Introduction

Staging the Trauma of Japanese American Internment

VICTOR: When I was in ‘Nam? You know when I was hit by some Viet Cong mortar fire? They wouldn’t pick me up, the medics. I was lying there, bleeding all over, they were picking everyone else up. I kept screaming, “I’m an American, I’m a Japanese American, I’m not VC.” But they wouldn’t pick me up. They walked right past me.

— Philip Kan Gotanda, *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* ¹

The traumatic reexperiencing of the event thus carries with it what Dori Laub calls the “collapse of witnessing,” the impossibility of knowing that first constituted it.

— Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* ²

After the closure of the World War II internment camps and the “relocation” of former internees to new postwar homes, many observed the remarkable silence and stoic rebounding with which most first- and second-generation Japanese Americans (Issei and Nisei) closed that chapter of their lives. It was this silence and stoicism that contributed in large part to their designation, along with other Asian Americans, as the “model minority.” ³ Conservative critics claimed this apparent lack of bitterness as proof that the internment camps were not unjust after all, that even their former inmates tacitly approved the “military necessity” that stripped them of civil liberties and segregated them from their fellow Americans after the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor. Liberal scholars have mostly chalked up this stoic silence to a diasporic retention of the Japanese cultural logic of *shikata ga nai*, or “it can’t be helped”—a fatalistic philosophy that negates the efficacy of resistance or other political action. Although silence has been used to justify and minimize the impact of the internment, outside this context the concept of silence circulates widely as a telltale symptom of trauma. Shoshana Felman resurrects Walter Benjamin’s
term “expressionless” (*das Ausdruckslose*) in order to describe “the silence of the persecuted, the unspeakability of the trauma of oppression” experienced by “those whom violence has deprived of expression; those who, on the one hand, have been historically reduced to silence, and who, on the other hand, have been historically made faceless, deprived of their *human* face.” This seems an apt judgment of how historical events left Japanese Americans silent and then the historiography of these events rendered this silence expressionless and inhuman, as epitomized in the stereotype of the automaton-like “model minority.” Americans have allowed the symptoms of wartime injustice to stand as apology for the injuries themselves. So what if—instead—we reinterpret former internees’ silence not as a culturally conditioned response to adversity but rather as the structural outgrowth of the particular trauma of this particular internment?

I emphasize the *structure* of the internees’ silence because the recent wave of trauma scholarship makes clear that traumatized responses cannot be wholly explained by the catalyzing event or by “a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it.” Rather than some inherent atrociousness adhering to the event or some inherent psychosocial predisposition causing an individual or group to react in a certain way, trauma should be understood in structural terms. The pathology of trauma, Cathy Caruth insists, consists “solely in the *structure of the experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.” I emphasize the *particularity* of the Japanese American internment because those who have written on the trauma of this experience have, by and large, bypassed these structural aspects, instead comparing the internment *event* with other more widely recognized atrocities such as the Nazi genocide of Jews and other minorities, the experiences of U.S. soldiers during and after the Vietnam War, and generalized sexual abuse against women. By accessing Japanese American trauma through these other atrocities—none of which directly implicates the racist domestic policies of the U.S. government as the internment does—these “American concentration camps” inevitably find themselves subordinated once again in hierarchies of suffering that always privilege the point of comparison. Such strategies of comparative analysis end up posing the internment as a debased mimicry of unquestioned traumatic events.

No genocide occurred against the Japanese American “evacuees” imprisoned in the “assembly centers” and “relocation centers,” euphemistically named and controlled by the U.S. military’s Wartime Civilian Control Agency (WCCA) and the U.S. government’s War Relocation Authority (WRA), so when former internee Raymond Okamura wrote that “the linguistic deception fostered by
the United States government” in regard to the internment “bears a striking resemblance to the propaganda techniques of the Third Reich,” the comparison might have been instructive, but Japanese American trauma inevitably paled in comparison to the Holocaust.7 The material losses of $200 million in Japanese American property, homes, and businesses become profane concerns when juxtaposed with the Nazi genocide.8 Likewise, Chalsa Loo recognized the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that plagued many former internees but only did so by discussing “parallels” with the symptoms of trauma widely associated with Vietnam War veterans who had witnessed, perpetrated, and suffered horrifying violence in Vietnam and returned home to find an American public that considered them “baby killers” and did not honor their military service.9 Although violent events did occur in many of the Japanese American camps and several internees were murdered both by U.S. soldiers guarding the camps and by fellow internees—and despite the fact that internees also experienced virulent prejudice and even violence when they returned to their prewar communities—the scale of this emotional and physical violence cannot compete (nor should it have to) with the PTSD of Vietnam veterans. Another common trope is the metaphoric equation of the violation inflicted upon internees by their own government with the experience of rape; this analogizing to the suffering of rape victims is most often voiced by male scholars of the internment and by male former internees, but the comparison also emanates from Amy Uno Ishii’s oft-quoted statement: “Women, if they’ve been raped, don’t go around talking about it. . . . This is exactly the kind of feeling that we as evacuees, victims of circumstances, had at the time of evacuation.”10 Since sexual abuse was not a systemic part of the camps, comparing the trauma of Japanese Americans to that of rape victims belittles the wartime internment and renders invisible the more subtle but no less insidious violations that made up the everyday lives of internees, such as the total lack of privacy that plagued every aspect of camp life, including toilet facilities, and the utter degradation resulting from assigning inmates numbers and lining them up in dehumanized masses for every conceivable purpose.

