

“Watching the world about them rock and sway”. Hidden upheavals in Hisaye Yamamoto’s short stories

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Abstract—The essay focuses on a re-reading of two of the most celebrated short stories written by Japanese American author Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” (1951). While both short stories are characterized by a sustained use of indirection, by tracing in them allusions to that crucial event in the history of Japanese Americans which is their forced relocation during World War II, it is possible to add a deeper layer of meaning that can further testify to the emotional turmoil of the internment experience. In addition, the essay offers a comparison between “Seventeen Syllables”, “Yoneko’s Earthquake”, and their movie adaptation produced by PBS and titled *Hot Summer Winds* (Omori 1991), in order to understand how the implicit references to the internment of the Japanese Americans found in the short stories are consciously mitigated or even deliberately removed in the television film. — *Japanese American literature, Japanese Americans relocation camps, World War II, Hisaye Yamamoto, Emiko Omori.*

Resumen—Il saggio si concentra su una rilettura di due dei più famosi racconti brevi scritti dall’autrice nippoamericana Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) e “Yoneko’s Earthquake” (1951). Se da un lato entrambi i racconti sono caratterizzati da un uso costante della tecnica della indirection, rintracciandone all’interno le allusioni a un evento cruciale della storia dei nippoamericani quale il trasferimento coatto di questi ultimi durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, è possibile riconoscere nei racconti un più profondo livello di significazione in grado di offrire ulteriore testimonianza del tumulto emozionale legato all’esperienza dell’internamento. Il saggio offre inoltre una comparazione tra “Seventeen Syllables”, “Yoneko’s Earthquake” e il loro adattamento televisivo prodotto da PBS e intitolato *Hot Summer Winds* (Omori 1991), al fine di comprendere in che modo i riferimenti impliciti all’internamento dei nippoamericani presenti nei due racconti brevi sono consapevolmente mitigati o addirittura deliberatamente rimossi nella versione filmica. — *Japanese American literature, Japanese Americans relocation camps, Seconda Guerra Mondiale, Hisaye Yamamoto, Emiko Omori.*

There’s more about Chinese Checkers in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* than there is about the internment of Japanese Americans. (Charles Kubokawa 1978)¹

[A] lot of literature came out of that experience, I would say. . . . [O]ur literature probably would have

been very different without the camps. (Hisaye Yamamoto 1994)²

A few months after the Pearl Harbor attack which prompted the United States to enter World War II, the entire Japanese American community living on

1 Tateishi (2020: 3).

2 Omori and Omori (1994).

the West Coast was forcibly relocated in internment camps in remote areas of the United States. This massive, racially-based uprooting, which represented one of the most serious violations of civil rights against an ethnic group in the history of the United States, involved around 120,000 people—two thirds of them being American citizens—between 1942 and 1946, yet it was promptly forgotten by the general population and the central government alike at the end of the war. Only after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s did the Japanese American community start to actively protest against the deep injustice it was subjected to during World War II; however, as pointed out by Creef (2004), at the end of the 1980s the internment of the Japanese Americans was still a largely obscure event in terms of national consciousness:

Critics like John Welchman have argued [in 1989] that perhaps the two most “controversial and repressed chapters in modern American history [include] the everyday life of blacks in the mid-19th century pre-abolitionist South, and the internment camps that held Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II.”³ That so little is known about these two historical events—outside the world of specialized scholarship—speaks to our national propensity to render invisible that which is historically too painful to look at and to silence that which still invokes our national shame. (17)

The end of the 1980s is a very important moment in terms of historical recognition of the injustices undergone by the Japanese American people: after a long political battle, the Japanese Americans finally obtained an official redress from the US Government, with the Civil Liberties Act signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1988. John Tateishi, former president of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and leading figure in the campaign for the approval of the Civil Liberties Act, describes the outcome of the decade-long protest by the Japanese American community as a “miracle” (IX-X), especially since, as pointed out by Daniels (1988: 201),

whatever significance the relocation, as it is usually called, might have for American history in general, it remains the central event of Japanese American history. “Before the war,” “after camp”—these and similar phrases punctuate the life history of almost every mainland Japanese American family.

The centrality of the internment experience was also deeply felt among Japanese American writers: as pointed

out by Cheung (1994: 6), “[t]he experience of incarceration looms large in postwar writing, notably in the works of Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Lawson Inada, John Okada, Mine Okubo, Monica Sone, Yoshiko Uchida, Mitsuye Yamada, and Wakako Yamauchi.” Hisaye Yamamoto, one of the first Japanese American writers to obtain immediate success right after the end of the war, described the internment experience in these terms:

Perhaps, hearing names like Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz or Maidanek, we know that [the Japanese American] concentration camp experience was comparatively benevolent. However, we also know that it, too, should never have happened. Any extensive literary treatment of the Japanese in this country would be incomplete without some acknowledgment of the camp experience. [...] It is an episode in our collective life which wounded us more painfully than we realize. I didn’t know myself what a lump it was in my subconscious until a few years ago when I watched one of the earlier television documentaries on the subject, narrated by the mellow voice of Walter Cronkite. To my surprise, I found the tears trickling down my cheeks and my voice squeaking out of control, as I tried to explain to my amazed husband and children why I was weeping. (Yamamoto, 1994 [1976]: 69-70)

This essay re-reads two of the most canonical and anthologized short stories written by Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” (1951), highlighting their covert connection with the Japanese American internment experience. While the two stories are both set before World War II and the relocation of the Japanese Americans, I will argue that they contain allusions to the traumatic event of the internment, which add a deeper layer of meaning to the two short stories. In addition, the essay compares these short stories by Yamamoto with their PBS movie adaptation by Emiko Omori titled *Hot Summer Winds* (Omori 1991), in order to understand the decisions made in adapting them for the small screen with a special focus on how the references to the internment experience that can be found in “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” are altered and reshaped (or rather erased) in the television film.

THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT IN HISAYE YAMAMOTO’S SHORT STORIES

I guess I write (aside from compulsion) to reaffirm certain basic truths which seem to get lost in the shuffle from generation to generation, so that we seem destined to go on making the same mistakes

3 Originally included in Welchman (1989: 152).

over and over again. If the reader is entertained, wonderful. If he learns something, that's a bonus. (Hisaye Yamamoto)⁴

Hisaye Yamamoto (1921-2011), a *Nisei* (i.e. second generation Japanese American) writer, was one of the victims of the forced relocation ordered by the US government with the Executive Order 9066 signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, and she was consequently interned at a camp in Poston, Arizona. She kept writing during the internment, and her short stories quickly achieved wide popularity, four of them being listed after the war as "Distinctive Short Stories" in Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories*: "The High-Heeled Shoes" in 1948, "The Brown House" and "Yoneko's Earthquake" in 1951, and "Epithalamium" in 1960. In addition, "Yoneko's Earthquake" was also chosen as one of the *Best American Short Stories* in 1952, and in 1986 Yamamoto became the recipient of the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation. (See Cheung 2001: xi) In 1991, as part of PBS's *American Playhouse* series, "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake" were adapted for a television film directed by Emiko Omori and titled *Hot Summer Winds*. In the meantime, Yamamoto's short stories have been featured numerous times in popular anthologies such as *AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Chin et al. 1974), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Gilbert and Gubar 1996), *The Heath Anthology of American Literature (7th Ed.)* (Lauter 2013), and many others.

Collected editions of Yamamoto's short stories were also published several times between 1985 and 2001.⁵ The most recent edition (Yamamoto 2001) includes 19 short stories, written between 1942 and 1995. In this collection, four stories are directly related to the internment experience, starting from "Death Rides the Rails to Poston" (1942), a mystery serial originally published in the *Poston Chronicle* while Yamamoto was still interned in the relocation camp, which is about an improvised Japanese American detective who investigates a murder happened on a train that is deporting Japanese Americans to the relocation camp of Poston. Whereas the victim is considered responsible for spying on other Japanese Americans on behalf of the FBI, the murderer confesses to having killed the man because of her fear of what would happen to her family and herself as a consequence

of the internment. Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1950) is the only short story in the collection which is completely set in an internment camp. In the story, the eponymous character, a beautiful woman with mental issues, is objectified by the community of people living in the camp who can't help but start rumors about her. The development of unfounded rumors on Miss Sasagawara inevitably stems from prejudicial assumptions about the woman, which ironically reflects the same perverse mechanism that brought to the spread of prejudices against the Japanese American people and that ultimately led to their internment as enemies of the nation. Loosely based on the life of Hisaye Yamamoto's father, "Las Vegas Charley" (1961) is another short story in which the internment has an important role. The story describes the life of the main character, a first-generation Japanese American man, which seems to represent the archetypal experience of every *issei* (i.e. first-generation Japanese American) man in the United States, including the feeling of helplessness associated with the inability to build a new life after having lost everything as a direct consequence of the internment. "Florentine Gardens", written in 1995, is a fictional account of Hisaye Yamamoto's visit to the burial place of her brother Johnny in the U.S. military cemetery in Florence, Italy:

Kimiko is invaded afresh by a wrenching sense of loss, as though news of her brother's death forty-six years before has only just reached her. Now all the fantasies must be put away. No, he did not walk away from the war and hide out with some farm family (he would have been a good worker) for the duration, nor did he marry the daughter, have a family and decide to stay on. Why not? It is within the realm of possibility, easier to imagine than the other, certainly more acceptable.

But here is Tommy's name, engraved on the white marble cross. (163)

While not directly related to World War II and the internment experience, four other short stories included in the 2001 collection *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* mention the tragic events related to the relocation camps, as in the case of "Wilshire Bus" (1950), a story set in Los Angeles after the war in which the main character, a Japanese American woman, is painfully reminded of the racism she experienced during the war when a drunk man hurls racist insults at a Chinese couple on a bus; "Epithalamium" (1960), in which the main character, another Japanese American woman, directly mentions her past experience as an internee at the Topaz camp in Utah; "Underground Lady" (1986), in which

4 Hsu and Palubinskas (1972: 113).

5 See Izzo (2006), for a bibliographic overview of the several editions of short stories collections published by Yamamoto (129) and a compelling analysis of Hisaye Yamamoto's short stories.

the eponymous character, a white woman with mental issues, eerily evokes the World War II slogan “Remember Pearl Harbor” during a conversation with a Japanese American woman; “A Fire in Fontana” (1985), based on Hisaye Yamamoto’s years as a journalist for the black newspaper the *Los Angeles Tribune*, one of the few job opportunities she managed to find as a Japanese American woman after the end of the war. In relation to this short story, Yamamoto (2001) explains that, “in the two to three years of my employment, I came to realize that our internment was a trifle compared to the two hundred years or so of enslavement and prejudice that others in this country were heir to.” (129)

Given the importance of the relocation experience for Japanese Americans in general and more specifically for Hisaye Yamamoto, it is not surprising that almost half of her most famous short stories, anthologized in 2001 in *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, refer explicitly to the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II. It is perhaps no accident, in light of the collective cultural amnesia about the whole episode of the Japanese American internment, that Yamamoto’s most critically praised and widely anthologized stories, “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake”, are among those that ostensibly make no reference to the war years and the relocation of Japanese Americans. And yet, as I will argue, even in these two celebrated stories it is possible to trace many covert allusions to the predicament of Japanese Americans during World War II, especially if one takes into account the writer’s constant reliance on indirection and on hidden stories beneath the surface of the overt plot.

“Seventeen Syllables” is a coming-of-age story set in California before the war and told from the point of view of Rosie, a second-generation Japanese American teenager. While the girl is experiencing tumultuous emotions related to her crush for Jesus, a Mexican American farm hand, her mother, Tome Hayashi, is both regularly working as a farmer and living a fictional life under the name of Ume Hanazono, a haiku poet. Following her artistic tendencies, she spends her limited free time writing poems and submitting them to local newspapers, while her husband, Mr. Hayashi, who on the other hand is completely uninterested in poetry, is exclusively focused on farming the land and harvesting tomatoes for the local market. One of the most dramatic moments in Yamamoto’s short story is when Mrs. Hayashi receives an unexpected visit from a man, sent by the local Japanese newspaper the *Mainichi Shimbun*, who gives her as a prize a painting by a famous Japanese ukiyo-e

artist, Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858), that the woman won at a haiku competition. Mr. Hayashi, who on that day has involved everyone around him, including Rosie, in harvesting tomatoes for the local market, is upset that his wife is neglecting her work duties, and he decides to destroy once and for all her double life as a poet by sending the man from the newspaper away and burning the prize she has just received:

Next [Mr. Hayashi] emerged, [...] something in his arms (it was the picture, she realized), and, going over to the bathhouse woodpile, he threw the picture on the ground and picked up the axe. Smashing the picture, glass and all (she heard the explosion faintly), he reached over for the kerosene that was used to encourage the bath fire and poured it over the wreckage. I am dreaming, Rosie said to herself, I am dreaming, but her father, having made sure that his act of cremation was irrevocable, was even then returning to the fields.

