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Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration

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Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration

Mira Shimabukuro

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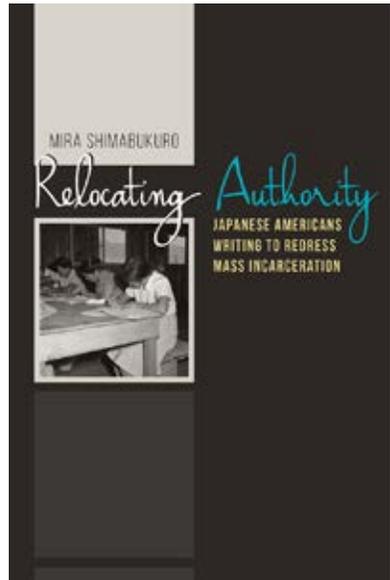
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Contemporary work in rhetoric and composition has made moves to address and theorize everyday writing patterns and silences, breathing new life into rhetors and rhetorics previously undertheorized. Mira Shimabukuro in *Relocating Authority* shifts the conversation to a focus on personal and collaborative writings composed by Japanese Americans forced into internment camps in the 1940s, both situating herself within and critiquing scholarly conversations happening in the field.

From the outset Shimabukuro calls into question rhetorical traditions that characterize silence as non-generative, as well as more recent investigations into silence that do not take Asian rhetorics into consideration. Because Japanese Americans, or Nikkei, have been stereotypically portrayed as the “Quiet Americans” (6), in Shimabukuro’s eyes, a new terrain must be mapped that acknowledges their experiences and the exigencies they have faced. Mass incarceration during World War II provides the setting for this work, a look at both personal and collaborative “camp-generated writing,” to address the ways the Nikkei navigated the system and regained a sense of control over their lives (6).

Relocating Authority offers rhetoric and composition researchers two conceptualizations that can be used to ethically and equitably conduct research: the methodological orientation of rhetorical attendance and the literacy tool of writing-to-redress historical injustice. Chapter one, “Writing-to-Redress: Attending to Nikkei Literacies of Survivance,” situates Shimabukuro’s work amongst scholars of color, such as Jaque-



line Jones Royster; Asian American feminist rhetoricians, such as King-Kok Cheung; and theorists of rhetorical silences, such as Cheryl Glenn. Amidst a discussion of Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, Shimabukuro introduces a theory of her own: rhetorical attendance. Rhetorical attendance requires that one "pay attention to, be present at, take care of, apply oneself to, or, . . . stretch toward" (22). Importantly, this stretching toward entails "mental vigilance, with physical readiness, with intent" (22). This is the ethics Shimabukuro applies to her archival research.

Writing-to-redress, a central theme in the book, is defined as a use of literacy to attempt to set things right, to alleviate suffering, to relocate authority back into one's culture. Shimabukuro links writing-to-redress to a rhetoric of survivance, a term amplified by Malea Powell in her writings on American Indian Rhetorics: survival + resistance. Shimabukuro insightfully articulates the literate work composed in the camps, showing readers how literacy practices have embodied and continue to embody self-protection and protest.

In chapter two, "Recollecting Nikkei Dissidence: The Politics of Archival Recovery and Community Self-Knowledge," Shimabukuro further delineates her project, assessing the problematic nature of relying upon national archives (which were composed and collected by the arbiters of Nikkei suffering) and the simultaneous necessity of needing to do so (because they do indeed house significant artifacts). Tracing the footsteps of those who walked the archives before her, including Densho, an organization explicitly documenting Nikkei internment, the author shows readers what is valuable about her work. For her, "[r]hetorical attendance is not about individual lives but a complex interacting array of knowledge still being collected, still being shared, still being redistributed back to the people whose material lives served as the source of that knowledge" (44). Thus, while Shimabukuro offers up new and engaging theoretical and rhetorical insights about archival research, she primarily does so in service of the communities with which she identifies, infusing personal memory and cultural knowledge into the book.

Returning to the historical communities themselves, chapter three, "ReCollected Tapestries: The Circumstances behind Writing-to-Redress," offers readers insights into the "rhetorical situation" of those living in the internment camps. The author characterizes common areas within the prisons as a public sphere for literacy-in-action, and we see the ways in which the American government sponsored certain forms of literacy, since many of the incarcerated enrolled in camp classes and had at least limited access to typewriters and other writing tools. We also learn more about some of the exigencies for the collective writing that took place: for example, respondents frequently engaged complaints and protests regarding the re-instated draft for Japanese Americans. This chapter therefore introduces the primary artifacts of Shimabukuro's analysis, with chapter four diving more deeply into the ideologies underlying these literacy events.

