

## **History and Memory (for Akiko and Takashige )**

Rea Tajiri, 1991

Color/B/W, video, 32 min

Women Make Movies, Video Data Bank, Electronic Arts Intermix

### **Description**

The film opens with white text, accompanied by the barely audible sound of wind, scrolling upward on a black screen:

*HISTORY AND MEMORY (for Akiko and Takashige) December 7, 1961. View from 100 feet above the ground. Street lights and tops of trees surround the view which is comprised of a strip of grey concrete with strips of green grass on either side. Then slowly, very, very slowly the ground comes closer and closer as the tops of trees disappear. The tops of the heads of a man and woman become visible as they move them back and forth in an animated fashion. The black hair on their heads catches and reflect light from the street lamps. The light from the street lamps has created a path for them to walk and argue. (The spirit of my grandfather witnesses my father and mother as they have an argument about the unexplained nightmares their daughter has been having on the 20th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the day that changed the lives of 110,000 Japanese-Americans who shortly after were forced by the US government to sell their property, homes, cars, possessions, businesses...and forced to relocate to internment camps.)*

These words conjure up a film scene in the mind's eye of the viewer, complete with camera moves. They also introduce central characters and subject of the film to follow.

The voice of the filmmaker is heard as the text scrolls, and continues as the screen goes to black: "I don't know where this came from, but I just have this fragment, this picture that's always been in my mind. My mother, she's standing at a faucet and it's really hot outside and she's filling this canteen..." We see a dreamlike image of a woman, viewed from behind, she is holding a canteen; this image recurs, with slight variations, throughout the film. ..." and the water's really cold [the image fades] and it feels really good and outside the sun is just so hot, it's just beating down. Then there's this dust that gets in everywhere and they're always sweeping the floors." This introduction, in which we have seen only one brief visual image, concludes over a black screen.

The next sequence opens with a rumbling sound that blends into fragmented, slightly hesitant music with a slow, pronounced beat. CU on a still from the Hollywood film, Gulliver's Travels, in which Gulliver is tied down and surrounded by Lilliputians. It is intercut with flashes of images from a documentary-style black and white film in which a young woman follows a young man through a park. In VO, the filmmaker says that her sister once had a crush on a young man, who she obsessively followed home from school. As the camera pulls back from the photo of Gulliver, revealing it to be part of a pile of photographs, she says that, rather than talking to the young man, her sister preferred to take his picture. The "documentary" of her sister pursuing the young man continues, visualizing the VO which says that, one day, the sister decided to go up to the young man and persuade him to pose for her. It is intercut with stills of romantic scenes from Hollywood films. Over hands riffling through the pile of photographs, we hear that the sister liked to pore over a box of pictures of movie stars that she had inherited from an aunt, and that a picture of the young man had gotten mixed up with the others. "The strange thing, when I thought about it later, was that all the photos were of white people." The camera holds on a long shot of two movie stars in a convertible, the long highway visible behind them; then a photograph of Jackie Kennedy in the Dallas motorcade; then a Hollywood actress posing in a convertible. VO, the filmmaker says she wonders how the movies influenced their lives

and where her sister's "habit of observing others from a distance came from." The sequence ends with a shot of a young woman, in black and white footage, sitting at a table looking at photographs, followed by CU: water pouring into her mother's canteen. Plaintive, slightly ominous music and rumbling sounds are heard.

VO, a young man says, "I never really understood what happened and what you heard about and what grandpa talked about..."