Rosie ran past him and toward the house. What had become of her mother? She burst into the parlor and found her mother at the back window watching the dying fire. They watched together until there remained only a feeble smoke under the blazing sun. (18)

Cheung (2001) connects the dramatic obliteration of the Hiroshige painting to the burning and destruction, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, of any kind of objects that Japanese American people thought could be dangerous because somehow related to Japan:

The cremation scene reminds me of the many poignant accounts about Issei who burned everything associated with their country of origin after Pearl Harbor, so as to avoid being suspected by the War Relocation Authority. Yamamoto herself must have witnessed actual incidents whereby family heirlooms and literary manuscripts were turned into ashes, and the experience might have added to the graphic and heart-rending quality of her description. (xxiii).⁶

A very similar account is offered by Yamamoto herself in her short story “Las Vegas Charley”, where the main

6 It is true that, during an interview with Hisaye Yamamoto published in 1994, when Cheung explicitly asked the author whether she voluntarily referred to Pearl Harbor and the war in the cremation scene from “Seventeen Syllables”, Yamamoto answered negatively, stating that she “didn’t connect the destruction of the family treasures after Pearl Harbor with the burning of the Hiroshige, which was purely imaginary” (Cheung 1994: 80); nonetheless, and as clearly pointed out by Cheung herself in 2001, the episode described in “Seventeen Syllables” still represents a powerful scene capable of reminding readers of a terribly traumatic moment in the history of Japanese Americans in the US.

character, Kazuyuki Sakamoto, and his two sons, Isamu and Noriyuki, are forced to deal with the terrible backlash of the Pearl Harbor attack on the Japanese American community:

after only a little more than a year together, had come the incredible war, and the trio, along with all the other Japanese on the West Coast, had been notified that they would be sent to concentration camps. How uneasy they had been in those days with government men coming in unannounced on three occasions to inspect the small wooden house for evidence of sabotage. In their panic they had burned all their Japanese magazines and records, hidden the *hotoke-sama*, buried the *judo* outfits and the *happi* coats the boys had brought with them from Japan. They had had to turn in their little Kodak (it had never been retrieved), lest they be tempted to photograph American military installations and transmit them secretly to Japan. (Yamamoto 2001: 78-79)

As a matter of fact, the act of destroying, burning, or burying objects related to Japan was something that thousands of Japanese American people felt they needed to do between the end of 1941 and the first months of 1942 in order to try to defend themselves against any possible accusations of being disloyal to the nation. Historian Erika Lee (2019) offers this illustrative example of what must have happened to thousands of many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast during World War II. Describing the hardships that a victim of the internment, Betty Morita, and her family had to endure at that time, Lee narrates what people had to do "to hide or destroy any possessions that would link them to Japan":

Betty's father, older brother, and grandfather began tearing the house upside down searching for anything that might be considered evidence that the family was disloyal. The dynamite that they and many other farmers used to disintegrate tree stumps was considered taboo. Luckily, there was none on the farm, but Betty's grandfather announced to the family that "we gotta get rid of everything Japanese." He built a fire outside the house and burned all of the Japanese dolls that the children had received for Girl's Day and Boy's Day, as well as records of Japanese children's songs and other personal items. "I just stood there and I just cried because I'd see those dolls that we used to display," Betty recalled. "And I said, I said, 'Why, why do you have to do this?' And he said he has to." (200)

This account gives an idea of the painful experiences that many Japanese Americans went through in order to destroy any connection with their past traditions and at the

same time hide their multicultural identity. In a similar way, in "Seventeen Syllables" Mr. Hayashi destroys the literary aspirations of Ume Hanazono, the artistic identity of Mrs. Hayashi, by violently smashing and burning the Hiroshige painting as a relic of a past that has become totally irrelevant—even dangerous—in their new toiling life as farmers in the United States. This would eventually lead to the dramatic ending of the story, in which Rosie's mother willingly brings back to life her past by telling her daughter about the tragic story of why she moved to the United States to marry her father. The woman had left her native country as a picture bride, after having given birth to a stillborn baby as a consequence of an illicit affair with a well-to-do man in Japan. This unexpected confession by Rosie's mother brings to light, through the innocent eyes of a Japanese American teenager, the intergenerational communication problems between *is-sei* mothers and *nisei* daughters, while connecting the death of Rosie's unborn half-brother—who would have been seventeen by then—with the death of the poet Ume Hanazono (who, on the other hand, would not be able to write seventeen-syllable long haiku anymore.) Both tragedies contrast with Rosie's inner emotions for Jesus, indirectly recalled both by her mother ("Promise me you will never marry!", Yamamoto 2001: 19) and by the girl's own thoughts:

Rosie stared at her mother's face. Jesus, Jesus, she called silently, not certain whether she was invoking the help of the son of the Carrascos or of God, until there returned sweetly the memory of Jesus' hand, how it had touched her and where. (19)

In addition, and as pointed out by Yogi (1994 [1989]), "Jesus, soon to be a senior in high school and her guide to budding sexuality, is probably seventeen years old," (72) thus giving the number included in the title of the short story another crucial symbolic meaning. The reiterated presence of the number seventeen in Hisaye Yamamoto's short story points directly to the moving end of the story, in which the lives of both Rosie and her mother are irreversibly changed by the highly charged emotional events that they experience.

