“Living as Art”: Performance and the Haunting of the Japanese Diaspora

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“Living as Art”: Performance and the Haunting of the Japanese Diaspora

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In loving memory of Hiroko and Santaro Tanabe

おじいちゃま、おばあちゃま、ありがとうございます
Introduction

“I got it working,” my father shouted down to me. “I got it working.”

I rushed up the stairs as he fiddled with the VCR remote, trying to find the right spot in the video. It had taken us a while to get our hands on a piece of equipment that could actually play the tapes for us, and now that it was sitting in front of me, the empty blue screen illuminating the dark room we sat in, I didn’t know what to think.

We’ve had these VHS tapes for years - dusty old tapes that we found sitting in my grandparents’ apartment back when we were cleaning it out, after we had moved them into a nursing home in 2013. I had never really given them much thought. I had forgotten about them, to be honest. Maybe at the time, I had viewed them as relics of the past, something I had no hope of ever understanding. I’m not really sure, at this point. Maybe I was just too afraid to confront what was in them. We tucked them away, out of sight, out of mind.

My grandfather, my Ojiichama, had been a part of a Japanese art movement. He became a member of the group that called themselves the ‘Neo-Dada Organizers’ sometime in the year 1960. Formed during a time of great flux and anxiety due to the rapid reconstruction of Japan after World War II, they raged against traditional Japanese artistic conventions, and against societal expectations as a whole. They cobbled together works of art made entirely of garbage; they stripped naked in front of their audiences; they caused a whirlwind of creation and destruction, of life and death. One of the more well-known members, Ushio Shinohara, spelled out their destructive mindset clearly in a group manifesto: “As we enter the blood-soaked ring in this 20.6th century—a century which has trampled on sincere works of art—the only way to avoid being butchered is to become butchers ourselves” (Kapur, 196).
None of that ever mattered to me, of course. I had known that Ojiichama was part of some weird art movement; it was a neat little factoid about myself I could use to brag to my friends. But I had never exactly stopped and thought about what that movement was, and I had certainly never thought to ask him about it.

I’m not sure he would have given me an answer if I had asked.

(Figure 1: Santaro Tanabe and Hana Tanabe at the Japan Society Festival in NYC, 2000)

He was just one of my four grandparents, my goofy old Ojiichama: the man who would race ahead of me and my grandma, my Obaachama, in the New York City streets; the man who, once he was far enough ahead, would hide around the corner where we couldn’t see him; the man who (without fail) would always stop dead in his tracks before rushing to buy me a small vanilla ice cream cone whenever he spotted a Mister Softee ice cream truck, even if it was on the other side of the street, parked by a totally different block. To me, that was him. That was my Ojiichama.

So on that evening in December 2021, when we had finally gotten our hands on a working VCR, I could feel my breath catch in my throat as the VHS resumed playing. The blue
screen quickly being replaced by a grainy, flickering shot looking up at the Empire State
Building—a site I’ve come to associate with the time I spent with my grandparents. In bold, blue
letters, a name appears on the screen:

田辺三太郎

Tanabe Santaro. Santaro Tanabe. The camera pans down, and my father and I watch as a
man walks through the shot, through a city that is so familiar (and yet it is so different, so
impossibly far out of our temporal reach). He’s wearing jeans, one hand tucked in his jacket
pocket. His usual pair of sunglasses rest on his nose, and he’s chewing a piece of gum. He
laughs. Text about his life, all in Japanese, begins to scroll across the bottom of the screen, but all
I can focus on is the man, walking through the city streets, as casual as can be. This man that I
was so close with, that is so distinctly familiar to me—and yet, I can’t help the feeling that nags
at the back of my mind that there was this massive, gaping pit between us that I never could
cross. Despite the familiarity, perhaps there was a distance that was even greater.

(Figure 2: Still from NHK, interview with Santaro Tanabe, 23:09 minutes, video)
That nagging feeling had always been there, looking back. I tried to cover it up, to ignore it. But seeing Santaro Tanabe—the man that I had known so well, and yet not at all—captured on film put me into an uncomfortable situation where I was forced to confront it. As I listened to this man speak in a language I have heard for my whole life, but only just begun to understand, I was forced to consider why it is that I feel the way that I do, and grapple with these feelings I had always shoved to the side.

With the help of my father, I managed to transcribe the interview, and began the process of translating it. What we found was a glimpse inside a world neither of us ever really knew, a glimpse inside Ojiichama’s mind as an artist, not a father or a grandfather. We listened to him talk about the confusion he felt as a youth and of how lucky he was to be able to find his friends in the Neo-Dada Organizers. “I was young,” he says, “and there was a lot of energy… there was so much energy that I struggled to process it inside of myself, to the point that I needed to let my feelings out.” He expressed his feelings through art, scouring the junkyard for bits and pieces that others had discarded to turn into art—he “searched for something living inside” the junk. His favorite was the drum cans, which held an existence inside of them that inspired him. He continues:

I have always thought of myself as an artist, always. That’s why, I always, in whatever I do, I push art into it. I say ‘fishing as art,’ when I’m fishing, I treat it the same as art, so, you know, even my feelings towards life itself, I feel as though I am ‘living as art;’ that’s how I’m doing it… I don’t believe that art is just what’s being shown in museums. I’m thinking of dismantling the idea that these art galleries, these museums, these ‘castles,’ where one statically observes pieces, are art… My stance towards art is a thing that is
very much a part of my life now, that I have had all along, and because of that, I know that it is something that will never disappear from inside of me.

My grandfather was always ‘Living as Art,’ he claimed. That was his life philosophy. Maybe, my family and I joked, it was just an excuse for him to do whatever he wanted and still call himself an artist (he really did love fishing). But I can also see the truth in what he was saying.

Santaro Tanabe was a performer. Everything he did, he viewed it as art—he was art, and art was a part of him. I don’t know much about his life, or Obaachama’s, past their interactions with me. Their status as diasporic individuals, separated from their homeland, along with their reluctance to speak about the past, rendered their stories near inaccessible to us. They left those gaping holes that I had always felt in the back of my mind. Maybe, though, there was a way I could try to reach out, reach through the barriers of space and time, and find a way to connect with this part of our family history that has been lost to memory, but continues to haunt us. Maybe I, too, could try to ‘live as art.’

(Figure 3: Santato Tanabe, sat in front of one of his many road sign paintings)
Incarceration, Amnesia, and Connecting through Performance

I have found other Japanese and Japanese American individuals who have also taken this ‘living as art’ approach. Similarly haunted, they have used their bodies to create pieces of art that attempt to cross these barriers, and to find a way to come to terms with their own diasporic gaps in memory. There is one unifying theme that links these artist’s pieces together: the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Although I do not have a personal or familial connection to this history, I can feel the effects of it all the same.

Japanese American history and experience has been fundamentally shaped by racial exclusion in the United States. This includes everything from incarceration, to the far more recent rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans in the face of COVID-19, to the constant microaggressions that occur throughout the country every day. Racial politics and racialization in the U.S. have resulted in countless laws, policies, and orders that have real, tangible effects on the lives of over a million people residing in the country. Their impact is undeniable. These experiences are a part of U.S. history and personal family histories; thus, they have had a direct hand in shaping Japanese Americans’ sense of identity. This history cannot be forgotten or ignored, and these artists and storytellers have taken it upon themselves to search for answers regarding their past, and utilize what they discover to inform how they tell their stories.

In this thesis, I focus on the work of three specific Japanese and Japanese American artists—Aisuke Kondo, Rea Tajiri, and George Takei—to explore the connection between the collective history that haunts them and living as art. How did these artists interact with their pasts? Did they attempt to fill in their gaps of memory, to find the exact answers to the questions that they sought? Or, did they simply try to come to an understanding of why this loss of stories
and memories have occurred? What influence does their medium have on their performance? How did they connect their stories to contemporary audiences—and who are these audiences?

Although each of the artists I have chosen address similar questions and gaps in knowledge and memory, their approaches and mediums—from experimental film to theater—result in a wide variety of interpretations of Japanese American history, identity, and culture. They each take drastically different approaches to connecting with the past, dealing with incarceration, and ‘living as art.’ In addition to a close reading of the texts and performances themselves, I will rely on the scholarly literature on and reviews of these artists in order to see how their works have been received and understood. These secondary sources provide insight into how viewers interpret the narratives presented to them (along with my own interpretations of the pieces), and how each artist interpreted their own history in order to craft these narratives.

