Resisting Erasure through Testimonials: An Analysis of Chay Yew's Play *Question 27, Question 28* (2004)(*)

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Abstract

In postcolonial discourse, people of color and those belonging to different races often find themselves fighting for their right to exist in a predominantly white world. The oral tradition, through testimonials and factual storytelling, provides a platform for the voiceless to share their side of history and avoid being forgotten. Consequently, documentary drama offers an opportunity for a first-hand experience of unveiling conflict, racism, trauma, and remembrance. This paper will trace the experiences of Japanese-Americans in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor as depicted in Chay Yew's play *Question 27, Question 28* (2004). The play highlights themes such as racial discrimination, otherness, power, conflict, memory, and voice. The testimonials used in the play provide an intimate glimpse into the trauma endured by Japanese-Americans during their time in internment camps and throughout the war. By employing various techniques of documentary and testimonial drama, the playwright enables the audience to hear—and relive—authentic first-hand experiences in an artistic form. The collective testimonies aim not only to rewrite a forgotten chapter of history for those with hybrid identities unrecognized by both conflicting political sides but also to prevent such a horrific history from repeating itself. This paper, therefore, explores how these traumatic experiences are conveyed, as well as the themes and techniques employed to foster intimacy with the audience, ultimately imparting this disruptive yet necessary knowledge.

Keywords: Japanese American, hybridity, racism, testimonial, verbatim, docudrama, documentary.

مقاومة المحو من خلال الشهادات الشخصية: تحليل لمسرحية تشاي يو "السؤال ٢٧، السؤال ٢٨" (٢٠٠٤)

مستخلص:

في دراسات مابعد الاستعمارية، يدافع هؤلاء من أعراق مختلفة في حقهم للوجود في العالم الأبيض. ولذلك نجد أن الحكي الشفهي عن طريق تقديم الشهادات والروايات لأحداث واقعية يوفر منصة لمن لا صوت لهم لمشاركة جانبهم من التاريخ وتجنب النسيان. وبذلك، يتيح المسرح الوثائقي فرصة لتجربة مباشرة تكشف عن الصراع، والعنصرية، والصدمات، والذاكرة. سيتتبع هذا البحث تجارب الأمريكيين من أصول يابانية في أعقاب هجوم بيرل هاربر، كما تم تصويرها في مسرحية **"السؤال ٢٧، السؤال ٢٨** (2004) "للكاتب تشاي يو. تسلط المسرحية الضوء على موضوعات مثل التمييز العنصري، والآخرية، والسلطة، والصراع، والذاكرة، والصوت. وتوفر الشهادات المستخدمة في المسرحية لمحة حميمة عن الصدمات التي تحملها الأمريكيون اليابانيون أثناء وجودهم في معسكرات الاعتقال وخلال الحرب. من خلال توظيف تقنيات متنوعة في المسرح الوثائقي وشهادات الشهود، يمكّن الكاتب المسرحي الجمهور من سماع—وإعادة معايشة—تجارب حقيقية من خلال شكل فني. تهدف هذه الشهادات الجماعية، ليس فقط إلى إعادة كتابة فصل منسي من التاريخ لأولئك ذوي الهوية الهجينة التي لا يعترف بها أي من الجانبين السياسيين المتنازعين، ولكن أيضًا إلى منع تكرار مثل هذا التاريخ المروع. لذا، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف يتم نقل هذه التجارب المؤلمة، بالإضافة إلى الموضوعات والتقنيات المستخدمة لتعزيز العلاقة الحميمية مع الجمهور، مما يساهم في نقل هذه المعرفة المزعجة ولكن الضرورية.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: مسرح وثائقي، مابعد الاستعمارية، هويات هجينة، اليابانيون الأمريكيون.

"Parrhesia is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears" (Foucault, 2011, p.13).

Introduction

In the dying scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist passes on his legacy to Horatio: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story" (Shakespeare, 1623/2014 5.2.381-4). Hamlet knows that his story must live on through Horatio, highlighting the power of oral storytelling to the preserve truth and history. But in

"this harsh world," how can stories survive, especially those of marginalized voices? Who will tell them, and how? In today's world, the mass media often suppresses minority voices: their stories are silenced, and their civil rights are ignored. How, then, can they challenge established histories? Oral storytelling and verbatim theater offer a platform for marginalized groups to document their own histories, allowing them to share what has been erased or overlooked. Verbatim theater gives real-life individuals the opportunity to tell their own stories, offering an authentic and truthful portrayal of their experiences. Through actors, their trauma, conflicts, and testimonials are brought to the stage, creating a counter-narrative to dominant histories and subverting the erasure of silenced identities. This paper examines Chay Yew's *Question 27, Question 28* (2004) as verbatim theater, exploring how it challenges the historical erasure of Japanese Americans during a sensitive period in U.S. history. It also looks at how the play fosters an intimate connection with the audience, inviting them to engage with the lived experiences of those who have been silenced.

I. Docudrama, Verbatim, or Testimonio?

A) Documentary Drama

Documentary theater is a broad term often used to encompass verbatim and testimonial theater. Contemporary documentary theatre is described using terms like theatre-of-witness, verbatim theatre, docudrama, and others, with critics and scholars often using them interchangeably (Maedza, 2013, p.10). The term "documentary drama" was coined by Scottish cinematographer John Grierson, originally linked to filmmaking, but later adopted by Bertolt Brecht, "who used it in relation to Ewin Piscator's idea of epic theatre" (7). Inspired by Brecht's ideology, German playwright Peter Weiss created a form of documentary theater called "theater of Fact" (Elias, 2021, p.23).

With the rapid technological advancements of the modern era, including the invention of radio, television, and the internet, documentary theater evolved "to cope with the needs of the new era" (Elias, 2021, p.24). New recording techniques allowed the exact words of real-life individuals to be captured "and then utilized in a dramatic context" (24). Clare Summerskill (2020), in her seminal book *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*, defines documentary theater as "an umbrella term referring to the creation of nonfiction plays based on

documents. Such documentation involves a variety of primary sources, including film excerpts, photos, newspaper articles, letters, diaries, statistics, and interview material." This development highlights the role of documentary theater in capturing and conveying authentic human experiences, making them a vital medium for reflecting societal change and preserving history.

Using these factual resources, the aim of documentary theater is no longer purely entertainment; it seeks to depict struggles, conflicts, and traumas, often without offering solutions. It brings to light realities that have been overlooked, using real documents. In this sense, documentary theater functions to reassess "international/national/local histories," as well as to celebrate "repressed or marginal communities and groups, bringing light to their histories and aspirations" (Maezda, 2013, p.8). In summary, documentary theater serves not only as a tool for education, but also as a platform for social change, giving voice to those who have been silenced throughout history.