Compared to "Seventeen Syllables," in the case of Hisaye Yamamoto's "Yoneko's Earthquake" it is possible to find even stronger connections with the internment experience, since the earthquake described in the short story destroys the family relations within the Hosoume family in the same way in which the internment shattered the lives of the Japanese American community on the West Coast of the United States. The story is again

set in pre-war California, and the point of view is once more that of a teenage girl, Yoneko, who experiences a series of tumultuous events that indelibly change her life. Another point in common with “Seventeen Syllables” is that also in this case the readers follow a Japanese American family of farmers composed of Mr. and Mrs. Hosoume, Yoneko, and her younger brother Seigo. In addition, a Filipino farm hand, Marpo, lives on the farm and works for the Hosoume family, and readers soon realize that Yoneko probably has a crush on him. Suddenly, a catastrophic event deeply affects the Hosoume family: the earthquake mentioned in the title causes an accident which permanently disables Mr. Hosoume, while Mrs. Hosoume, Yoneko, and Seigo are saved by Marpo, who will end up taking on Mr. Hosoume’s patriarchal role by looking after the farm on his behalf and also having an affair with Yoneko’s mother:

Mr. Hosoume came home later that evening in a stranger’s car, with another stranger driving the family Reo. Pallid, trembling, his eyes wildly staring, he could have been mistaken for a drunkard, except that he was famous as a teetotaler. It seemed that he had been on the way home when the first jolt came, that the old green Reo had been kissed by a broken live wire dangling from a suddenly leaning pole. Mr. Hosoume, knowing that the end had come by electrocution, had begun to writhe and kick and this had been his salvation. His hands had flown from the wheel, the car had swerved into a ditch, freeing itself from the sputtering wire. Later it was found that he was left permanently inhibited about driving automobiles and permanently incapable of considering electricity with calmness. He spent the larger part of his later life weakly, wandering about the house or fields and lying down frequently to rest because of splitting headaches and sudden dizzy spells. (Yamamoto 2001: 50)

Yogi (1994 [1989]) offers a revealing close reading of the car accident involving Mr. Hosoume during the earthquake. He focuses on the sexual imagery included in the description of the accident, with Mr. Hosoume being “kissed” by an electricity wire, while also pointing out that the car accident is metaphorically related to the earthquake through the writhing and kicking of the “sputtering wire” and the subsequent trembling of Mr. Hosoume. As a result, according to Yogi, “[t]hrough these images of shaking, Yamamoto not only bonds Mr. Hosoume with the alterations caused by the earthquake, she underscores his impotence through the orgasmic associations the images suggest.” (Cheung 1994: 152). While the sexual impotence of Mr. Hosoume as insinuated by the de-

scription of the accident can further motivate the affair between Mrs. Hosoume and Marpo, at the same time it represents a powerful reminder of the feeling of impotence experienced by *issei* Japanese Americans in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and the internment experience. As pointed out by Richard Reeves (2015), “[t]he Issei, whose average age was fifty-nine [at the time of the internment], thought there was a chance the government was planning to execute them all” (74–75) and, after the closing of the internment camps between 1945 and 1946, “Issei had aged before their time, seriously damaged by camp life.” (265).⁷ As a result of the earthquake, not only does Mr. Hosoume become permanently an invalid and sexually impotent, but he also loses his patriarchal role in the family, thus being unable to adapt and face the changes due to the earthquake. It can be argued, then, that the earthquake described in Yamamoto’s short story represents a powerful metaphor of the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II. As in the case of the helplessness and uncertainty experienced by the *issei* after the internment, the Long Beach Earthquake⁸ described in Hisaye Yamamoto’s short story leads to an utter redefinition of the family relations within the Hosoume family, with Marpo taking care of the farm and de facto occupying the role of the head of the household, while Mr. Hosoume is left to his own health problems. The author uses a teenager’s limited point of view to describe the events, and while it is impossible to overlook the subtext of the short story, with the hidden dynamics related to the interactions among the adults (as in the

7 Reeves describes a very bleak scenario for first-generation Japanese Americans at the end of the internment: “By the summer, when Imperial Japan surrendered, there were just over forty thousand evacuees left in the other camps and fifteen thousand or so in Tule Lake. The majority of them were elderly. Many of them had been convinced against all evidence that Japan was winning the war and that the empire would reward them for their loyalty to the emperor. The rumor was that the victorious Japanese would give each family \$10,000 plus \$7,000 more for each child as recompense for their years in the camps. The end of that era finally came on March 20, 1946, when Tule Lake was closed. The last prisoners there were given \$25 and a train ticket back to wherever they had been first picked up. There were more suicide attempts by old bachelors; one seventy-seven-year-old hanged himself the day before he was to leave with the last group. As in other camps, some had to be carried or pushed onto the trains. One old man ran back toward the camp as fast as he could, throwing his \$25 on the tracks.” (Reeves 2015: 265)

8 The *Los Angeles Times* recently referred to the Long Beach Earthquake, which took place in Southern California on March 10, 1933, as “the deadliest in Southern California history, [which] focused attention like never before on the seismic dangers the region faces.” (Lin II 2016). According to Hough and Graves (2020), the 1933 Long Beach Earthquake was a major seismic event that caused about 120 fatalities.

case of the abortion and the metaphorical disappearance of the body of the dog killed by Mr. Hosoume while driving to the hospital),⁹ at the same time it is also impossible to gloss over the disruptive event of the earthquake as a fictional equivalent to the internment experience of Japanese Americans. The way in which Yoneko reacts to the earthquake represents both a masterful representation of the naïveté of someone who is overreacting to her first experience with an earthquake, and a much more sober description of how Japanese Americans must have felt when they were forcibly moved to the internment camps: "Yoneko was in constant terror during this experience. Immediately on learning what all the commotion was about, she began praying to God to end this violence [...] Yoneko began to suspect that God was either powerless, callous, downright cruel, or nonexistent." (Yamamoto 2001: 51). If the young girl's negative attitude toward the earthquake represents the emotions felt by the Japanese Americans when they became victims of the forced relocation, it seems that Yamamoto, in describing how the other characters in the short story try to find positive aspects in the earthquake, is directly mocking those who were misleadingly trying to depict the internment as a positive event for the Japanese American community:

The others soon oriented themselves to the catastrophe with philosophy, saying how fortunate they were to live in the country where the peril was less than in the city and going so far as to regard the period as a sort of vacation from work, with their enforced alfresco existence a sort of camping trip. They tried to bring Yoneko to partake of this pleasant outlook, but she, shivering with each new quiver, looked on them as dreamers who refused to see things as they really were. (51)

Of course, if by "city" one considers the big cities on the West Coast with their own Japantowns where many Japanese Americans used to live, and by "country" the

9 In this scene, Mr. Hosoume, who at that point can barely drive because of the accident he had during the earthquake, is taking both wife and children to the hospital in order to give Mrs. Hosoume the possibility to have the abortion: "Mr. Hosoume, who now avoided driving as much as possible, handled the cumbersome Reo as though it were a nervous stallion, sitting on the edge of the seat and hugging the steering wheel. He drove very fast and about halfway to the city struck a beautiful collie which had dashed out barking from someone's yard. The car jerked with the impact, but Mr. Hosoume drove right on and Yoneko, wanting suddenly to vomit, looked back and saw the collie lying very still at the side of the road." (Yamamoto 2001: 54) Later on, after Mrs. Hosoume had the abortion, "[o]n the way home they passed the place of the encounter with the collie, and Yoneko looked up and down the stretch of road but the dog was nowhere to be seen." (54)

remote areas in which the internment camps were built, then it is easy to imagine that the "enforced alfresco existence" and the "camping trip" can indeed be considered as ironic allusions to the internment camps. By comparison, in order to have a better idea of the kind of disinformation widespread during the war years and targeted by Yamamoto in her short story, it is worth mentioning that, for example, on April 6, 1942, *Life* magazine featured an article about the relocation of the first groups of Japanese Americans in the internment camp of Manzanar, California. The article, titled "Coast Japs Are Interned in Mountain Camp," talks about people "settled comfortably" and "prepared to wait out the war in willing and not unprofitable internment." While pointing out that, among the Japanese Americans, "four-fifths were citizens of the U.S.," the article adds that "[t]he Army hopes this great and unprecedented migration will continue to be [...] spontaneous and cheerful," with soldiers who were "friendly and affable, and the Japs comment[ing] afterwards on the courteous treatment they had received." (Anonymous 1942: 15)

Going back to Yamamoto's "Yoneko's Earthquake," while the limited point of view used by the author forces readers to actively uncover the hidden meanings behind the surface plot, at the same time one of the advantages in using Yoneko's naïve point of view is to expose the role of racism in the story, starting from the overtly racist comments made by Mr. Hosoume against Marpo. In fact, if Yoneko promptly acknowledges the versatility of Marpo and the impossibility to ascribe him to any stereotype, Mr. Hosoume links Marpo's industriousness to a supposed superiority of the Japanese American people as a way to directly undermine the young man's accomplishments:

there seemed to be nothing Marpo could not do. Mr. Hosoume said Marpo was the best hired man he had ever had, and he said this often, because it was an irrefutable fact among Japanese in general that Filipinos in general were an indolent lot. Mr. Hosoume ascribed Marpo's industry to his having grown up in Hawaii, where there is known to be considerable Japanese influence. (Yamamoto 2001: 48-49)

After the earthquake, another racist comment against Filipino Americans pronounced by Mr. Hosoume signals the start of an argument between himself and his wife that reveals the hidden turmoil in Yoneko's parents' relationship. The scene, which leads to Mr. Hosoume hitting his wife, thus disclosing to the readers the unfolding of a family crisis, starts when Yoneko is caught by her father in the act of painting her nails, and continues with Mr.

Hosoume overreacting by using again a racial stereotype: “‘You look like a Filipino,’ Mr. Hosoume said sternly, for it was another irrefutable fact among Japanese in general that Filipinos in general were a gaudy lot.” (Yamamoto 2001: 52) While Yoneko does not seem to react directly against his father’s racist comments, it is also true that previously she played with racial prejudices against Filipino Americans by asking Marpo, “is it true that you eat dogs?” and with Marpo causing her “no end of amusement” by replying to her, “Don’t be funny, honey!”. (48) Later in the story, when Marpo suddenly leaves the farm, Yoneko seems to have learned how to use racism to her own advantage in order to deceptively feel better and hide her pain from herself:

Privately, Yoneko was wounded more than she would admit even to herself that Marpo should have subjected her to such an abrupt desertion. Whenever her indignation became too great to endure gracefully, she would console herself by telling Seigo that, after all, Marpo was a mere Filipino, an eater of wild dogs. (54-55)

All these racist episodes included in “Yoneko’s Earthquake” have the effect of showing readers how an eleven-year old girl would quickly internalize, in a deeply racialized context, how discrimination against another ethnic group works (more specifically, another Asian American ethnic group), with the whole short story representing an attempt at describing how hard it can be for a young *nisei* Japanese American girl to understand her own identity in the United States, and with the earthquake operating as an unexpected disruptive event capable of exposing also the identity issues of all the other characters of the short story.

Apart from the identity upheavals that the characters undergo in the story, soon after the earthquake the Hosoume family experiences other important changes, starting from the sudden departure of Marpo, which is directly related to the unexpected pregnancy of Mrs. Hosoume. As already mentioned before, Mr. Hosoume promptly provides his wife with the opportunity to get an abortion, an event that is only implicitly suggested in the story but never openly described. Still, Marpo’s departure and the death of the unborn child are not the only losses suffered by the Hosoume family, because another character, Seigo, suddenly dies toward the end of the short story. Yoneko’s younger brother is mostly a secondary character in the story; however, during the initial scene in which the two siblings go to their cousins’ Baptist church for the first time, Seigo causes them to be recognized as intruders:

everyone had sat down again and the man had suggested, “Let us pray.” [Yoneko’s] cousins and the rest had promptly curled their arms on the desks to make nests for their heads, and Yoneko had done the same. But not Seigo. Because when the room had become so still that one was aware of the breathing, the creaking, and the chittering in the trees outside, Seigo, sitting with her, had suddenly flung his arm around her neck and said with concern “Sis, what are you crying for? Don’t cry.” Even the man had laughed and Yoneko had been terribly ashamed that Seigo should thus disclose them to be interlopers. She had pinched him fiercely and he had begun to cry, so she had had to drag him outside, which was a fortunate move, because he had immediately wet his pants. But he had been only three then, so it was not very fair to expect dignity of him. (47)