Firstly, I will look at the series “Matter and Memory” (2017-present) by Japanese artist Aisuke Kondo. An experimental filmmaker, Kondo utilizes short, often dialogue free clips in order to put together a story. While not Japanese American himself, Kondo is tied to Japanese American history through his great-grandfather, an Issei, or first-generation, immigrant incarcerated during World War II. In his films, Kondo highlights the lack of spoken dialogue he has access to regarding his family history. Although he has an album of pictures, the diasporic nature of his family in America has resulted in the lack of stories normally told while looking through it. Instead, Kondo retraces his great-grandfather’s steps to the best of his ability, enabling him to reconnect with his past through a shared viewpoint in the physical world, rather than through spoken word. Kondo aims to reconstruct a narrative, a goal that is reflected by the pieced-together nature of his work.
Next, I will examine Rea Tajiri’s works. In particular, I would like to focus on the experimental documentary, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991). Much like Kondo, Tajiri contends with gaps in family history, haunted by the feeling of “living in a family full of ghosts.” Tajiri’s *nisei* (second-generation) mother was amongst those incarcerated; although she was able to connect with her mother in a way Kondo could not with his great-grandfather, the history she has been given is limited by what her mother has remembered and ‘forgotten to remember.’ In her effort to connect with her family’s past, Tajiri utilizes her family photographs and memories alongside historic pieces of media, ranging from footage of the attack on Pearl Harbor, to Hollywood films, to World War II propaganda. Using these varying narratives, Tajiri presents audiences with her understanding of memory, and showcases a distinct presence in the absence she has long felt.

Finally, I will focus on the musical, *Allegiance* (2012), written by Jay Kuo, Marc Acito, and Lorenzo Thione. Inspired by the lived experiences of George Takei, who plays multiple principal roles in the musical, *Allegiance* attempts to follow a family through their incarceration and examines the strains that the experience puts on them. First performed in San Diego in 2012, 2015 saw the musical become the first on Broadway to be created by Asian Americans, featuring mainly Asian American actors. This musical directly addresses a portion of Japanese American history that, as focused on by the previous artists, is often seen as a gap in family memory. However, unlike Kondo and Tajiri’s works, *Allegiance* was performed in a setting where the main audience was predominantly white theatergoers. I will examine how the expectations of this intended audience may have had an impact on the conceptualization and actualization of the piece.
Through performance, dialogue, and images—or even their distinct absence—these artists have engaged in a history of cultural activism in order to ensure that their voices are heard. They have used these varying art-forms to bring representation to their ethnic community and to weave together their own narratives; they have used their bodies as conduits in order to reconnect with a past that others would rather forget. These stories have been left for Japanese American audiences to interact with and interpret, and, in my own search for my family’s forgotten past, I will do just that. The final component of this thesis is my own attempt to “live as art” and come to terms with my diasporic history as I dig through boxes to find family artifacts, find moments of introspection, and interact with the works of other artists.

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Ojiichama’s art studio was always full to the brim with paintings. I was always in awe of the size and scope of the things, these giant canvases that absolutely dwarfed me. All of these strange, nonsensical, colorful paintings of road signs, of flowers, of the human body—were filled with bursts of color and strange shapes that I could never understand, and that yet held some sort of meaning. I could stare at these paintings for hours, sitting up in the loft that overlooked the studio. I was always so excited for the rare occasions Ojiichama would invite me in, to show me his art, and maybe, if I was lucky, to create some new art with me. I remember painting fireworks with him, the same fireworks I always looked forward to seeing with my grandparents on the Fourth of July—and proudly showing Obaachama my beautiful artwork.

He was constantly rotating out the artwork that lined the wall next to their little dining room table, too. They were smaller ones that I didn’t stop to notice in his studio. Many of these were sketches of odd, cylindrical structures, arranged in some sort of pattern, holding some sort of meaning that I couldn’t decode. I never asked about them. In the later years, he sometimes
switched these out for odd paintings that resembled a cross between a mushroom and a flower.

Portraits, he told me. That one was a portrait of himself, he said, and that one was of my Obaachama. Those ones over there were of his friends from Japan. There was even one of my mother. I was never really sure what to think of this series he was working on (it was a bit creepy, if I’m being honest), but he seemed to be proud of it.

(There was never a portrait of me.)

I didn’t really realize the importance that this art—these physical pieces of memory—held for me, until it was too late. When we opened the door to the studio after we had moved my grandparents out, it felt like a ball of lead had been dropped into my stomach. I took a shaky step forward, blinking, hoping this image would go away like some sort of bad dream. The image of my Ojiichama’s paintings, slashed up neatly, deliberately, an X cut into the center of each.

Decades of work, torn apart by a razor blade in seconds. The canvas drooping down, the paint beginning to crack and chip off.

What a shame, I remember the realtor saying. Beautiful artwork. We could have displayed these. Nothing left to do but throw them out.

I didn’t cry. I couldn’t. But as I walked around the lifeless art studio, staring, I could feel a strange, aching sense of emptiness consume me. Swallow me whole.

But lately, as I’ve looked at what few surviving pieces of art we have left, as my family and I have uncovered cookie tins full to the brim with black-and-white photographs from an age and place I am completely unfamiliar with, I’ve felt my emotions begin to bubble to the surface in a way I no longer had any control over. These artifacts connected me with my grandparents in a way I never had been able to before, and yet something was still missing.

— — —
Connecting with the Past in Aisuke Kondo’s Matter and Memory

“It is okuri-bi, isn’t it?”

A tiny fire, barely large enough to rise above the edging stones that mark the border between concrete and soil, flickers gently in the stillness of the night. An editor’s note at the bottom of the screen explains the significance of this flame: “okuri-bi is the bonfire lit to speed the spirits of one’s ancestors.” Though viewers may question whether or not such a tiny flame can carry so much meaning, the miniature bonfire continues to crackle, and we hear the young man speak once more:

“[Grandma?]”

“Hm?“

“Whose soul are you sending to heaven?” (Kondo, About M.K., 00:03)

The man receives only silence in response. Insects chirp, the wind blows, the fire continues to crackle. A hand, the grandmother’s, adds another small piece of kindling to the flame before she stands, and the video cuts to black.

This short interaction at the very beginning of Aisuke Kondo’s About M.K. (2017), totaling approximately thirty seconds, stands out prominently not only as the only bit of spoken dialogue in the five minute video, but also as some of the only dialogue in Kondo’s works as a whole. As the video cuts back in, the young man sits down at a desktop displaying the black-and-white image of another, older man. Wordlessly, viewers are transported into a first-person narrative of this man’s life. Important life events are shown on silent, black screens, with short video clips interposed between these breaks; there’s a clip shot from a boat approaching a port, a clip of an American flag, multiple shots of black and white family photos.
set up in a city landscape. There’s a video of a boat speeding from the port, of concentration camps where he was incarcerated, of the vast expanse of ocean.

There is a striking contrast between the text of the video, with its usage of the word “I” (or, perhaps more importantly, the equivalent word “watashi” in Japanese) to refer to this man—who, as the text in the video eventually states, “died February 21, 1956 in Shizuoka, Japan”—and the modern-day footage paired alongside it. The man, Kondo’s “Issei” (or first generation) great-grandfather Miki Kondo, is unable to take viewers through these images, to narrate his own life story. Much of his experiences have been seemingly lost to time, inaccessible in any traditional way. As Jessica Nakamura notes, this sense of loss is typical of the Japanese diaspora in the United States: “His experiences reflect the long separations and obscured histories of Asian migrants that resulted from US anti-immigration legislation and forced relocation” (Nakamura, Diaspora and Performance). The typical method of passing on stories through both image and spoken word was rendered impossible by Miki’s inability to set up roots, his politically and racially influenced diasporic experience leading to a loss of family memory in the present.

Aisuke Kondo’s About M.K. is representative of his efforts throughout his experimental short film series, Matter and Memory, to connect with the missing pieces of memory that make up his family history. With only photographs and a basic timeline to work off of, Kondo stays away from the usage of spoken word, reflecting his own inability to access it; he is able to form connections with his past using the physical world, instead. Kondo uses his own body as a physical “conduit between past and present, near and far” (Nakamura, 132) inhabiting the spaces that his great-grandfather lived in order to interact with and reenact his life. In doing so, he blurs the distinction between time and space. On his website, Kondo states:
I try to connect the past to the present with my artworks, and they function as a 'memory machine.' In that machine, we can come and go between the past and present through the borders, which lie between self, others, history, and place. (Kondo, *Recent Works*)

By passing through these borders and reenacting these small snippets of his life, Kondo not only is able to form a more concrete idea of how Miki lived, but also gain an understanding of the logic and emotions that helped to shape both him and the family that came after.