B) Verbatim Theater

Documentary theater is verbatim when it uses exact words from recorded interviews or documents. Summerskill (2020) explains that verbatim theater is "regarded as a subset of documentary theatre, since it employs documents in the form of transcribed interviews." But what does "verbatim" mean? It comes from the Latin *verbum*, meaning "word," and refers to the precise, word-for-word repetition of a phrase (Fisher, 2020, p.17). The term was first introduced by Derek Paget in the 1970s, referring to community-based plays in Britain. Paget (2008) defines verbatim theater as originating in interviews, with scripts that use recordings of actual words spoken by real people (p.130). He also links verbatim theater to documentary theater, saying: "Verbatim theatre, which makes fascinating use of taped actuality recording as its primary source material, is the latest manifestation of documentary theatre" (Paget, 2009, p.317). The recording itself, as the essence of the dramaturgy, lends authenticity to the text.

Verbatim plays often explore social and political issues, giving voice to minorities and subalterns. Summerskill (2020) emphasizes this, noting:

> After the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks in the US, audiences’

> interest in the global impact of many countries' political actions and decisions was heightened. . . . During this period, some members of the public realised that the media did not always convey the full scope of political information and social arguments on the matters discussed. Verbatim theatre became a means to address this information gap and to reflect a more authentic form of personal experience to theatre audiences.

Verbatim theater offers a more authentic, personal experience to theatergoers. It challenges the mainstream media's narratives, providing a platform for untold histories and perspectives. As Fisher (2020) suggests, "the play's dramaturgy might in some way contribute to the historiographic telling of the conflict and the political and ethical challenges of placing one history over or alongside another" (p.21). In this way, verbatim theatre becomes an essential tool for countering dominant narratives and presenting a more inclusive understanding of history and society. Paget (2008) notes that verbatim theater often uses material that "tended to escape official discourse" (p.131). When attending a verbatim play, audiences expect political, authentic, and truthful content. They anticipate being challenged by "an unconventional format" that provokes thought and reflection (Elias, 2021, p.24). Verbatim theater fills the gap by the media, which has often overlooked or erased the stories of marginalized communities. By elevating the voices of the subaltern, it exposes civil rights abuses and resists the erasure imposed by the powerful. Hence, verbatim theater, like oral history, "informs and educates" (Summerskill, 2020).

C) Testimonial Theater

Testimonial theater branches out from verbatim theater. Amanda Stuart Fisher (2020) explains that "while the term 'verbatim' denotes the accuracy with which particular forms of evidence are represented and repeated, 'testimony' on the other hand refers directly to the truth claims associated with and performed by a particular type of text" (p.17). A testimony involves an eyewitness to an event and requires a listener. Testimonials often carry urgency in conveying a particular incident or story. Ana Forcinito (2016) defines "testimonio" in Latin American literary studies as a narrative "marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and/or of resistance" (p.239). Testimonial theater, therefore, gives voice to

minorities and those labeled as others, enabling them to express their traumas and defy erasure.

The term "theatre of testimony" was first used in 1983 by South African director Barney Simon, following his work on Emily Mann's *Still Life*. Testimonial theater is defined as "a form of theatrical performance created from the narratives of real people interwoven with excerpts from primary documents such as diaries, letters, participant observer's field notes, court transcripts, and other texts" (Deal, 2008, p.5). This form shares similarities with verbatim theater and documentary theater. In essence, "testimonial theatre can be defined as a form of theatre that both depends on and depicts subjects testifying to, or speaking about, their experiences of trauma" (Wake, 2010. p.19). This form of theater, by giving voice to those who have experienced trauma, provides a powerful platform for personal stories that might otherwise remain unheard.

In testimonial theater, the witness narrates their testimony, which is then received by the listener, often the audience. This is not a simple monologue, but a truthful retelling that may risk reopening wounds or endangering the speaker. Dr. Dori Laub (1992) emphasizes: "The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (p.57). The listener holds responsibility, as "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" (p.57). As both verbatim and testimonial theater aim to educate, the responsibility now shifts to the listener or audience. Dr. Laub (1992) insists that "For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other - in the position of one who hears" (p.70). This bond between the speaker and the audience highlights the transformative power of testimonial theater, where witnessing trauma becomes an act of shared responsibility and understanding.

The aim of testimonial theater is "demanding justice and reparation, solidarity with a form of struggle, or with the aim of constructing collective memory and reconstructing knowledges, languages, and identities that were lost or silenced" (Forcinito, 2016, p.240). Additionally, it offers a healing opportunity for the eyewitness -and sometimes the listener- through the factual retelling. Furthermore,

testimonial theater creates a space for marginalized voices in order to challenge the power structures that silence them. Forcinito (2016) emphasizes that "Testimonio is generally associated with the term 'subalternity,' and, thus, is understood as an attempt to undo the erasure within official narratives" (p.239). Indeed, undoing this erasure is central to the verbatim retelling in testimonial theater. As Fisher (2020) states, "testimonial theatre not only exposes certain processes of erasure and silencing, but . . . it can intervene within discourses of oppression by speaking out against hegemonic structures" (p.141). In a similar vein, Derek Paget (2009) describes this as "'fighting against the dark' - in this case, the darkness imposed by a hegemony which persistently marginalizes anything not manifesting 'official' attitudes" (p.334). Therefore, the audience is challenged, educated, and indirectly urged to drive societal change.

Truth is fundamental to testimonial theater, as testimony "is constitutively structured around the promise to speak truthfully" (Fisher, 2020, p.19). Both verbatim and testimonial theater depend on real individuals and their stories to maintain authenticity in dramaturgy. The audience plays a crucial role, as "the performance of testimony . . . is bound by an invitation to the audiences to listen and to believe what is being attested to and not to turn away or disavow this act of witnessing" (p.19). This fosters an intimate connection, as audiences engage with genuine accounts. Fisher (2020) notes that "when an audience encounters a verbatim character who has lived through a critical event, . . . their personal testimony is used to generate a form of witnessing that establishes a direct and empathic engagement with the audience" (p.84). This "empathic engagement" is vital, as audiences expect to witness real-life narratives rather than fictionalized stories. This connection is further strengthened through direct address in the play. The actors, with their factual retelling, directly engage with the audience, creating an intimate bond. As Fisher (2020) explains, "while direct address can be adopted to suggest a degree of objectivity, it is also used (and often within the same play) for the opposite effect, to generate a form of direct, empathic engagement with an audience" (p.85). The audience becomes a witness to the shared story, carrying the burden of responsibility to act on it.

In this sense, *Chay Yew's Question 27, Question 28* (2004) functions as a testimonial, verbatim, and documentary play. *Chay Yew*

(1971–) is an Asian American playwright and director known for exploring themes of identity, culture, race, belonging, hybridity, and the immigrant experience, often from an Asian American perspective. Born in Singapore, Yew moved to the United States and has made significant contributions to both American and Asian American theater. Some of his notable works include Porcelain (1997), A Language of Their Own (1995), A Beautiful Country (1998), A Winter People (2002), Question 27, Question 28 (2004), and Visible Cities (2011), among others. Yew has received several prestigious awards, including the London Fringe Award for Best Playwright and Best Play, as well as the GLAAD Media Award ("Chay Yew"). His work continues to have a lasting impact on American theater, particularly in giving voice to Asian American narratives.

