

Tule Lake Troubles

Scott Tsuchitani

Tule Lake, Tule Lake — that
was a name I dared not mention
spoken warily, always with
hesitation, never voluntarily

Hiroshi Kashiwagi¹

As a site of exceptional resistance to the ethnic cleansing of Japanese Americans from the West Coast during World War II, Tule Lake segregation center was cruelly stigmatized as a camp for “disloyals” and “troublemakers” by both the racial state and pro-assimilationist Japanese Americans.² This resistance proved troublesome to not only the War Relocation Authority’s (WRA) wartime objective of structural assimilation but also the liberal, postwar recuperation of the racial standing of Japanese Americans as a “model minority,” blindly obedient to the racial state even in the face of gross injustice. While the model minority remains one of the most pernicious stereotypes confronting Asian Americans today, its co-authorship by Japanese Americans came at the expense of the disavowal of the history of resistance to racial injustice at Tule Lake.³ In this essay, I trouble the racial liberalism and settler colonial logic behind that wartime ostracism and subsequent historical erasure by relocating the political and cultural resistance of Tule Lake, as embodied in the life and work of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, within an anti-racist, decolonial frame of structural analysis, liberation, and dignity. This takes place within a larger project of unsettling liberal settler affect in order to reclaim Japanese American subjectivity from the humiliation of assimilationist governmentality.⁴ By reframing the mass incarceration and structural assimilation as symptomatic of ongoing systems of settler colonialism and structural racism, I highlight how these systems remain deeply embedded and crucially relevant today.

In Linda Hattendorf’s documentary *The Cats of Mirikitani* (2006), the artist appears haunted by his Tule Lake past as evidenced by the repeated depiction of gravestones in his drawings (fig. 3.01) and as implied by both his repeated spoken references to the US as a “stupid country” and his refusal of federal assistance. In the film’s denouement at the Tule Lake Pilgrimage in 2002, the spirits that haunted Mirikitani are neatly laid to rest where they will sleep peacefully forever after. As an Asian American cultural studies practitioner and grandson of Tule Lake No-Nos

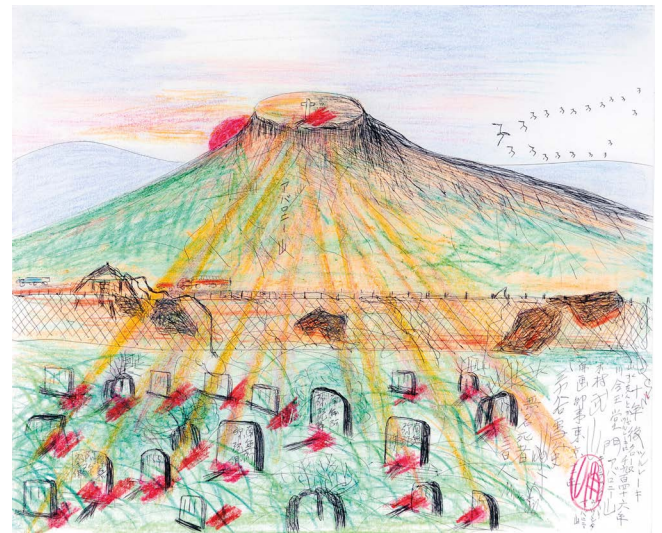


Figure 3.01 (CAT. 081) Signed: Mirikitani Setsuzan gaishi and Mirikitani. *Untitled (Tule Lake: cemetery, Abalone Mountain)*, date unknown. Drawing, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, crayon, paper. Wing Luke Museum, Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico. 18 ¼ × 23 ¼ in. (46.35 × 59.05 cm)

on both sides of my family, I want to trouble this framing of Mirikitani’s subjectivity. I too have communed with the spirits of Tule Lake ancestors but with a very different outcome as described below.