In this book I posit the importance of understanding the structural trauma of the internment as located in the spectacularization imposed upon Japanese Americans by the U.S. government and mass media. Unlike the Holocaust, the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans was perpetrated in full view of the public by capitalization upon the propaganda possibilities of the U.S. “free press.” Unlike the abject treatment of Vietnam veterans, who were mostly drafted into war, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and WRA coerced Japanese Americans into “voluntary” participation with their abjection from the rest of society, demanding that they cooperate with authorities and put on a happy face for reporters and other visitors to the barbed-wire-encircled
camps. And unlike the sexist contract of victim-shaming that protects rapists, American politicians and pundits broadcast far and wide the violations enacted during the mass evacuation and internment, leveraging—for an audience at home as well as in the European and Pacific theatres of war—the supposedly benign captivity of ethnic Japanese as absurd proof of U.S. racial tolerance and, at the same time, melodramatically posing these “suspect” Americans as antagonists against the many heroes and heroines of the American home front.

By thus spectacularizing the disenfranchisement and imprisonment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans, the U.S. government and mass media denied the gravity of what was taking place and disavowed the psychological suffering and material violence perpetrated against a persecuted ethnic minority. Thankfully, much has been written about the fictitiousness of the “military necessity” placed around the evacuation and used to justify the internment of all West Coast Japanese Americans, regardless of citizenship status, for the duration of U.S. hostilities with Japan. But in this book I argue that an equally seductive framing device justified the camps for the wartime American public and continues to be uncritically deployed by conservative analysts like Michelle Malkin in her recent book, In Defense of Internment. By framing the evacuation and internment as spectacles, the United States positioned the American public as passive spectators to the unconstitutional treatment of their ethnic Japanese neighbors and, simultaneously, cast the public as heroic “patriots” opposite Japanese Americans, who were cast in one of two thankless roles: expressionless automata or melodramatic villains.

So in the case of the internment, theories of trauma and theories of spectacle intersect and converge. Both trauma and spectacle are haunted by visuality, a visual scene/seen that inscribes its image deeply within one’s psyche precisely to the extent that it alienates the subject from any comprehension of the material underpinnings of the transpired event. On the side of trauma, Shoshana Felman finds that “the unexpectedness of the original traumatizing scene” is replayed in the compulsive repetitions that characterize traumatic symptoms. On the side of spectacle, Guy Debord finds that the images offered up by commodity culture violently foreground the presence of the visual realm in order to absent spectators’ awareness of their own exploitation and disenfranchisement under advanced capitalism. In his classic book, The Society of the Spectacle, Debord claims that “The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation,” and he describes the means of this alienation as precisely visual: “Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance.” For Debord, “spectacle’s essential character” consists in “a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself.” The refuge taken in the visual as a means to negate life leads performance theorist Diana
Taylor to warn of spectacle’s potential as an arrangement of events that rewards passive spectatorship and denies the need for active witnessing. Writing of the terrifying political spectacles staged by the Argentine government during the Dirty War (1976–1983), Taylor claims that “The onlookers, like obedient spectators in a theatre, were encouraged to suspend their disbelief. Terror draws on the theatrical propensity simultaneously to bind the audience and to paralyze it. Theatrical convention allows for splitting of mind from body, enabling the audience to respond either emotionally or intellectually to the action it sees on stage without responding physically.”

Likewise, the failure to respond physically—on the part of both the onlooker and the victim—causes psychoanalyst Dori Laub to characterize trauma as a “collapse of witnessing.” He defines the corrective to this visual refuge as an active listening; as Taylor points out, Laub defines the witness as a listener rather than a see-er, if only in the post-traumatic setting of psychoanalytic therapy or testimony-taking. In addition to listening, the engaged witness refuses the visual refuge of spectacle by resisting the objectification of the other that characterizes spectacular images. As Caruth (as well as Felman) emphasizes, the mute isolation of trauma can be redressed only by engaging the other as a subject of address in order to witness how “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.”