Yew's play *Question 27, Question 28* (2004) is constructed from testimonials and official documents. Yew begins the play by declaring its verbatim nature, stating that it "uses and incorporates interviews, transcripts and testimonials taken from books, archives, newspapers, and magazine journals" (Yew, *2004a, p.*230*).* The play draws from autobiographical accounts, interviews, and official statements, ensuring it is entirely verbatim. This commitment to truth and authenticity aligns it with the genre of testimonial drama, with a clear mission to educate. Additionally, the play highlights the struggles of minorities, challenging the hegemonic mass media's portrayal of a significant period in U.S. history. The title of the play is borrowed from the infamous loyalty questionnaire that was distributed to Japanese Americans during their internment camp period and decided their freedom from these camps.

In *the play*, Chay Yew presents 51 witnesses (37 Japanese American women, 8 Caucasian Women and 6 American officials), to depict the experiences of Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor. The play incorporates both the perspectives of Japanese Americans and white Americans, including government officials, offering contrasting views on the internment camps, hysteria, and occasional sympathy. Yew structures the play in two acts, featuring an all-female cast: "Three Asian women and one Caucasian woman of varying ages" (Yew, *2004a, p.*230). Noticing that male perspectives often dominated narratives of internment, Yew was particularly interested in exploring the female experience, focusing on how these women manage to

survive. The cast portrays multiple roles of Issei (first generation) and Nisei (second generation) Japanese women, discussing their backgrounds, immigration, wartime experiences, and family life during and after internment. In his director's note, Yew (2004b) acknowledges that oral history can never fully represent everyone's experience but hopes his play "will offer a small but truthful window into these brave women who fought, endured and lived through this dark period of world history." Through his play, he highlights their courage, perseverance, and resistance. In addition, the play opens with a direct address to the audience, as the cast reads from scripts with music stands, immediately establishing the connection. The prologue and epilogue feature the real names of those whose testimonies are shared, introducing the audience to the individuals whose voices will be heard throughout the play.

Isabella Haro (2020) reflects on the educational power of the play. Writing about a field trip where 20 AVPA artists attended a reading of *Question 27, Question 28,* she observes: "Many of the comments were focused on the lack of knowledge any given person would have prior to experiencing the play, despite being so close to where it happened." Consequently, this is "a testament to the relevance of the play still is to this day, as many citizens of the United States still live their lives ignorant to the horrors of history, doomed to repeat it" (Haro, 2020). This highlights the educational impact of the play, emphasizing how it sheds light on historical ignorance and the continued relevance of its message. Dr. Laub (1992) comments on the importance of narrative in raising awareness, stating: "The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to -and heard- is therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to" (p.57). Yew's play serves as a crucial vehicle for this knowledge, making the internment story relevant to today's audience.

II. Pearl Harbor Happened

The play focuses on the experiences of Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor. On December 7, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, causing widespread destruction and loss of life. This led to the U.S. declaring war on Japan the following day. The attack fueled fear and distrust of Japanese Americans, resulting in the forced internment of approximately 120,000 individuals under Executive Order 9066 in

1942. Many lived on the West Coast and were uprooted without notice, losing property and businesses, and were sent to remote camps under harsh conditions, justified by the government as a wartime security measure.

The play features eight slides, each with a distinct title that are just read out load by the actresses or displayed as a title on a projector behind them. The first slide, titled "Before Sunday," illustrates life in America prior to the Pearl Harbor attack (Yew, *2004a, p.*231). In this segment, some individuals share their stories of immigration to the U.S., while others identify as second-generation Americans. Mary Tsukamoto, the educator and cultural historian, also the co-author of the book *We the People: A story of Internment in America* (1987) from which Yew quotes her testimonials, states she "was born in San Francisco," and the advocate for detaining Japanese Americans, Amy Uno Ishii was "born in Salt Lake City, Utah" (p.231), representing the second generation with no connection to Japan. In contrast, Haruko Niwa, born in Japan in 1923, came to the U.S. after her father invited her, but she chose to stay permanently. She symbolizes the immigrant experience. "Before Sunday" portrays how the Japanese American community integrated into American culture, finding sanctuary in the country and living peacefully. Amy Uno Ishii's father fled from Japan due to religious discrimination, seeking refuge in America, believing "America is the land of the free and the home of the brave" (p.232). Furthermore, Chay Yew highlights testimonies from Japanese Americans who felt more American than Japanese. To exemplify, Yuri Kochiyama, who was born in California and later on became a political and civil rights activist, reflects:"I was red, white, and blue when I was growing up. I taught Sunday school, and was very, very American" (p.232). Nevertheless, this section raises questions about how their identities will shift during the internment camps and wartime.

The second slide, entitled "That Sunday," depicts the dramatic shift after Pearl Harbor (Yew, *2004a, p.*234). Kochiyama states: "Everything changed for me on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed" (p.234). Haruko Hurt, a Japanese American translator who was confined in Rowher Camp in Arkansas, recalls her initial ignorance of Pearl Harbor's location, stating: "I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. I was that naive" (p.234). This illustrates the identity struggle Japanese Americans face when their loyalty to the U.S. is

questioned after the bombing. Despite their American identities, they are racially marked and targeted by the government's decree of evacuation to internment camps. Kay Uno, who was nine years old at the time, remembers how she and others initially dismissed the attack, saying: "Oh those Japs. What are they doing that for?" (p.235) However, once the reality sets in, Kay Uno experienced an identity crisis, realizing that she, too, was now labeled as "Jap" (p.234). This highlights the conflict between their ethnic identity and the broader American societal view, exposing the painful discrimination Japanese Americans faced during the war.

III. Racism: The Ugly Side of War

Racism inevitably emerged during the war, and the testimonies in the play highlight how this racism was specifically targeted at Japanese Americans, demonstrating that it was not an isolated incident. As Fisher (2020) notes:

> A testimonial theatre that draws on witness-narrators tends to focus on multiple narratives of the past where different testimonies are placed together in dialogue in order to construct a shared history of an event of injustice. In this testimonial practice, it is the plurality of voices and the crisis-crossing of narratives that become a means of collective bearing witness to the past and which co-creates a shared history of it. (p.126)

Hence, Chay Yew often incorporates multiple testimonies on the same issue in the play. Yuri Kochiyama recounts the FBI's arrests of Japanese American men, stating: "They took those who were leaders of the community, or Japanese school teachers, or were teaching martial arts, or who were Buddhist priests. Those categories that would make them very 'Japanesey'—were picked up" (Yew, 2004a, pp.235–6). Similarly, Amy Uno Iishi shares her experience of the FBI's illegal search of her home: "The FBI were tearing out floorboards . . . Looking for machine guns, munitions, maps, binoculars, cameras, swords, knives" (p.237). She highlights the illegality of the search, explaining that they "didn't have a search warrant" (p.238). Her testimony echoes Kochiyama's, as she recalls how the FBI took her father. To emphasize the commonality of such incidents, a third testimony is included from Mary Tsukamoto, who witnessed a similar event in her community: "Mrs. Tsuji's husband was also taken away by the FBI" (p.238). By

presenting multiple accounts of the same event, Yew underscores that these were not isolated incidents but part of a systematic, racially motivated effort targeting Japanese Americans.