In the early 1990s, amidst a period of deep soul searching, I found myself at my paternal grandparents’ gravesite at the Japanese Cemetery in the town of Colma, just south of San Francisco, asking them “Why do I feel so much grief?” In response, I received a calling: “You need to go to the camp.” This led me to direct and produce a documentary, *Meeting at Tule Lake*, for the Tule Lake Pilgrimage in 1994. The documentary is structured around the poem “A Meeting at Tule Lake,” written and read by Hiroshi Kashiwagi (1922–2019), a Tule Lake survivor, at one of the early community pilgrimages in 1975. Like Mirikitani, I was profoundly influenced by the pilgrimage experience, but not as a moment of catharsis that laid troubling spirits permanently to rest. Instead, it compelled me to trouble through creative praxis the liberal logic of a settler status quo that relegates the incarceration to the sentimental



Figure 3.02 Scott Tsuchitani (b. 1962). *Lesson Unlearned*, 2018. Digital print. Courtesy of the author

past rather than connecting it to ongoing systemic racial violence. For example, in *Lesson Unlearned* (fig. 3.02), I juxtapose a photograph of children sleeping on bare cots at Tule Lake in 1942 with a photograph of children sleeping on the floor at an ICE detention facility, subject to the cruelty of family separation in 2018. By showing the persistence of the racial targeting of children by nativist structural policies, the work attempts to unsettle settler comfort with ongoing structural violence.

By reframing Mirikitani's story through a decolonial lens per the wisdom of Tule Lake survivor and scholar activist Isao Fujimoto (1933–2022), we can reinterpret Mirikitani's life and work with radically different meaning that exceeds the boundaries of the settler logics of racial liberalism and Japanese American governmentality. Fujimoto argued that if the lesson from the incarceration truly is "Never Again!" then we need to redirect our gaze away from the victim and toward the systems of oppression that produced the victim.⁵ Focusing on the victim implies they are a problem that needs to be fixed through government programs to help them adjust to society. This focus not only diverts attention from systemic issues but reinforces the racial liberalism that justified the incarceration in the first place. Following Franz Fanon,⁶ decolonial scholar Sylvia Wynter similarly contends that we must study colonial power dynamics in order to destroy them.⁷ Therefore, this essay is far less about Mirikitani and his work than it is about unsettling the dominant systems and structures that have framed them.

To effect this paradigm shift away from pathologizing the victim and toward dismantling systems of oppression, I first examine the logical and affective structure of settler colonialism. Once that has been established, I then critically apply it to the mass incarceration and structural assimilation of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁸ Predicated on the elimination of Indigenous peoples through the seizure of land and resources,⁹ settler colonialism should be understood not as an isolated event but as an ongoing structure that remains in place while evolving over time, creating narratives that justify not only Indigenous removal and replacement but also its own existence.¹⁰ As a knowledge structure, settler colonialism operates by concealing its violence, justifying its dispossession, controlling Indigenous biopolitics, and denying any alternatives to the settler past, present, or future.¹¹ The primary mode of Indigenous elimination in post-frontier temporality is the agenda of assimilation best characterized by the stated government goal of "Kill the Indian, save the man."¹² Settler comfort with ongoing colonial violence is bound up in a myth of settler innocence that works discursively and affectively to relegate settler violence and systemic injustice to a sentimentalized past.

We can unsettle settler colonialism by correcting settler histories and engaging with truth-telling about settler violence, contesting the ongoing sentimentalization and naturalization of colonialism, and asserting unsettled futurities through cultural production.¹³ Destabilizing the

current racial order requires undermining predominant settler colonial conceptions, attachments, and practices in order to reveal contradictions rooted in and reproducing settler colonialism.¹⁴ This essay pursues that goal by analyzing settler colonial tactics and racial ideologies in the federal government's administration of the concentration camps through the WRA, as well as their representation in visual culture. It does so through three interconnected threads: first, by examining the liberal racialization of Japanese Americans as racial children; second, by analyzing the WRA's social engineering of Japanese American (JA) governmentality through the figure of the Nisei soldier; and third, by reframing Mirikitani as uncontainable within the narrow confines of settler colonial racial liberalism.

