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At Peace Finally? Gene Oishi's *Fox Drum Bebop* and the Last Memories of Japanese American Internment Camps

Abstract: Gene Oishi's autobiographical and episodic novel *Fox Drum Bebop* (2014) will likely be one of the final novels published by someone who was an internee in the detention camps in which the US government imprisoned Japanese Americans during the Second World War. As such, it presents complicated questions about temporality, representation, and the processes of trauma. Through focusing on the protagonist Hiroshi Kono (largely, though not restrictively, based on Oishi's own life experience) and his siblings who have distinct ideological reactions to their ethnic identity and their wartime experience, Oishi explores how internment at once lasted for a determinate period but continues to extend in space and dilate in time for as long as the memories of it endure. The novel uses the musical aesthetics of jazz as a correlate for this discontinuous processing of experience. Oishi's narrative asks if those who suffer oppression and trauma can ever find peace, and how, if at all, having a long life and reflecting upon the past can alter one's sense of what happened.

Keywords: Gene Oishi, trauma, Japanese American internment, *Nisei*, aesthetics of jazz, temporality

1. Introduction: Gene Oishi and the Literature of Japanese American Internment

Today, the possibilities for the literature of the direct witness to Japanese American internment in the US during the Second World War are very close to vanishing. Gene Oishi, who was in the camps as a boy, published *Fox Drum Bebop* in 2014 at the age of eighty-one. This is a fictionalized memoir that also experiments with multiple narrations. Though Oishi's alter-ego, Hiroshi Kono, tells most of the

story, the initial chapters are narrated by his parents and other older people who have had a mature-age experience of internment. While this narration foregrounds a subjective view of history, it also indicates the particular pathos of the youngest internee who will be the last to tell the tale. This figure is close to being too young to understand the injustice at the time; at the same time, the other characters may be too old for a definitive framing of the trauma within the whole sweep of 20th-century American culture. Oishi uses the aesthetics of jazz music to evoke the discontinuous nature of processing this experience. I intend to link the particular narrative dilemmas in Oishi's text with the US internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. This article will also explore how internment is reflected in what Oishi knows will be the final testimony about it. My focus will be on the book in time, in form, in space, and in the condition of its rhetorical expression within trauma.

Gene Oishi was born in 1933 and had a long and successful career as a reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* as well as for many other large, general-circulation American magazines and newspapers. Like the hero of *Fox Drum Bebop*, Hiroshi Kono, Oishi was interned when young in the Japanese American internment camps established in the western United States by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 in 1942. Oishi survived the experience of these camps, the largest-scale attempt by US authorities to intern elements of the country's own population in the 20th century, and went on to a successful journalistic career. But he always aspired to be a creative writer as well, and in the 1980s he took graduate writing classes and composed a fictionalized memoir, *In Search of Hiroshi. Fox Drum Bebop*, his first full-fledged work of fiction, is episodic and impressionistic in nature, almost a short-story sequence, albeit with every episode told in chronological sequence. The tale of the protagonist, Hiroshi, offers the reader a journey from his childhood to the internment, to adult relationships within and outside his family of origin, and, finally, including a reflection on his life experience from the vantage-point of an older man. The novel is narrated from a third-person point of view which, despite being centered on Hiroshi's own response to events, also includes his siblings' and parents' experiences.

Oishi's book appeared very late in a testimonial literature that began in the 1950s and 1960s. Like Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960) or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) which made, respectively, the Holocaust and the Soviet Gulag visible in the literary sphere, the US government's internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War soon found expression in literary works. An early example is John Okada's 1960 *No No Boy*. Okada's is a foundational book which is, however, rendered very differently from Oishi's near-to-memoir approach by Okada having the protagonist, Ichiro Yamada, try to evade fighting in World War II. This is the diametrical opposite position from Okada, who served with the US Air Force on the Pacific front. Okada, who was already an adult when he was in the Minidoka camp in Idaho, was a decade older than Oishi, even though both were *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese Americans). An even

earlier book, Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953), was likely the first memoir of internment experience, although Sone emphasized more the Americanization process than the trauma of internment.

The typical experience of what Greg Robinson has called the "mass confinement" (5) of Japanese Americans was for parents to be *Issei* (Japanese immigrants) and the children to be *Nisei*. Yet those generational definitions have to do with temporal distance from a birth in Japan and not with the year in which a child was born. Thus, there were undoubtedly some families in the camps whose the parents were *Nisei* and the children, as in the case of the poet Janice Mirikitani, were *Sansei* (of the third generation in America). Different lives go through the same experience, processing it differently through generation and lifespan. The poetry of Mirikitani, who was interned as a baby at the camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, and of Lawson Fusao Inada, who as a child was in internment camps in California, Colorado, and Arkansas, testified to the event in subversive lyrical terms. The 1973 account by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (co-written with James D. Houston) *Farewell to Manzanar* has been widely taught in secondary schools. While Houston is similar in age to Oishi and both were in the camps when they were preteen children, Inada and Mirikitani were younger in the camps. These age differences affect the way the writer responds, and so does, necessarily, the time of publication. When Okada wrote, knowledge of the camps among the general American public was not widespread. The works of Mirikitani, Inada, and Houston emerged into a climate where there was widespread acknowledgment of the crimes committed by the US government against Japanese Americans. They helped foster the US government's formal apology in 1987 and the ensuing financial reparations that began in the late 1980s.

