

## EVERYDAY SOURCES ABOUT LIFE IN THE CAMPS:

### THE VALUE OF THE VERNACULAR<sup>1</sup>

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In this essay, I want to highlight the very real value of what literary scholar Houston Baker identifies as “the vernacular.” In Baker’s case, of course, this is the analytic he develops in order to highlight the blues, a musical and poetic genre, as being key to Afro-American expressive culture.<sup>2</sup> Borrowing liberally from Baker’s exposition, I want to deploy the idea of “the vernacular” to discuss unique data sets that speak directly to the experiences of Japanese Americans themselves during travails experienced during World War II.

Many of the so-called standard accounts of the Japanese American experience in either the War Relocation Authority, or the U.S. Department of Justice, camps are based on various kinds of “official” records and documents. First and foremost are the WRA’s own records, as well as Poston’s Bureau of Sociological Research files, as well as those of the University of California’s “Japanese Evacuation and Resettlement Study” (or JERS).<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have even utilized declassified FBI and DOJ records, the ultimate federal records. These official sources have all be deeply mined and are the primary basis for a sustained historiography that emerged during the war and that continues up to today.

In this context, the long-term significance of the CSU Japanese American Digitation Project holds many promises for future research. First and foremost among

these is that the Project will make more-widely accessible sets of vernacular materials—letters, diaries, photos, art work, and other vernacular expressions of daily personal experience in camp. These documents in turn will allow careful scholars of the Japanese American experience to recuperate an inclusive, holistic history of the 1940s that recognizes and foregrounds what Issei, Nisei, and Kibei experienced first-hand. Written from Japanese American points-of-view, a large on-line resource of the kind the CSU Japanese American Digitization Project envisions will surely tie into a new generation of scholarship that predicates its work on sources distinctive from the WRA-generated, WRA-influenced, work of its predecessors.

In this essay, I would like to detail three research encounters I have had where popular, vernacular materials have significantly supplemented my understanding of the process of forced, racially segregated confinement which Japanese Americans were subject to in the states of WA, OR, CA, and AZ.

### THREE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF VERNACULAR EXPRESSION

While the copious collection taken by the WRA's Photography Section or WRAPS has many uses, despite its problematic features, I was instantly struck when I happened across the sketches of a first-generation *Issei*, Mr. Jitsuo Kurushima. One of the thousands of persons of Japanese ancestry imprisoned in what the WRA called "The Colorado River Relocation Center," Kurushima was an amateur artist who, although impassioned about drawing and painting, never really had the time or resources to pursue art as he might have otherwise. Having an enforced period of leisure, Kurushima took advantage of the situation and began to sketch anything and everything that caught his

fancy. From the first time I saw a sample of Kurushima's sketches of daily life in Poston, as the "Colorado River Relocation Center" confinement site was popularly known, I was captivated by the insight they expressed about what people experienced in camp. So much I was impressed that, when the need came up to include illustrations of Poston in my book about anthropology graduate student Tamie Tsuchiyama, who did fieldwork there for the JERS project, I wrote to the Kurushima family (since Mr. Jitsuo had already passed away by 1991) to ask for their permission to reproduce eleven of his sketches.<sup>4</sup> Some fifteen-plus years later, I still delight in Kurushima's hand/eye in skillfully and affectionately capturing the humanity as well as the ironies of people's everyday lives in Poston.

To wit, in terms of its inherent biases, the WRAPS photographers simply could not document the darker, negative, dimensions of camp life. There are, for example, no photos of protests, riots, or infamous tools of domination such as the "stockade"—the prison within a prison, specially-built for "resisters" at the WRA camp known as Tule Lake in northern California. Again, it is necessary, as well as informative to turn to artists' renditions in order to see images of how repression looked like to the ordinary camp observers—in this particular case the Issei artist Gene Sogioka. In trying to prepare a public presentation about Poston, and finding no available photos in the WRAPS corpus of the strikes or other forms of popular resistance, I did locate the fabulous watercolors by Sogioka, depicting a range situations of struggle and conflict in the camps ("unsavory," at least from the WRA's point of view, and thus unrecorded pictorially by the government agency). The presence of informers, the beatings, riots, arrests, and

interrogations—all of these “facts of life” in the Poston camp are rendered by Sogioka, giving us a precious vernacular account by someone who was on the scene at the time.<sup>5</sup>

The point is simple. Where the WRAPS falls short, we need to be able to turn to the many Japanese American artists in confinement, whether professional or amateur, in order to see if any of their graphic representations provide us with images or knowledge that the U.S. government agencies were loath to create and/or circulate.