The Settler Colonial Gaze of the WRA

The systemic intersections between Indian removal and Japanese American incarceration that are present in the shared tactics of forced removal, displacement, confinement, and structural assimilation are no coincidence given the overlap in leadership between the WRA and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The WRA, the federal agency that administered the concentration camp system, was headed not by Southern racists but by New Deal liberals who saw themselves as anti-racist and their policies as benevolent.¹⁵ Dillon Myer was a ten-year veteran of the BIA before becoming WRA director, and in the early 1950s went on as BIA commissioner to accelerate the termination policy that withdrew federal support for tribes and liquidated Indian property in what legal scholars refer to as an "abject failure."¹⁶ The similarities between settler colonial government policy toward Japanese Americans and Native Americans were rooted in Myers's conflation of Japanese and Native bodies.¹⁷

In the same way that Native Americans and Filipinos were racialized as children in need of paternal care from the "great white father"¹⁸ to respectively justify genocidal conquest and Indian removal and the brutally violent colonization of the Philippines, WRA liberals similarly positioned Japanese Americans as "dependent wards not yet fit for democratic citizenship."¹⁹ The racialization of adult Japanese as children extended beyond domestic national borders and the temporality of the war itself to postwar Japan, where Douglas MacArthur, head of the occupying (colonial by another name) forces infamously stated that "measured by the standards of modern civilization," the Japanese "would be like a boy of twelve."²⁰ Under the settler colonial hubris of benevolent assimilation and rooted in white supremacy, the WRA's racial paternalism produced the "most disastrous and incendiary aspects of the internment experience,"²¹ such as the loyalty questionnaire that led to Tule Lake's transformation into a segregation center for "disloyals," as well as the mass renunciation of US citizenship, both of which adversely impacted Mirikitani's life for decades to come.

A Poetics of Evasion: Racial Child as Regime of Representation

To understand how the Japanese American has been constructed as a racial child, we can turn to Stuart Hall's concept of the racialized regime of representation—an archive of images and ideas that sediment over time yet continue to inform the present.²² As Cedric Robinson wrote, “racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.”²³ Decades after the war, in 1972, the figure of Japanese American as racial child as justification for ethnic cleansing and structural assimilation was made visually iconic by Maisie and Richard Conrat's traveling photographic exhibition and catalogue, *Executive Order 9066: The Incarceration of 110,000 Japanese Americans*.²⁴ While it was preceded by a small number of regional exhibitions, *Executive Order 9066* was one of the first national exhibitions to tell this story and likely the first introduction to the topic for many viewers.²⁵ It was also the first pictorial collection that was made widely available in book form in the San Francisco Bay Area where I grew up. I recall, as a ten-year-old boy, seeing the catalogue on the coffee table of seemingly every Japanese American family we knew. Funded by a Guggenheim fellowship, the Conrats, a white couple based in Berkeley, produced the exhibition and catalogue through a process that ultimately selected 64 photographs out of 25,000 in US government archives to tell the visual story of Japanese American incarceration from their own point of view.

The visual strategy of the Conrats' narration of the incarceration three decades after the start of the war echoes earlier discursive practices, creating an intertextual relationship between past and present forms of racial meaning-making. The intertextuality between the WRA's settler colonial infantilization of Japanese Americans in the 1940s and the Conrats' visual infantilization is illustrated by the radical cropping of the photograph that was positioned as the frontispiece for the catalogue's cover, shown in in fig. 3.03. The cover image is taken from an original composition by Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), shown on the left, that depicts the Mochida family awaiting evacuation in Hayward, California, in 1942.²⁶ Alan Trachtenberg argues that individual images organized into a photographic catalogue can be viewed as part of a historical totality.²⁷ As measured by area, the Conrats erased 95% of the original image in order to represent the totality of the incarceration through the image of a racial child. Through familial and gendered tropes such as the lost child,²⁸ sentimental biopower²⁹ invokes an ethic of emotional identification that is not only superficial but also racialized because it privileges settler affect at the expense of those racialized as less than fully human.³⁰ As evidence of this ethic, the pictured child, Miyuki Mochida (1936–2010), is rendered nameless by the Conrats, who only name the white photographer in their annotation of the photo.³¹

Sentimentalism superficializes colonial histories, struc-

tural racism, and contemporary complicities through the normalization of subjugation. The visual sentimentality of the cover pervades the contents of the catalogue: of the forty-six photographs that depict human subjects, the vast majority are Japanese Americans, with an emphasis on small children and the elderly. Images of adult incarcerated who are not elderly are few in number: only three of women, each of them carrying a baby in a “Madonna and Child” pose; and six of men, half of whom are in US military uniform. Adriana Cavarero uses the term *defenselessness* to describe scenes that are “entirely tilted toward unilateral violence,”³² which, through the lens of settler colonial critique, can be read as visual justification for the colonial violence of an ethnic cleansing of Japanese Americans from the West Coast.