**The Body as a Conduit Between the Past and Present**

Racialized and minoritized people tend to be noted in history only when acts of violence are committed against them. As Saidiya Hartman argues, this recorded history is “not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that… transformed them into commodities and corpses” (Hartman, 2). This phenomenon can be seen by the relative invisibility of Japanese American lives in US history and popular culture. It is their forced incarceration that “marks the introduction of Japanese Americans to US visual culture” (Phu, 22). Mainstream attention was only afforded to their experiences when they became directly subjected to the violence of others, and thus more easily romanticized. This invisible time ‘before-incarceration’ is where Kondo begins his exploration of his great-grandfather’s life, in San Francisco, where Miki lived and attempted to plant roots for over forty years of his life.

In *The Past in the Present in SF* (2017), Kondo retraces Miki’s steps through the city via the family album, holding photos up when he is able to locate the exact spot they were taken. Using side-by-side comparisons and peering around the photographs, audiences are able to see the direct link between the past and present, no matter how thin said connection may have become through the passage of time. Kondo doesn’t simply link the physical spaces through time; through abrupt cuts in the video, he takes Miki’s place in the present day, standing exactly
where his great-grandfather once stood. The distinct absences in Kondo’s contemporary reenactments, alongside the physical differences between the two men, evokes a sense of haunting. While there is a sense of unknown and haunting that comes with Miki’s present absence, this feeling of the story being unwhole is able to inform and fill in gaps for both Kondo and viewers. Through reenactment of these family photographs, we are given insight into the ‘absent presence’ of Japanese American history.

In her analysis of Kondo’s *The Past in the Present in SF*, Jessica Nakamura theorizes that “the family photograph is performative—it enacts a doing” (Nakamura). The photographs that Miki had taken communicates the values and customs that he wished to transmit, whether that be to future family members or the general public. In each photo that is shown, Miki is seen with a smile, posed for the camera in formal attire. We do not question these images until we are shown Kondo in his grandfather’s place—while the two men stand in the same physical location, Kondo stands with a neutral face and casual attire.

(Figures 4 & 5: Stills from Kondo, Aisuke, The Past in the Present in SF, 2017, 6:32 minutes, video, © Kondo Aisuke)

While the lack of the other subjects that appeared with Miki (alongside the changes to physical space) communicates to audiences that which cannot be recovered, these differences also challenge viewers to consider Miki’s absent story behind the family photographs. How much of
Miki’s outward appearance was curated for the photos, and what did he willingly conceal in the act of curation? While he communicates a sense of success through his attire, of rootedness through his presence among other Japanese Americans, and of ease through his smile, it is important to question how truly ‘assimilated’ was Miki in a country that continuously passed racially-charged anti-Asian legislation. Part of Miki’s invisibility before incarceration can likely be attributed to his efforts to assimilate, despite his position as a diasporic subject.

In *Cut a circle* (2019), Kondo once again questions what has been hidden, or cut out, of family history. In this video, he (re)enacts the violence of wartime incarceration on Japanese American identities. Kondo opens with an black screen, then white text from question 27 and question 28 of the loyalty questionnaire given to incarcerated Japanese Americans appears:

Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, whenever ordered?

Will you swear unqualified allegiances to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor or other foreign government, power, or organization?

Kondo then cuts to a scene from the Tule Lake War Relocation Center, where those who answered no to the questions above, thus being seen as disloyal, were segregated. In *Cut a circle*, Kondo stands at the former site of the camp unfolding a Japanese flag as it flaps in the wind. He takes a pair of scissors, then cuts the sun emblem, the red circle, out of the flag, leaving the remaining white fabric with a gaping hole in the center. He stands there holding this flag for a moment. In the next scene, he holds the butchered flag up with an American flag behind it, the stars and stripes now appearing where the sun had been cut out. The effect causes the American
flag to become more prominent—a displayed “social exterior” (Brown, 72)—against what now appears to be a white sheet. Nonetheless, he is unable to hide the butchered Japanese flag. In the following scene, he lays down in the field and covers himself with the flags, resulting in an image of a dead body covered in a shroud, as if taking this mutilation with him to the grave.

By mutilating the flag, Kondo physically embodies how Japanese Americans were forced to ‘cut out’ aspects of their Japanese identity, even as diasporic markers remained visible. The cut out pieces, the lost fragments of memory, haunt the physical spaces they inhabited into the present, much like the crimson-colored sun that comes to rest behind Kondo after he lets the wind carry it away. Although Kondo appears alone in the video, he reenacts what many Japanese Americans, including his great-grandfather, were forced to do. He attempts to create a distinct divide between two identities, erasing his ‘Japaneseness’ from view. In order to continue living in a community that had labeled them as an ‘other,’ Japanese Americans were forced to embrace the American side of their identities while hiding away their Japanese cultural heritage. As Kate Brown argues, physical belongings were managed by Japanese Americans to show how even before incarceration, objects deemed “Japanese” side of identity had to be hidden away, forced into the interior aspects of life in order to appear assimilated. Japanese Americans created and crossed borders through their belongings and material culture: “From the old to the new, the handmade to the mass-produced, from that which is interior, intimate and often of Japanese origin to that which is public, social and usually American made” (Brown, 72). In Kondo’s video, the flag performs this function of the materiality of identity. That which was American was allowed to be shown publicly. We are made to question: how much can missing information inform our understanding of the past?
Kondo continues to explore his great-grandfather’s story by visiting the concentration camps where he was incarcerated. In *Santa Anita* (2017), Kondo spends the first half of the video simply displaying contemporary clips of the Santa Anita Racetrack; we see bales of hay, parking lots, and the racetrack itself. It isn’t until Kondo limps into the scene with Miki’s cane that the video’s tone begins to shift. Kondo, embodying Miki, causes the “elided past [to] erupt into the present” (Nakamura, 135). The physical changes to the space seen in *Santa Anita* are far more drastic than what is seen in *The Past in the Present* in SF. However, the fact that there are no remaining traces of the Santa Anita Assembly Center, or concentration camp, does not mean that the memory of what happened has disappeared. As Kondo observes the track, the video cuts to images of the thousands of Japanese Americans forced to live in horse stalls. At once someone who experienced incarceration and someone who inherited the emotional burdens, Kondo-as-Miki’s connection to the physical space revives these memories.

The revival of memories does not, however, mean that Kondo is able to resolve the issues associated with them in the present day. This is shown in *here where you stood* (2017), where Kondo travels to the Topaz War Relocation Center—the concentration center Miki was sent to after his time at the racetrack. The video has very few images; there is not much to display, as most physical traces of the past have been erased from this place, too, leaving only an open field. As an image of Miki and other incarcerated Japanese Americans fades from the screen, we see Kondo-as-Miki limping down the path. Unlike in *Santa Anita*, Kondo does not end the video by walking away. As he stated himself, Kondo “started thinking about the effects of the war and all the people who were interned there. ‘I became quite emotional and felt the need to swing it (the cane) around. I accidentally ended up breaking the cane,’ [he] said” (Mo).
While the breaking of the cane may have been unintentional, it reflects an inability of the current generation to fully resolve the issues of their past. History views the issues of Japanese American incarceration as resolved; at the time, the incarceration wasn’t seen as an issue. As Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga states, “‘relocation center,’ ‘non-aliens,’ and ‘evacuation’ were only a few of many euphemisms that were deliberately used to obscure and conceal what was done to American citizens under the fraudulent rationale of ‘military necessity’” (Herzig-Yoshinaga, 2). While the Redress Movement, which sought compensation from the US government for the treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II, won a victory in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan issued a formal apology and reparations to those who had been incarcerated, these terms continue to see usage, and the apology did not rectify what had already been done. In addition, the issues of the past continue to bleed into the present. This is shown in The Past in the Present in SF by the images of former presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Donald Trump spliced together, the former signing Executive Order 9066 and the later a strong proponent of xenophobic legislation. There is a futility in fighting the past and how it continues to influence the present; however, while there is no way to engage in dialogue with the past, we are able to do so in the present.