My theoretical intervention comes at this convergence of trauma and spectacle: the spectacular structure of the Japanese American internment removed the public-as-spectator from any participation, empathy, implication, or complicity in the dramatic disenfranchisement of racialized citizens that was taking place in full view. The political spectacles staged by the U.S. government and broadcast by the American media framed the internment event in visual terms that objectified the Japanese American other within an economy of Debordian “mere appearance” that was based on a racialized understanding of Japan as a culture of artifice and surfaces. But the most important sense in which the spectacle became the trauma of Japanese Americans consisted in the demand placed on internees to comply with this spectacularization so as to provide “proof” of their loyalty to the United States—a command performance that actually prevented internees from fully processing the material violence enacted against them by the internment policy. Whether called upon to “voluntarily” relocate to internment camps under intense media scrutiny or, later, asked to offer their interned bodies (and those of their sons and brothers) up to military service on behalf of a nation that impugned their loyalty, many Japanese Americans found that the only way to prove the internment policy’s baselessness was to comply with the terms of its spectacularization. Caruth’s insights into trauma as a “missed” event (missed insofar as “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly”) thus illum-
nate the experience of internees. Japanese Americans “missed” the impact of their forced evacuation and imprisonment after Pearl Harbor because their persecution was staged—over and over again for the more than three years of the Pacific War—as a series of political spectacles that denied the psychological violence and material underpinnings of what was taking place.

Every aspect of the U.S. government’s (and its “fourth branch,” the mass media’s) framing of these events prevented those involved from fully grasping the injustice of what was taking place and from preparing to deal with a cataclysmic change. Caruth calls this aspect of trauma “the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs,” so that the traumatic event carries within it “an inherent forgetting.” The compulsion to forget was built into the government’s overhasty institution of the internment policy from its first moments, as the U.S. military posted euphemistically devastating evacuation notices throughout West Coast communities. On these notices, “aliens and non-aliens” of Japanese descent were told to report to assembly stations, taking only what they could personally carry to the camps, sometimes with as little as forty-eight hours’ notice. Not only were Japanese Americans rushed through the material and psychological processing of their forced evacuation as they quickly packed up their lives and boarded a bus or train to unknown destinations for an indeterminate duration, but the harsh glare of media attention and political rhetoric spectacularized the process in a way that encouraged fellow Americans to sit back and watch in passive awe and silence. Although trauma has been most easily associated with bodily injury, Caruth reminds us that in Freud’s foundational Moses and Monotheism, the trauma “is first of all a trauma of leaving, the trauma of verlassen.” In their own forced leaving, Japanese American “evacuees,” it should be clear, have a distinct claim on trauma.

Nearly a century before Japanese Americans were forced to leave their communities on the West Coast, the U.S. government perpetrated the opposite but complementary deception against the internees’ Japanese ancestors. In 1853, the United States came to them: with the government’s blessing, Commodore Matthew C. Perry led an expedition of four battleships to forcefully but peacefully open Tokyo Bay, ending Japan’s two-century policy of national isolation. For a Japan that had never laid eyes on such imposingly industrialized steamships, these uninvited vessels of American modernity immediately became known as “the Black Ships.” Their forced opening of Japan—what one American historian recently called Breaking Open Japan—resulted in the proverbial equal and opposite reaction, in the form of a stream of Japanese immigration to the Americas that would culminate in the World War II persecution. But Perry’s arrival also inspired a spiritual and cultural “leaving,” even for those who stayed, as Japanese people at large became sudden exiles from their long-standing traditions. In addition, with Commodore Perry, spectacle
became established as the mode for obscuring the psychological violence and material underpinnings of Japanese disenfranchisement. In a self-conscious national image constructed against the imperial histories of its fellow Western powers, the U.S. State Department communicated to Perry that he was to be extremely concerned to avoid any “real” violence in his mission to end Japanese isolation—he was instructed, instead, “to show an imposing display of power”—and, through his study-at-a-distance of Japanese culture he devised in advance a strategy for manufacturing the other’s consent that centered upon the staging of spectacle.25 Upon the mission’s victorious return to America, Perry’s official chronicler described the commodore’s strategy for deploying spectacle to conquer “these people of forms and ceremonies”:

In a country like Japan, so governed by ceremonials of all kinds, it was necessary to guard with the strictest etiquette even the forms of speech; and it was found that by a diligent attention to the minutest and apparently most insignificant details of word and action, the desired impression was made upon Japanese diplomacy; which, as a smooth surface requires one equally smooth to touch it at every point, can only be fully reached and met by the nicest adjustment of the most polished formality.26

The “smooth surface” of Perry’s strategy manifested itself in parodic heights of civilized pageantry—refined gift-giving receptions, theatrical entertainments (including blackface minstrelsy), and militaristic display, all performed under the assumption that “so ceremonious and artificial a people as the Japanese” would consent only to a military policy of spectacle.27 The other option was to use outright force, but this explicit course of colonialist aggression would not conform to a component of the national self-image that nineteenth-century Americans increasingly referred to as Manifest Destiny.

