

## Keeping the Memories Alive: Fictionalized Narratives of Japanese Internment in North America

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### **Abstract:**

Since the end of World War II and the release of over 120,000 interned Japanese Americans and 20,000 Japanese Canadians, a handful of novels and memoirs have been released detailing the lives of those whose lives were interrupted and whose experiences were silenced by their own governments. In this paper, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*, written across sixty years and set during, immediately after, and two decades after the internment, will be analyzed according to their roles as important representations of the cultural memory of Japanese Americans and Canadians. The timeline of when these novels were written is linked to their individual roles within the community and among North American cultural history as a whole, which has largely chosen to view the war in more recognizable depictions of the war and has retained little to no visual record of the Japanese internment. These novels deal with the themes of identity, citizenship, family, loyalty, and closure, tying in the absence and loss of memories with the importance of intergenerational relationships within families and communities of Japanese Americans and Canadians. According to Marita Sturken in her analysis of a film created by the daughter of one of the internees, the destruction of culturally important memory items, silence of the generations living through the camps, and the ban on media capture of the internment have created a vacuum of cultural remembrance that these novels and the few personal accounts written after the internment attempt to fill. Rea Tajiri captures memories of her mother who never spoke about her time in the internment camp by recreating them, paralleling the role these three novels and their counterparts fit as they attempt to occupy the void of vocalized experiences with fictionalized representations in order to reconstruct the cultural memories shared by Japanese Americans and Canadians.

After the events of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were relocated, as well as over 20,000 Japanese Canadians. Two-thirds of the Japanese relocated to internment camps were American citizens, the Nisei and Sansei, or second and third-generation descendants of first-generation Japanese immigrants. Valerie Matsumoto gives a concise run of the facts for the internment in American War Relocation Authority camps, of which there were ten in seven different states located in largely desert areas of the West and Midwest. Japanese Americans were given only a short amount of time before they were forcibly removed, many of the community leaders having already been removed to specific camps for expected troublemakers or “enemy aliens.” Both American and Canadian Japanese were stripped of their citizenship and possessions, though Japanese Canadians were unable to return to the coastal area for years after the war, unlike Japanese Americans. Many repatriated to Japan after the war, but many more did not, and instead relocated after being released from internment camps.

In this essay, I will examine three novels written across the half century after the end of World War II, each representing their own distinct visions of the experience of living with and recovering from the internment of Japanese Americans and Canadians. In the process of analyzing the novels, I will place them in the timeline of when they were written and attempt to discuss the significance of their publication and their use as examples of reconstructed representations of memory within the larger framework of the existence and absence of cultural memory about the internment of Japanese descendants and immigrants during World War II. How these fictionalized narratives interact with the possibilities of real yet absent portrayals of unrecorded lives will provide a basis for the argument of the importance of such portrayals in the absence of real accounts from those who lived the experiences being fictionalized.

John Okada's *No-No Boy* was largely ignored when it was first published in 1957. Okada's book was deemed a failure during his lifetime, and he did not live to see the book become well-known among Asian American Studies scholars as it would after republication. The book was rediscovered and republished in the 1970s by the publishers Lawson Inada and Frank Chin, although not before Okada himself died of a heart attack at age 47 in 1971. While Okada's personal account of the war differed in at least the crucial aspect of serving in the war, his description of the issues dealt with by the protagonist and other characters, such as the jarring racism and lack of support for reintegrating into society for both the no-no boys as well as Japanese American veterans, provides a powerful narrative novelization of Okada's own experiences and the experiences of no-no boys, whom he researched and personally interviewed.

*No-No Boy* follows Ichiro Yamada, a 25-year old Nisei youth, from the moment he steps off the bus in his hometown of Seattle, Washington just after being let out of two years of prison for refusing to serve in the army. Throughout the novel, Ichiro confronts his lack of identity and rediscovers fleeting moments of hope shared with him by a handful of other characters, both Japanese and white. Citizenship and instability of identity are themes Ichiro struggles with as he attempts to place himself in an America that imprisoned him for his actions and within a Japanese American community that largely rejects him for choosing inaction instead of joining his fellow young men in showing his patriotism and serving proudly in the war as many Japanese Americans did.