Note how the focus on sentimental depictions of the victim serves to conceal the racial regime of whiteness—a regime that is, in the words of Cedric Robinson, “unrelentingly hostile to exhibition.”³³ This sentimental framing also evacuates from historical totality the troubles that took place at Tule Lake, a site of exceptional Japanese American political resistance to racial oppression. This absence constitutes what Marita Sturken calls a “forgetting produced through the absence of images,”³⁴ or, in a different context, what Roderick Ferguson has termed a *poetics of evasion*—“avoiding those elements that confound our narratives of heroism, political purity, and innocence.”³⁵ Lisa Lowe similarly refers to the process of operative forgetting as “the economy of affirmation and forgetting” that structures and formalizes humanism, “the way the humanist archive naturalizes itself and ‘forgets’ the conditions of its own making.”³⁶

Given the unprecedented visibility of this collection within the Japanese American community, the book's frontispiece and a slightly expanded cropping of Lange's photo inside the book that includes the two Mochida girls on the left—Miyuki and Hiroko, their names again omitted by the Conrats—achieved iconic status within the regime of representation of the incarceration.³⁷ The persistence of settler colonial vision is demonstrated in a more recent

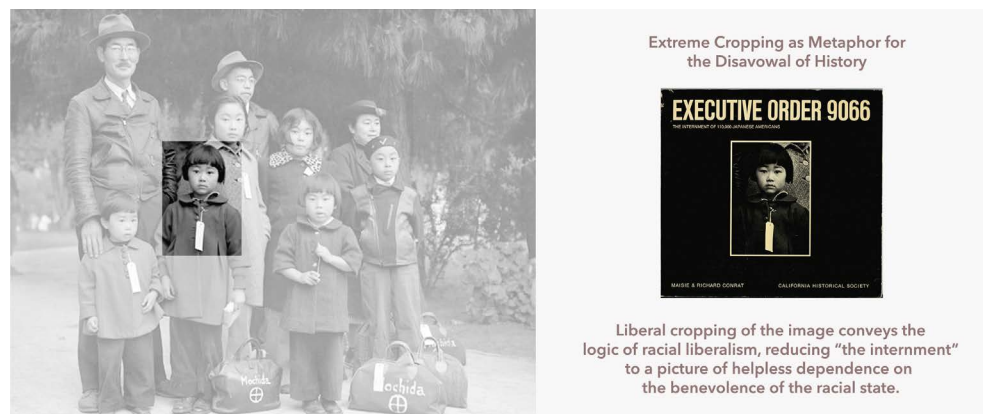


Figure 3.03 Illustration by the author, 2022. Courtesy of the author. Extreme cropping as visual metaphor for racial infantilization and liberal erasure of history.



Figure 3.04 Scott Tsuchitani. *For the Sake of the Children / 子供の為に (Kodomo no tame ni)*, 2007/2022. Plywood cut-out, 72 x 48 x 18 in. (182.9 x 121.9 x 45.7 cm). Courtesy of the author. Installation views: confined to the wall in 2022 (left) and free-standing in 2012.

contribution to this regime by a larger-than-life bronze statue of the Mochida sisters titled *For the sanctity of the individual*. It was unveiled in 2018 by a white sculptor named Sandra Shaw and erected in a memorial to Tanforan “assembly center,” the site of a former horse racing venue that was rapidly converted to a detention center under Executive Order 9066 and is now a shopping mall.³⁸