The next sequence is composed of radio news reports and black and white images taken from various Hollywood movies, newsreels, and Japanese films about the attack on Pearl Harbor, juxtaposed in a way that raises questions of historical truth and the representation of events. The date, title, and source of each film (and each film clip thereafter) appears in text on screen. The first shows a ship under attack; text on screen says: Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941, shot by Capt. Erik Hakansson. The word HISTORY appears. "There are things that happened in the world while cameras were watching, things we have images for," says the narrator. Universal newsreel scenes of ships aflame are followed by careening camera views of a ship's deck as seen from a Japanese fighter plane; then scenes of the attack on a US military base from the 1953 film, From Here to Eternity. "There are other things that have happened, for which we have no images, which we restage in front of cameras in order to have images of." We see captured 1942 Japanese film that features a fierce Japanese fighter pilot and an ensuing attack on a U.S. ship; then a 1943 John Ford film, December 7th, made for the US Navy, featuring a priest blessing the troops who scurry from air attack, followed by a flaming bridge, and heroic men manning anti-aircraft guns. All these clips are labeled HISTORY. An eyewitness account is heard over clips from a 1941 Universal newsreel about the attack and its aftermath. VO: "There are things that have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of the observers present at the time. While there are things for which there are no observers except for the spirits of the dead."

In a stylistic repeat of the opening sequence, white text appears over black, July 31, 1942. It describes, also from a view 100 feet above the ground, a scene in which the family home is removed from its site by a crew of workmen. The voice of the filmmaker's father, taped in 1990, explains that Japanese in California at that time were prohibited from owning property [while their American-born children were able to do so], and so his mother had bought the family home in his name. We see a 1942 snapshot of him in uniform. He goes on to say that while he was in the army, his house was condemned and taken by the Navy. He and his family were prevented from visiting their home. Text on screen says that grandfather's spirit hovers over the scene of the house robbery, that the family had been interned as "enemy aliens." Over a snapshot of the family in front of their home, the father says that the house disappeared.

The next sequence opens with a scene from a 1942 U.S. government information film, Japanese Relocation, in which an official seated at a desk explains that there were 110,000 people of "Japanese ancestry" living on the West Coast in 1941 at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, some of whom were potentially dangerous. As he speaks, text appears on screen: WHO CHOSE WHAT STORY TO TELL? Cut to a patriotic scene from the 1942 Hollywood film, Yankee Doodle Dandy. An actor dressed to resemble Teddy Roosevelt is marching with Old Glory fluttering behind. A group of Americans - a nurse, a policeman, a housewife, a working man, etc. - march forward, accompanied by a large flag and an anti-aircraft gun, as a chorus sings, "We're behind the man behind the gun." In VO we hear Aunt Betsy in a 1989 recording, as she remembers her father giving courage to a neighbor boy who had volunteered for service on Pearl Harbor day. Over a scene of Jimmy Cagney and dancers dressed in American flag motifs, the filmmaker's voice says that in 1942 her mother's and father's families were interned while

her father was serving in the U.S. Army. As the chorus continues, “And now that we’re in it, we’re going to win it,” cut to a film clapperboard on which is written “Salinas.” Text on screen identifies these scenes as outtakes from “Apartment,” part of a 1942 U.S. Signal Corps film found in the National Archives: Relocation of Japanese Aliens. We see a pleasant dormitory scene with cots on which women and children sit. A woman in the background is primping in the mirror of a vanity table. The music continues as VO comes up: the filmmaker reading a letter from her uncle, who says he moved to Holland after returning home, a wounded World War II veteran, only to discover that anti Japanese feeling in the US was more intense than ever. Clips from the government film continue: a doctor examines a young boy, and a scene, titled “Canteen,” is seen in slow motion. The voice of Tajiri’s mother is heard saying, “Canteen? There wasn’t any canteen in Salinas. I don’t remember anything like this.”

To the strains of “My country ‘tis of thee,” we see documentary footage of Japanese-Americans being fingerprinted by officials. Voice of Aunt Yoshiko (1989) is heard over a scene of cameras being confiscated. Text on screen says possession of cameras and radios prohibited. Over family snapshots at Poston 2, 1942, Tajiri tells us there are few family photographs from this period because cameras were forbidden.