Perry’s 1853–1854 opening of Japan prepared the ground for the convergence of spectacle and trauma that would characterize Japan-U.S. relations up to and through the shock-and-awe bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that were seen as necessary to force the 1945 surrender of “so ceremonious and artificial a people as the Japanese.” Perry’s landing and its attendant spectacles serve as both the “original traumatizing scene” that obscures material violence throughout the history of Japanese-American relations, and as what Michel de Certeau calls the “inaugural scene” that historicizes Western narratives of discovery and conquest.28 Diana Taylor derives from de Certeau’s “inaugural scene” the notion of a “scenario” that scripts intercultural encounters; each consisting of “a paradigmatic setup” and “a schematic plot,” these scenarios “exist as culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution—activated with more or less theatricality”
throughout the history of these ongoing encounters. As the traumatic scene is replayed in the repetition compulsion, and the inaugural scene prepares the ground for the restaging of familiar spectacles, the logic of Perry's landing was reenacted by the U.S. government and mass media in the political spectacles staged in the wake of Japan's 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. In chapter 1, I will start with this original traumatizing scene of the Perry spectacle in order to trace what I call a “theatricalizing discourse” constructed by the West (particularly America) around Japanese “cultural” (racial) difference. In the remainder of the book, I will focus on the scenario's particular reenactment in the events of the Japanese American internment.

**Spectacle**

When I use “spectacle” in this book’s title, I mean to invoke the spectacular mode's propensity to disengage its audience—to render even its participants as passive spectators. Although numerous possibilities always exist for spectacle to be used as a tool for active, critical engagement (in the manner that Bertolt Brecht and his many followers intend), for the most part spectacle can be defined as the staging of an event and arrangement of an audience that rewards passive consumption and deters engaged witnessing, most often through what twenty-first-century Americans increasingly recognize as a strategy of “shock and awe.” When resistant spectacles seek to challenge their audiences’ passivity and encourage some mode of critical participation—as I will argue that Japanese American theatrical performances in the internment camps did—the term “spectacle” needs to be modified and qualified, not in a way that undermines this general definition, but instead so that the space for resistance can be recognized as always already in negotiation with what Debord calls the society of the spectacle's imposition of a normative “social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”

Debord’s 1960s formulation of the consumerist spectacle has different emphases but was prefigured by the witnesses to the 1930s and '40s political spectacles of Italian and German fascism. Recently, Henry Giroux has identified these two moments in the formulation of spectacle as “the spectacle of fascism and the spectacle of consumerism,” labeling them “two different expressions of what I call the terror of the spectacle.” According to Giroux, the terror of the spectacle inheres in its demand for “a certain mode of attentiveness or gaze elicited through phantasmagoric practices, including various rites of passage, parades, pageantry, advertisements, and media presentations [which] offers the populace a collective sense of unity that serves to integrate them into state power.” Where the spectacle of consumerism that Debord writes about uses visuality to obscure the material underpinnings of commodity capital-
ism—causing consumers to “miss” their own exploitation and disenfranchise-
ment—the spectacle of fascism uses visuality to distract the populace from
the political reality underwriting the regime’s ideology. Giroux concludes of
both twentieth-century manifestations of spectacle: “Politics and power are not
eliminated, they are simply hidden within broader appeals to solidarity.”

Rey Chow has identified yet another reason that fascist ideology relies so
heavily upon the visuality of spectacles. In her essay “The Fascist Longings in
Our Midst,” Chow departs from critics such as Louis Althusser and Roland
Barthes who have attempted to explain fascism’s rending of civilized internal
feelings (morality, empathy, sociability) from external manifestations of atro-
cious behavior (racial persecution, witch hunts, genocide). On the contrary,
Chow argues that fascism has no inside—or rather that under fascism the exter-
nal becomes the internal—and that fascist regimes deploy spectacle as the ideal
metaphor for a cognitive system that wholly consists of surface. She defines
fascism as “a term that indicates the production and consumption of a glossy
surface image, a crude style, for purposes of social identification even among
intellectuals.” The simultaneous ascendance of film technology and fascist ide-
ology was no coincidence for Chow; rather, in the age of film, “If individuals
are, to use Althusser’s term, ‘interpellated,’ they are interpellated not simply as
watchers of film but also as film itself. They ‘know’ themselves not only as the
subject, the audience, but as the object, the spectacle, the movie.” Under fas-
cism, then, the motto for subjectivity is “to be is to be perceived” because the
fascist spectacle positivistically proclaims that all judgments can be made based
on the interplay of surface images. Difference and danger can be seen/scene
just as certainly as unity and national security can be scene/seen.