Miki’s story did not end when his incarceration ended, though what occurred after the violence committed against him, much like what occurred before, has not been recorded in the archive. In Go back to home from SF (2019), Miki’s cane is whole again, and Kondo-as-Miki stands with it firmly planted in the sand of a beach. As he stares out into the vast, foggy expanse of ocean, Kondo repeatedly cuts to a black screen with small amounts of text, a stand-in for Miki’s own thoughts:

“Home”
“Home”

“I’ll go back home”

Although Kondo-as-Miki ventures further and further into the water with each cut, he is unable to cross the vast expanse of ocean—though he moves, he goes nowhere. The water churns before him. As the video ends, one last piece of text takes over the screen:

Where [sic] is my home?

Miki had attempted to place down roots in San Francisco, and he was forcibly removed by those who only viewed his Japanese identity. Though he may have come from Japan, Kondo has noticed that he may not have been truly accepted there, either: “Some people felt that those who were interned were the ones who had chosen to leave Japan, and were therefore considered gone from the Japanese nation” (Mo). He would have been viewed for his American identity alone. Like how Kondo lies down under the Japanese/American flag at the end of Cut a circle, Miki found it impossible to separate himself from his diasporic experiences and identity. With roots planted nowhere, it became hard to identify what truly counted as ‘home.’
As Kondo’s *About M K* last few seconds play on screen, we again see the miniature bonfire, still burning bright. A hand reaches in and adds another piece of kindling, and another. It becomes clear; this bonfire is meant for Miki. While the image is not a combination of past and present as many of Kondo’s videos are, it stands for the spiritual, emotional connection between Miki and his family in the present day. Kondo has been able to connect with his great-grandfather through an exploration of physical space. In a way, Miki’s presence continues to bleed into the present. Though his flame may be small, though it may not be a roaring flame like the fires that history has recorded, there are hands that continue to tend to it. There is a bond between Kondo and Miki as diasporic individuals—through their shared physical spaces and the issues they’ve had to contend with—and it continues to burn on.

(Figure 7: Still from Kondo, Aisuke, *About M.K.*, 2017, 5:13 minutes, video, © Kondo Aisuke)

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*I can remember this clearly. I was maybe around six years old (or seven, or eight). I was sitting on the hard, carpeted floor, bawling my eyes out as my Ojiichama yelled at me, berated me. He was a loud person, much louder than Obaachama. I knew this from all the times he sat in*
his worn, black, leathery recliner with his headphones on and his eyes closed, singing like there was no one around to hear him. I knew this from when the two of them would jump out at me and my dad from behind the hedges in front of Gilsey House, laughing as they welcomed me back to New York. But I couldn’t remember him ever getting this mad. This scary. Why hadn’t I ever bothered to learn Japanese? Why wasn’t I speaking Japanese with my poor grandparents? Their English wasn’t good, they were getting older, they were starting to forget. They wouldn’t be able to speak with me for much longer if I didn’t start learning Japanese. Shame on me.

What happened afterwards is far more fuzzy. Everything from that day, everything from that entire week-long visit to New York is a blur. Maybe I ran up to the dusty loft to hide away from my mean grandpa, wallowing in self-pity. Maybe Obaachama, who had been sitting and watching the whole ordeal in silence, came over to comfort me. There might’ve been ice cream involved—Häagen-Dazs, of course, the only brand they ever bought. I’m not sure. It’s all a blur, other than that one, defined moment that sticks out in my memory like a sore thumb. Why couldn’t I speak Japanese? What was wrong with me? And what was wrong with my grandparents for not putting in the effort to teach their American granddaughter to speak a foreign language? It was all my fault. It was none of my fault.

When I was younger, I never really gave much thought into my grandparents’ story, their side of things. They came over to the United States from Japan, settled down in New York, and had my father. And that was all that I really needed to know.

Looking back, I can’t really blame myself. It was just a side effect of me being the age that I was. When my Ojiichama and Obaachama were still well enough to have me over, for me to really interact with them, my age was in the single digits. Why would I care about what had happened before me, what had led to their lives, my life, being the way that it was?
And yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was haunted. By what, I didn’t really know. What was the story of all of those paintings, sitting in Ojiichama’s giant studio for years? Where was Obaachama’s art? She was an artist, too, wasn’t she? Why had they chosen to come to the States, to live out their lives here, if they seemed to want so desperately to remain surrounded by Japanese culture? And why were they so upset that I couldn’t speak Japanese with them? What was their story, and why hadn’t they ever sat down and told me?

By the time I was old enough to begin to feel the weight that these questions really held in the back of my mind, it was too late. The only people who knew the answers were the spirits of the dead.

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**Cultural vs Collective, Personal vs Historic in Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory***

When one begins watching Rea Tajiri’s documentary *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, one might expect a ‘grand opening’ of sorts, some powerful beginning to start an epic journey of historic remembrance. A documentary is, after all, a ‘historic writing,’ something that is “factual, realistic… based on real events or circumstances” (OED, documentary, adj. and n., A.4). It may come as a surprise, then, that Tajiri’s film begins with a black screen, paired only with slowly scrolling text and the low murmur of white noise. This eerily silent display continues for nearly a minute and a half, disrupting any conventions the audience may be expecting. While the text explains to viewers that the spirit of Tajiri’s grandfather is witnessing an argument between her father and mother about her “unexplained nightmares… on the 20th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor,” there is none of the expected footage to accompany this story, no narrator to recount the event. One is left to wonder—where is the historical evidence to back up Tajiri’s claims? If the only reliable observer of the argument is her deceased grandfather, how
Tanabe 23

can we be sure that it even happened? How can we be sure that this isn’t an image conjured up by Tajiri’s imagination?

Tajiri eventually breaks through the silence, though the words she speaks seem to bear no relation to the text that has finally begun to wrap up on-screen. An image of a woman filling a canteen with water briefly cuts through the black as Tajiri gives a halting speech, giving the impression that she is unsure of what it is she’s trying to explain, or how exactly to articulate it:

I don’t know where this came from, but I just had 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, and the waters really cold, and it feels really good, and outside the sun is just so hot, it’s just beating down, and there’s this dust that gets in everywhere, and they’re always sweeping the floors. (Tajiri, 01:24)

Despite—or because of—its uncertainty, it is this tiny fragment of memory, this image of her mother filling up a canteen with water in the desert, that is the driving force behind Tajiri’s documentary. The memory seems almost insignificant when compared to the narrative of Japanese American incarceration. However, its significance lies in the fact that it is the sole story that Tajiri has been given; it is a mental image of her mother’s past, of her own past, that she’s been forced to carry with her, long after the story itself has faded. And the image is not the only weight bearing down on her. She has been given no more context, no more story—her mother has refused to remember. It is the stories that Tajiri lacks, too, that caused her pain. “I remember having this feeling growing up,” she says, “that I was haunted by something. That I was living in a family full of ghosts.”
True to its name, *History and Memory* subverts audience expectations, mixing together and confusing the lines between history and memory, between the collective and the personal, and challenging the dictionary definition of the word ‘documentary.’ While the typical documentary aims to provide viewers with an easy to consume version of history, Tajiri manipulates the art form in order to “analyze the implications of documentary’s ‘historical writing’” (Nornes, 269). In a disorienting, jumbled up cacophony of text, newsreels, propaganda, radio, Hollywood films, and home video—among other things—Tajiri brings into question how, exactly, history is constructed, and how it relates to and affects one's personal memory. What has been left purposefully tucked away, left out of history—and why have these things been forgotten? What happens to these memories, when there is no camera to witness them? And how does this gap in memory affect the people born after, who inherit a family history full of unknowns? In this way, *History and Memory* becomes a “self-aware testimonial to the
manipulation of documents and artifacts in the construction of one’s own sense of self… as well as statements about the location of individuals within history” (Aufderheide, 120). By stitching together a patchwork quilt of film and history, Tajiri is able to weave together a narrative of memory, coming to terms with the gaps that have haunted her for so long.

