he went to federal prison instead of to the battlefield. Throughout the novel, Ichiro is caught between despair and hope, between familial and communal ties and his ties to the country that questions his loyalty and citizenship. What he finally comes to

know is that the contradictions within himself and within his community also prevail in America. His emancipation happens when he sees America in double vision: The abundant, beautiful, and desirable America is also the same America where racial hatred and injustice flourish not just for Japanese Americans, but for almost everyone else. He begins to see many others as outsiders like him. This cognitive process finally culminates when he understands the connections between him and other human beings. His search has been a search for wholeness and connections through compassionate love as a "good sharp knife" that cuts out the diseases afflicting him, his family, and his community. Instead of disappearing, therefore, he decides to remain in his community, his roots, and his past. The novel ends with Ichiro's salvific affirmation that the America he envisions one day will become a reality.

Like Okada's, Joy Kogawa's novel Obasan also demonstrates her uniquely universalist understanding of the Japanese Canadian wartime experience. While Okada's redemptive knowledge derives from his protagonist's almost Puritanical final vision of America as "a city on a hill," Kogawa's protagonist, Naomi, finds emancipation and redemption by finding unexpected ways in which Christianity and history – in particular, the Japanese Canadians' concrete struggle during and after WWII – merge to yield a universal meaning. Kogawa weaves many narrative threads. At one level, the novel is Naomi's journey of healing and self-discovery. But, this dramatic movement is lifted from its conventional autobiographical narrative with the intentional insertion of a biblical passage from Revelation (2:17) that sets Kogawa's thematic thrust:

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna and will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name written.

As Jane Naomi Iwamura has explicated, the passage places Japanese Canadians within an ongoing realization of a part of biblical history as the "unfolding Word." This passage from the book of Revelation warns Christians in Asia Minor to keep faith even during persecution, but also encourages them with the final promise of rewards and consolations (the "hidden manna," "the white stone" and "a new name written") that the faithful can look forward to. What Kogawa accomplishes is to harness the authority of one dominant tradition – Christianity – to undermine the action of another authority – the nation of Canada. Consequently, the passage as the Christian Logos functions as a source of emancipation and salvific hope. By drawing specific connections between the Japanese Canadian wartime history and the biblical past of the Israelites' struggles, Kogawa universalizes a contemporary event and demonstrates how its truth and meaning are expressed in the concrete struggles of the Japanese Canadian community. In the end, Kogawa allows the protagonist to shift her gaze from the Canadian government's unjust treatment of Japanese Canadians to one that is trained to envision the community's journey teleologically as part of a historic reality that is unfolding but yet never fully realized.

In Keeping Time: Memory, Nostalgia, and the Art of History, Peter Carroll has said, "To live in history . . . provides coherence. It offers the power to understand, and perhaps even to change, the course of time" (147). In this way, my thoughts circle back to the haiku with which my presentation began. Though born of Japanese North Americans' actual wartime experiences, instead of being just simply historical documents, Internment Literature attests to one group of citizens' ascent to a fresh region of meaning. Its attestive gaze so chronicles "the power to understand" that it endows Internment Literature with rhetorical and aesthetic coherence. It is in the creation of the rhetoric of epistemological ascent and beauty that Internment Literature wins its natural affinity to a membership of good standing in rhetorical and literary community of American literature.

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