This next chapter, "Me Inwardly before I Dared: Attending Silent Literacies of Gaman," details at length the Japanese concept of *gaman*, "a race conscious and consciousness-raising voice encouraging [individuals] to *keep going* and *be strong*" (79, emphasis in original). Shimabukuro traces the word's lineage, from its origin in Japa-

nese culture, through its rhetorical embodiment within the literate and material lives of those incarcerated, to the resonances it still possesses today in Nikkei communities. Specifically, the author invests the term with action and power; it becomes a verb—to *gaman*—signifying one’s relation within a wider community and the duty one has to that community to internally confront pain and dissonance in order to offer a stable and supportive front within a constellation of social networks. The private therefore operates in service of the public, blurring the lines between the two, as Shimabukuro illustrates vis-à-vis private diaries and other personal writings composed during imprisonment. Generative rather than stagnant, the quiet writing-to-gaman registered the hidden transcripts of incarcerated Nikkei, sustaining the energy needed to resist and protest.

In chapter five, “Everyone . . . Put in a Word: The Multisources of Collective Authority behind Public Writing-to-Redress,” the author takes a closer look at collectively-authored artifacts she erroneously believed had not existed: manifestos, petitions, letters to editors and institutional authority figures, all of which sought to disrupt camp life and invoke redress for mass incarceration. What makes these compositions so remarkable, according to Shimabukuro, is not the degree to which they are rhetorically “successful”—as they largely remained unpersuasive to their intended audiences—but the fact that they emerged from within the collective authority of the incarcerated Nikkei. Their shared experiences in the camps created collaborative energies and resituated authority back within the community. In essence, their collaborative agency, which arose from the pain endured while imprisoned, catalyzed an endogenous literacy sponsorship grounded in the life experiences of the Nikkei.

At fifty pages, chapter five is by far Shimabukuro’s longest chapter, and it is therefore one that requires the most engagement. Here is where she locates the bulk of her concrete evidence, making careful connections between her source materials and the theories she articulates. She weaves tangible artifacts, such as the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee’s public bulletins, into her rearticulation of Brandt’s literacy sponsorship, illustrating the ways in which camp rhetors felt authorized to respond to a uniquely Japanese American struggle and constructed literacy practices wrought by damage and destruction. This amassed authority—what Shimabukuro designates a “sponsorship from below” (134)—intertwines with more traditional literacy sponsors (such as government and other institutional authorities, like the Spanish consul, but also Nikkei culture itself) to fashion a multisourced authority situated within competing discourses and sociohistorical currents.

Shifting to a case study of this articulation of multisourced authority, in chapter six, Shimabukuro delineates the collective agency constructed by the Mother’s Society of Minidoka, composed of Japanese-born women, as they wrote to authorities within the US government to challenge the proclamation that would draft their incarcerated sons, in service of the nation delimiting their livelihood, into the war. What makes this chapter particularly valuable is the revisionary work undertaken by these mothers as they navigated their subject positions—they were arguing on behalf of US citizens, their sons born in America, though they were not permitted to become citizens themselves—and rewrote a letter, penned initially by a male lawyer, that portrayed

them in stereotypically feminine terms. Rather than utilize the weeping mother imagery, invested with a sentimentality prohibited in Nikkei culture, they instead drew upon the Japanese notion of *ryosai-kenbo*, an ideology that refigured Japanese mothers as “central to the ‘public’ work of building a strong nation” by virtue of their duty to produce productive and successful male citizens (180). Shimabukuro expands the concept of literacy and its potential as she characterizes the work of the Mother’s Society as a form of rewriting-to-redress.

It is therefore fitting that in chapter seven, “Relocating Authority: Expanding the Significance of Writing-to-Redress,” Shimabukuro unpacks what she means when she discusses “[l]iteracy’s role as mediator of recovery” (195). Careful to ground her work within Japanese American communities, Shimabukuro illustrates how the material covered in her book remains infused with rhetorical potential for new uses, new recoveries. She writes of relocation and reactivation of artifacts, evoking an authority transmitted across time and space—the collective authority of the camp survivors and victims remains within these artifacts, many of which are now archived. Continued rhetorical attendance provides opportunities for renewed activation of the “resistant capital” passed down to new generations by these rhetors (199).

What is most significant about Shimabukuro’s work is that she locates agency beyond the university, critiquing institutionally sponsored narratives and archives. By grounding her analysis in personal experiences—her own, her family’s, of the thousands incarcerated en masse in internment camps—she embodies the necessity of constructing narratives and archives both with and for the community. She aims to keep alive the rhetorical work performed by those incarcerated by transmitting it into the future. New engagements with this archival material might entail, for example, an examination of non-print literacies or alternative ways of composing. This book is valuable to anyone committed to the study of community-engaged literacies and particularly those invested in and archival practices and spaces, activism and protest, and rhetorics of silence and listening.

Works Cited

Powell, Malea. “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 396–434.