**HISTORY**

As upbeat music plays in the background, viewers are greeted by found footage of plumes of smoke rising up on the water, of chaos and destruction. Of the Attack on Pearl Harbor. Tajiri begins to speak. “There are things which have happened in the world while there were cameras watching. Things we have images for” (Tajiri, 5:11). One after the other, different clips of this attack flash on the screen; one shot by a Navy captain, one from Universal News, one from the cockpit of a Japanese fighter plane. Throughout these clips, one thing remains the same, placed prominently in the center of each image: the word **HISTORY**, written in bold letters. The way in which Tajiri strings together each clip of the bombing gives viewers a sense of the scene unfolding in front of them, as if they are watching it happen in real time. This effect is reflective of the way in which television, and by implication video as a medium, is coded, according to Marita Sturken: “Slightly blurred, often shot with the immediate feeling of the hand-held camera, these images seem to evoke not a fixed history but rather history as it unfolds—the making of history” (Sturken, 2). As an American viewer, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor being taught as a major historic event in schools, and with the memory of the bombings continuing to reside in the forefront of the country’s collective memory, it is natural not to question the accuracy of the label pasted on the center of the screen. The videos are, after all, taken at the precise time and location that the bombing happened.
This feeling of certainty that these memories are history is disturbed as Tajiri seamlessly transitions to the next clip of the bombing; however, this particular clip is taken directly from the critically acclaimed Hollywood film, *From Here to Eternity*. This clip is a piece of pop culture, not a piece of found film taken as a historic event unfolded—and yet, Tajiri once again overlays the word H I S T O R Y over the image of actors dropping to the floor as gunshots ring out, as women drape themselves over a radio that claims, “This is a real attack, not a maneuver.” Tajiri’s claim of film as history is further enforced by *From Here to Eternity*’s induction into the Library of Congress as a “‘culturally, historically or aesthetically’ significant motion picture” (Cannady). Despite its status as a film, *From Here to Eternity* is treated by the federal government as historically significant.

While this film, and the clips that Tajiri follows it with (a film by Toho Pictures, a film reenactment produced by US Navy) are not necessarily ‘history as it unfolded’ as the first clips
were, Tajiri’s continued labeling of them as fragments of HISTORY brings to light the effect that they have on a nation’s collective memory—and thus, inevitably, its history. Earlier in the documentary, Tajiri wonders aloud how movies influence people's lives. She answers her question here. When our lives are constantly exposed to carefully curated images from film, propaganda, and even cherry-picked footage of the events themselves, the line between history and memory begins to blur. In a time when video holds so much power, when “popular film reinforces and even manufactures the collective memories of the nation,” (Furrh, 5) one can’t help but to question how much of these memories actually stem from ‘authentic history.’ How many of our memories come from, as Tajiri states, “things which have happened while there were no cameras watching, which we restage in front of cameras to have images of?”

MEMORY

After the dramatic clips of bombings, after the panicked running and shouting of military men, Tajiri plunges viewers into darkness once more as she talks of events that have no place in the nation’s collective memory—things which the news has deemed not important enough to record in real time, which the film industry has deemed not exciting enough to reenact for the masses. The bombing of Pearl Harbor was an event that was deemed important, that made Japanese Americans hyper-visible to the nation—“the historical camera focused and saw not citizens but enemies of the state” (Sturken, 4). With Japanese Americans already labeled and ignored as an Orientalized other, the nation saw Pearl Harbor as an opportunity to “gain in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient” (Said, 3); it was an opportunity to rally its people around a cause, to feel secure in its own image as a strong, superior entity. What wasn’t given any visibility was the human side of the Japanese-American picture—the people
who lived in the United States as citizens, who worked jobs, who owned houses, who created lived-in spaces.

As the darkness haunts the screen, Tajiri begins to speak. “There are things which have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of the observers, present at the time,” she begins. “While there are things which have happened for which there have been no observers, except for the spirits of the dead” (Tajiri, 06:52). Cheery music plays as text once again begins to scroll, telling the story of the spirit of Tajiri’s grandfather watching as her family’s home is lifted up and driven away by a group of workmen, men who all have homes of their own that they can return to. “The owners,” Tajiri states through the slowly scrolling text, “had been interned as enemy aliens.” Though no one was around to witness this event, and no cameras were there to record it, it exists as a personal, cultural memory, suppressed by popular media and haunting the lives of those it affected. As a spokesperson for the department of war speaks of the danger of Japanese-Americans, Tajiri superimposes a question:

Who Chose

What

Story to Tell?

Although Japanese American incarceration is now seen as a dark blotch in the history of the United States, the media at the time carefully created history and embedded itself into the nation's collective memory. The movement of people was filmed, much like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and showcased Japanese American citizens packing, filing into buses—it was stated that ‘relocation’ was necessary, and that the Japanese Americans went willingly. In contemporary times, now that the incarceration is seen as a mistake, it is not often taught in schools, not given some ‘day of remembrance’ that brings it into the forefront of people's
memories. Perhaps this is a side effect of the fact that memories from the incarceration, the Japanese American perspective on events, have not been recorded in history; Abé Mark Nornes recalls that “at a screening of History and Memory in Japan, an elderly (white) American man told me, ‘It was a fine work but you know no one ever stole their belongings. That never happened’” (Nornes, 170).

(Figure 10: Still from Tajiri, Rea, History and Memory: For Akiko and Tajiri, 1991, 32:27 minutes, video, © Rea Tajiri)

As Madison Furrh states, “when the memories of an oppressed group are no longer supported by the collective sources… necessary to sustain them, then they can no longer contextualize their memories to the external social and historical matrices necessary for memory to survive” (Furrh, 4). The survival of cultural memories is dependent on their being passed down. When recorded media and dominant narratives don’t bother to cover them—and the people who have experienced them have survived only by forgetting, preferring to leave the past in the past—these memories don’t necessarily fade, but they lose contextualization necessary to know the whole story. They become ghosts. “I remember having this feeling growing up, that I
was haunted by something… There was this place that they knew about,” Tajiri explains. “I had never been there, yet I had a memory for it… I had no idea where these memories came from, yet I knew the place” (Tajiri, 12:57). Tajiri’s mother, much like the nation that forced her out of her own home, had forgotten most of the details of her incarceration. It was not that she was unwilling to provide details to Tajiri—the impression that is given, both to viewers and Tajiri, is that she was unable to. With the trauma that her mother’s generation endured ensuring a mindset of not looking back, of collective amnesia, combined with the constant din of video and audio information informing the collective memory of the nation and overwhelming the personal, Tajiri is left to grapple with these formless, imageless memories. This act of forgetting and the gap in family history spurs Tajiri into action, to try to “create an image where there are so few.” Tajiri travels to these places that she has memories of, placing her body in these ‘places of memory’ that history has forgotten; utilizing this experience, along with the few fragments of artifacts and stories that she has, Tajiri succeeds in this task. She re-manipulates the already manipulated media in order to come to an understanding of her mothers gaps in memory, and form an image for the both of them.

As History and Memory concludes, we once again see Tajiri’s mother crouching by the faucet, splashing her face, and filling up her canteen with water. The stories that haunt Tajiri are still missing, and it almost feels as though we end right back where we began. But amongst the bombardment of video and audio, the gaps in our history, in our memory, become even more poignant—as Tajiri states, their absence is their presence.

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I wonder now if a part of what created a distance between myself and my grandparents was my positionality: I was a half-white, half-Japanese girl living in a nearly one-hundred
percent white town in Connecticut when I was growing up. Even before I could talk, I was labeled as different. My mother was furious when an overly curious store clerk told her how cute I was, before proceeding to ask her where she adopted me from.

I can remember how upset I would get in elementary school when someone would bring up my race. I was no different from anyone else, until I was, until my classmates learned that I was part Asian. And then, sometimes, it felt like all they saw was my Asianness. Little boys would pull up on the corners of their eyes when they talked to me, and so many people insisted that my hair was jet black, as if Asians could only have black hair (my hair is brown, not black, and this particular statement enraged me for years). One of my teachers pronounced my name the Japanese way, the way that it is spelled, Hana, and I cried and cried for her to please pronounce it as Hannah (the way the other Hannahs in my class had their names pronounced). I felt different. I felt like I didn’t fit in. And I just wanted so desperately to fit in. Maybe the feeling of being othered is what drove me away from learning Japanese at such a young age.

(I had actually understood it somewhat when I was even younger, when my grandparents made an effort to speak Japanese to me. But they would speak Japanese, and I would reply in English. Eventually they just gave up—Ojiichama first, then Obaachama followed. Eventually, I forgot it all.)