Although the Japanese American internment took place between these two
moments of spectacle’s formulation, it should be clear that the U.S. govern-
ment and mass media’s spectacles staged around the internment event capitalized
on the spirit and power (if not always the precise ideology) of both consum-
erism and fascism. In addition to theorizing the fascist spectacle, Rey Chow
represents an important intellectual strand within Asian diasporic studies that
emphasizes how “Asia” (as a Western-constructed conglomeration to begin
with) has been spectacularized by the West. In her essay “Where Have All the
Natives Gone?” Chow argues of Western racialization, “When that other is Asia
and the ‘Far East,’ it always seems as if the European intellectual must speak in
absolute terms, making this other an utterly incomprehensible, terrifying, and
fascinating spectacle. . . . As such, the ‘native’ is turned into an absolute entity
in the form of an image (the ‘empty’ Japanese ritual or ‘China loam’), whose
silence becomes the occasion for our speech.” Moreover, for Chow, the image
of Asian difference “is always distrusted as illusion, deception, and falsehood,”
leading to an anxious Western fixation that masks the implication of the West’s
own identity. Instead, the logic of the spectacle renders East-West difference absolute, insofar as “the production of the West’s ‘others’ depends on a logic of visuality that bifurcates ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ into the incompatible positions of intellectuality and spectacularity.”\(^{35}\) Chow’s theorization of the West’s construction of Asian spectacularity allows us to see how “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” underwrote (and continues to underwrite) an entire U.S. policy for containing the threat of Asian American difference by making the Asian other into an expressionless, dehumanized spectacle—pure surface, all image, so of course silent—undeserving of the protection of Western intellectuality and U.S. constitutional law. While this volume focuses on the manifestation of this spectacularity within the internment policy, spectacle is a traumatic structure potentially applicable to and resonant with many other instances in Asian American history and cultural studies.

**Trauma**

As a hidden psychic injury that results from the temporal delay occasioned by the shock and inexplicability of an atrocious event, the “trauma” of my title requires an interdisciplinary methodology to understand its history, structure, and ongoing repercussions.\(^{36}\) Caruth poses trauma’s scholarly challenge by saying “it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.”\(^{37}\) Theatre and performance studies need to be added to this list of interdisciplines because of our intimate understanding of the operations made possible by the spectacular structure of trauma (as a repeated scene) and of the analytical richness of spectacle as an arrangement that seeks to reify Western binaries (such as mind-body, subject-object, reason-emotion, and actor-audience) but cannot live beyond the borderland in between. Diana Taylor focuses on the liminal quality of spectacle’s visuality when she writes, “seeing also goes beyond us/them boundaries; it establishes a connection, an identification, and at times even a responsibility that one may not want to assume.”\(^{38}\) Even though spectacle is most often characterized by a failure to assume the responsibility of seeing—a refusal to actively witness or be personally implicated in the spectacularity—theatre and performance scholars are aware of spectacle’s potential to unfold otherwise and of a lasting impact on actors and audience alike that outlasts the apparent ephemerality of the live event. These scholarly concerns have much to add to the interdisciplinary conversations happening around “trauma.”

Likewise, scholars in Asian American studies have increasingly argued that racialization is a national trauma (even when the word “trauma” is not used)
whose understanding exceeds the oppressor-oppressed and perpetrator-victim binaries. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng rejects the concept of trauma in favor of “melancholia,” arguing that “trauma, so often associated with discussions of racial denigration, in focusing on a structure of crisis on the part of the victim, misses the violators’ own dynamic process at stake in such denigration. Melancholia gets more potently at the notion of constitutive loss that expresses itself in both violent and muted ways, producing confirmation as well as crisis, knowledge as well as aporia. . . . It is this imbricated but denied relationship that forms the basis of white racial melancholia.” 39 Melancholia thus becomes an analytic through which Cheng can highlight the mournful but compulsively repeated structure of racialization in the United States from outside the limits of the violator-victim stratification. As compelling as Cheng’s book is, I would argue that racial trauma can also be understood as a dynamic national process that particularly underwrites the racialization of every “American,” regardless of the individual’s proximity to whiteness. For instance, Felman reminds us that compulsive repetitions of “the unexpectedness of the original traumatizing scene” are not only experienced on an individual level but can also act as the fuel feeding the engine of history; in her reading, “Freud thus shows how historical traumatic energy can be the motive-force of society, of culture, of tradition, and of history itself.” 40 The spectacle of Japanese American internment emerged as a traumatic repetition and reenactment transmitted from the “historical traumatic energy” reverberating throughout Japan-U.S. relations since Perry’s 1853 landing at Tokyo Bay. In this “original traumatizing scene” of coerced contact (what Taylor might call the inaugural scenario) Perry established a transmittable energy for both spectacularizing the Asian other and self-consciously performing white privilege across the East-West divide; this traumatic scenario repeats itself in various moments of Asian American encounter throughout U.S. history, including the Japanese American evacuation and internment of World War II.

**Racial Performativity**

Even as these national traumas repeat themselves in various moments throughout U.S. history, the traumatic structure of spectacle does not manifest itself untouched by its particular historical context. The “racial performativity” in my subtitle refers to a two-faced mode for imagining American national belonging; the United States deployed such a mode during World War II in order to distance its “racial problems” from the fascist persecutions occurring throughout Europe and especially from the Nazi policy toward Jews. Within gender theory in particular, performativity (after Judith Butler) has been defined as the unconscious repetition of a repertoire of codified acts that render their
performer legible within a given society’s normative gender roles. To be a “real” man, society tells us, involves a scripted set of gestures, behaviors, and physical mannerisms that the performer internalizes and society scrutinizes. For more than a decade, scholars have pondered the applicability of gender performativity to our understanding of racialization, with the key stumbling block being the extent to which race is biologically inscribed onto one’s skin rather than culturally available for performative construction.