Ichiro departs prison to fall back into a "home full of loonies," as described by Frank Chin in the afterword of the 1979 edition of the book. Ichiro's mother falsely believes Japan won the war, and when confronted with inexplicable evidence that the letters they have been receiving from Japan are not, as she believes, propaganda to force the Japanese in America to

ignore Japan's victory, she is driven into a psychotic episode that ends in her quiet suicide.

Ichiro's brother, Taro, who was too young to be drafted during his time in the internment camp, despises Ichiro for his decision not to enlist, and he refuses to continue with his education after he turns eighteen. Taro enlists in the army and cuts contact with his parents and brother, but not before becoming an agent in a brutal assault against his own brother by racist hoodlums. Another unstable force in Ichiro's life is Freddie, a friend and fellow no-no boy from within Ichiro's time in prison. Freddie is harassed just as Ichiro is for being a no-no boy, and it is in contrast with Freddie's refusal to move on from his aimless, stationary life of adultery, drinking, and gambling that Ichiro is shown to develop the capacity to move on and grow toward the end of the story.

Kenji Kanno, a veteran and old friend of Ichiro's is presented as nearly the opposite of both Ichiro and Freddie, and despite the two friends' power over Ichiro's life, Freddie's and Kenji's effects on Ichiro are starkly different. Kenji and Freddie are both shown to care for Ichiro and wish for his best interests, but Freddie's actions are nearly the opposite of Kenji's. The actions of Freddie only endanger Ichiro and serve to further displace him from society, like Freddie himself, and foster anger and restlessness in Ichiro while Kenji's actions build a stillness in Ichiro that, together with other people's efforts and events within the story, culminate in a more hopeful, secure Ichiro.

The theme of death is thick in the novel, but death as a changing force is prominent enough to act on behalf of Ichiro's ultimate arrival at a somewhat easier path. Ichiro's mother, delusional and controlling, finally loses her iron grip on Ichiro and his father in her suicide. Her death frees Ichiro's father, who basks in the attention given him by the community during her funeral while Ichiro escapes. Arguably the most important figure in Ichiro's development in the short duration of the novel's scope, Kenji, dies as well, but not before seeding a change in Ichiro

as he says his goodbye. Kenji's presence in Ichiro's life is stable and calming, though colored as it is by youth just as Freddie's presence is. He introduces Ichiro to Emi, a wife left behind by her husband who has refused to end his tour in Germany after the war, and leaves a short but powerful friendship between the two as they cope together with his and Ichiro's mother's deaths. The metaphorical death of another character, Gary, is explained by Gary himself to have happened before the novel begins as he sat in prison. Gary explains to Ichiro that he died in prison in order to allow himself to live anew once more after he was released, eventually securing a job painting every day, which contrasted greatly with the life he led prior to the war, which consisted of his laziness and actionless talking about painting. Gary's interracial friendship with an older black man, despite the dangerous environment of the foundry they worked in, provides another turning point for Ichiro just as Gary's description of his newfound passion for living and painting he developed after "dying" in prison did for him.

Freddie, too, dies at the end of the novel, destroying himself in a flurry of bad choices and a clash with a man he has antagonized while Ichiro was away in Portland. Freddie's death provides the closing scene, and Ichiro departs the scene of Freddie's death with a "glimmer of hope" which had been building throughout the events of the story as Ichiro was inspired by the words and actions of several characters. Three of the main characters in Ichiro's life are dead by the end of the novel, and yet Ichiro is a measure more free and hopeful about his recovery from his two years in prison with each of the three deaths.

Criticism for the novel illustrates how the disconnect between the actual no-no boy phenomenon and the no-no boys that Okada fictionalizes both enhance and muddy the truth of the novel's portrayal as that of the real Japanese Americans he bases his writing on. Ken Narasaki, in a 2009 article on a website dedicated to people of Japanese descent, the Nikkei,

writes about this criticism and yet still praises the novel for its realistic depiction of the nihilistic Japanese American youth. The nihilistic tones so present within the novel and Ichiro's grappling with the few strains of hope shown to him are perhaps the most important themes of the work, showing how the youth of the internment, old enough to serve in the military whether they did or not, and yet not old enough to mirror the middle-aged adults of the next novel to be examined.