In terms of both community self-determination in the narration of history and the racial position of the artist-narrator, the choices of who to commission and how to thematically celebrate the unveiling of the memorial speak to the persistence of a Japanese American governmentality that operates in accord with the interests of the racial state. The Japanese American-led memorial committee raised \$1.2 million in donations from community members yet chose to commission a white artist who, by her own admission, knew little about the camps.³⁹ In this context, instead of asking if the subaltern can speak, the question becomes one of what it means when the subaltern, empowered with all the necessary resources, willfully chooses to be spoken for.⁴⁰ At the ribbon-cutting event for the memorial in 2020, former incarcerated and their descendants were invited to sign their names on vintage forty-eight-star US flags—flags of the same government that subjected them to ethnic cleansing and structural assimilation—demonstrating the enduring effects of the WRA’s social engineering of Japanese American assimilation and governmentality.⁴¹

With the larger-than-life sculpture, not only has the figure of the Japanese American as racial child been memorialized in bronze, she has also been scaled up to the very adult height of sixty-seven inches. What racial meaning

is created when six-year-old Miyuki’s three-dimensional form is enlarged to adult scale? In 2007, as part of a series of artworks engaging with Lange’s portrait of the Mochida family, I began exploring this very question through my own art practice in the form of an interactive, carnival-style plywood cut-out depicting the Mochida sisters in a mash-up with Akatsuka Fujio’s (1935–2008) popular manga *Tensai Bakabon* and the iconography of cherry blossom nationalism, shown in fig. 3.04. At the same height as Shaw’s Miyuki, it playfully invites adult-sized viewers to implicate themselves both physically and visually in the reductive and normative logics that, I contend, “tone police” Japanese American representation via governmentality.

To wit, at the most recent exhibition of the cut-out in 2022, the Japanese American curator required that it be pushed up against the gallery window to prevent interaction out of concern that children might stick their faces through without comprehending the political meaning they were making, despite them not being tall enough for this to pose an actual risk.⁴² By manifesting the very governmentality that the work critiques, the work of art was made complete. To formally incorporate this reaction into the art, and as further provocation, I titled the heretofore untitled work *For the Sake of the Children / 子供の為に (kodomo no tame ni)* (2007/2022).

Where did this governmentality come from and how was it implemented?

The Social Engineering of Japanese American Assimilation: Nisei in Uniform

The incarceration provided the New Deal liberals in charge of the WRA with ideal conditions to socially engineer the cultural and structural assimilation of Japanese Americans, transforming them from “enemy alien” into “model citizen.” Racial liberalism, the prevailing political philosophy of the time, is predicated on the belief that the racial order is best managed by the state through assimilation.⁴³ To be clear, the goal of colonial assimilation is not racial equality but rather integration into a racial order of whiteness by replacing the lifeways and systems of knowledge of the colonized with those of the colonizer, including the internalization of the racial ideology of the colonizer. As noted above, Michel Foucault’s concept of *governmentality* is useful here as a measure of the WRA’s success in assimilating Japanese American subjects as demonstrated in visual cultural production.⁴⁴

Of the WRA’s pipelines for re-entry into American life, “Nisei in Uniform” stands out as a “stunningly effective” example of JA governmentality that, like the trope of the racial child, continues to resonate into the present.⁴⁵ Begun by the WRA and War Department (fig. 3.05), the “Nisei in Uniform” public relations campaign was executed within the larger context of a global propaganda war with Japan over which empire could appear less racist on the global stage (fig. 3.06).⁴⁶ The WRA and War Department tapped the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) to