The testimonies continue to show how they were treated based upon their ethnicity not their earned citizenship. Haruko Hurt who did domestic work for her employer, Mrs. Dunlevy, faced trouble at work for being Japanese American: " 'I'm going to look under your bed to see if you have a radio transmitter hidden there.' . . .I thought she was joking. . . Can you imagine? I know she wasn't joking" (Yew, 2004a, p.238). Amy Uno Iishi faced a similar situation, recalling: "Even the people I worked for treated me and talked to me as though it was my own father who was piloting those planes out there at Pearl Harbor" (p.237). Despite having cared for the family for many years, they still asked her to leave until the FBI cleared her of any suspicion. She expressed her disappointment: "I've lived here in your home for many years, nursed you when you were sick, and fed you. And I never poisoned you once, and I'm not about to do it now" (p.237), but they insisted on their decision. Iishi further describes her experience of discrimination: "I felt like an ant.. . . All I know is I am an American, and yet now, at a time like this, people are going to say, 'You are a Jap,' and that turns the whole picture around. I had never been called a 'Jap' in my life" (p.237). This piece of evidence illustrates the deep psychological and emotional toll that racial discrimination inflicted upon Japanese Americans, undermining their sense of identity and belonging in their own country.

The duality of their identity causes significant conflict. Japanese Americans perceive themselves as American above all else, but America denies them this right, along with its associated privileges and status, treating them according to their skin color and ethnicity. In other words, their hybridity prevents them from fully passing as Americans, resulting in their internment. Furthermore, for those who did not initially embrace their Japanese identity, the camp experience forces them to confront their hybridity. They learn that asserting themselves solely as Americans does not protect them; they must accept their hybrid identity, as they are taught the hard way "behind the fence" (as one of the slides of the play is entitled). Additionally, Americans do not view them as equals. From this denial of their American identity (and even citizenship) arises racism.

IV. Erasure of the Japanese Americans

Summerskill (2020) said that "the subject matter of many verbatim plays has expanded to address human rights abuses, and universal issues of crisis and/or controversy such as war, natural disaster, political debates and criminal act." In this context, the play under discussion examines the racism faced by Japanese Americans after the evacuation order was issued in the aftermath of World War II. President Roosevelt is quoted in the play issuing "Executive Order 9066," which mandated that Japanese Americans vacate their homes and relocate to designated areas under military control. Eleanor Roosevelt's official statement further clarifies the evacuation, stating that "all persons of Japanese ancestry [were] excluded from the coastal area" and later from the entire state of California (Yew, 2004a, p.241). This traumatic period of evacuation is referred to in the play as "Exodus," a biblical allusion symbolizing the forced uprooting of the Japanese American community. Amy Uno Iishi recalls: "No one had an inkling as to where we were going to be sent and for how long" (p.239), while Mary Tsukamoto reflects, "It would be a situation where the whole community would be uprooted" (p.239). Emi Somekaw[a, who worked as a nurse in the camp's hospital,] expresses similar feelings: "I didn't know whether we'd come back to our home again, but it was a feeling that all these years we'd worked for nothing" (p.240). These testimonies challenge the official narratives that often depicted the evacuation as orderly and rational, and they serve as a means of "speaking out against structures of power" (Fisher, 2020, p.141).

The packing process itself underscored the trauma experienced by Japanese Americans. Caucasian neighbors often seized the opportunity to purchase their belongings at drastically reduced prices. Yoshiko Uchida, the author of *Journey Topaz* (1971) and *Desert Exile* (1982) that tackle the internment camps during wartime, describes the pain of leaving home:

> As our packing progressed, our house grew increasingly barren, and our garden took on a shabby look. My mother couldn't bear to leave her favorite plants to strangers and dug up her special roses, London Smoke carnations, and yellow calla lilies to take to a friend for safekeeping. (Yew, 2004a, p.240)

Similarly, Amy Uno Iishi recounts: "We stood by so helplessly when people whom we thought were our friends and neighbors came by and said to my mother, 'I'll give you two dollars for your stove - ' 'A dollar and a half for your refrigerator—' 'A dollar for your washing machine—'" (p.241). The emotional devastation was escalated by the realization that years of hard work could be reduced to mere transactions. Iishi's mother, unwilling to part with her treasured piano, refused a two-dollar offer, stating: "She would take the piano out in the backyard and take an axe to it before she'd let anyone take it away for two dollars" (p.241). This powerful testimony exposes the profound anger and grief that the evacuation triggered.

These personal accounts are a relevant counter-narrative to the erasure of Japanese Americans from public discourse, as evidenced by official documents and statements from the Roosevelt administration. According to Forcinito (2016), subaltern groups often face two types of erasure:

> The first erasure concerns the representation of subaltern groups as invisible and disposable. The second one blurs or dismisses the violence of oppression and exploitation as the cause of different forms of struggle and inscribes subalternity as connected to criminality in the official narratives of authoritarian states, to further justify the illegal repression of apparatuses of enforced disappearance and massacre. (p.239)

Both forms of erasure are present in *Question 27, Question 28*: the first is the representation of the Japanese Americans as invisible and disposable, and the second occurs when violence is obscured and framed as criminality in official narratives. To illustrate, the first type of erasure is seen in the forced relocation of Japanese Americans, effectively removing them from the public sphere, while the second is reflected in the silencing of their experiences in the internment camps. Eleanor Roosevelt described the evacuation as "a safety measure" (Yew, 2004a, p.247), minimizing the injustice of the forced relocation.

Chay Yew effectively contrasts the official narrative with the Japanese American testimonies, exposing the disconnection between mainstream historical narratives and the lived experiences of those affected by the internment camp. Therefore, the play incorporates white voices, such as Mrs. Ethelyne Joseph. She is a white American citizen

from Lone Pine, who has gave her testimonials through interview conducted by the Japanese American Oral History Project (1973) which Chay Yew utilizes in his verbatim play. Mrs. Ethelyne B. Jospeh in her testimonial justifies the evacuation as a wartime necessity, saying:

> The camps were a necessity because when you think of Pearl Harbor, naturally, if they would have made a return on Pearl Harbor, well, we would have been done. I think above everything else that it was a necessity. I'm sure we all felt the same way because we were at war. Naturally, we had a feeling of hatred toward them. (Yew, 2004a, p.273)

This is the kind of hysteria that President Roosevelt created at the time. Another white woman, Katarine Krater (who with her husband owned a grocery store and witnessed the construction of the Manzanar camp), sympathizes with Japanese Americans and disapproves of the entire evacuation order, recalls: "the hysteria ran so high at the time" (p.274). She even personally knows some people who were so frightened of Japanese Americans that they slept with guns under their pillows for protection. Mary Gillespie (another White American) exemplifies this hysteria. Her words reflect the brainwashed media that portrayed the camp experience as a fun trip. She narrates: "they were royally treated—they fished and hunted" (p.259). The phrase "royally treated" is ironic, as many testimonies reveal a vastly different reality. This so-called royal treatment included according to Ms. Gillespie: "The Japs had ham and bacon and all this stuff . . . They got the best of everything. They were treated very, very good. I'll say that for them" (p.258). Another claim insists that Japanese Americans were royally treated in camp because they "had their basketball courts and their tennis courts and their swimming pools. So they really didn't live as though they were in an internment camp" (p.274). In a nutshell, these white voices are framed in contrast to the Japanese American testimonies, highlighting their ignorance and racism, thereby reinforcing the truth of the latter's experiences. These white testimonies and official documents intensify the erasure that happened to the Japanese American in the white community. Therefore, quilting white voices within the narrative of the play was essential to exhibit all feelings towards the Japanese Americans.