In this early scene, Seigo is described as a caring and sweet little brother who is unable to fake his identity as a Christian, while Yoneko is already trying to experience the boundaries of her own identity by playing with the idea of pretending to be someone she is not. Unfortunately, by the end of the story, Seigo dies, at the age of five, after a suspicious stomachache that the doctor can neither diagnose nor treat. While the text does not give readers a clear description of the illness which causes Seigo to pass away, it does emphasize how, before his untimely death, the boy is the victim of language jokes invented by Yoneko, who plays with his Japanese identity and taunts him with racial slurs:

Seigo [...] suddenly died in the night. He and Yoneko had spent the hot morning in the nearest orange grove, she driving him to distraction by repeating certain words he could not bear to hear: she had called him Serge, a name she had read somewhere, instead of Seigo; and she had chanted off the name of the tires they were rolling around like hoops as Goodrich Silver-TO-town, Goodrich Silver-TO-town, instead of Goodrich Silvertown. This had enraged him, and he had chased her around the trees most of the morning. Finally she had taunted him from several trees away by singing “You’re a Yellow-streaked Coward,” which was one of several small songs she had composed. Seigo had suddenly grinned and shouted, “Sure!” and walked off leaving her, as he intended, with a sense of emptiness. (55)

As part of a short story that continuously refers to interethnic racism, this apparently secondary scene evokes the identity issues faced by young Japanese American males during their internment experience. Second-generation Japanese Americans, who were US citizens but at the

same time were interned as allegedly disloyal to the nation, soon after being interned in the relocation camps were given the possibility to enlist for the US Army and fight against the Axis powers. Although many *nisei* Japanese Americans understandably felt betrayed by their country and decided not to join the army (the so-called "no-no boys"), many others decided to prove their patriotism even though their families were still imprisoned in internment camps; as a result, thousands served the country as either interpreters and code-breakers on the Pacific Front or as infantrymen in Europe in what would become the most decorated regiment in the history of the United States, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Also Hisaye Yamamoto was directly affected by the draft of Nisei Japanese Americans, since her younger brother Johnny joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and was killed in combat in Italy at the age of 19. While the earthquake in "Yoneko's Earthquake" may be read as a reference to Pearl Harbor and the internment of Japanese Americans, Seigo's identity issues and subsequent death foreshadow the sacrifice of many Nisei sons and brothers who died in combat as the ultimate sacrifice to prove the loyalty to the United States of America of the whole Japanese American community.

As in the case of "Seventeen Syllables," also "Yoneko's Earthquake" ends in a very sad and moving tone. After Seigo's death, Yoneko decides to refuse altogether to think about her dead brother: "Yoneko herself did not think about Seigo at all. Whenever the thought of Seigo crossed her mind, she instantly began composing a new song, and this worked very well" (56); her mother, instead, ends up finding solace in Christianity. In the final exchange between mother and daughter, which parallels the dialog between Tome Hayashi and Rosie in "Seventeen Syllables," Mrs. Hosoume's words are particularly significant since they remind readers that she has suffered more than just the loss of Seigo: "Never kill a person, Yoneko, because if you do, God will take from you someone you love." In this ambiguous sentence, in fact, Mrs. Hosoume is simultaneously referring to the loss of three people, since not only did she lose Seigo, but she also lost Marpo and the unborn baby that she had had with him.

To summarize, even if Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake" are set in the pre-World War II United States, they nonetheless offer covert references to the internment of the Japanese Americans during the war, which ultimately help readers better understand the emotional toil as well as the deep injustice of the relocation experience for the Japanese

American community. What the three main events that refer to the internment in the short stories have in common is the fact that they are traumatic and irreversible events, forcing the respective characters involved in them to renegotiate their own identities while being subjected to irreparable losses. Through the reiteration of events of irreparable loss which characterizes both short stories, Yamamoto is highlighting the irreversibility of the internment experience for Japanese American people, who had their lives completely devastated and could never really recover from that event and forget about what happened to them. The definitive traumas depicted in these two short stories, along with the more overt references to the war and the internment in other short stories written by Yamamoto, stand in clear opposition against any attempt at dismissing the dreadful magnitude of the internment of the Japanese Americans, an attempt constantly made not only by misleading voices like the one found in the illustrative article from *Life* mentioned above, but also ever since the promulgation of the Executive Order 9066, which never really mentions the words "detention" or "imprisonment" and that implicitly suggests that the internment was merely meant as a measure to protect and keep safe the Japanese American people during the war.¹⁰

***Hot Summer Winds* AND THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF A REASSURING NARRATIVE CLOSURE**

A long picture scroll
Humorous and pathetic
Both, this past of mine.
(Ume Hanamoto, *Hot Summer Winds*)

As already mentioned before, in 1991 Emiko Omori directed, as part of PBS's *American Playhouse* series, the TV adaptation titled *Hot Summer Winds*. The movie was praised by Robert M. Payne in 1993 in his article "Adapting (to) the Margins: *Hot Summer Winds* and the Stories of Hisaye Yamamoto" as a pioneer enterprise in terms of self-representation of Asian Americans in the motion picture field:

Emiko Omori's television film *Hot Summer Winds* marks a significant step for Asian American cinema. A drama about a Japanese American woman, written and directed by a Japanese American woman,

¹⁰ According to Okamura (1982), "although Japanese Americans were herded into barbed wire compounds surrounded by guard towers and armed sentries, the government continually insisted that only an "evacuation" or "relocation" was involved. The linguistic deception fostered by the United States government, and institutionalized by numerous scholars thereafter, bears a striking resemblance to the propaganda techniques of the Third Reich." (95)

based on the writings of a Japanese American woman, has finally found the opportunity to reach a wide viewing public. Because of its singularity, *Hot Summer Winds* claims an accessible space of integrity and dignity for the Asian American image in a medium which has done much to marginalize that image. (Yamamoto, 1994 [1976]: 203)