Many other books relating to the wartime internment have been written by children of internees, spouses or in-laws, or non-internees who find the subject compelling, in a moral and ethical sense, for literary fiction. Though the writing by actual internees should not be elevated in a strictly literary sense over other accounts, there is a quality of lived experience that makes it impossible to reproduce elsewhere. There are, in addition, archives of testimonial memoirs and information about the internment experience, such as the online *Densho Encyclopedia*. Yet the writers who use literary forms, genres and modes of address are combining a testimonial responsibility with a sense of craft, shape, and formal address. This sense of the literary is something that has particularly concerned Oishi. He has gone over his experience twice, first in a quasi-fictional memoir and then in an autobiographical novel. Just as genre inflected Oishi's experience, so did time and growing old. In Oishi's case, temporality is both extended and made poignant by his publication of this novel very late in his long life.

When a writer bears personal witness to an atrocity, there is an inevitable temporariness. The event will, and should always be, open to historical inquiry and imagination. But there is no replacing the writing of people who were actually

in that historical situation. Gene Oishi's book may be the last such record of the wartime internment experience. His work is not just merely of documentary or archival interest; he offers the perspective of someone who has lived through a majority of the 20th century and into the 21st. He can thus evaluate how the internment experience shaped him over the arc of his entire life. He can also register the gamut of the 20th and early 21st-century historical experience. Oishi's narrative not only traces the changes in the Japanese American community through wartime internment and postwar assimilation, but also analyzes changes in lifestyle, gender roles, sexuality, and personal identity that are meaningful with respect to broad swaths of contemporary global society.

This temporal span has the effect of releasing internment experience from any conceptual enclosure. *Fox Drum Bebop* possesses an elasticity of implication, including experiences from the 1950s through to the 1980s. It also allows the reader to observe family dynamics, and how subsequent generations react, without limiting this experience to a reception-history or an account of intergenerational trauma. This is because the witnessing generation, in the person of Hiro, is our narrative lens throughout the entire novel.

2. Hiroshi in Time

Oishi's account starts movingly with the meeting of a young Japanese-American boy and a white boy named Tex. He and his mother have come to California from West Texas, but they are called "Okies" because the locals see them as part of the Dust Bowl migrants who were devalued as poor and undesirable, and made memorable in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hiroshi Kono, the young Japanese American boy who is Oishi's surrogate in the book, befriends Tex, only to see Tex and his mother evicted by police who claim they are squatting on railroad property. Tex's mother supports her son's friendship with Hiroshi. In fact, here this minor character serves as a surrogate for the author, hinting to the reader how we should evaluate the main character. Tex's mother calls Hiroshi a "good boy," echoing language used by Hiroshi's own mother, Otsui Kono, pages before. That Tex had defended Hiroshi against other white boys, and that he felt accepted by Hiroshi after the other white boys had rejected him because of his family's poverty, makes it all the more upsetting that it is Tex's family that is called out by the police, as Hiroshi watched in pain, unable to do anything about it. As a sort of mirror image, this sets up the way that, now Hiroshi's family is interned, no merely personal action can change anything.

The idea of the systemic, which lies behind the logistical possibility of internment, structurally parallels the racism and xenophobia that led to the internment of well over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans who posed no threat to the United States government. This systemic aspect of oppression comes

up later in Oishi's novel. After the war, Hiroshi returns to school. Here, he is befriended by a Latino boy, Ramón, who at first hurls racial insults at him but later befriends him. Hiroshi realizes that Ramón is misunderstood and branded as a criminal by the school system. But Ramón soon departs without a trace, leaving Hiroshi to remember him as an index of the possibility of recognition of the excluded. This is the same recognition he feels he himself has been denied. Thus the problem is systemic, which means that the solution, or the treatment, should also be such. The novel embeds its narrative arc in lived situations. But, metaphorically, it moves to the conceptualization of the systemic.