The play also draws attention to the erasure of Japanese

American voices through the suppression of their testimonies. When the Japanese American Citizens League sent a telegram to President Roosevelt on December 7, 1941, pledging loyalty to America, President Roosevelt ignored it (Yew, 2004a, p.247). This act of silencing is further illustrated by the cinematographer Emiko Omori's(1) recollection of being forced to downplay her internment experience: "I do remember being asked about the camps when I went to NYU in 1947 but always in the context of the Holocaust. All my friends were Jewish. You were made to feel apologetic, almost, about complaining of our 'treatment'" (p.271). Not only this, she was given the harsh remark: "at least you weren't gassed or anything" (p.271). Such comparisons minimized the trauma of Japanese Americans, forcing them to internalize the erasure of their own experiences.

Even after their release from the camps, Japanese Americans continued to face discrimination. As the civil rights activist Noriko Sawada Bridges(2) recounts, the relocation office advised evacuees not to "congregate in groups of more than five" or "speak Japanese" (Yew, 2004a, p.270). One anonymous witness further explains:

> We weren't to congregate among our kind. We shouldn't speak Japanese nor be conspicuous. . . . In other words, we were not to be Japanese in any way. But to the dominant society we were not only Japanese, we were "Japs." Certainly, not American. So where the hell did that leave us? (p.270)

This illustrates the continuing alienation and identity crisis faced by Japanese Americans, even after their release from the camps. Bridges describes how, in post-internment Chicago, she denied her Japanese identity out of fear, then regretting not asserting her identity in being a Japanese American (p.271). The persistent ignorance and racism demonstrate the ongoing struggle for recognition and visibility. In summary, Chay Yew's *Question 27, Question 28* uses personal testimonies to resist historical erasure and expose the systemic racism faced by Japanese Americans during and after World War II. Through the juxtaposition of Japanese American experiences and official narratives, the play uncovers the layers of injustice and the enduring impact of internment camp, challenging the dominant historical accounts and amplifying the voices of those who were silenced for too long.

V. Internment Camp or Concentration Camp?

Since "verbatim theatre productions and oral history projects seek stories from members of marginalized communities who have not previously been able to speak publicly about their experiences or had their stories recorded by historians or sociologists" (Summerskill, 2020), the play under study highlights the perspective of Japanese Americans on their internment camp experiences. This is the first mode of fighting back and resisting erasure: speaking up. The testimonials in the play describe the devastating realities of these camps. Initially, many did not know what to expect: "They said 'camp.' I thought 'summer camp'" (Yew, 2004a, p.241). However, the reality was far different. Florence Nakamura, who was interned in Gila River War Location Center in Arizona, recalls, "Our family number was 19153. . . each member of my family had a cardboard tag with this number attached to his or her coat. This tag was our identification" (245), a stark reminder of the dehumanizing conditions, reminiscent of concentration camps. Mary Tsukamoto remembers the evacuation day: "I remember that sad morning when we realized that we wouldn't be free" (p.245). The camp is remembered with "The dust, no trees - just barracks and a bunch of people standing against the fence" (p.246). Masako Saito, who stayed in Santa Anita, recalls: "We lived in a horse stall" (p.246). Emi Somekawa also describes the Portland Assembly Center: "We were put into a cubicle that just had plywood walls... It's depressing we had to go into a place like that" (p.247). Mine Okubo, the author of *Citizen 13660*[3] (1946), also remembers the hasty whitewashing of the camp: "The room showed hurried whitewashing. Spider webs, horse hair, and hay had been whitewashed with the walls" (p.247). Similarly, the writer of the autobiography *Kiyo's Story: A Japanese-American Family's Quest for American Dream* (2009) Kiyo Sato describes her assembly center: "Not a blade of grass, not one tree for the five thousand people living there behind barbed-wire fences" (p.249); whereas Monica Sone, the author of *Nisei Daughter* (1952), likens her stay to a prison: "When I got to the camp, I noticed a powerful beam of light sweeping across my window every few seconds... I no longer had the right to walk out of it" (p.253). These varied testimonies highlight the appalling conditions and the deprivation of freedom experienced in the internment camps. But most importantly, this stand as a contrast to the royal treatment claimed by the white/oppressive narrative.

Moreover, Chay Yew incorporates white voices to further emphasize that these camps resembled prisons, not places of relocation. Eleanor Gerard Skerak, a white teacher who taught at Topaz camp(4), confirms the terrible conditions: "I wondered how I could teach American government and democratic principles while we sat in classrooms behind barbed wire" (Yew, 2004a, p.260); whereas Katarine Krater, who witnessed the construction of the Manzanar camp, describes it as "enclosed in barbed wire, with a tower at each of the four corners. It wasn't a relocation camp. It was a concentration camp . . . They were prisoners there" (p.253). These testimonies from various individuals validate the grim reality of the internment camps, helping create a counter-history that challenges the official narratives.

Yew further explores the internal conditions of the camps, particularly the lack of privacy and the adaptations the Japanese American women had to make. Mary Tsukamoto recalls: "We began to realize what it meant to stand in line—long hours standing to eat in the mess hall, standing in line for our bath . . . That was a shock" (Yew, 2004a, p.247). Chizu Iiyama, the activist and social worker, says, "There was no privacy" in the shower room (248). The lack of privacy extended to all aspects of their lives. Aiko Yoshinga-Herzig(5) recalls, "making love on a straw mattress was noisy . . . every time you moved a toe . . . you know " (p.257). An anonymous testimony recounts how she and her husband had no choice but to take "long walks in the middle of the night" to maintain their privacy (p.257). These accounts demonstrate how their freedom was stripped away and highlight the theme of dehumanization explored in the play.