As I got older, I learned to better deal with the comments people threw at me. In high school, when asked which part of China I came from by a classmate who assumed I was a foreign exchange student, I was able to stare him dead in the eye and say, “The New York part.” It’s annoying, but it doesn’t get to me, not like it used to. But that didn’t change the hurt I had felt before, the hurt that had driven me to attempt to erase a part of myself. Even as I try so desperately to reconnect to this part of my identity in the present, I still feel the sting of the past. I
I can’t help but wonder how things might’ve been different had I seen more people like myself around town, or on the television—maybe I could’ve been bilingual, maybe people wouldn’t have seen me for one aspect of my identity, maybe I would’ve been able to be closer to my Ojiichama and Obaachama, to understand them more. I just don’t know.

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Asian American Voices Amidst a Sea of Whiteness in Allegiance

As soon as the curtain opens on Allegiance and the lights illuminate the stage, audiences are given the impression that what they are witnessing is not a typical Broadway production. It is not that the show doesn’t have rousing bursts into song, full of emotion and heart. It’s not that it lacks a dramatic love story between a man and a woman who are, heartbreakingly, separated by fate. It’s not that it is really missing any of the standard Broadway musical tropes that people have come to expect. Allegiance has all of these traits. What gives the show away as something different, something new, is the fact that the spotlight shining on the stage is illuminating an Asian American perspective instead of a white one.

When one watches any sort of performance, be it a pre-recorded film or a theatrical production, it is important to pay attention to not only who is being represented, but who is representing who, who is telling the story, and to whom the story is being told. While this issue may not be discussed or considered much among theater-goers themselves, it’s a well known fact that the audiences of most mainstream theaters, including Broadway, mainly consist of middle-class white people. It is a space for the rich, college educated, and white. According to Dani Snyder-Young, “arts attendance reflects and builds the kinds of cultural capital valued by the upper classes—and the upper middle class in the United States is about 75 percent white” (Snyder-Young, xviii). A result of systemic issues of racial discrimination and white privilege
which present barriers to access to the arts, this skewed audience demographic has affected what shows are produced and how they are produced within the history of American musical theater.

The sea of white faces in the audience restricts the lengths that creators can go to in their performances when it comes to race, which is a particularly prominent issue in more widely known and attended theaters. Snyder-Young explains that “many audience members arrive at large institutional theaters with a horizon of expectations that they will receive services designed for their comfort” (Snyder-Young, 8). As middle-class white theatergoers, it is expected that they will be able to participate and immerse themselves in the theater experience through the gaze of a character who shares aspects of their positionality. Representation allows viewers to feel far more connected to the content they are consuming. However, this predominantly white audience also makes it difficult for those who wish to produce theater that takes into account a different perspective. If this new perspective calls too much attention to the whiteness in the room, the 75 percent white audience may grow uncomfortable, and the theater may lose revenue. Thus, theater producers have historically felt it safer to tell the story of any set of people through a white lens.

This racial barrier has been a particular issue for Asians and Asian Americans in theater, in large part due to the model minority myth and the impression that they are not a group of people that face discrimination. While stages such as Broadway have provided a limited form of representation for Asian people, these representations have been by and for a white gaze. Shows that have featured Asian characters, such as Miss Saigon or Pacific Overtures, have elicited critiques of their Orientalist representations of these characters. Miss Saigon sexualizes and exoticizes Vietnamese characters, and it features a ‘white savior’ story. Pacific Overtures relies heavily on the stereotype of an exoticized Japan, with a script written by older, white American men for an older, white American audience, to entertain. While Asians American actors have
been featured on Broadway, Asian voices have not. The collective memory of the United States is not educated about Asian American history, and thus if, as Diep Tran writes, their “stories don’t fit into the “model minority” myth of Asians being affluent and successful, you probably haven’t heard them.” In her article on the invisibility of Asian voices onstage, Tran continues: “When the wider culture tells you that your stories, your face, your people are not worthy of attention, you make yourself smaller… After all, if you’re invisible, you can’t bleed” (Tran).

(Figure 11: Still from George Takei’s Oh Myyy, Allegiance || First Look, 2018, 2:53 minutes, video, © George Takei)

In this way, Allegiance can be seen as a remarkable step forward for Asian American representation in theater—in particular due to the fact that it focuses on an often forgotten, dark spot in the history of the country. Based on the childhood experiences of George Takei—who stars in the show—as a Japanese American incarcerated during World War II, Allegiance takes a risk by highlighting a topic that could potentially cause discomfort among white theatergoers. Its status as a musical, however, helps to soften the blow of the show's message, as well as reach the
predominantly white audience that might not have been educated on the history. In an email sent to Takei by producer Lorenzo Thione and composer, lyricist, and writer Jay Kuo, they state:

The story of the internment has never been told in song, where it would have the most lasting impact both artistically and on our society’s remembrance and attitudes. Our goal is to tell the human side of the story, from the uprooting of lives to the deprivation inside the camps, as well as the psychic toll it exacted from those caught up in the relocation. Through singing and dancing, through the performance of the emotions and memories associated with incarceration, rather than attempting to lecture on the history of it, Allegiance is able to connect and communicate with audiences in a way it might not have been able to had it been performed as a traditional, non-musical play. However, the presence of the largely white audience and the expectations placed on musicals performed on-Broadway force Allegiance to play a balancing act between being entertaining to a broad audience while also dealing with an ‘uncomfortable’ topic—one that, according to some, it does not necessarily achieve.

The Fine Line Between Goofiness and Melodrama, Fiction and Fact

In Allegiance, audiences follow the story of a family whose relationship has become strained due to the experiences they were forced to live through during incarceration. The central character, Sam Kimura (played by George Takei as an elderly man), spends his time in the present day feeling angry and embittered, having sacrificed his relationship with his family in order to prove his allegiance to his country—to enlist in the army. Audiences are able to view incarceration through the eyes of those incarcerated, watching as a once closely knit family tries to survive and thrive in their new situation.

In an earlier draft of the musical, a sense of haunting was evoked as Takei-as-Sam witnessed his younger self navigate through incarceration. However, in the version that
premiered on Broadway, Takei instead takes the role of comedic relief *Ojii-chan*, or grandfather, in the past scenes, thereby de-emphasizing the sense of haunting. This comic effect results in a show where, as Emily Roxworthy states, “the ghost of internment frames, but does not intrude on, the past unfolding onstage.” This change was likely made to ensure that white audiences felt less discomforted by the story of *Allegiance*: “This illusionary break with the past sanitizes the present day… thus discouraging today’s witnesses from seeing any parallels between the injustices of the past and those of our current administration” (Roxworthy, 109-10). Audiences can clearly see that the actions of white figures of power in the past were abhorrent, but the lack of attention paid to the issues of the present “reinforce the moral superiority of the white people choosing to attend… audience members [may] persist in blaming *other, bad white people*” (Snyder-Young, xxi).

(Figure 12: Still from George Takei’s *Oh Myyy*, Allegiance on Broadway is 'Powerful!' "A Triumph!", 2015, 0:30 minutes, video, © George Takei)

In addition to veering away from highlighting contemporary white supremacy, *Allegiance* attempts to lighten the blow of its message with traditional Broadway musical tropes—it takes
time to let its characters dance to joyful songs, crack jokes, and showcase budding romances. A review from *USA Today* states that the show was “as corny as Kansas in August and as obvious as Lady Gaga on a red carpet,” and that it “show[s] little imagination in nodding to old-fashioned musical comedy” (Gardner). Despite these statements, the reviewer rated the show favorably, finding its quieter moments to be touching. While *Allegiance* may lean into common theater tropes often throughout its runtime, these tropes are what allowed it to become more accessible to a non-Asian American audience. Moreover, the traditionally Broadway-esque music may have been a deliberate choice “to critique erroneous representations of Asia and Asian-ness in much of mainstream musicals” (Banerji). The show has the stereotypes of a traditional Broadway musical, but it does not attempt to stereotype its Asian characters.

On the other side of the coin, some found *Allegiance* to be too heavy-handed in its approach to teaching about Japanese American incarceration. While a review from the *New York Times* states that the show “need not be held to the standards of strict documentary,” as it bills itself as being inspired by George Takei’s experiences, it “often feels more like a history lesson than a musical” (Isherwood). In its attempts to teach an audience with little to no exposure to the topic of incarceration, *Allegiance* slips into melodrama— it exaggerates the events that actually happened in order to evoke an emotional response from its audience. While *Allegiance* makes the tone light in some areas, it also depicts incarceration as extraordinarily harsh, inflaming the emotions of the characters and audience alike.