Hiroshi has three brothers, Yukio, Isamu (Sammy), and Mikio (Mickey), all of whom embody different ideological responses to the family's traumatic wartime experience. The Kono family faces prejudice even before the war. Yet some whites such as Hiroshi's elementary school teacher Mrs. Abernethy, stand up for the rights of Japanese Americans. After Pearl Harbor the family is interned, including Hiro's father, Seiji, his mother, Otsui, his sister, Sachiko (Sachi), and his brothers Yukio, Sammy and Mickey. As Jenny Xie puts it, "the family forms a microcosm of complex Japanese-American loyalties during World War II" (384). They are already facing the obstacle of not being white in a nation where definitions of what 'white' is are at once capacious and firmly fixed. Aside from creative writing, Oishi is most famous for being a reporter for the major daily newspaper published in the state of Maryland, *The Baltimore Sun*. In this capacity, Oishi was the object of an ethnic slur by the future Vice-President Spiro Agnew. Although Agnew was himself, as a Greek American, a member of an ethnic minority, he was white and thus, notwithstanding his Southern European, Mediterranean ancestry, a member of the mainstream. From the beginning, the Kono family knows that they are not of the mainstream. That the experience of internment is added on to this inherent exclusion leaves them further wounded, and each member of the family has his or her own strategy for dealing with these wounds.

Yukio sees himself as the most "Japanese" of the brothers and the closest in psychology to his father. Unlike his brothers Mickey or Sammy, Yukio never adopts an American nickname. He falls into the category of "Kibei" (Oishi 2014, 52), whom Robinson describes as "*Nisei* who were sent back to be educated in Japan" (304). Yukio has gone to school in Japan and feels a sense of cultural if not political loyalty to Japan that makes him suspect to the authorities. This becomes ironic when Yukio goes to Japan, as there he is treated like a foreigner and deemed too American. Hiroshi's brother, Sammy, is disabled and uses a wheelchair. When Sammy meets the elderly radical activist Mr. Nakashima, he is attracted not only to Nakashima's iconoclastic views but also to his sense of personal freedom. When Nakashima vanishes into the desert, Sammy takes his wheelchair into that rogue space and dies there. It is found, near his decomposed body, weeks later. His brother Mickey had been traumatized when, after finding success as a high school football star, his father had pulled him from the team because he felt football

was too dangerous and that Mickey's participation dishonored the family. Mickey joins the pro-American Loyalty League and tries to demonstrate that, despite the US Government's unjust treatment, he is a patriotic American. In a small grace note, Mickey, appalled by the food in the internment camp, becomes a cook and later in life operates a successful restaurant. Hiroshi, on the other hand, just tries to get through the internment experience in one psychological piece. After the war, Hiroshi stays in touch with his family, but also goes his own way, working in Baltimore as a newspaper reporter and marrying a French woman. The novel takes Hiroshi through to the age of fifty and the passing of his father.

Although Oishi's book was published by a small though prestigious firm, Kaya Press, it was not extensively reviewed by the mainstream media. Nor, despite winning the 2016 Award from the Association of Asian American Studies for best book of the year in prose, has it attracted so far special attention from scholars in the field. But Oishi is not an untrained or outsider writer. He studied with John Barth and Stephen Dixon – two highly self-conscious writers – at the Writing Seminar at Johns Hopkins University, one of the United States' most prestigious creative writing programs. Oishi, as previously noted, has treated this material before in memoir form in his book *In Search of Hiroshi* (1988). He brings not only extensive life experience but also extended literary reflection to bear upon *Fox Drum Bebop*. Oishi has genuinely thought about his material and, in cognitive and imaginative terms, has allowed it to simmer. He unfolds the narrative episodically and through images. This is done without losing any sense of force or urgency. That Oishi's account comes so late in the literature of testimony to the event enables his approach to wriggle out of certain stereotypical approaches. For instance, Oishi complains that, in the correct and justified effort to show *Nisei* as victims of American race prejudice and stereotyping, mainstream representations portrayed his generation of Japanese Americans as “comic book people” (278). The *Nisei* internees were put on such a “delicate perch” (278) that they fail to be interesting literary characters. He is able to make these critiques while expressing outrage at the internment experience and frustration at its belated acknowledgment by mainstream American culture.

Oishi did not intend his account to be so late. Besides the memoir, he wrote newspaper accounts of his experience as early as 1960. The long gestation period of *Fox Drum Bebop* was most likely frustrating to its author. But that he was still wrestling with the right shape for this material in the 2010s shows that he found not just the form of fiction congenial but that the long perspective honed and liberated his voice. By the 2010s, the genres of fictionalized memoir and autofiction were also flourishing. Oishi's narrative transpired differently within those genres than would have occurred earlier when the split between fiction and nonfiction was still rigidly defined. One could also describe the long perspective of old age as a kind of witnessing, as opposed to the fixed gaze of retrospection when one is still in the midstream of life. Oishi's narrative intertwines testimony

and detachment, historical accounting and perspectival reflection, in a manner not entirely attributable to age, but certainly informed by it.