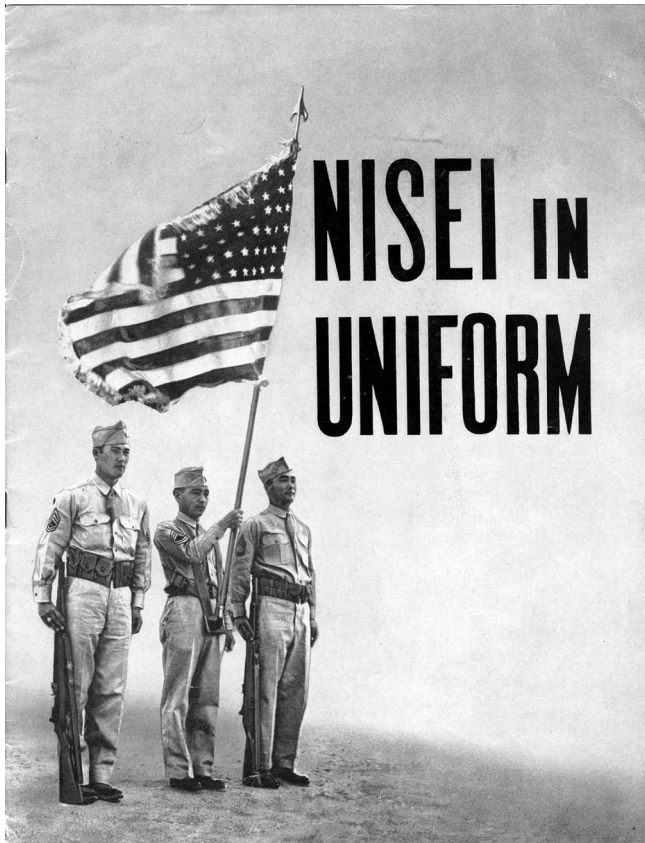


Figure 3.06 Cover of *Nisei in Uniform*, 1944. <https://archive.org/details/NiseiInUniform>. A twenty-eight-page promotional brochure published in 1944 by the Department of the Interior, War Relocation Authority and Department of War.

“astroturf” the campaign. Astroturfing refers to a deceptive practice of concealing the sponsors of a campaign to make it appear grassroots. The JACL’s track record of racial assimilationism dating back to the 1930s⁴⁷ made them a useful vehicle for public relations, and they were appointed to represent the entire population of incarcerated Japanese Americans despite their membership barely reaching 2,000 during the incarceration.⁴⁸ With the backing of the federal government, the JACL’s promotion of the martial super-patriotism of the Nisei soldier became hegemonic, successfully self-racializing Japanese Americans as blindly obedient to the racial state and erasing a history of resistance at Tule Lake.⁴⁹

The extent to which this misrepresents JA response to the WRA’s compulsory loyalty questionnaire is remarkable.⁵⁰ As an instrument intended to identify eligible Nisei for volunteer military enlistment, the questionnaire provoked confusion, outrage, and resistance, ultimately ending up as a failure for the WRA, the military, and the JA prisoners.⁵¹ Fewer than six percent of eligible Nisei, or roughly 1,200, volunteered for the Nisei combat team, while a full twenty percent of Nisei males answered “no” to one or both loyalty questions or refused to answer, and over 3,000 incarcerated applied for repatriation or expatriation to Japan during the questionnaire registration period.⁵²

As a result of the registration program, more US citizens ended up as disloyals (43%) than aliens (17%).⁵³ Instead of promoting enlistment, the questionnaire served as an official vehicle through which to register JA resistance to racial oppression.

However, despite active resistance outnumbering voluntary military enlistment by a factor of greater than three to one, the JACL would succeed in using the figure of the Nisei soldier to promote a public image of state compliance in the face of racial oppression that would become foundational to the formation of the model minority stereotype, one of the most pernicious and anti-Black racial stereotypes faced by Asian Americans today.⁵⁴ Counter to famed civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer’s liberatory idea that “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free,”⁵⁵ the JACL operated with an internalized white supremacist logic of meritocracy, seeking redemption through the valorization of martial super-patriotism while multiple JACL leaders condescendingly blamed Black and brown communities for their own lack of economic success during the time of the civil rights movement.⁵⁶

This accommodationist narrative of “blind obedience” to the racial state was instrumental to the congressional passage of reparations with the Civil Liberties Act in 1988, a narrative that erased the history of resistance at Tule Lake in favor of an unambiguous message that “there are rewards for acquiescence.”⁵⁷ The late legal scholar and Asian American Movement troubadour Chris Iijima



Figure 3.05 Charles E. Mace (1889–1973). *Untitled*, July 1943. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, WRA no. H-108. <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/ft5f59n99k/>. Tom Parker, WRA Photographer, makes a close-up movie of Japanese-American soldiers at Camp Shelby running the obstacle course.

