
Book Review

Mira Shimabukuro. *Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), \$26.95, 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60732-400-3 (paper).

For scholars working on Japanese American internment, government materials—such as those issued by the War Relocation Authority—can be easily found in federal holdings. Similarly, internees’ memoirs and autobiographies published by established presses are readily accessed. Beyond these sanctioned avenues of distribution, camp artifacts are harder to come by. Many archives that contain internment ephemera still have not been digitized, although this is slowly changing. Mira Shimabukuro’s important study, *Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration*, takes a deep dive into these materials, casting much-needed light on how ordinary Japanese Americans made sense of and challenged their relegation to the status of enemy aliens.

Much of the knowledge production on Japanese American resistance during World War II has focused on draft resisters, men who refused the path of least resistance when the loyalty questionnaire was distributed in camp. In 1943, Japanese American men who were of age were provided the choice between serving in the US military and facing removal to another camp designated for the seditious. The overwhelming majority sought to enlist, and a small but vocal minority refused to do so on the basis that the United States had violated their rights to due process in their incarceration. These unruly subjects faced hasty trials and were sentenced to two- to three-year terms in federal penitentiaries for their civil disobedience. Because so much attention has focused on these gendered histories of Japanese American protest, women activists’ roles have been downplayed. Shimabukuro’s research centers the invaluable contributions women made in the redress movement, which contested and sought reparations for the incarceration of their community. Those such as Michi Weglyn and Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga spent countless hours in the National Archives reading against the grain of the federal government’s materials to uncover evidence of the United States’ obscuring from public view its prior knowledge that Japanese Americans did not pose a national security threat. Their research skills in these state repositories were formidable. But what about those ephemeral artifacts that are

less easily recognized as intellectually or politically valuable, such as diaries, letters, poems, drafts of speeches, petitions, complaints, and miscellaneous notes? *Relocating Authority* turns its attention to these objects, found in places such as the archives of the Japanese American National Museum, as Shimabukuro locates herself in a wider tradition of women activists who invoke “archival recovery as a means to bring truth to power” (54).

Without romanticizing the conditions of internment, Shimabukuro claims that Japanese American women’s writing thrived inside the camps partially because traditional gender roles in the domestic sphere were disrupted. “[M]ass incarceration did release many women from several of their gender-assigned chores” (70), and subsequently, created more latitude for women to set the terms of their work and leisure. While Japanese American women, because of discriminatory hiring, may have faced barriers to employment before the war began, they found paid work easier to come by inside the camps because the War Relocation Authority was reliant on the labor force from within. Because of the leverage that women had over their time, poetry clubs flourished. Other collective spaces of literacy, such as schools and English-language classes, which—like the poetry clubs—were sponsored by the War Relocation Authority, served as inadvertent incubators of protest writing.

Although everyone above the age of 18 was required to answer the loyalty questionnaire, it most saliently affected Nisei (second-generation) men who, largely, were adolescents and young adults at the time of internment and, therefore, ripe for conscription. Issei (first-generation) men had mostly aged past their eligibility for the draft. The bulk of scholarship paid to draft resisters has, understandably, focused on the men most directly impacted by the imperative to serve in the military. The presence of women’s voices in these conversations has been overlooked.¹ In Shimabukuro’s research, we see that, contrary to what the previous work suggests, women were very vocal in their protest against the draft. Issei women positioned themselves as mothers of Nisei men and couched their concerns in the language of maternal responsibility. These acts of protest, which consisted of letters and petitions, were all the more extraordinary if we consider, as Shimabukuro notes, that these women were noncitizens (due to racially discriminatory laws dictating naturalization at the time) and that, as noncitizens, they did not have a legal right to petition the federal government.

In addition to intervening in prevailing Japanese American studies’ assumptions about the gender composition of resistance movements, Shimabukuro addresses another misconception. In much of the knowledge production on internment, rebellion from within the camps has been cast as isolated and fleeting. It is assumed that a critical mass of Japanese Americans who held the US government accountable did not manifest until the 1960s, when the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements provided a more amenable context for it. However, far from being docile incarcerated subjects, rebellious Japanese Americans were very common, as Shimabukuro finds in the written testimony

1. Exceptions to this gender specificity in the previous scholarship are Brenda Moore, *Serving Our Country: Japanese American Women in the Military during World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003) and Cynthia Wu, “Asian American Feminism’s Alliances with Men: Reading Hisaye Yamamoto’s ‘Seventeen Syllables’ as an Antidraft Tract,” *Signs* 39.2 (Winter 2014): 323–339.

produced inside camp. Complaints over subpar living conditions, petitions that demanded improved treatment, and other forms of written protest functioned “not simply as reformist literate activity but as rhetorical training grounds for subsequent, broader-visioned writing-to-redress that challenged the entire logic of mass incarceration” (68).

Shimabukuro argues that previous researchers’ inability to perceive the existence of Japanese American protest stems partially from a misreading of a Japanese-language concept, *gaman*. The word tends to be translated into English as “endurance,” which—according to Shimabukuro—has then been misread by many English-speaking researchers as an ethos of silent suffering. Through an examination of the written artifacts produced during internment, however, Shimabukuro finds quite the opposite. *Gaman*, rather than connoting passivity and resignation, performs a resistance that is more closely aligned with strength in the face of adversity. Moreover, this endurance was not one invoked on an individual basis. It was rooted in communal awareness and a concern for the well-being of the whole. It was oriented both to addressing the granular specifics of present-day internment (such as inconsistent access to hot water, inadequate food and clothing, and the presence of barbed-wire fencing) and toward a future where a more robust redress for mass incarceration would be possible.

Relocating Authority proposes that, going forward, we see the thinking and action of incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II differently. Far from the compliant, obedient masses that many previous studies have cast them to be, Japanese Americans were unruly. Resistance to internment was widespread, not fleeting, at the time of its occurrence. The voices of protest came from both women and men. ■

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