The issue of theatrical exaggeration is a concern that author Frank Abe stresses in his 2015 review of *Allegiance*. As a Japanese American himself, he worries that the show entertains by “sacrificing truth for theatricality.” While the *New York Times* review claims that *Allegiance* does not need to stick entirely to the truth as a piece of entertainment, Abe believes that the
opposite is true. Though he states that incarceration was degrading and dehumanizing, the show over-exaggerates the truth for dramatic effect. The problem lies, once again, in the mainly white audience: “Audience members do not realize that this is no longer an historical fiction of the kind promised… [Allegiance] risks supplanting the truth of the resistance and the Japanese American experience in the popular mind” (Abe). With nothing but their experience with the show to go off of, he worries that audiences may leave the theater believing Allegiance to be historically accurate in its entirety. Though the show aims to inform, its status as a piece of entertainment means that it must inflate the truth in order to invoke audience sympathy, all while continuing to provide the comfort that is expected in a theater environment. Critics of Allegiance, such as Abe, reveal how audience expectations and the genres inherent in musical theater make it difficult to balance telling a story that both teaches and entertains.

The Importance of Place and Memory

In truth, Broadway was not the place where Allegiance found the most success. Commercially, it was significant that the show managed to run on such a high-profile stage. The fact that it was able to reach an audience that may have known next to nothing about incarceration, thus allowing for a spotlight to be placed on the Asian American experience, also cannot be ignored. One can hope that a show such as Allegiance managing to make its voice heard on such a stage such as Broadway is a sign of positive change, as slow as said change might be.

While the critical reception of Allegiance on Broadway was mixed, the musical was greeted with far more warmth in Los Angeles. Produced and performed by the East West Players, the first and longest running Asian American theater group in the country, the show was also performed in the city that not only was Takei’s childhood home, but is currently home to the
largest Japanese American population in the country. Director Snehal Desai was “excited to bring the musical back to its spiritual, if not actual home,” to put on a performance that takes place in a place of memory, or lieu de mémoire. As a place that is so significant to both Takei and the Japanese American community, the show is intrinsically tied to the city—in some ways, Arnab Banerji states, “[Allegiance] is a metaphor for the city of Los Angeles—quietly significant [and] sprawling in its scope and possibilities” (Banerji).

(Figures 13 & 14: Childhood photos from George Takei’s Personal Collection, taken from the Collectors Edition DVD Box Set of Allegiance)

The aim of Allegiance’s creative team was to teach and highlight an often forgotten experience, something that it had to find a way to juggle with also being an entertaining piece for white audiences to consume. However, in Los Angeles, the show could be a show by Asian Americans, told by Asian Americans, and presented to Asian American audiences. Amongst an audience who has a cultural memory of incarceration, the concerns of misinformation lessen. The songs and dances that could be perceived as silly elsewhere instead carried the emotions of both their characters and audiences. As Bradley Rogers states, “musicals burst into song—and
dance—when one body will no longer suffice to carry the emotion” (Rogers, 5). In a crowd of Asian bodies, where dialogue about incarceration may falter and stories may be forgotten, performance is the way, perhaps, to communicate and connect with the memories of the past.

I’ve always had a bit of a bad habit when it comes to things and places. I get way too sentimental about them. It’s way too easy to make up some excuse to keep something around. I consider it a blessing that I’m typically able to get over this sentimentality and do what needs to be done (lest I end up on an episode of the reality TV show, ‘Hoarders’), constantly reminding myself that a thing is just a thing, and a place just a place—they are not the memories that are associated with them, but empty husks that once served as a place where memories were created. They can hold a special place in my heart, in my memories, but they don’t need to haunt me in the present.

I had to remind myself of this as we closed the door on my grandparent’s apartment for the final time. I watched as the heavy blue door I had rushed through so many times before shut behind me, knowing I would never walk through it again. As we walked through the lobby, I paused by a mural of the Gilsey House, back in its glory days as a hotel. I rubbed a finger over the face of one of the dapper looking men standing by the entrance of the building, a face crudely scribbled onto his featureless head by my father, decades ago. It’s just a place, I reminded myself as we handed in the keys and walked out the door, never to enter Gilsey again.

Lately, painfully, I’ve found myself wishing to go back. This is, of course, nothing unique to me, personally—dealing with loss, having to say goodbye to places and objects that hold sentimental value are a part of life that we all have to deal with as human beings. But as I’ve found myself studying, looking back, and sitting with my thoughts, I’ve come to understand and
accept my feelings as something that doesn’t need to be suppressed. It’s true what I always try to say to myself: A thing is just a thing, a place is just a place. But these places are sacred, in a way. They are a physical place of memory—the countless memories that occurred there are intrinsically linked to our past, our traditions, our sense of being. By being present in a place like this, it’s possible to reconnect with memories that have faded from the collective, to link the ghosts of the past and the present for the briefest of moments though one’s body.

The other day, my family drove by a cute, old, one-room schoolhouse, the same one that my maternal great-grandmother went to and my grandpa after her. My mother talked and talked about the story of that school, how it must’ve been to learn there, and how my great-grandmother’s childhood home was that small one, right across the street. It’s odd, how technically close I am to this time where my relatives went to school in a building straight out of a historical drama, and yet how separated I feel from it temporally. But in that brief moment, as we drove by, I could share a physical space with my late great-grandmother who I’ve heard so much about but never got the chance to meet.

A place is just a place, but I want to see them, to exist in them, even if just for a moment. For my mother’s side of the family, doing so is just a several minute drive away. But to connect to the diasporic memories of my father’s side, it would take a bit more effort. I want to go back to New York City, to get as close to Gilsey as I can, to go to the places where my grandparents went. If the opportunity arises, I want to travel to Japan and see these spaces that I have no stories for, but that hold so many memories, somewhere in my family’s past.

—–
Loss and Recovery

Aisuke Kondo, Rea Tajiri, and George Takei may not be able to rid themselves of the ghosts of the past that haunt them, to paint an exact replica of memories that their families and the United States as a nation have lost through amnesia. But, through their performances in places of memory, through their utilization of whatever information was recorded, and through their stringing together of the bits and pieces of family artifacts, they are able to create a picture of their own. One that doesn’t necessarily need to set out to teach, or claim to be completely historically accurate. Instead, they create something that allows them to interact with the suppressed, forgotten memories that they carry with them. While having a piece of art that is accessible to a large audience is one measure of success, I argue that what really matters is the emotional journey that the artist took in order to make the piece of art, and what significance that art holds for them. I’ve come to believe that what matters is that they ‘lived as art.’

Inspired by these artists, I began to search deeper for artifacts from my own family’s history, hoping to find something that would help me to come to terms with our own version of diasporic, familial amnesia. Although COVID-19 restricted my movement, and my schedule prevented me from creating a piece of art like the individuals I studied, I kept my grandfather’s words in mind. Perhaps the act of searching and discovery in and of itself, even if a camera wasn’t there to watch, is art—maybe my research and writing is an art, as well.

As I poured over the art books and exhibition catalogs my Ojiichama had left behind, I stumbled across page upon page of history that no one in my family had ever been aware of. There were short biographies, written by exhibition curators, which spoke of the multitude of works he had created throughout his time as an active member of the Neo-Dada Organizers, and his motivation behind making the move to the United States. There were plenty of pictures from
these exhibitions, which I had never gotten the chance to witness with my own eyes. And, of course, the books were filled to the brim with page after page of information on the artists that Ojiichama had called his friends, so much information that I couldn’t even begin to delve into it.

I was surprised when I discovered that perhaps one of the most important pieces of writing I found was one that, in a traditional sense, barely gave me any ‘history’ at all. It didn’t provide me with any factual information about my grandfather’s path through life. Instead, using his own words (or kotoba, in Japanese), I discovered that my grandfather was speaking to me through the pages.

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I don’t know a lot of words, but I must use words to explain my piece. However, I can’t do anything to explain my ambiguity regarding this.

...

Actually, the thing I have the most problem with in my life in America is words. I really want this to be right and I know it’s not uncertain.

...