Butler herself has emphasized the primacy of the visual realm in racialization, suggesting that racial performativity is a conditioned mode of perceiving visual evidence that spectacularizes the other—in other words, the unconscious (or even conscious) enactment of codified acts would seem to have little impact because race will be predetermined through the reading practices of the interracial observer. In an essay on the 1992 Rodney King beating and the not-guilty verdict awarded to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers caught on videotape, Butler makes clear how little the intentionality of the African American motorist’s gestures of supplication meant when viewed by the white jurors at the trial. She writes of the verdict: “That it was achieved is not the consequence of ignoring the video, but, rather, of reproducing the video within a racially saturated field of visibility. If racism pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception, then to what extent does it interpret in advance ‘visual evidence’?” The LAPD officers’ defense attorneys edited the “visual evidence” of the explicit videotaped beating into a series of still images—including a close-up of King’s hand raised in surrender, which was instead reinterpreted as raised in aggressive threat—and thereby converted the witnessing video into pure spectacle, pure visibility, by eliminating the accompanying soundtrack containing the officers’ anti-black racial slurs. By thus spectacularizing the black body and activating a racialized mode of visually reading the other, the defense easily (and, for Butler, explicity) won a not-guilty verdict. In a subsequent interview, Butler extended her analysis of the King verdict to a tentative theorization of racialization through performativity:

There is a performativity to the gaze that is not simply the transposition of a textual model [Austinian iteration] on to a visual one; that when we see Rodney King, when we see that video we are also reading and we are also constituting, and that the reading is a certain conjuring and a certain construction. How do we describe that? It seems to me that that is a modality of performativity, that it is racialization, that the kind of visual reading practice that goes into the viewing of the video is part of what I would mean by racialization, and part of what I would understand as the performativity of what it is ‘to race something’ or to be ‘raced’ by it.41
Consistent with Butler's hypothesis of a “racially saturated field of visibility,” U.S. history clearly demonstrates the extent to which national belonging has been legislated to follow a strict brand of biological racism that uses a visual basis to exclude “non-whites” from full citizenship. Nonetheless, at various moments the nation-state has required a level of unity and patriotism possible only through the circulation of what I call “the myth of performative citizenship.”

Karen Shimakawa has recorded the extent to which visually perceived racial characteristics have operated in the U.S. courts' upholding of restricted notions of citizenship—often posited on the assumed intentions of our Constitution's white forefathers—including the racial prerequisite laws and the adjudication of citizenship by birthright and by naturalization. These legislative and judicial decisions repeat their national traumas in the afterlife they live in the U.S. official archives, dramatically manifesting what Jacques Derrida calls the *mal d'archive.* In his reading of Derrida's *Archive Fever,* Herman Rappaport suggests that *mal* (usually translated as “fever”) could also be interpreted as trauma: “where there is regularity and efficiency in Foucault's archive, there is trauma in Derrida's. The trauma in the archive is what, I think, Derrida is referring to when he speaks of there being a *mal d'archive.*” Rappaport goes on to argue that for Derrida, “*mal d'archive* concerns a forgetting or obliteration of the trauma that the trauma itself instantiates in its being repeated as discourse.”

Actively attempting to forget the trauma of racial spectacularization that has underwritten the adjudication of U.S. citizenship since the founding of the republic, the American myth of performative citizenship publicly circulates in the place of this repressed history. The myth proclaims that American citizenship is officially and effectively conferred upon any individual, regardless of race or national origin, based simply upon the performance of a codified repertoire of speech acts and embodied acts, ranging from the recitation of the Oath of Citizenship to public participation in patriotic pageantry and even enlistment in the armed services. What this myth obscures is the extent to which citizenship has been officially denied to various racialized groups and, when conferred, has lacked efficacy in terms of the unequal enforcement of its privileges based on proximity to whiteness. Historian Nayan Shah highlights similar concerns through his concept of the “citizen-subject,” a term that attends to both the citizenship privileges of liberal democracy and the subject-formation produced by modern disciplinary institutions such as public health initiatives (the focus of his book, *Contagious Divides*). Analyzing San Francisco's Chinatown from the mid-nineteenth century through World War II, Shah finds that “The outcome of the Chinese American community's claim to citizenship and cultural belonging depended upon the performance of normative hygiene and heterosexual family forms.” The performative dictates of U.S.
citizenship demanded that unsightly members of the “community” (especially Chinese bachelors) be rendered obscene (literally, “offstage”): “The terms of incorporation into American society redefine certain Chinese immigrants as citizen-subjects by their demonstrations of respectable domesticity, economic stability, and proper conduct.” Shah makes the important point that Chinese American “demonstrations” of their fitness for national incorporation ended up excluding entire segments of their community, and even when such performative demonstrativeness succeeded in conferring citizen-subject status upon some Chinese Americans, it always “also emphasize[d] their perpetual difference from ‘true’ white American citizens.”