In the second novel to be analyzed, *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa provides a deeply personal account of a middle-aged schoolteacher in rural Alberta, Canada, as she digs into her childhood memories of life during and after the war as well as the memories of her elderly aunts and her mother, who disappeared after travelling to Japan to attend to the narrator's sick grandmother right before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Naomi Nakane, together with her brother Stephen, was raised by her aunt and uncle, Aya and Isamu Nakane, after they were separated from their parents at the start of the war. Aya Obasan, Aunt Aya, as Naomi calls the elderly woman, was fifty at the time of the war's onset and over eighty when Naomi's uncle Isamu dies at the beginning of the novel. Naomi travels to Granton, Alberta, where her aunt still lives after being relocated multiple times from their homes in Vancouver, British Columbia. Obasan is always quiet in contrast with Naomi's outspoken aunt from her mother's side, Emily Kato, who also provides a strong guiding presence to Naomi as an adult during the novel's scope.

At the end of the book, Naomi and Stephen learn for the first time after years of silence on the part of their aunts and uncle that their mother and grandmother were both badly injured when the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Throughout her life, Naomi questions why she never heard from her mother, but learns only after her uncle dies that it was upon her mother's own request that the Canadian family decided to remain silent and keep the truth of her silence from the children. "*Kodomo no tame* – for the sake of the children," is repeated constantly

throughout the text. For the sake of the children, Obasan endures amazing hardships. For the sake of the children, she and Isamu remain quiet.

In nearly the exact same fashion as *No-No Boy*, the novel's opening and closing frame the story within two mirrored moments on the coulee, surrounded by grass blowing in the wind over the open Canadian prairie. "*Umi no yo* – like the sea," her grandfather repeats in the novel's opening scene, and Naomi repeats this as she stands alone at the end of the story, in the same spot. In these two moments, Naomi is closest to her grandfather, even though she has just endured his death at the end of the novel as she stands on the same hill as she had with him once every year. Naomi's last moment with her grandfather mirrors her moment of coming to terms with the secret hidden by him, his wife, and Aunt Emily for most of Naomi's life, just as Ichiro's two bus rides and iconic departures from the bus signifies both his return to Seattle and his subsequent rebirth as a slightly wiser man after the deaths of his mother and friend Kenji.

In its narrative style, *Obasan* seems to replicate the way a memoir might progress. Naomi speaks in first-person, detailing her own life as if it were a part of the letters and diary her aunt provides her. Her remembrances flow as though Naomi were sitting to write her own diary as she picked her way through her life's memories in response to the news of her uncle's passing. At the end, Naomi speaks to her dead mother directly just as Aunt Emily did in her own diary, which was at times written in the form of letters to her sister. Naomi's voice as an adult bleeds through her memories as she replays her experiences throughout her childhood, describing her life and what she remembers of her family, yet her perceptions as a child are contrasted with those of the older members of her family. Naomi's story is ultimately one of knitting together the threads of memory from and about each family member in order to piece her life and the life of her family together in an effort to cope with and heal from their collective experiences.

The third novel in this exploration is the last published chronologically and represents an altogether different aspect than the other two have painted. While *No-No Boy*'s short and brutal vision of a troubled youth shows the harsh realities experienced by those Nisei who refused to show their unyielding loyalty for America in the guise of military service and *Obasan* pans across a lifetime as a Sansei Japanese Canadian recovers her past as well as that of her silent aunt and missing mother, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* shows a depersonalized account of a single Japanese American family before relocation, within the Topaz internment camp in Utah, and during the reclamation of their lives at their home in Berkeley, California. Unnamed, the family is represented by a chapter each in the third-person point of view of each of the family members who resided in Topaz, while the father is given his own short first-person chapter at the end of the novel. The three third-person chapters are followed by a collective first-person chapter before the novel ends with the father's first-person account, and each of the five chapters forms a narrative of themselves as the experiences are tied together within the novel's collection and by their family connection.