A brightly colored carved red bird comes into view on screen against a black background. VO, the filmmaker says that at the beginning of World War II, people were curious about what would happen to her family. Whereas they had formerly been ignored, the war brought them “sharply into focus.” The bird grows larger. Cut to the film scene of cameras being confiscated; then to a photograph of “Grandpa’s Alien I.D. Card.” The bird reappears as the filmmaker says that her mother had this little carved bird in her jewelry box, and told her not to play with it, that it was her grandmother’s. A picture of her grandmother appears small on screen. The filmmaker, VO, says that years later, in the National Archives, she came across a 1942 picture of a bird-carving class at Poston, which included her grandmother. The small picture now merges into a group photograph.

The image of her mother with the canteen into which water is flowing flashes briefly on screen. VO shows a wavering image of the small town railroad station with subtitle: “Bad Day at Black Rock: 1942.” I began searching for a history, my history, says the narrator, because... (we see a film clip of a woman playfully hiding behind a frying pan; it is labeled Topaz. Shot by David Tatsuno, an internee, with an 8mm-movie camera smuggled into camp) ...I had known all along that the stories I had heard were not true, and parts had been left out. I was haunted by this feeling that I had growing up that I was haunted by something, that I was haunted by this family full of ghosts. That there was this place they knew about. I had never been there, yet I had a memory for it.” We see men digging on a construction site at the camp. “I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born...we had lived with a lot of pain. I had no idea where these memories came from, yet I knew the place.” We see people sweeping, icy snow scenes, a solitary girl ice-skating, then cut to Spencer Tracy in *Bad Day at Black Rock*. He is searching for the Japanese farmer Kimoko, who arrived in this place, very near the Poston camp, in 1941. One version of the farmer’s fate is heard on the soundtrack, over the silent image of a solitary skater. Scenes from the Hollywood film are intercut with CU on the skater’s feet, as a niece says, VO, ...”she didn’t remember, she didn’t remember.” (laughter). CU: Spencer Tracy picking a wildflower. Her mother is heard saying, “There are so many things I have forgotten.” CU: her mother’s cupped hands receive flowing water. White text on black screen (with the mother’s murmuring words in the background explaining that a friend of hers went mad during this terrible time) says that her mother remembers why she forgot to remember. A negative image of a woman appears, as her mother says, “Beautiful woman. She lost her mind.”

Text on screen: Letter sent to members of Japanese community post Pearl Harbor. The letter lists family members being considered for repatriation to Japan. Cut to: Spencer Tracy, who says “Someone is buried up there,” as he pulls a wildflower out of his pocket. Cut to wildflowers in mother’s garden, then to government film about the Japanese-American internment “operation.” Over a scene in which public official Milton Eisenhower explains the logic of relocation, text on screen says that at the same time, in 1942, Warner Brothers is filming Yankee Doodle Dandy, for which James Cagney won an Academy Award. We see documentary footage of a moving truck approaching a home, as VO announces, “We were allowed to take what we could carry.” Text on screen tells how Tajiri’s uncle and his two brothers decided to take a hand printing press and a camouflage-painted bicycle; some items were stored in a spare room. Tenants in the house later stole the valuables. Finally, the house was stolen, and there’s no trace of it.

Over a scene from Yankee Doodle Dandy, in which a black singer sings “Glory Glory Hallelujah,” text on screen says that at this time the Office of War Information was making a film in which Japanese Americans were described as being “willingly” relocated to camps. We see a scene, in which black slaves kneel in front of a statue of Abraham Lincoln. “And that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish...” is heard to the sound of swelling music.