While Shah is interested in how the “repertoire” of public health acts variously impacted Chinatown’s inclusion in notions of American national space over the course of a century, here I am interested in demonstrating how performative citizenship became an exclusionary discourse widely circulated on the American home front during World War II. During the war, when America relied upon a constant cycle of patriotic pageantry that was often visually indistinguishable from that associated with fascist aesthetics abroad—and U.S. home-front policies such as the internment policy and the military policy of segregated armed forces bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the ideology of racial purity that underwrote fascism—the widespread circulation of the myth of performative citizenship became crucial to the manufacturing of consent and the spreading of national unity among the American public. As Henry Giroux describes European fascism, “In the 1930s, the fascist spectacle was embodied in the theater of giganticism with its precisely scripted pageantry around ‘the mass of groups of people’. . . art glorifying racial purity and uniformed, white men.” So instead of foregrounding racial purity, American wartime pageantry leveraged the performative citizenship myth, which appeared to incorporate racially diverse groups based on their patriotic demonstrativeness. The publicizing of this myth bolstered the illusion that the internment policy resulted from the suspicious behavior of Japanese Americans (their lack of demonstrativeness) rather than from a historical ideology of biological racism that tied U.S. democracy to European fascism. Therefore, the other face of performative citizenship is what Butler describes as a performativity of the gaze that racializes the other through visual reading practices that bear much greater resemblance to the traumatic operation of the spectacle than to the self-determined constructions usually associated with performative identity. “Racial performativity,” then, refers in this book to the two-faced discourse of American national belonging, the public presentation of which focuses on the myth of performative citizenship but whose mal d’archive testifies to the performativity of the gaze at work in spectacularizing the racial other. In this book, I use the methods of theatre and performance studies as well as historical
ethnography to portray both faces of the wartime internment, in large part by reading between the lines of archival materials such as government documents, mainstream media accounts, and camp newspapers.

While the first part of this book considers the operation of the anti-Japanese spectacle, the second part considers the resistant potential for internees’ own camp performances to call attention to the two-faced promise of American citizenship constantly dangled in front of Japanese Americans during World War II. As Esther Kim Lee notes in A History of Asian American Theatre, “Internment camp theatre has been dismissed and even forgotten mainly because of its controversial emphasis on assimilation and accommodation.” I argue that the emphasis of camp performance on U.S. principles of assimilation and accommodation does not translate to acceptance of these terms; rather, in foregrounding these issues, Japanese American performers revealed the contradictions inherent in American national belonging by putting both faces of racial performativity onstage. Guy Debord wrote that “spectacle’s culture sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality: the communication of the incommunicable.” Without romanticizing internee theatre, I wish to consider these performances as productions of a “culture sector” capable of seizing upon the internal contradictions that characterized the spectacle of Japanese American trauma. Although Debord may have meant his formulation of cultural work to convey less optimism for resistant potential, my analysis of camp performance is meant to amplify his promise: “Culture is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.”

In chapter 1 I argue that the spectacularization of Japanese (Americans) has been reenacted through what I call a “theatricalizing discourse” in formation since Commodore Perry’s military and diplomatic coercion launched the Meiji era (1868–1912) of Westernization in Japan. In the Euro-American imagination, the rapidity of this Western-inspired modernization was immediately interpreted as symptomatic of the uncommon imitativeness of Japanese people, with the concomitant implication that their Westernization was only a surface imitation that was not truly assimilated into Japan’s “feudal soul.” Eight decades later, the internment policy would replicate this logic by insisting that Japanese Americans’ claims to U.S. citizenship were merely surface imitations of Americanization that disguised their deep-seated loyalty to the Japanese Empire. I trace this theatricalizing discourse circulated by thinkers in the West about the natural-born actors of Japan from the 1850s up to the present, in which many Anglo-Americans still blithely repeat the long-standing racist stereotype that those of Japanese descent are inherently theatrical people prone to hide their true motives behind a screen of aesthetic display and disguise.

I trace the theatricalizing discourse about Japanese people to Western encounters with traditional Japanese performing arts (including Kabuki and
other Japanese theatrics) and to scholarly accounts of Japan propagated by social scientists, culminating in anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s famous wartime misreading of Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. During the war, Benedict deployed Japanese Americans to stand in for the enemy abroad through her “culture-at-a-distance” methodology; while it was necessitated by wartime, Benedict never questioned how her interviews with a spectacularized ethnic minority in the United States might have preconditioned her findings that the Japanese Empire was populated by self-conscious, shame-ridden, and theatrical people. Moreover, the theatricalizing discourse for which Benedict’s text seems to stand as fountainhead in fact preceded the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the United States, as decades of Western writings on the perceived peculiarities of Japanese culture constructed an airtight case for Japanese theatricalism. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* should thus be understood as the repository of this theatricalizing discourse, which heretically questioned the existence of a sincere essence beneath the aesthetic constructions of Japanese culture and, when deployed to manage the home front in World War II, disallowed Japanese Americans access to the performative promise of U.S. citizenship.