As Peschel (2009) argues, "Testimony as a source does not offer a transparent window into the past, but it does provide access to the felt experience and significance of events to the survivors in their present moment" (p.11). In this light, Yew weaves stories of medical negligence and trauma. Emi Somekawa recalls a pregnant woman at Tule Lake with a serious cardiac condition who fell into a coma after early labor. The doctor said, "We have nothing here to offer her" (Yew, 2004a, p.265). The machines were removed, and she was simply put to rest. June Tsutsui whose testimonials appear in *Japanese Women: Three Generations 1890-1990* (1990) by Mei T. Nakano, describes her own traumatic delivery: "I carried my baby full term . . . I believe that was aggravated by the hasty delivery on a hard flat table. I still think a

better-staffed hospital might have prevented it" (p.266). Mabel Ota[6] recounts how she was in labor for twenty-eight hours and no anesthesia, and she "was conscious all the time" (p.266). She recalls seeing "the knife he used to cut into [her]" and the huge forceps (p.266). Unfortunately, the baby had "scabs on her head where the forceps had been used" and suffered "permanent brain damage due to that procedure" (p.266). These medical failures led to the loss of life and enduring trauma.

The play also explores the trauma of separation from loved ones during this period. Mary Tsukamoto recalls Mrs. Kuiama, who had a son with special needs: "They had to take him away to institutionalize... you can't take your son with you to camp" (Yew, 2004a, p.240). After a month in camp, she received word that her son had died: "He only knew Japanese and ate Japanese food" (p.240). Similarly, Elaine Black Yoneda, a Caucasian woman married to a Japanese man, faced separation from her son due to his Japanese ancestry. The Army claimed: "But your son must go on the basis of the Geneva Accords. That is, the father's ancestry counts, and one-sixteenth or more Japanese blood is the criteria set" (p.243). Despite the army's insistence that she could not go with him, she fought to stay with her family (p.244). These examples underscore the pain of family separation and the strength of the maternal bond during these difficult times.

VI. Am I even American?

Clare Summerskill (2020) has noted that "Oral history projects and verbatim theatre productions often seek the alternative version of a current or historical event – one that was not recorded in more 'official' forms of documentation." Chay Yew's *Question 27*, *Question 28* contrast official narratives with Japanese American testimonies, revealing how the official accounts were discriminatory and ironic. Eleanor Roosevelt claims that the internment was a necessary safety measure, highlighting the Japanese Americans' patience, adaptability, and courage (Yew, 2004a, p.247). Making internment camps a necessity helps in the erasure of those of Japanese ancestry from the American society; in other words, as if it is a must to do such an erasure, to simply wipe them out.

Though American officials acknowledged Japanese Americans as citizens, they stripped them of their rights. Esther Tani protests: "This

is against the Constitution," whereas Nobu Miyoshi expresses her wonder: "I was amazed to hear such a purely American expression. I heard no other Nisei openly call our government into question. I think most of us felt that we had no rights" (Yew, 2004a, p.243). The word "our" expresses the feeling of belonging to a government that ironically shuns them. Many felt betrayed by the government, as Haruko Niwa expresses her disillusionment: "I trusted this country so much" (p.247). Monica Sone's thought-provoking question brings up the whole identity dilemma: "What was I doing behind a fence like a criminal? . . . Maybe I wasn't considered American anymore. Maybe my citizenship wasn't real. Then what was I? Of one thing I was sure. The wire fence was real" (p.253). The loss of freedom was undeniable, and it became the most painful part of the evacuation process. Despite their hard work to earn their rights as Americans, they were treated as aliens, even as criminals. Many had embraced their American identity, yet their attempts at assimilation failed them. This unsettling reality brings to light a deeper issue: an identity crisis.

This question "Then what was I?" explores issues of identity, assimilation, and belonging. Haruko Niwa, disillusioned by her treatment, cries upon seeing the Sierra Mountains in Manzanar (Yew, 2004a, p.253), symbolizing her failure to be fully accepted as an American. Crying is a statement of disappointment at failing to fully pass as an American citizen, despite what her official documents that she carries around say. The land of the free that she migrated to has failed her. Chizuko Omori's[7] protest, "I'm not Japanese! I'm American!" (p.264) also reflects the confusion of second-generation Japanese Americans who were still detained in camps despite their citizenship. Yuri Kochiyama further captures this dilemma, noting her earlier rejection of her Japanese identity, only to recognize in the camp how easily constitutional rights could be taken away due to her ethnicity (p.273).The play also illustrates the irony of teaching American ideals in the camps. Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, the Caucasian teacher, struggled to teach the Pledge of Allegiance while witnessing the injustice around her; how can one teach something that fails to practice what it preaches? It is thus crucial not to dismiss their feelings about the evacuation and their time in the internment camps, as doing so would only continue their erasure and silence.

The irony of the internment camps lies in the fact that many

Japanese Americans had loved ones serving in the U.S. Army while they themselves were imprisoned behind barbed wire. This serves as a form of resistance, demonstrating their true loyalty to the country. One testimony recalls a girl in Manzanar bidding her fiancé - who was enlisted- farewell: "The girl was in camp, and he was out. The girl was standing by the-wire fence saying good-bye to him, composed and undemonstrative, holding the barbed wire, and she didn't even realize that those barbs were cutting into her hands" (Yew, 2004a, p.262). Similarly, Mrs. Itsu Akiyama[8] shares the story of her son George, who was serving in the army, while Sato Hashizume remembers the Nambas family who has lost their son, and they "created a shrine with a photograph of their uniformed son, his medals, and a carefully folded American flag" (p.264). Despite being separated by the camp's barbed wire, these families showed their deep patriotism. Yet, the irony remains that their loyalty was still questioned.

A significant evidence on this was the "Question 27, Question 28" loyalty questionnaire, which was given to internees (and where the title of the plays comes from). Question 27 asked whether a person was willing to serve in the armed forces, while Question 28 asked for unqualified allegiance to the U.S. and a renouncement of loyalty to Japan (Yew, 2004a, p.262). Amy Uno Ishii speaks out about the unfairness of the questionnaire: "What is the justification of the government bringing questionnaires such as that into these barbed-wire encampments where we were being 'protected' when we didn't ask to be protected? When we didn't feel we needed to be protected?" (p.263) She highlights how this questionnaire was a means of erasure, demanding Japanese Americans to deny their ethnic identity. Despite the harshness of the questionnaire, it became a means to gain freedom from the camps. Florence Ohmura Dobashi recalls: "Had I not wanted to leave camp, I might have answered 'no' to both 27 and 28. But I chose to be practical and said, 'Yes' . . . It was the only way out" (p.264). The painful irony is that the only other path to freedom was death. Yoshiko Uchida remembers attending a funeral: "Many of those who died in Topaz were buried in the desert. And it seemed ironic that—only then, they were outside the barbed wire fence" (p.267). This illustrates the stark contrast between life behind barbed wire and the bitter freedom that came only with death. These testimonies reveal the tragic choices and the suffering of Japanese Americans during their internment. Hence

the significance of the title of the play where the Japanese Americans had to go through an internal conflict between their origins and roots and their belonging to their country, America. The title reflects their hybridity, but also the racism inflicted upon them through this demeaning loyalty questionnaire. Why would anyone choose to belong to only one identity, whilst they can just be both? But the reality of American dictated otherwise back then.