Oishi is not primarily motivated by ethnic pride, personal ego, or, beyond the facts, any animus against the United States government. His perspective is an inclusive, optimistic (though not facile) one, open to reconciliation and recovery (though not to any sort of cheap absolution). This is not to say that he sloughs off his experiences in the camps or that he in any way wishes to exculpate those responsible for the atrocities. In an interview in 2015 with *Baltimore* magazine, Oishi did not shy away from using the term “concentration camps” (Lewis, n.p.). He argued that even “internment camps,” generally the prevalent nomenclature, suggests that the people in the camps might have done something to deserve this form of incarceration. While not directly comparing the experience of the Japanese American camps to the Holocaust’s extermination camps, Oishi is aware that his internment experience has a place in the genealogy of modern biopower theorized in such works as Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

3. Hiroshi in Form

Fox Drum Bebop does not announce itself as formally innovative, and its narrative techniques are not obtrusively self-conscious nor do they call attention to themselves in a manner that would divert the reader’s attention from the book’s content. But the novel’s syncopation of various life experiences and episodes has an improvisatory feel to it, something that mirrors the significant role that jazz plays in the narrative. Moreover, the novel’s intermittent unwillingness to reveal all in a cathartic sense is also analogous to what *Fox Drum Bebop* itself says about jazz. Hiro befriends a jazz trombonist named Munsey who, though loquacious to the point of being a raconteur, has capacity for “ellipsis” (150) in the midst of his “seductively outlandish tales” (150). Art can express, but it can also conceal, and sometimes what it conceals is more important. Munsey is actually mediocre at playing the trombone, but he gets by through his canny knowledge of what notes to leave out in order to sound better than he actually is. This makes the reader wonder if the internment experience is at its most present at this point in the narrative where the action seems overtly to bend away from it.

Jazz enlivens the narrative and lends it formal orientation. Though Lawson Inada has incorporated jazz influences in some of his 1990s poetry about the camps, Oishi is the first internee novelist to fully integrate jazz aesthetics in his work. Whereas his father’s melody is that of the traditional Japanese fox drum, his son’s is the African American inflected form of bebop. But Oishi romanticizes jazz (which he sees as potentially destructive and amoral) as little as he does his own ethnicity. There is a lack of romanticism about both. The fox drum itself is the product of violence towards animals. In the story, a baby fox witnesses his mother’s skin being

made into a drum. The fox's baby is thereby transformed into the samurai drummer to be close to her spirit. While Oishi's narrative acknowledges Japanese traditions, it also understands their limited valence in modernity. Indeed, somewhat in the spirit of James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), Oishi acknowledges the danger, anarchy, and potential social anomie in jazz and "beatnik bohemianism" (279). He does not see Hiroshi's experience with these social and artistic forms as representing personal fulfillment. Hiroshi's seeking out of voids or anomic spaces might be a perverse reaction to the closed space of the internment camp.

A conventional immigrant experience might posit a trajectory towards greater assimilation into the dominant culture. Yet here not just *Issei*, but *Nisei* like Hiroshi, were interned. Both generations had their experience of American civil society interrupted by this denial of their rights. This reminded *Nisei* of their alterity just at the point when, conventionally, they would have been gravitating away from their parents' traditions. As Reed Ueda has pointed out, because of this, the model of Hansen's Law – by which the third generation seeks to rediscover what the first generation had left in literal terms and the second had left behind psychologically – works imperfectly with Japanese Americans (483–484).

The second generation, the *Nisei*, were hindered from becoming Americans, having been told by the US government that they were suspect as enemies of the society. Thus the third generation did not identify with Japan in the same way as Norwegian Americans or Italian Americans. In *Fox Drum Bebop*, Hiroshi's nephew, Seiji, who follows his father Yukio in being skeptical of the American Dream, is not curious about Japan itself. He is, though, inquisitive about the internment camps, which have come to occupy the place of 'homeland' in the conventional ethnic narrative. Similarly, Hiroshi's niece, Susan, wants to, in the words of her mother Sachi (who has renamed herself with the Anglo name Alice), "interview everyone about their camp experiences" (268). His brother-in-law Harry has a somewhat nostalgic memory of internment, treating it as if it were just a chance to experience the splendors and miseries of youth in a memorable setting.