The second vernacular resource I would like to identify here has to do with personal letters. In my previously mentioned book, *The Politics of Fieldwork*, I undertook to study the research trajectory of Tamie Tsuchiyama, a young second generation Nisei graduate student who was already of advanced status in terms of her doctoral-level studies at U.C. Berkeley. Tsuchiyama’s correspondence with her employer and mentor, Professor Dorothy S. Thomas, effectively captured Tsuchiyama’s trajectory from a neophyte field researcher for JERS, to a somewhat bitter, disillusioned, employee who wound up resigning from the project after accusing Thomas of demanding too much, too soon, under the trying circumstances of clandestine data collection. Although it is difficult to be fully certain that Thomas included all of the letters that Tsuchiyama sent to her, what is in the archives does give a rare, detailed look at the kinds of pressures that this young Nisei woman from Hawai’i was under; certainly details are presented there that did not make their way into any of Thomas’s subsequent books, nor in to any of the official JERS publications. These details, however, provide important insights not only into the Thomas-Tsuchiyama relationship, but also the power quotient between a senior Euro-American professor who holds all the professional cards, and a junior, graduate student of color, who is actually in the field, and who is collecting the

data that the senior scholar is more able to exploit and to turn into publications that would eventually generate professional awards not to mention monetary recompense and scholarly acclaim.

Another widely cited example of the use of personal letters by those imprisoned that generate new, insightful views of the personal costs of mass removal and incarceration would be Professor Louis Fiset's remarkable book entitled *Imprisoned Apart*.<sup>6</sup> In this moving, poignant account, Fiset draws on the personal correspondence of two Seattle Issei, Iwao Matsushita and his wife Hanaye. Incarceration splits the two, who had been married for more than two decades, sending Hanaye to the WRA camp, Minidoka, while Iwao, a professor of Japanese language, was imprisoned in the DOJ camp at Fort Missoula, Montana. The letters express the pain of separation, and are emblematic of the thousands of Nikkei who were torn away from kith and kin during and because of the war. The Matsushita's letters, in other words, paint a portrait of the personal anguish that no official WRA account, report, or statistics could ever capture.

The last example of vernacular sources has to do with a book I helped to compile and write titled *A Personal Stand: The Story of Gordon Hirabayashi vs the United States*.<sup>7</sup> In sorting my uncle Gordon's personal papers, my father Jim found a number of items that no one knew Gordon had. These were voluminous correspondence from the 1940s, personal diaries that Gordon had kept in prison, as well as Gordon's "central file" created by the FBI, which was thought to have vanished without a trace.<sup>8</sup> In any case, my father quickly realized that these materials, (which by the way are now deposited in the Special Collections department of the University of Washington libraries), would provide the basis for the first extended account of what Gordon was thinking, and more

importantly: what he was *feeling*, between 1941 and his release from the McNeil Island Penitentiary in 1944. As one scholar subsequently put it in a review: “*A Principled Stand* proves that boxes of paper hauled from home to home and stored in closets and garages can eventually become the meat of history.”<sup>9</sup>

This, of course, is not the first time that diaries have been used to great effect in terms of generating first-hand, on the spot, accounts of the incarceration experience. For the most part, those who have had their personal diaries published in book-length renditions are either the famous or especially prolific writers. The two examples that come immediately to mind would be Yamato Ichihashi--an Issei as well as a professor at Stanford--whose diaries were utilized by Gordon Chang to write an extensive account of Ichihashi’s transition from the university to life in the WRA’s infamous Tule Lake camp.<sup>10</sup>

A second notable example is the historian John Modell’s use of the diary of JERS fieldworker Charles Kikuchi. Both an insider and an outsider vis-à-vis the pre-war Japanese American community, Kikuchi was a life-long keeper of a personal diary in which he recorded both his daily observations as well as his innermost thoughts and feelings. Modell utilized Kikuchi’s war-time diary to fashion a compelling portrait of day-to-day life in the Wartime Civil Control Administration camp, erected in the hastily refashioned race track in Tanforan, California.<sup>11</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: Toward A Vernacular Cultural History of Experience