Since the movie is an on-screen adaptation of both “Yoneko’s Earthquake” and “Seventeen Syllables”, quite predictably, even though the two stories share a lot of commonalities, the movie director made some changes to both storylines in order to develop a unified narrative. The main characters in the movie are Mr. Hosoume (Sab Shimono), Mrs. Hosoume (Natsuko Ohama), Yoneko (Tricia Joe), and Seigo (Rand Takeuchi), while Marpo (Pepe Serna) is a farm hand of Mexican origins. Mrs. Hosoume is a poet who writes haiku under the pen name of Ume Hanamoto, and, as in the case of Tome Hayashi in “Seventeen Syllables,” the prize that the woman wins from a local newspaper is burned by her enraged husband. From that point on, the story continues following relatively closely the events described in “Yoneko’s Earthquake”: Mr. Hosoume leaves the farm and is involved in an accident during an earthquake; in the meantime, Marpo stays at the farm with Mrs. Hosoume, helps the woman taking care of the farm after the earthquake, and the two end up having an affair; however, when Mr. Hosoume returns to the farm, the Mexican farm hand decides to leave. Before long, Mrs. Hosoume discovers that she is pregnant, and Mr. Hosoume arranges an abortion for her. The movie ends with a final reconciliation between Mr. Hosoume and his wife, sealed with the gift of a pen to Mrs. Hosoume by her husband which signals his willingness to allow her to write poetry again.

One of the most evident changes in the movie is the point of view from which the events are narrated, since the story is no longer filtered by a teenage girl who hardly understands the complicated world of the adults as in the case of Hisaye Yamamoto’s characters Rosie Hayashi and Yoneko Hosoume.¹¹ Instead, the story seems to be told

11 Kim (1982) explains the importance of *issei-nisei* relationships in Yamamoto’s short stories as well as the reasons for the author’s choice to often employ the limited point of view of second-generation Japanese American characters: “Most of Yamamoto’s stories have something to say about the relationship between the *issei* and *nisei* generations, who are brought together in stories essentially addressed to fellow *nisei* almost as a warning to them not to lose the experiences of their parents, which they (and she) can only partially understand. [...] Generally, the stories are told from the viewpoint of a *nisei* narrator who sees the *issei* as through a glass darkly, without ever fully comprehending the feelings and actions of the older persons. The understanding is incomplete partly because of communication

from the point of view of both a young Yoneko and an adult one, with the former being visible on screen while the latter is retrospectively remembering past events and commenting on them through the use of voiceover. In addition, some scenes (especially the ones related to the affair between Mrs. Hosoume and Marpo) are unequivocally told from the point of view of Mrs. Hosoume,¹² while in “Yoneko’s Earthquake” the eponymous character does not really understand the relationship between her mother and the Filipino farm hand. The result is that, in the movie, all the events that happen to the Hosoume family are transparently described on screen, including those that are only implicitly suggested in the story, since Yoneko never really understands the tumultuous world of the adults. As pointed out by Payne (1993):

Yamamoto’s narrative lacunae are associable to invisibly oppressive power relations among the characters in her stories: the absence of important narrative information marks the missing alternative voice of the underling. Just as they suggest the amorphous space of an alternate literary discourse, the rupturous gaps in Yamamoto’s stories suggest the contours of a perceptually radical history denied by patriarchy, hierarchy, and racism. By drawing the reader to the silences *within* the open-ended narrative, Yamamoto’s stories quietly question what remains to be said *beyond* the narrative, and beyond the construct of American culture as fundamentally immutable and Eurocentric. (208)

In the case of *Hot Summer Winds*, not only does it seem that there is only one unambiguous way to interpret the events described, but there is no way of connecting the story of the Hosoume family to the internment experience. Indeed, Emiko Omori’s movie repeatedly suggests that the traumatic events in the plot are far from unique,

difficulties, but also because of the self-absorption of the *nisei*, who are intent upon conquering other worlds. Yamamoto demonstrates the impossibility of anyone’s ever fully understanding the motivations and experiences of others, but she is not pessimistic. What the *issei* have lived through is in danger of being lost to their children, but if the *nisei* make a conscious effort to learn from what the *issei* have experienced, the *nisei* may also learn to understand themselves.” (158)
12 In relation to the scene in the movie in which Mrs. Hosoume imagines a sexual encounter with Marpo, Payne (1993) asserts that “[t]he bathing scene also begs the question of the voiceover’s omniscience: how did the adult Yoneko, supposedly the film’s narrator, get inside her mother’s head—especially in a scene where the child Yoneko isn’t present on-screen? The viewer may conclude that Yoneko ultimately isn’t the film’s controlling perspective. Rather, Yoneko’s split points of view (as a child and as an adult) are only two of many perspectives (including the mother’s) sewn together by the film to create its omniscient visual field. This narrative strategy reinforces the film’s adherence to dominant cinema.” (217)

definitive, and irreversible. For example, while the movie includes the scene of the burning of the painting, this scene does not have the peremptory tone that can be found in "Seventeen Syllables", primarily because Mrs. Hosoume receives a new pen by her husband at the end of the movie as a consolation prize for her forced abortion. In addition, while there is only one dramatic burning scene in the short story, in the movie Mr. Hosoume is later shown again burning things, as if this were a common habit of his rather than an exceptional (and rather emotional) event. After the fire, Mrs. Hosoume actually finds her old pen among the ashes, as if Mr. Hosoume's fire was not effective in destroying his wife's connections with Japanese traditional culture, nor meant to destroy objects that might be used to prove any allegation of disloyalty by Japanese American people against the US government.