I always run on top of my favorite map

I drive that route

To me       Landscapes that people don’t care about       Landscapes that are ignored

Landscapes that are there regardless of you

It might not have real meaning

Time goes on

Suddenly       When I encounter a certain road sign

That was promised       I start blinking
Blinking has a word
Blinking has a memory
Blinking has a harmony
Blinking has a time difference
Blinking has a distance
Blinking has an emptiness
And my landscape starts beating

The roads are a landscape    The sky too
The trees are a landscape    The stones too
The buildings are a landscape    The windows too
173cm x 195cm is a landscape    The signs too
Six 2cm x 7cm cuts of wood are landscapes    The staples too
S. T - A - N - A - B - E is a landscape    And I am too

As one sign passes
Because there is always an encounter with the next sign
I don’t need a rear-view mirror
And I still enjoy driving

- Santaro Tanabe
(Figure 15: A contact sheet filled with Santaro Tanabe’s images of his travels, with road signs circled in red marker)
Ojiichama had always been nervous about his ability to speak English, afraid of flubbing his words and making mistakes. Maybe this is why he eventually snapped and yelled at me, after years of my stubborn refusal to learn the language that was most familiar to him. But even with Japanese, Ojiichama struggled to convey his emotions through words alone. Where words failed him, performance allowed him to speak. He went on his own journeys of discovery, connecting to the landscapes [in front of him] and within him. And he didn’t look back.

Perhaps this philosophy he carried with him throughout life was in part due to his own history. He was born in 1939 in the midst of war, and raised in the heavily firebombed and nearly completely destroyed city of Toyama. Very little is known about his childhood, and what details have survived are hazy, and often contradictory. Maybe these formative years spent during wartime informed his later desire, perhaps subconsciously, to look forwards, rather than back. Maybe his decision to join the destructive Neo-Dada art movement was a way to express his repressed feelings through performance, rather than words. Without my grandfather around to confirm, I am only able to speculate.

About midway into my research, over my winter break, my father, sister, and I set out in the bitter cold to a storage unit we have rented. We had filled it to the brim with all sorts of things we couldn’t fit into our house after we moved, including my Ojiichama’s paintings, the products of his performance. So many of his paintings had been destroyed, but I knew that we had a few left, and I wanted to be able to see them again, to connect with him through the art he had left behind. He hadn’t left behind many words for us to interpret, or shared many stories of his past. But perhaps his performance, along with my own, would allow us to connect across the time and space that had separated us.
Despite the fact that I had started my journey with the mindset that I likely wouldn’t be able to fill in the gaps caused by the loss of my grandparents and their stories with them, I found that I hadn’t prepared myself emotionally to handle this realization.

The storage unit that we had thought was climate controlled was, as we quickly learned, not. When we found the paintings behind piles of junk, we discovered that for many of them, their paint had stuck together, or mold had grown on their surface, or something had fallen on top of them, creating indents in the canvas. When we attempted to pull the paintings apart, we watched helplessly as bits of paint were ripped off the canvas entirely, damaging the paintings further.

When I got home, the sense of emptiness I had felt when we found Ojiichama’s paintings, torn apart by his own razor blade, came back to me. But this time, I began to feel myself hit a sort of breaking point. I couldn’t help but think about how in the absence of stories, these physical products of his ‘living as art’ were all that I really had to feel any sort of connection to my grandfather.

(Figure 16: SELF PORTRAIT 2, one of the most intact of Santaro Tanabe’s larger paintings)
This pain that I was feeling only grew as I tried to search online, to learn more about the Neo-Dada movement, to learn more about Ojiichama’s place in it. It finally bubbled over when I stumbled across an art professor’s post:

Last winter I saw some paintings being loaded onto a truck in Manhattan. Half of them were life-size copies of green highway exit signs, and the others featured vibrant abstract forms articulated in thick brushstrokes. One of the signs simply read: SANTARO TANABE. I assumed this was the artist's name, so I began to search for more information online. I found remarkably little... I wanted more, so I asked artists, critics, and curators about him, and sent cold e-mails to experts on the scenes I assumed he had moved through. No one had anything. I spend a lot of time imagining the other works Tanabe may have made and where they might be now. (Miko)

Someone had wanted to learn more about Ojiichama, somebody who had been interested in his art. Had we discovered this post earlier, maybe his art would have been preserved. But it hadn’t, and I was sitting in a room full of the remaining, damaged pieces of the past. At that moment, I cracked—I needed to grieve all over again, but this time, for the art, and for the feeling of what little connection I felt I had being severed further. I put the blame on myself, angry that I hadn’t taken the time to learn Japanese when I was younger, angry that I hadn’t tried to find a way to preserve the paintings when we moved them. For my father’s side of the family, all that remains in the United States is him, my sister, myself, and some ruined pieces of art. And that revelation was devastating.

I believe now that this second period of mourning was necessary—that it was something I absolutely needed to confront and work through. In order to gain the perspective on family history and memory that Kondo, Tajiri, and Takei have, I needed to unleash the emotions that I
had been hiding away from myself for all of these years. Only then could I feel strong enough to face the spirits of Santaro and Hiroko Tanabe, to learn about their story, and to understand and forgive them for the countless stories they never told us, that are now lost to the winds of time.

After countless hours of searching, I can say that I do know some things.

Joining as an official member of the Neo-Dada Organizers in 1960, Santaro Tanabe was well-known for his drum can art. He worked in an abandoned house in Fukagawa, in an empty lot full of drum cans. His cans were used as the stage set for the TBS musical “Green Theater,” and he held many exhibitions featuring them, including but not limited to “Fuchōwa-on onkai” (“Dissonant Scale”), and “Haha neiro to doramukan no jōken” (“Mother’s Tone and the Condition of the Drum Can”). In 1965, he began work on his “Ingram Paintings.”

(Figure 17: An image from “Mother’s Tone and the Condition of the Drum Can”)

In April of 1966, Santaro and Hiroko moved to the United States. Their path took them from Japan to Hawaii, San Francisco, Denver, and Minnesota, before finally settling down in New York. Santaro took great interest in the climate and grandeur of the United State’s vast wilderness—he was impressed by its pioneering spirit and moved by the energy contained within
it. As he traveled through the continental states, he discovered the ‘true America’—there, he
became inspired by the road signs he came across, and the art of fly fishing. Although he didn’t
exhibit his work as he grew older, he always kept himself busy fly tying and dreaming up more
art in his large home studio.

(Figure 18: Hiroko Tanabe posing, photo taken in Japan at an unknown time)

For all the work that has been put into finding stories and memories from the past, I do
not have much to show for it. I have come to the realization that my work on this project will
never be complete. I must learn to be satisfied with dissatisfaction. But, perhaps, the many
absences my grandparents left behind have a presence. Perhaps that which was not recorded
bears the same amount of importance. Where is my grandmother, my Obaachama, amongst this
history? While it is possible to trace Ojiichama’s path with some certainty, and to speculate on
his story, next to no information has survived about his wife. What does her absence in the
archive say about her role? Despite the fact that I started my journey with the mindset that I
likely wouldn’t be able to fill in the gaps caused by the loss of my grandparents and their stories
with them, I found that I hadn’t prepared myself emotionally to handle this realization. But she
was my grandfather’s backbone, holding him up so he didn’t collapse. She might not have been recorded in written or oral history, but her presence is strongly felt all the same.

Maybe, it was Ojiichama’s ‘living as art’ philosophy that has prevented so much information from surviving into the future. In his interview, the interview that sparked so many repressed emotions and memories for my family, he states:

    My work, at that time... I really didn’t even in the slightest bit think that it was necessary for me to preserve it, or keep it, or anything like that. So, it’s the energy of that moment, that instantaneous moment of the show. It really is amazing.

Santaro Tanabe lived in the moment—he always looked forward, never back. Maybe this is why, with his ability to create and ‘live as art’ fading, he took matters into his own hands and destroyed his paintings. He never wanted his art to be displayed—it was the experience, not the end result, that mattered to him. As he stated in his poem, he didn’t need a rear-view mirror. But he just didn’t consider how this philosophy would affect those who came after him.

    Perhaps it was selfish of him. But at least now, I’ve been given the tools to understand him and my grandmother in a way that I was never able to before.
Ojiichama, Obaachama,

Many signs have passed now
As I keep driving forward
Some are specks in the distance
But still they remain
There is always another encounter with the next sign, and the next
But as I blink
My eyes flick up to the rear-view mirror
And, just for a moment,
I take in the landscape behind me.

(Figure 19: Hiroko, Hana, and Santaro Tanabe on a swing set)

Note: To learn more about Santaro Tanabe, go to https://tanabelivingasart.wordpress.com.
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