After the critical discourse analysis of chapter 1, the remaining four chapters of the book pursue a historical ethnography of the spectacles and counter-spectacles performed by the internment’s various players. Chapter 2 demonstrates how this theatricalizing stereotype of “the Japanese” was seamlessly transferred onto Japanese Americans and how Commodore Perry’s inaugural scenario was repeated through the FBI’s spectacular raids on Japanese communities in the wake of Pearl Harbor. The FBI spectacles anxiously asserted the duplicity of Japanese American suspects by attempting to pacify the American public with polished, choreographed containment of “the enemy” at home. These raids were very much the stage upon which the FBI sought the American public’s approval for consolidating its national power. But the mimicry between the spectacularity of the FBI’s highly constructed raids and the theatricalized identity of the Japanese American suspects met with dissatisfaction from domestic anti-Japanese factions, who pushed past the FBI’s partial containment of roughly one thousand Japanese Americans by agitating for the wholesale removal of all those of Japanese descent.

Chapter 3 reconstructs the patriotic pageantry that the Hearst media empire staged in its newspaper pages and on city streets across the United States and argues that these pageants downplayed the coercive spectacularity of their stagings by showcasing the myth of performative citizenship. I demonstrate how William Randolph Hearst, as a metonym for the centralized power and influence of media magnates in this era, staged his own patriotic spectacles so as to exclude Japanese Americans from such assertions of loyalty to the
United States and reiterate instead the other's theatrical duplicity. The interplay between the myth of performative citizenship and the spectacularization of Japanese suspiciousness—a dual movement I have defined as racial performativity—yielded a repetitive melodrama in the Hearst pages throughout the six months in which the military evacuated Japanese Americans from the West Coast. I show how Hearst's wartime coverage of the West Coast's so-called Japanese problem punctuated his five decades of anti-Asian propaganda and deployed melodramatic film techniques gleaned from Hearst's Pathé studio in order to offer a compelling narrative in favor of the internment of Japanese Americans. Once the internment was under way, Hearst's pages constructed the evacuation as a benign field trip for Japanese Americans, a farcical spectacle that insisted upon the playfulness of U.S. internment camps, in contrast to the racist seriousness of Nazi concentration camps abroad. Such coverage disappeared the internment's violent import and traumatized Japanese Americans by compelling them to “miss” the event of their own disenfranchisement.

Chapter 4 explores the self-conscious construction of Japanese American identities and the internment experience in the internee-run Manzanar Free Press, which epitomized the camp newspapers independently published in each of the ten relocation centers. In the face of political spectacularization and racist media slander, internee journalists drew attention to what I call a “spectacle-archive,” recording the ambivalent scrutiny imposed upon them from all sides. At the same time, internees staged intercultural performing arts festivals that defied the U.S. government's mono-Americanist assimilation policy, which pitted second-generation Nisei against their “Japanesey” Issei parents and criminalized displays of Japanese culture. Cultural performance festivals that brought together odori (traditional dance) and baton-twirling, Noh theatre chanting and swing musical stylings, opted out of the spectacle-archive by meriting few mentions in the Manzanar Free Press publicity machine. At the same time, for internee audiences these intercultural performances made visible the contradictions of American racial performativity. Unfortunately, the fact that this performed resistance lives on mainly through embodied memory has meant that progressive narratives of America’s triumph over adversity—epitomized by the U.S. National Park Service’s celebration of internees’ festivity at Manzanar National Historic Site—have appropriated only the “model minority” interpretation of camp performing arts as rehearsals for assimilation and accommodationist endorsements of U.S. policy.

Chapter 5 uncovers the transnational performing arts (theatre, dance, and music) of internees at the “other” California relocation center, Tule Lake, which served from 1943 to 1946 as a segregation center for Japanese Americans deemed especially “disloyal” to the United States and loyal to Japan. Manzanar and Tule Lake are generally understood to have very different, even dia-
metrically opposed, histories of internee compliance and resistance, but closer examination of the performance histories of Manzanar and Tule Lake reveal the nuanced and similar ways that internees “talked back” to theatricalized stereotypes about Japanese culture, the spectacularization of Asian American assimilation, and the scrutinization of Japanese American loyalty. Significantly, these transnational performing artists rejected the myth of performative citizenship outright by denying that the enactment of either Japanese or American culture necessarily correlated with their loyalty to either nation. The intercultural politics of such internee performances have not survived in the traumatized reenactments. The Western psychological realism of postwar “camp plays” particularly contributed to this amnesia, as realist dramas became staples of Asian American theatre companies in solidarity with the dramatic Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) hearings that toured the United States in the early 1980s and produced the 1988 Civil Liberties Act’s reparations for surviving former internees. But before turning to the performing arts staged by interned Issei and Nisei, I will start with a genealogical approach to the “natural-born actor” discourse that intuitively adheres to “the Japanese,” in order to begin to explain why spectacularizing Americans of Japanese descent seemed to U.S. authorities the most natural and effective strategy to accomplish this ethnic minority’s abjection from the U.S. body politic.52