VII. Resisting Erasure: I shall Prevail

Ironically, despite the traumatic experiences in the internment camps, Japanese Americans continued to resist in subtle ways, demonstrating their enduring loyalty to the United States. As Saxenmeyer (2004) notes: "Beyond the humiliating conditions and the tragedies of inadequate medical care, however, the speakers show the determination of internees not only to survive but to thrive in the face of injustices." Their resistance often took the form of symbolic acts, such as reaffirming their allegiance to the country. For instance, Mary Tsukamato recalls their July Fourth program:"We had an artist draw a big picture of Abraham Lincoln with an American flag behind him . . . I know it didn't make any sense, but we wanted so much to believe that this was a government by the people and for the people and that there was freedom and justice" (Yew, 2004a, p.249).Similarly, Chizu Iiyama speaks of her mother's initial fear of death in the camps, which soon turned to resilience: "she took English in camp. She even took a class in American Constitution. And when the time came for her to become a citizen, she was one of the first people to" (p.251). Their experiences show that the camp did not deter their will to be active, productive citizens.

Despite the grave circumstances, Japanese Americans continued to exhibit grace and kindness. Pauline Miller, a white American who was 35 years old when WWII broke out and has visited Manzanar camp, recalls: "One time, we went for a dinner out at Manzanar, and they served all this beautiful food that they had raised. They raised their own vegetables and everything, and that's what they were showing" (Yew, 2004a, p.255). Tsukamato also reflects on their deep respect for cleanliness and order, a cultural practice that persisted even in the camps: "When we left, we swept our house and left it clean because that's the way Japanese feel like leaving a place" (p.244). These

small acts of resistance were reminders of their identity, even within the confines of barbed wire. Kiyo Sato recounts a moment of resilience when a seed sprouted in camp, symbolizing growth and hope: "A seed had sprouted, and everyone was there to look at it . . . Every day, no matter what time of the day I went, there was somebody there. And they built a little fence around it, so that it would be safe" (p.249). Similarly, despite the harsh circumstances, they continued to marry and carry on with their lives in camp. Yoshiko Uchida recalls: "One of the elementary school teachers was the first to be married at Tanforan" (p.250). They have also built furniture from stolen "carpenter nails" and "lumber," though they were never thieves before (p.257). In other words, they went on with life, to resist being erased, and to show their perseverance; they resisted by performing life.

Resistance is also manifested in more personal acts of defiance. Helen Murao (was a 16-year-old orphan with two younger brothers when she was confined in Minidoka internment camp in Idaho) described her internal determination to overcome the situation: "The United States government may have made me leave my home, but they're going to be sorry. . . I'm going to prevail. My will is going to prevail. My own life is going to prevail. I'm not going to kill myself. I am going to prevail" (Yew, 2004a, p.251). Such defiance was not only emotional but practical. For example, Tsukamato illustrates how the Issei generation coped with their reality, offering English and public speaking classes, alongside creative activities like crepe-paper flower making. Despite their suffering, they adapted, and even found beauty in their environment. As Tsukamato says: "Who but Nihonjins would leave a place like that in beauty? It was an inspiring sight. I felt proud that the Nihonjins, who had coped through the heat of the summer, had faith enough to plant a garden" (p.252). These testimonies, when combined, help resist the erasure of the Japanese Americans' experiences, challenging mainstream narratives. They serve as a counterpoint to the ignorance perpetuated by both media and public perception, aiming to rewrite history and bring to light their suffering and resistance.

Moreover, amidst their deprivation of freedom, Japanese Americans fought for their constitutional rights. The case of Mitsuye Endo became pivotal in challenging the internment system. As the play notes: "In July, she challenged the Constitution by filing a petition for

a writ of habeas corpus asking the courts to rule on whether she could be held indefinitely as a prisoner without being accused, tried, or convicted of a crime" (Yew, 2004a, p.268). Endo's actions, despite attempts to silence her, led to the eventual closure of the camps and the return of the internees to the West Coast. On December 18, 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "Mitsuye Endo is a loyal and law-abiding citizen . . . They make no claim that she is detained on any charge or that she is even suspected of disloyalty," granting her "an unconditional release" (p.268). Endo's legal victory not only secured her release but also set the stage for the American government's official apology. In 1976, President Gerald Ford acknowledged the wrongful nature of the evacuation decree: "The evacuation was wrong" (p.275). Similarly, President George W. Bush's 1990 apology stated:"A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories. We can never fully right the wrongs of the past. But we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II" (p.275). These apologies serve as a form of resistance against the historical erasure of the Japanese Americans' pain and trauma, offering a counter-narrative to the actions of President Roosevelt and others involved in the internment decision.

VIII. Preventing Recurrence

In her article, "*Remembering Japanese Internment*," Karen Sakai (2004) asserts: "It is important to keep their stories alive because it helps us look at life in the 21st century." Chay Yew reflects this by contrasting the official, white voice of power with the apologies made to Japanese Americans, highlighting the internal conflict viewers or readers may experience based on previously ingrained beliefs, often influenced by the media. Through the Japanese American testimonies in his play, Yew challenges the narrative dictated by mainstream media, exposing its racial biases and ultimately allowing the Japanese American perspective to prevail. Yew works to unbrainwash the audience, challenging the ignorance they may have been fed. Cara Lemon, a white woman quoted in the play, offers an insightful perspective, which mirrors the experience of many viewers and readers, saying:

> One of the reasons the internment is able to maintain its

> obscurity is the absence of education and general knowledge about it. The fact that I had absolutely no idea of the internment when I went to college is a testament to how little attention the subject has received... Education about the Japanese American internment has received little attention. (Yew, 2004a, pp.272-3)

This reflects the main message of Yew's play: to prevent the recurrence of such racial injustice in the U.S. Today, many Americans, especially younger generations, remain unaware of the internment's consequences, which could hinder efforts to prevent similar atrocities in the future. As the playwright himself noted, education about this history is vital.

The play insists: "We never forget" (Yew, 2004a, p.275). While the bitterness of the past may have subsided, the Japanese Americans' demand for remembrance remains resolute. Chay Yew (2004b) reflects:

> *Question* and all internment camp stories belong to the Japanese Americans as they belong to non-Japanese Americans. As much as we recognize the adversity of these remarkable Americans, we must also be vigilant and proactive when this history revisits us, especially in this time in American history.

This statement serves as a cautionary reminder to ensure that history does not repeat itself. The retelling of the Japanese American story is not only about resisting erasure but also about preventing future racial injustice. In the aftermath of 9/11, Yew wrote *Question 27*, *Question 28* to remind America of its past mistakes. As Mike Boehm (2004) writes: "History came tapping after Sept. 11, 2001, and made the relevance of the internment camps obvious to [Chay Yew] and many others." Bohem (2004) adds how Yew recognized the fragility of freedom in times of national crisis and saw the internment story as a cautionary tale for future generations. This cautionary message is encapsulated in the play's final slide, entitled "Near Distance," reminding audiences that hatred can arise unexpectedly, and vigilance is necessary to prevent it.