Nonetheless, Hiroshi sees the camps as sites of trauma where virtuous, life-affirming people such as his father "lost everything" (269). Despite, and in a way because of, having "honest convictions" (269), Hiroshi is reluctant to talk about his experience on tape. Yet, paradoxically, he says he is thinking about writing a book on the subject – a version, necessarily, of the *Fox Drum Bebop* that we are reading. Why would he find it easier to write a book than talk? What does it mean for the reader that the very text we are reading is, according to this interchange among the family, a byproduct of the protagonist's silence, a silence that extends even to those whom he loves and those who can claim the legacy of the camps as part of their cognitive and affective inheritance? Why do we, as readers, receive what the family does not? What does it mean that, if the family does end up reading Hiroshi's book, they will be doing so, in theory, contemporaneous with an at least partially *hakujin* (white) readership?

The action here is in the early 1980s, in other words, a full generation before Oishi actually published the book, although perhaps near the time when he began to conceive it (and the time, 1987, in which he published his memoir *In Search of Hiroshi*). In temporal terms, there is a considerable difference between publishing a book in one's late forties or early fifties and publishing it in one's eighties. In the former instance, it could well be that the author is around to comment on or to direct or at least influence the reception of her or his book. In the latter, the author must concede that most of those who read the book will not be doing so within the author's lifetime. The book thus becomes a way of speaking *to* as much as *about* the dead. The novel is not sententious in proclaiming absolute truths about the historical experience it chronicles, but tries to embed every political or social point it is making in the instanced actuality of the characters. The narrative assumes the freedom of presenting its subject in scenes but tends to shy away from either polemics or exuberance in speculating on the meaning of its subject. As Jenny Xie puts it, the book is constituted by "radically different points in Hiroshi's life with little allusion to the connective tissue between them" (184). This might, as Xie seems to suggest, run the risk of fragmenting the narrative too much, but it certainly defrays any sense of an overly aggressive or histrionic central ego. That the narrative is told in the third person contributes to this unobtrusive craftsmanship. There is certainly a protagonist with a life-trajectory. But the story does not revolve around a declarative ego or even a limited set of experiences. Some chapters, such as Hiroshi's affair with the older woman, Samantha Chatham, who is his piano teacher, his visits to France and his courtship of his French wife Simone, and his time as a Baltimore crime reporter, have little to do with internment or even Japanese American identity as strictly defined.

Notably, in his earlier memoir, *In Search of Hiroshi*, which traces much the same material as *Fox Drum Bebop* but in a more referential and less literary way, Oishi not only refers to himself in the third person but also calls himself "Hiroshi." Oishi stated that it was easier for him to talk about himself in a work of fiction that was "bigger than [him]self" (277). Jeanne Sokolowski has, in analyzing earlier works of the internment experience, seen in them the potential for "a renovated relationship between the state and the (wronged) citizen," one in which "reconciliation and forgiveness might occur" (69). Oishi's canny narrative semi-disguise is a formal mechanism that operates in affectively meaningful ways. It attempts a more powerful coming to terms than could be achieved by mere reliance on the egotistical sublime.

4. Hiroshi in Space

The experience of internment in *Fox Drum Bebop* is spatial as well as temporal. As a result of Executive Order 9066, over twenty internment camps were set up.

These were mostly in the inland areas of the Pacific Coast states and in the desert and Rocky Mountain states. Yet two were as far east as Arkansas. The camps were the product of longstanding anti-Japanese racism, paranoia, and xenophobia. Yet a broad swath of American whites, including liberals like Roosevelt and Governor Earl Warren (who later presided over the Brown versus Board of Education decision that desegregated schools) were the political forces behind the internment. It was a local and immediate expression of anti-Japanese paranoia but, in another sense, it was the latest stage of long-time processes of colonization and white-supremacist power. As Inada's poem "Healing Gila" demonstrates, the camps were on land that belonged to indigenous Americans (110). This is brought home in one of Oishi's most powerful scenes, an encounter with a Native American chief and his people. An old man with "a high, sharp nose and withered brown skin" seemed to "enjoy talking to the Japanese children" (113). The child internees had known of American Indians from stereotypes disseminated to them by the white-run media, but now they sense that they share a kinship as fellow victims of racism and state power. Hiroshi realizes they are the "rightful inhabitants" (113) of lands that do not truly belong to the United States government or its internees. The relocation of the internees to seemingly empty spaces of desert and mountain evoked earlier acts of biopower and dispossession. Hiroshi says that he realizes that the land belonged to the native people, and that he did not belong there: a statement both of acknowledgement of precedence and an affirmation that his destiny is not to be where the US government has arbitrarily mandated him to be. This concentration of the Japanese diaspora into designated spaces extended even outside US territorial jurisdiction. As Mary Jo McConohay points out, the United States, by interning Japanese Americans, positioned them as totally and uncomplicatedly Japanese (40). The US Peruvian and other Latin American citizens of Japanese background were also moved to US-based internment camps, as if to deny that there could be any middle term between Japanese in the Americas and the general population.