In what I consider to be the most theoretically-significant passage of my book, *The Politics of Fieldwork*, I draw from expositions by Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Sanjek

about what both have studied as “colonial science.”<sup>12</sup> Without wanting to simplify their explanations of what colonial science is, a relevant point can be made fairly easily: When researchers from a superordinate ruling nation study a subordinated population the data generated are shaped in both conscious and unconscious biases in terms of the matrix of power that surrounds the social spaces that interface the two groups. Thus Bourdieu advocates the use of “reflexivity,” not in a subjective, personal sense, but in terms of the fact that social scientists, whose research activities are typically predicated upon their ties to a superordinate ruling nation must understand the historical formation of their intellectual tools so as to do their best to manage biases and distortion.

Why, then, do I herald the efforts of the CSU Japanese American Digitization Project? To date, as I have briefly explained here, I have been fortunate enough to find vernacular accounts that have deepened my understanding of the lived experience of mass removal and incarceration. These were buried in the massive compilations of data, often collected by the Japanese American researchers working for the WRA, as well as large research projects such as JERS, and BSR.

What stands out about the holdings of many of the CSU library collections that I have had the opportunity to survey are the many photographs, personal documents, and other memorabilia by “ordinary” men and women who, with foresight and vision, donated their “papers” to their local university libraries. Moreover, what would surely have taken years in terms of involving an extensive itinerary, money, and effort, back in the age before present-day technologies, has been totally transformed by computers, scans, web sites. The latter have transformed the ability to mine personal documents on a 24/7 basis, and I fully expect that increased access to vernacular data sets of all kinds will

likewise transform our interpretations of the camps, what happened in the camps, and how living through that history transformed the individuals, families, networks and communities subject of incarceration.

My claim here is not to argue that the official accounts of mass removal and incarceration are useless. Rather, they bear the strengths as well as the limitations of any data set that one chooses to utilize, especially on a second-hand basis. What I am proposing is that the everyday, vernacular accounts of ordinary men and women are invaluable resources that students, scholars, and interested community members can peruse in order to better grasp what happened to over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry during the 1940s, and, most importantly, how it felt to go through this particular experience as a Japanese American. And for this, we should be very grateful to Gregory L. Williams and his colleagues at the CSU who planned this project, to the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding it, and to the many CSU librarians at the Dominguez Hills, Sacramento, Fullerton, San Jose, Fresno, and Northridge campuses who will labor to scan and make available over three hundred linear feet of materials. We are decidedly in their debt.



## NOTES

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2. Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

3. For any readers who want to read short, authoritative accounts of what the JERS and the BSR, were all about, or is desirous of information about the War Relocation Authority, a recommended resource is the Densho Encyclopedia on line: <http://encyclopedia.densho.org/>

4. I used Kurushima's drawings of Poston in my book *The Politics of Fieldwork* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 67-79.

5. A biography and selected Poston watercolors by Sogioka are presented in the book by Deborah Gesensway and Mindy Roseman, *Beyond Words: Images From America's Concentration Camps* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 145-155.

6. Louis Fiset, *Imprisoned Apart: The World War II Correspondence of an Issei Couple* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

7. Gordon K. Hirabayashi, James A. Hirabayashi, and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, *A Personal Stand: The Story of Gordon Hirabayashi vs the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

8. My father made a FOI/A request in order to obtain a declassified copy of Gordon's FBI files. After months of delay, the Justice Department informed him that no such file existed. My father, needless to say, was furious.

9. Paula Becker, Review. *HistoryLink.org*.

10. Gordon Chang, *Morning Glory, Evening Shadow: Yamato Ichihashi and His Internment Writings, 1942-45* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

11. John Modell, *The Kikuchi Diary: Chronicle for an American Concentration Camp. The Tanforan Journals of Charles Kikuchi* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

12. See Hirabayashi, *The Politics of Fieldwork, 163-165*, for my application of the analytic of "colonial science" to the Thomas-Tsuchiyama relationship, especially insofar as it is an exemplar of the unequal relations of production so typical of the collection (by junior assistants of color), as versus the exploitation (by Euro/Euro American scholars), of ethnographic field data.

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