Short, blunt at times, and removed in a way that seems to simultaneously generalize the specific moments across the entirety of those relocated across America and pinpoint the particular experiences of a single family, the style of *When the Emperor Was Divine* contrasts deeply with the stories contained within *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*. Otsuka's prose is more often than not written in a matter-of-fact style, reporting the perceptions and actions of the family without dwelling on internal thoughts and feelings. Actions are characterized by looks while memories and dreams represent the hidden thoughts of the characters. Dialogue is as important as description as the family lives their time at Topaz and in Berkeley after returning to a barren house.



After the mother's, the older sister's, and the younger brother's chapters, which recount the time between the evacuation order, the train ride from the assembly site at Tanforan racetrack to the Topaz War Relocation Center, and their lives at Topaz, respectively, a fourth chapter is written from the combined points of view of the family after they return to Berkeley and must reforge their lives with the little they have left after the years of someone else renting their house while they were away. This "we" perspective is told mostly from the two children together as they watch their mother work to carry their family by herself before and after their father returns from a camp in New Mexico. The father is quiet, refusing to speak of his time there and sitting in decay, doing nothing as he secludes himself within the house, yet in the last chapter, he describes in a passionate tongue-in-cheek confession everything he, as an enemy alien Japanese American, did as accused by Americans.

Published in 2002, sixty years after the relocation of Japanese Americans, *When the Emperor Was Divine* provides a view of the experience that the other two novels do not in that the length of time between the war and the publication has allowed for a major loss of the matter in the minds of the author's audience. *No-No Boy*, published in 1957, was written in the same lifetime as many of those who would have experienced the relocation and covers the time directly after the end of the war. *Obasan*, published in 1981 and set in the 1970s, is a dated work, showing a specific timeline from between Naomi's childhood memories and her reclamation of her aunts' memories in her present. *When the Emperor Was Divine*, however, represents the visions of nameless characters sixty years prior to its publication and, in her notes on sources at the end of her work, Otsuka herself attributes thanks to the preceding literature she was able to draw on in the depiction of possible experiences lived by real Japanese Americans during that time.

While her portrayal was written much later, it serves the same purpose as the other two novels: keeping the cultural memory of the Japanese internment alive through fictional accounts. In her 2001 essay contained within the compilation volume *Perilous Memories*, Marita Sturken describes the role of reconstruction of cultural memory through new images and descriptions. Sturken views the remembrance and restructuring of memory, as stated in the title of her essay, through a “dialogue” with Rea Tajiri’s documentary on her own family’s experience within the internment camps, entitled *History and Memory*. Tajiri’s work accomplishes the same act as the novels described above do: Tajiri’s reenactment of her mother’s actions and the filming of the place where she lived, in the absence of her mother’s own descriptions, paints a living picture of the experiences that were forgotten without capture by cameras. Sturken argues that the destruction of culturally important memory items, the silence of the generation living within the camps, and the ban on media capture of the camps create a vacuum of remembrance that Tajiri and, as this essay argues, the three novelists above, attempt to fill with their own fictionalized representations of the experiences lived by the thousands of real Japanese Americans relocated during the war.

In Julie Otsuka’s short attribution to the sources she consulted, she includes Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*, one of the first personal accounts of the internment published. The memoirs and autobiographies published about the internment provide an array of particular experiences, yet the experiences of so many internees, being largely absent in pictures and contemporaneous literature of the wartime, have been forever silenced by a refusal to speak of the past, such as depicted by Naomi Nakane’s Uncle Isamu in *Obasan*, and by the overwhelming presence and power of other depictions of the war. Sturken names the picture of soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima as one of these iconic images forever seared into the cultural memory of the

American experience of World War II. The soaring bomber planes homing in on their targets is another image Sturken describes as the same overwhelmingly popular vision of World War II held by Americans. So popular are these images, Sturken says, that many of the most iconic lengths of footage thought of as showing real action during the war are actually clips taken from war movies filmed long after the war had ended.

“Counterimages and absent presence” restrict the visibility of internees and their starkly contrastive experiences during the war, argues Sturken, and thus the need for literature and recreations arises in order to reintroduce the images of the internment into the memories of Americans. She quotes Tajiri as she describes the absence of visual memories of the internment:

“There are things which have happened in the world while there were cameras watching, things we have images for. There are other things which have happened while there are no cameras watching, which we restage in front of cameras to have images of.