The play thus highlights the need for continued dialogue about the internment experience. Mary Tsukamoto reflects:

> I realized I needed to be angry not just for myself personally but for what happened to our people. And also for our country

> because I really believe it wasn't just Japanese Americans that were betrayed but America itself . . . For their sakes, we need to be angry enough to do something about it so that it will never happen again. (Yew, 2004a, p.275)

Tsukamoto's words reflect her desire and aspiration for a better America for the next generations. She channels her anger in a constructive way to show her sense of belonging to her Japanese roots but also as an American citizen. Yew echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that the play is about correcting historical wrongs. As Tsukamoto asserts, "I want the record to be straight," expressing disappointment that such events occur in America (p.275).The play ends with a haunting line from Emi Somekawa: "I hope that something like this will never happen to another group of people or to us ever again. But sometimes I wonder" (p.275). This conclusion serves as a powerful reminder of the need for vigilance in preventing history from repeating itself, urging both reflection and action. Mike Boehm (2004) observes in his review on the play:

> For Chay Yew, the internment story is one of resilience, in which Japanese Americans' suffering and perseverance made it easier for subsequent immigrants such as himself to claim a place as Americans. But it also resonates because he can envision America still capable, in a crisis, of blanketing some group in suspicion.

This recognition of the potential for future injustice underscores the lasting relevance of the Japanese American internment story.

Conclusion

To sum up, whilst some critics claim that the writer of a verbatim play is just an editor, Chay Yew proves himself more than that; his creativity shines through his careful selection of excerpts from diverse sources. Yew provides a list of bibliography at the end of the play to showcase his sources, like for instance the Japanese American Project and *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley* (1993) by Linda Tamura, *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps* (1984) by John Tateishi, among many others. He skillfully weaves contrasting testimonies to construct the play's narrative, blending

multiple perspectives. There is no traditional plot and action taking place, but rather a journey back in memory lane of the numerous female witnesses that we listen to their testimonials and how they felt amidst this period in history. Yew's inclusion of the Caucasian viewpoint, whether through ordinary citizens or figures like Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, highlights the white-power media and historiography and how they addressed the internment. Additionally, Yew integrates over 50 testimonies, each distinct yet seamlessly organized to depict the internment experience before, during, and after the camps, while also reflecting concerns for the future.

The dramaturgy relies on four actresses, who each reads the testimonies while occasionally intervening with one another to show characters' conversations with others as their memory recalls it. The actresses also announce the witnesses' names, ensuring that each person quoted receives recognition, reinforcing that their voices will not be erased. Although the testimonies are organized around different themes, the play tackles a broad range of issues, including identity crisis, racism, belonging, evacuation, citizenship, inner conflicts, poor camp conditions, family, privacy loss, deprivation of freedom, hybridity, sex, fear, trauma, anger, and rage. Rather than following individual storylines, the audience is invited to hear the voices as one collective narrative. Anne-Kelly Saxenmeyer (2004) captures this in her review: "As the outstanding cast . . . reads the interspersed accounts, one first attempts to seize on the individual threads of story. By the end, however, individual impressions and shared images merge into a single portrait." These testimonies come together to form a unified portrait of the camp experience. Fisher (2020) explains the power of witnessing as resistance: "A singular testimony stands in for collective and community histories, and the witness draws on personal testimony and significant life events not to reconstruct an individual life story, but to address a shared experience of an unjust social situation" (pp.119-120). Accordingly, this emphasizes the collective nature of the experience, allowing the audience to witness the shared trauma and resilience of the Japanese American community. Moreover, the play notably features an all-female cast, emphasizing the sacrificial role of women. The cast showcases courageous women of various ages, portraying mothers, wives, daughters, and lovers, and providing a female perspective on the entire evacuation process. Even the inclusion of Eleanor Roosevelt is

significant, illustrating how even women in positions of power were reluctant to show empathy for the internees.

Yew includes testimonies from individuals of varying ages, ranging from nine years old to much older, countering accusations of memory failure. The varied testimonies help validate the experiences, strengthening their credibility and making it impossible for anyone to dismiss them as false or inaccurate memories. Despite being sent to different camps, the experiences of Japanese Americans were strikingly similar, united by a common trauma. The play addresses the conflict of identity, urging characters to embrace both their Japanese ethnicity and American identity. This hybridity becomes essential in resisting erasure.

Furthermore, direct address to the audience in *Question 27, Question 28* serves not to create distance, but to generate an intimate connection between the characters and the audience. This technique establishes authenticity, creating an emotional bond. Karen Sakai (2004), reflecting on her experience watching the play, recalls a moment when "a man in the audience, once an internee himself, smiled and whispered from nostalgia, 'Yes, that really happened.'" This is the power of verbatim theater: authenticity. However, the direct address carries a greater responsibility. The witness, having endured trauma, now looks the audience in the eye to deliver their testimony. This challenges the audience, confronting them with their own ignorance and clearing away any misconceptions. It calls upon them to bear the emotional weight of the testimony. Chay Yew succeeds in achieving this empathetic connection in his play. Each time an actor announces the name of the character whose words will be spoken, it reminds the audience that these are not fictional voices; they are real, lived experiences.

Is *Question 27, Question 28* a political play? Absolutely. It is a play of correction and caution. As Fisher (2020) notes: "The act of witnessing becomes highly politicized, and the dramaturgical structure positions the testimonial subject as a parrhesiastes who speaks out against the violence and social injustice that they encounter within their community and their day-to-day existence" (p.23). Chay Yew himself acts as a parrhesiastes, using the play to stand up to power and prevent the recurrence of these agonies. His goal is a better future for America's

children. The lives of Japanese Americans were shaped by their past, just as the present and future of the United States are shaped by its own history. It is now up to citizens to decide which future they wish to follow. *Question 27, Question 28* is more than a historical play; it urges action, awareness, and reflection on the ongoing fight for justice. By examining the past, Yew challenges us to address issues of race, identity, and belonging, using the resilience of the Japanese American community as a guide for building a more compassionate society. But, just like Emi Somekawa, sometimes I wonder too.

Notes:

1. Emiko Omori (1940-) born in California is most famous for her documentary film *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999) which is a memoir about Japanese internment camps.
2. Noriko Sawada Bridges (1923-2003) helped in overturning the ban of mixed marriages in Nevada.
3. Another source that the playwright Chay Yew derives the testimonials from.
4. Skerak (1928-2019) has shared her testimonial in the article "A Teacher in Topaz" that appears in the anthology, *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* (2013) that Yew also uses among his bibliography.
5. Aiko Yoshinga-Herzig (1924-2018), born in Sacramento, California, was confined in Manzanar camp where she gave birth to her first child. She played pivotal role in uncovering documents that helped in the formal apology for the procedures done against Japanese Americans during war. She has given testimonials in numerous interviews to document her wartime experience.
6. Mabel Ota's testimonies on healthcare in internment camps appear in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* (2000) edited by Lawson Fusao Inada, one of Chay Yew's resources to his writing of the play.
7. Emiko Omori's sister, and also the producer of the award-winning documentary, *Rabbit in the Moon*.
8. Mrs. Itsu Akiyama's testimonial has appeared in the book *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley* (1993) by Linda Tamura; it is one of the sources that Chay Yew depended on for building his verbatim play.

9. References

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