By sending Japanese Americans to internment camps, the US government not only denigrated them but ontologized them as a certain kind of people. Indeed, the US government went so far as to say not just that its own citizens were 'Japanese,' but that citizens of several Latin American countries were, in fact, 'Japanese.' This foreshadowed the tactics of the 21st century when the US government interned prisoners captured in Afghanistan and Iraq in the extraterritorial site of Guantanamo Bay and in 'black sites' run by third countries. These operations of what Natsu Taylor Saito calls "plenary power" determined who was imprisoned and who was free (3). It also regulated the space in which they were imprisoned from legal definitions of nation and identity. As Ignacio López-Calvo makes clear, this identification was not just ethnic but topographic: the United States "did not pressure" (107) Brazil to intern its Japanese Brazilian citizens in a third country because Brazil has no pacific coastline and because the *Nikkei* population in Peru was simply too large. As Ronald Takaki points out, "the 159,000 Japanese Americans living

in Hawaii did not become victims of mass internment” (343) even though it was there that the actual Japanese military attack had occurred in 1941. The lack of Japanese Hawaiian internment was primarily because there were so many Japanese Americans in Hawaii that were essential for labor and the islands’ economy. In other words, they were too close to a majority to be treated like a minority. But the Japanese Americans, even those *Nisei* and *Sansei* who had become “Americanized” (Takaki 344), were judged to be of “undiluted” (Takaki 344) racial background. Thus, paradoxically, they were considered as much more Japanese than they in fact were, and more of the Pacific than their accidental, rather than essential, habitation near that ocean indicated. The United States government was fetishizing its own space to correspond with its own racial fears. Just as their stereotype of the Japanese American was that they were dangerous because they were near the Pacific, so did the deportation policies keep them nearer, psychologically, to the Pacific.

This Pacific orientation is noticeable when Canadian policy is examined. Canada similarly interned Japanese Canadians. Greg Robinson uses the umbrella term “Japanese confinement” for both countries. However, some of the internment camps were as far east as Ontario. Both the US and Canada removed their citizens of Japanese extraction from the Pacific Coast and interned them against their will and in defiance of the democratic norms the nations claimed to protect. But Canada, though mostly interning them in the inland valleys of British Columbia, did undertake what Roy Miki calls a “scattering” policy (105), with Japanese Canadians moved as far east as Ontario and Québec. Yet the curious American essentialization of the Japanese Americans as “Japanese” led the US to keep them in areas closer, in American terms, to Japan. Thus when Hiroshi leaves California as an adult for Baltimore and, for a time, Paris, he is declaring his own independence from the confining identities externally imposed on him.

But another reason for the US keeping Japanese Americans west of the Mississippi was that doing otherwise would call attention to the fact that German American and Italian American communities, many of which saw as much support for the enemies of the United States as among Japanese Americans, were (unlike their equivalents in Latin America, Canada, Britain or Australia), for the most part not interned. Hiroshi, as an adult, makes his home in Baltimore, near the Atlantic, and marries a French woman. Hiroshi was not doing this to reject his family and heritage. He was demanding a more mobile idea of space than the definitions of internment permit. Hiroshi’s residence and marriage thus parallel his brother Isamu’s quest for freedom in the desert.

Japanese confinement was an act of governmentally ordained persecution. But it also imposed an identity more rigid than that of the community itself. That *Nisei* identity was thus different from typical second-generation American identity (including second-generation Chinese American) had an impact on Asian American identity. *Nisei* like Yuji Ichioka (see Kim) were crucial in defining the term “Asian American.” The term “Asian American” speaks to the way people

of Asian descent had a common “interethnic” bond to use King-Kok Cheung’s phrase (27). This interethnic bond arose because Americans of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent, whose countries of origin were often at odds could all be the object of racially-based paranoia. Yet the *Nisei* internment experience also speaks to a sense of internal difference among Asian Americans. The term was produced by a conjunction of similarity and difference that would not have been the same had Japanese Americans been marked out by internment.

Oishi makes clear the difference in attitude between generations. Seiji, the *Issei* father, still identifies with Japan during wartime, although it is an identification more cultural and political. On the other hand, *Nisei* children who have grown up in America have very different, but in all cases, marked relationships with the country. But even when Seiji tries, as an old man, to reconnect with Japan, he finds his old country only “a burden on his heart and mind” (225). Without necessarily being at home in America, he is no longer at home in Japan. The experience of internment, meant both to solidify and to condemn the family’s Japanese identity, has in fact estranged them from Japan, without simply subjecting them to a naïve and unexamined process of Americanization.