There are things which have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of observers, present at the time, while there are things which have happened for which there have been no observers, except the spirits of the dead.”

Tajiri’s description puts the sentiment in concise words. Images that do not exist must be recreated in order to be visible. Sturken argues that the meanings and subjects change slightly when they are recreated, for the moment’s exact environment can never be recreated in its entirety, but for a cultural remembrance of an event that lacks many authentic visual and written representations of the experiences of those who lived it, recreated pictures and written records are vital to reintroduce memory of the forgotten events into cultural memory.

The novels examined in this essay attempt to accomplish that feat just as Tajiri’s film does; in recreating the lived experiences of the Japanese Americans whose voices were never

heard, these three novels provide accessible stories that may stand in for the silenced memories. These fictionalized narratives replace the absent images with the experiences of very possibly real people through personalized views and expansive accounts of the families, relations, and environments so integral to the development of real families as they dealt with the same things. The real importance of remembrance of family across generations is just as believable in *Obasan* as it is in Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*. Perhaps it is as a mock-memoir that this story derives a majority of its power over the reader, as the family in *Obasan* seems as real as any of the Canadian families who were dislocated and splintered during the war. Less generalizable as the nameless family represented within the pages of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the experiences of the Nakane and Kato families still stand as a very real depiction of poignant, memorable moments in the lives of people who very well could have existed. Naomi reading the diary of Aunt Emily and letters to her mother mimic the audience as they read Naomi's diary and are pulled through the pastor Nakayama-sensei's reading of the letters sent from Naomi's grandmother after the bombing of Nagasaki as he discovers the letters upon a visit to comfort the family after Isamu's death. Just as real memoirs depict the internment camp experiences and Rea Tajiri's recreation of her mother's life in camp piece together the memories lost from cultural memory, so too does the memoir-style of Naomi Nakane in *Obasan*.

*No-No Boy* draws less from the narrative style, being a simple novel instead of a diary written as a novel, but it too fills in the absent presence of the Japanese youth returned from a place where their lives and voices were silenced most as "disloyals" and "troublemakers." The depiction of four different young men show the variety of experiences encountered by Japanese American youth during and after the war. The inclusion of Emi, a young Japanese American woman whose Japanese American husband extends his stay in Germany after the war to avoid

coming home, also gives a glimpse into the lives of the young Japanese women who were left behind as their Japanese husbands went to war to prove their loyalty to America. The importance of intergenerational relationships is also presented in the form of the father-son relationships of both Ichiro and Kenji as well as the broken relationship between Ichiro and his mother.

Though the internment of Japanese descendants in fiction is not a replacement for the actual memoirs and autobiographies written by those who lived through the internment, their depictions in novels represent the voices of authors and readers who relive the experiences of real internees. Fiction is important as it can provide a lens through which to see the lives of those whose voices were silenced before they could be heard. Through the fictionalized narratives of these three novels, the experiences of like individuals whose stories were never told can be inferred and contrasted against those stories which have been written, such as Miné Okubo's memoir *Citizen 13660* and Monica Sone's fictionalized autobiography *Nisei Daughter*. Not only do the fictional experiences of the three novels accomplish their goal of describing the conditions of the camps and the environmental barriers faced both physically and socially by Japanese Americans and Canadians during and after World War II, they also describe the mental difficulties that Japanese descendants faced as they grappled with their conceptions of identity, citizenship, family, loyalty, and closure. Such themes are present in these novels just as they were present in the lives of real Japanese American internees and Canadian relocated families. Fiction in these cases, provides a medium for those whose silences widen the gap between the violently patriotic idealizations of World War II-era American and Canadian society present in cultural memory and the lost stories of the men and women whose memoirs and observations, unlike John Okada, Rea Tajiri, and Miné Okubo, were never written down or published, possibly having been drowned in the silence of the older generations as in the cases of Tajiri's mother, the

father in Otsuka's nameless family, or Aya Obasan. In this way, potential voices given form through the younger generations bridge the silence of the older generations and lead the cultural memories onward into future remembrance.

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