The next sequence begins, VO: 1942, Salinas California. A 20-year old woman and her family pack one suitcase each, sell their remaining possessions, and are moved to the Salinas Rodeo Grounds barracks. We see documentary footage, scanned in close-up, of families arriving with suitcases, CU on a child. VO continues, saying that they will stay there until they are sent by train to Poston, Arizona, to part of an Indian reservation that has been “converted into a concentration camp.” Text on screen describes where each of her parent’s families were sent. Cut to present-day scene, as Tajiri drives her mother to the Salinas site, trying to find the exact place they were quartered. Still images of the barracks in 1942. VO tells us these were whitewashed horse stables, in which five people took the place of one horse. Over scanned footage of a blurry landscape seen from a moving vehicle, her mother says she can’t remember the trip to Poston by train. On screen, Poston April 1988 over train tracks; then a scene from Bad Day at Black Rock of a group of men at a train station labeled “Parker Station 1942,” followed by a shot of a train station labeled “Parker 1988” and text on screen saying this is where her mother’s train arrived in 1942. Train sounds over footage of landscape seen from a moving car, then a brief negative image of the woman seen earlier. VO, Tajiri says she is reminded of that scene from Bad Day at Black Rock; we see the opening titles and scene from the film of a moving train. Text on screen: On July 5, 1942, my mother went by train to Poston. She didn’t see the view. On April 12, 1988 I went to Poston in a rental car and filmed the view for her.

Cut to a scene from the film Come See the Paradise, in which Japanese Americans are crowding onto a train. Again, the filmmaker says that she is looking for her history, because she has known along that the stories she had heard were not true and parts had been left out. Cut to a film by the War Relocation Authority, The Way Ahead. A vigorous and optimistic Japanese couple are walking. We see a family seeking an apartment, with aunt describing how a Japanese American couple couldn’t get housing. The filmmaker says that she found out Poston was built on an Indian reservation and that, after the war, the Indians had been offered the shoddy abandoned barracks as repayment for the use of their land. Views of the camp are seen, including a photo of Indian mothers and children on the site in 1942. The filmmaker says she felt “ungrounded somewhat like a ghost that floats over terrain, watching others living their lives, yet not having one of its own.” Scene of collapsing building on the site.

The filmmaker says she stayed in Parker when she visited Poston, as Spencer Tracy did in *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Her narrative is intercut with scenes from the film. Like Spencer Tracy, she was an outsider who had come to make people remember something they wanted to forget. People in Poston want to forget the camp and her aunt speaks of someone who refuses to believe that the U.S. government would have interned Japanese Americans. Her story continues to parallel Spencer Tracy's as he discovers that Kimoko had tried to find water (we see the mother's hands cupping flowing water); the Japanese, she says, had always known how to bring water to the land and so they prospered as farmers, which contributed to the hostility toward them in the West. We see pictures of their irrigation project in the internment camp and the trees that still flourish there. The mother fills the canteen. Family members remember, over scenes over abandoned buildings. The filmmaker describes inexplicably finding the barrack in which her mother lived. She says Kimoko's disappearance from Black Rock is like the Japanese-American disappearance from American history. "His absence is his presence." Which is why she has had a powerful desire to "create an image where there are so few." An item from *The New York Times*, in text on screen, reports that an Orange County politician wants schoolchildren taught that Japanese Americans were simply detained in relocation centers required by military necessity.

As her aunt talks about the dreams she continued having, we see bits of evidence: a Poston log book, a piece of tarpaper from a barrack, a heart carved by her grandfather.

Her nephew reads his review of *Come See the Paradise*, intercut with parallel scenes of dislocation seen in the US Signal Corps Film, *Alien Round-Up*. He says that he has no personal stories because his grandparents didn't talk about their internment. He points out the significant presence in the film of the "virtuous white guy," who audiences can relate to and who gets the girl, as well as the questionable credentials of Alan Parker, who made *Mississippi Burning*, which credited the FBI with helping to advance civil rights in the South.

We again hear the uncle, whose letter was heard at the beginning of the film, saying he lost his faith in the U.S. Constitution and felt compelled to leave the country 43 years ago. In voiceover, the filmmaker says that when someone tells you a story, you create a picture in your mind, sometimes without the story. Over shots of her mother filling a canteen in the desert, she says, "For years I've been living with this picture, without knowing the story." Now she can fit the picture to the story, and forgive her mother her loss of memory. She made this picture for her. A crow caws, as the camera pans across a desolate landscape.