Other important changes concern the earthquake. While also the movie is set before the war (more precisely in 1934), the earthquake does not seem to represent a clear equivalent of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent internment of Japanese Americans, since its role in the movie is obviously different. In the movie, the earthquake is preceded by the scene of the burning of the painting by Mr. Hosoume, who abruptly leaves the farm by car right after having humiliated his wife. The adult Yoneko informs the audience through the voiceover that "Papa didn't come home right away; sometimes, when he got very angry, he'd stay away for several days," thus transforming an absolutely exceptional event as described in "Seventeen Syllables" into an ordinary event in *Hot Summer Winds*, due to the quick-tempered behavior of the movie version of Mr. Hosoume.¹³ While in the short story Mr. Hosoume is described as a truly unfortunate victim of the earthquake since he just happened to be driving his car to go buy some fertilizer when the earthquake happened, in the movie Mr. Hosoume is willingly leaving the farm as a consequence of his bad temper; in addition, and contrary to the short story, in Omori's movie the car accident does not seem to have any permanent and irreversible effect on the Hosoume family, given that Mr. Hosoume quickly returns to full health after a short time, thus completely regaining, by the end of the movie, the patriarchal role that he had before the seism, and that Marpo manages to briefly challenge only during the time Mr. Hosoume is away. As a consequence, the earthquake in *Hot Summer Winds* represents nothing more than a nar-

rative ploy that forces Mr. Hosoume to stay absent from the farm for some extra time while giving Mrs. Hosoume and Marpo the right amount of time to develop their relationship. A final difference between *Hot Summer Winds* and "Yoneko's Earthquake" is that the character of Seigo does not pass away, and that Emiko Omori's film does not include any reference to Yoneko's racist jokes against her brother as found in Yamamoto's short story.¹⁴ Thus the film erases another irreversible event, Seigo's death, along with the pervasive anti-Japanese racism expressed through Yoneko's jokes, preventing the viewers from making any connection between the movie and the death of many second-generation Japanese Americans who had joined the Army in order to prove their true identity as American people.

The differences found between the movie and the short story all point in the same direction: downplaying the tragic, irreversible quality of the events in the story, by erasing any trace that could remind the audience of the metaphorically seismic internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. What the PBS movie tries to implicitly suggest is that, after more than forty years, the internment of the Japanese Americans can be considered like a healed wound that, retrospectively, did not damage in any irreversible way the lives of the people involved. In fact, it seems that every possible effort is made in *Hot Summer Winds* to offer a positive and happy conclusion to the story in a way that brings the characters and their world all the way back to the calm and peaceful situation found at the beginning of the movie. By contrast, Emiko Omori's effort to develop a reassuring ending for *Hot Summer Winds* retrospectively throws into relief the irreversibility of all major events in Yamamoto's stories, reinforcing the idea that the irreversible quality of those events is exactly the point of the stories, which should be read as metaphors of that irremediably traumatic event, the internment experience.

The lack of different layers of meaning in the movie compared to Yamamoto's short stories strongly reduces the interpretive potential of the movie. Furthermore,

14 The movie is mostly purged of any reference to racism, with only one racist line left: after the earthquake, there is a scene involving both the Housoumes and Marpo in which Mr. Hosoume—who has finally realized at that point that Marpo and his wife feel something for each other—comments on Yoneko's painted nails by telling his wife: "Your daughter, she looks like a painted Mexican puta." The result is that, while identity issues are crucial in "Yoneko's Earthquake" and racism can be considered a recurring theme in the short story, racism in the movie seems to be exclusively confined to the bad temper of Mr. Hosoume, with Yoneko consciously reacting to her father's racist slur with an offended as well as defying stare.

13 The volatility of Mr. Hosoume's behavior in the movie is further highlighted by his drinking habits, while in "Yoneko's Earthquake" he is characterized as a teetotaler.

while being scrupulously realistic in terms of representation of life for Japanese American people in pre-war rural California,¹⁵ *Hot Summer Winds* presents a story that is completely decontextualized from a historical and socio-political perspective.¹⁶ And yet, perhaps that is just a deceptive appearance, especially if one keeps in mind the context of the film's production. *Hot Summer Winds* was broadcast on PBS in 1991, that is, after the redress and the first payments, which started to be sent to the surviving victims of the internment by the end of 1990, together with the letter signed by President George Bush, in which the government officially apologized for the racist and criminal behavior against Japanese Americans during World War II. In other words, Omori's movie seems to offer a more optimistic view of the history of the Japanese Americans as a possible consequence of the positive outcome of the redress movement, implicitly suggesting that the Japanese Americans ended up surviving the internment experience without being too damaged by it, and should leave that episode behind them and start a new life with a bright future ahead of them as accepted members of the US society.

However, if the original goal of the Japanese American redress movement, as clearly stated by John Tateishi (2020), was to push "for an official apology," thus "prevent[ing] the United States from ever repeating the treatment [Japanese Americans] had experienced in wartime," (ix) then it is possible to state that it ultimately ended in a defeat for both the Japanese Americans and the United States at large. Unfortunately, this desire to set a precedent that would provide in the future more justice and equality to all the minority groups living in the US hardly

15 As pointed out by Payne (1993), "[b]ecause Omori entered into the film industry as a documentary cinematographer, it's no surprise that her film pays meticulous attention to visual detail. Great care is taken to naturalistically re-create rural California in 1934." (208)

16 It is important to point out that, whenever Hisaye Yamamoto's short stories are either anthologized or collected, they are generally preceded by introductory comments which both offer context information about the author and her stories and at the same time unequivocally link the author's short stories to the history of the Japanese Americans and the internment experience. On the other hand, the movie does not include any similar introductory frame, and in fact it seems to actively avoid any kind of reference to the internment experience, starting from the year in which the movie is set to the fact that the lives of the characters in the movie are at no time in real danger. Payne reports that "given the infrequency of popularly available Japanese American dramas, the co-producing PBS station created a curriculum guide for the high-school classroom to emphasize what students can learn from *Hot Summer Winds*'s presentation of Japanese American life" (203). The publication Payne is referring to, written by Cayleen Nakamura, is *Seventeen Syllables: A Curriculum Guide for High School Classroom Use*. (Nakamura 1991)

became reality, and, as a matter of fact, the main organization which promoted the redress, the JACL, already in 2001 had to tenaciously act in defense of Muslim Americans who, in the aftermath of 9/11, ran the serious risk of being racially discriminated, just like the Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor. In more recent years, a number of voices have even tried to offer revisionist interpretations of the internment experience, (Rothstein 2011, Lotchin 2018) including the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump. (See for examples Scherer 2015, Bromwich 2016, and Hennigan 2019) This is not surprising, given the treatment reserved to racial and ethnic minorities during his administration, which explains why it is absolutely important to keep reading stories like the ones written by Hisaye Yamamoto while trying at the same time to understand through them the horror that the Japanese American people had to experience during the internment, which should remain in the national consciousness as an indelible memory of one of the darkest moments in the history of the United States of America.

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