Fox Drum Bebop shows that attachment and detachment can be culturally complicated. Hiroshi has a serious relationship with a Japanese American woman, Michiko. Like Hiroshi, Michiko is a talented young person open to the possibilities of American postwar life. But Hiroshi’s attitude towards her becomes atavistic, recidivist. He begins to be, like his father, “domineering and imperious, brooking no contradictions” (196). Hiroshi’s relationship with Michiko is burdened by what the political theorist Wendy Brown calls “wounded attachment” (390), an emotional bond that constricts his identity rather than expand it. Michiko finally realizes that she and Hiroshi cannot move forward because the identity of “Japanese American woman” will always stand in the way of Hiroshi’s apprehension of her as a person. Hiroshi himself is not misogynistic nor patriarchal in mien. His subtle and empathetic mode of masculinity stands as much in contrast to norms of American masculinity as it does to the conduct of Hiroshi’s own father. Either way, the contours of Hiroshi’s attitude towards Michiko – whom he truly loves – remain within patriarchal models. This is precisely because Hiroshi projects Michiko as a kind of home – of the sort that internment had taken from him. He subjects her to an identity-constraint – much as the US government had insisted that the internees were, first, potential enemy agents, secondly, ‘Japanese.’

Hiroshi ends up marrying a French woman, Simone. This reflects his need for a very wide cultural and topographic space, which in itself is a move made in rejoinder to the confines in which he had been immured in youth. But Hiroshi’s marriage is not simply an escape from his own identity or experience. Indeed, as his relationship with Michiko shows, marrying a woman of a different background is probably the only way he can escape from relations of domination. What might seem like a continuation of his father’s male chauvinist attitudes is on another level

a symptom of trauma or developmental arrest from his time in the camps. Simone brings with her Europe's own history of warfare and suffering. In addition, the juxtaposition of French and Japanese conjures the most direct interaction between those countries in modern times. This is the wartime Japanese occupation of French Indochina – and thus the Vietnam War that is defiling Hiroshi's generation. One might in fact see the chapters dealing with the 1960s as the hinge portions of the book, and those years as the time when the historical shocks of the Second World War fully reveal themselves in cultural terms. Hiroshi is not an activist. He chooses the career of newspaper reporter because he is seeking objectivity and to register rather than prescribe experience. Hiroshi gravitates to crime reportage because it is there that the questions raised by psychology – in particular the racism shown towards African Americans by the Baltimore police department – are most evident. Yet, as mentioned previously with respect to Yuji Ichioka, this generation of *Nisei* men were crucial (Kim n.p.) in raising Asian American political consciousness.

The bebop element in the title *Fox Drum Bebop* thus exists not just to contrast Western music to traditional Japanese music, but also to reference the postwar proliferation of avant-garde styles and the way they reflected the racial pluralism of America. As Juliana Chang says of the role of jazz aesthetics in Lawson Fusao Inada's work, "in Oishi's fiction Asian American experience is mediated through an African American musical form" (135). The African American experience underlies bebop as a musical form. Hiroshi finds bebop both fascinating and rebarbative. He values the music precisely because he does not totally understand or sympathize with it. To acknowledge and come to terms with his own pain requires exploring the pain of others. His spatial odysseys – from San Francisco to Baltimore to Paris – express his quest for freedom and mobility. As Chang also indicates with respect to Inada, jazz also embodies a "disjunctive racial temporality" (134) that gains another level in Oishi's work by the delayed temporality of his own narrative response to the experience of internment. Chang mentions trauma as a possible description of how this disjunctive temporality registers in relation to past events. Thus bebop can be seen as both a riffing on, an avoidance of, and a commentary upon the internment experience. Expressive even if verbally non-articulate, demonstrating even as it conceals, bebop figures the ultimate delusion of Oishi's work: how it at once testifies to injustice, but that its protagonist, fundamentally, does not want to talk about it. Hiroshi's reticence will be the focus of this essay's final section.

5. Conclusion: Why Hiroshi Does Not Want to Talk About It

What Donna K. Nagata, Jacqueline H.J. Kim, and Laidi Wu call "race-based historical trauma" (96) is the condition for Oishi's orchestration of Hiroshi's utterance. Seiji Kono, the father of the family, never ceased to identify as Japanese, but at the end of his life actually being in Japan or having anything to do with

contemporary Japan had become irrelevant. The Japan he had known has passed away, and he would be at home no more there than in America. This does not mean, however, that Seiji is rootless or uprooted. He is very rooted in his family and his own life experience. What might otherwise be a drive in the *Nisei* generation towards assimilation and a kind of rootlessness is transformed by internment into an involuntary inorganic rootedness.