### **Style/Structure**

This densely layered personal essay is a meditation on the search for truth about an historical episode. It is a personal film about a particular family, but it tells a larger story of the United States at war, with patriotic narratives of an embattled democracy that neatly erase the injustices suffered by US citizens on account of race. In complex, often ironic, juxtapositions of images, text, and voice over, it encourages viewers to think critically about the nature of evidence - visual evidence, in particular; and to become aware of the importance of that which is rendered invisible or absent. *History and Memory* gives special attention to absence, silence, and that which is not visible, as it considers the political factors that influence what is and isn't shown and remembered, and what can and what cannot be known about the past.

The film is structured as a quest for personal history, the key to which is an image of a woman (portrayed by Tajiri herself) in a parched desert, holding a canteen into which water is flowing. Finding the story that accompanies that image is the task at hand. Evidence is sought in photographs, Hollywood films, government films, home movies, personal recollections,

archives, and locations. Visual images, spoken memories, and words on screen are juxtaposed in ways that invite the viewer to question them. Over newsreels and fiction films about Pearl Harbor, text on screen asks viewers to consider the difference between documentary versions and Hollywood versions of Pearl Harbor? Are they all “History”? In some cases, films are viewed by eyewitnesses to the events depicted, such as the Salinas assembly center seen in the documentary-style government film that does not match her mother’s memories of the place

The film explores Hollywood films for the stories and values that help shape national memory. They may conceal or elide racism (*Yankee Doodle Dandy*) or reveal a tragic example (*Bad Day at Black Rock*) or simply represent the confusion of liberal thinking on the subject (*Come See the Paradise*). What and who is missing from *Yankee Doodle Dandy*’s patriotic celebration of American democracy? The nephew’s wry review of *Come See the Paradise* reminds us that, while filmmakers may have messages to communicate, viewers make their own interpretations. Words on screen highlights the question: “Who is telling this story” and why? Viewers are encouraged to consider the unseen connections between apparently disparate things. We learn, for example, that *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, a celebration of egalitarian democracy, was shot at a studio not far from an internment camp, which we see in a government film. Tajiri’s discovery that Poston was built on an Indian reservation links two examples of racist government policies.

The power of visual representation is a continuing theme. The parallels between Tajiri’s trip to the camp in which her mother was incarcerated and *Bad Day at Black Rock*, suggest how deeply films are entwined with our sense of social reality. By juxtaposing images, words, and points of view, *History and Memory* shows how slippery a business it is to interpret the film and photographs as evidence. What is not in the image can be as significant as what we see. Absence and invisibility are intrinsic elements, and Tajiri employs many techniques to represent that which cannot be seen: text on screen and voiceover are two key techniques. Finally, the video asks us to consider how much of our social reality is excluded by mass media, and what the consequences are.

Marita Sturken points out that in this video, “history” is represented by cinema, and presents official versions of policies and events, while memory, represented by video, expresses the subjective experience of those policies and events and their consequences. Memory is personal, interior, and unseen. It is text on a black screen that introduces us to the story; viewers visualize that scene in the mind’s eye, effectively making a personal film. We don’t see Tajiri’s mother (except in a symbolic recurring image, played by Tajiri herself), father, uncle, or aunt as they tell us what they saw and suffered. Memory, by implication, is a less corrupted source of knowledge, and it is at the core of the person. The trauma that caused Tajiri’s mother to lose her memory of the internment, caused her to lose an essential part of herself. The film, which constructs a memory for her mother, is a gift of life.

While the film explores many kinds of historical and cultural evidence as sources of knowledge, Tajiri also refers to many things she knows on the basis of no tangible evidence: she knows the camp, and even the specific place in the camp, in which her family lived before she born. She has a visceral sense of the camp as a dry and dusty place, and the icy coldness of the water pouring into her mother’s canteen, now seen as a source of life and regeneration, echoed in the irrigation project and the trees it produced. An evocative sound design that includes popular music and environmental sounds expresses physical sensations of distant memories, dry winds, and personal loss.