The first generation is often undertheorized in accounts of immigrant narratives, and that Oichi gives Seiji his own chapter and allows him to speak outside of his son's focalizing prism contributes to the narrative's complexity and integrity. Oishi himself was the youngest child of eight born to his parents, and his alter ego Hiroshi is portrayed as a younger child of an *Issei* father. Oishi's long life and the late writing of his book also extend the life of his *Issei* father. Yuji Ichioka, the activist who is often credited with coining the term Asian American, has seen the *Issei* generation of Japanese Americans as extending from the 1880s to the 1920s in their beginning in the US, which means that Seiji and his sons are late in the sequence of the *Issei Nisei* generational dialogue in a way that allows their familial experience to dilate creatively through time. The interview proposed by the sister, Susan, seems the ideal conclusion of the book, indeed a form of supreme cathartic closure. How better to tie the end to the beginning than to have Hiroshi unfold himself to the next generation, and, through Susan's recording, to even further generations, to history and to the archive?

Yet Hiroshi does not want to talk about it. Or, rather than talking about 'it' directly, he prefers to talk about it in the mode of autobiographical fiction that we are reading. Why does Hiroshi squander what would seem to be the best opportunity for transmitting the urgent message of his life experience? Why does he make recourse to an indirect form with an unknown and indefinite audience instead? Here the title's reference to musical forms becomes pertinent. Both the fox drum and bebop jazz are expressive without being obvious. In addition, giving this title to Hiroshi's story defines the character's role in his family. Yukio is the 'Japanese' one, Mickey is the assimilated one, Sammy is the radical (and the disabled, and the prematurely dead). Sachi is the one who maintains the continuity of the family the most and mediates between all her brothers. In turn, Hiroshi's identity is an aesthetic one. Notably, his first sexual relationship is with his piano teacher, Samantha Chatham, whose first name echoes that of Hiroshi's dead brother, Isamu (Sammy).

This episode is actually jarring and discordant. Not simply a stage in an assured process of maturation, it shows how Hiroshi's aesthetic persona is both self-conscious and disjunctive. In other words, Hiroshi is very aware of art's capacity to address his pain but does not rely upon art to conclusively heal that pain. His aesthetic and musical sensibility enables him to take the long view without 'forgetting' or totally 'forgiving.' Not talking about 'it' in so direct a way lets Hiroshi attend to the experience of others close to him, their trauma, their pain. Moreover, Hiroshi realizes that the *Nisei* "couldn't talk about the camps" because

it undercut their “self -image as Americans” and signified a “fear too deep to probe” (271).

By the early 1980s, Hiroshi and his brothers Sammy and Mickey are well into midlife. However, their thoughts still turn to the brother who did not make it nearly that far, who died in the desert. The novel's end speaks eloquently of the wish for healing and closure. The last words of the book unfold as Isamu's ashes are finally buried in the Arizona desert: “Isamu was at peace finally. He was where he wanted to be. He was home” (275). The ending is an affirmation of the freedom that Isamu had sought. Paradoxically the very desert in which he was interned gave Isamu, topographically and attitudinally, a sense of freedom. Nevertheless, it is the dead Isamu who is at peace, not the living Hiroshi. There is no determinate closure for Hiroshi unless it is in the writing of the book and the Afterword that Oishi writes in his own authorial voice. If Hiroshi had permitted himself to be interviewed by his niece Susan and to unburden himself to Seiji, he would have unfolded his experience within the narrated confines of the book and to those closest to him. This would have been a revelation of the heart. As it is, Oishi, using the persona of Hiroshi as an at least partial surrogate, unfolds Hiroshi to the reader through the necessarily incomplete mechanism of a novel.

Fox Drum Bebop pivots around the internment experience. It sounds it, dilates it, extends it, gains its resonance from it. Nonetheless, it does not really talk about it, not in a direct way. There is no summary conclusion or takeaway point. Indeed, such a takeaway point would be confining and would work against Hiroshi's entire trajectory, which is to evade the constraining effects of confinement imposed upon him during the war. There is also no imperative to reconcile matters within the family. The Konos, despite their respect for each other, remain divided at the end. When Hiroshi and Simone, who experienced the Nazi ruin of Europe, agree that her experience of the war is more direct, but his, more complicated, it speaks to a paradox emerging from the wounds of traumatic experience. This highly personal novel, fastidious in its sense of testimonial possibility, evades any generalizations that might arise from its subject. The demonization of the Japanese was propagandistic, reductive, dehumanizing. Then it ended, yet, leaving the internees not with a sense of closure but simply an insensate feeling of “shame” (272). After dehumanization, there was respite, but no room for a discernible sense of re-humanization. Thus Hiroshi, as his sister Sachi (who now renamed herself “Alice”) says, is “never satisfied” (260). The straightforward refusal of *Fox Drum Bebop* to be silenced by the oppression of internment coexists with a haunting evasiveness. If Sammy, once his ashes are belatedly buried in the desert, is “at peace finally,” for Hiroshi the matter is more complicated. Hiroshi can never be at peace finally – after the experience of internment, there cannot be finality, even as the thread of life shortens.

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