Tajiri’s task is to create a story that is marked by gaps, absence and concealment and to bring to

light, to visualize, that which has been hidden and lost into light of day. Janet Sternburg suggests that Tajiri sees a strategy of poetics to “represent that which can’t be recovered, can only be imagined.” The image of Tajiri’s mother filling a canteen with water in a parched desert is a symbol of the fragility and thread of life in extreme circumstances. “The ice skater,” Sternburg suggests, “represents the filmmaker herself crossing patches of time, revisiting with keen perception a scarred site.”

### **Background on Director/Film**

After graduating from the California Institute of the Arts, as a video artist with a strong background in critical theory, Rea Tajiri decided to use her training to make accessible work that connected with the ideas and concerns of her family and community. During a visit to Los Angeles in 1981, by chance, she attended Congressional hearings being held on reparations for Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. While she had vaguely heard about her family’s experiences of internment, she had never paid much attention to them, and was forcibly struck by the testimony at the hearings. In response to her mother’s inability to remember internment, Tajiri traveled to Poston and to the National Archives, looking for evidence of her family’s odyssey. A Poston logbook documented her mother’s time there, thus triggering her mother’s memory and her pointed remark that she had seen a woman in the camps go mad with the experience. Tajiri’s next films include the documentary *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice* (1993), and a narrative film, *Strawberry Fields* (1997).

### **Production Context**

The Japanese-American Redress campaign turned the spotlight on internment at a time when the New Social History, feminism and cultural activism were stimulating the excavation of suppressed and hidden histories of women, minority groups, and others marginalized in official histories. Emphasis was placed on “history from the bottom up,” about relatively undocumented people and events. Oral histories, artifacts, and popular culture became important sources of evidence for the construction of narrative histories. During this period, many independent Asian American filmmakers, including Lise Yasui, Steven Okasaki, Loni Ding, and Arthur Dong, came to the fore. The media produced by these makers was seen as part of larger efforts to correct past injustices and to challenge media stereotypes with stories, facts, and images showing the complex realities of the Asian-American experience.

An awareness of the politics of representation was deeply embedded in this work, which asked: who are the authoritative tellers of history? whose experiences are significant? who “makes history”? Women and members of minority groups stepped forward to tell their own stories, injecting the personal into public discourse and claiming their places in American history. Many, keenly aware that their images, lives, and points of view were absent from mass media, were using accessible film and video technologies to tell their own stories. The Asian-American movement was notable not only for the work that was produced, but for the infrastructure that was created for circulating independent media. The National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), established in 1980 as one of five consortia of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, fosters the production and distribution of film and video by and about the Asian American experience. It is within this dynamic context of cultural activism and political struggles that *History and Memory* was shaped and circulated.

### **Reception**

*History and Memory* premiered at the 1991 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial, and traveled to film and video festivals in the U.S., Japan, Europe and Australia. It has received many honors: Yamagata International Documentary Festival Sidebar Selection (1991); Distinguished

Achievement Award, Independent Documentary Association (1992); Special Jury Prize, San Francisco International Film Festival, New Visions (1992); First Place, Experimental Video, Atlanta Film and Video Festival (1992); New York Film Festival Video Sidebar (1993); U.S.I.S. international tour (1992). In 1993, it was broadcast nationally on the PBS series, "Alive TV."

### **Discussion**

Why is recovering memory so important to the filmmaker? What are the tools she uses to recover memories of the internment?

How are old news footage and old movies used? How are personal effects used? How are they used in relation to each other?

What is the difference between history and family memories?

This is a film about a particular moment in history, Japanese-American internment. Can the filmmaker's arguments about history and memory apply to other historical situations, and to today's news?

### **Further reading**

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