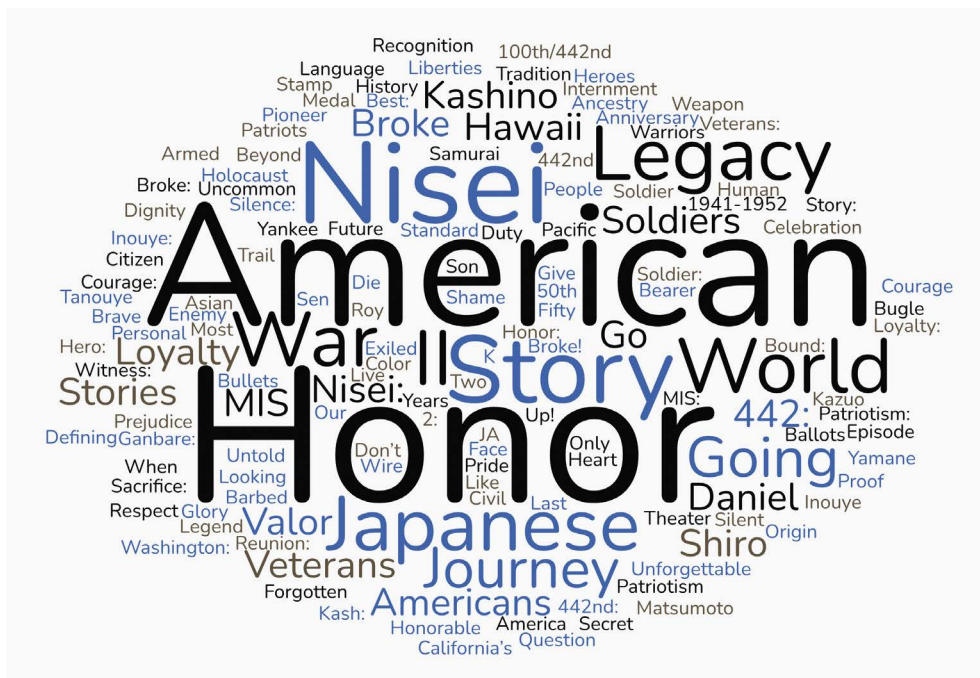


Figure 3.07 Word cloud generated from fifty-three Nisei soldier film titles at <https://simplewordcloud.com..> Courtesy of the author.

asserted that “the question remains whether that response should be what we, as a nation and community, celebrate and commemorate when we look back on the experience,” asking further, “Should not the lesson that we as a nation learn from the experience of Japanese Americans be that when injustice happens we should listen better to the dissenters and the protesters against that injustice?”⁵⁸ Such a national lesson is needed to prevent any other community from being “forced to humiliate themselves” in the face of their oppression in order to survive.⁵⁹ Despite calls for lessons of structural resistance from legal scholars such as Iijima and Eric Yamamoto,⁶⁰ JA governmentality has been rewarded for acquiescence at the national level through not only the exceptional rewarding of reparations⁶¹ but also more recently the heralded publication of a Nisei soldier US Postage stamp in 2021.⁶²

A Poetics of Evasion, Part II: Essentializing JA Governmentality

JA governmentality is evident across decades and generations in the realm of visual culture where, by my own count, the number of films, videos, and media projects celebrating JA martial super-patriotism exceeds fifty since 1965, an average of more than four every three years since 2000, with four of them produced in 2022 alone.⁶³ The promotional poster for a recent award-winning short film titled *Nisei* (2023) depicts a solitary Nisei soldier seated, head bowed, behind his upright rifle.⁶⁴ By titling the film simply *Nisei* and not *Nisei Soldier*, the producers essentialize martial patriotism to an entire generation of Japanese Americans when, as indicated above, the response to the loyalty questionnaire strongly indicated otherwise, thus

demonstrating the hegemonic self-colonization endemic to JA governmentality. What is striking beyond the sheer quantity of films on the topic is the thematic monotony demonstrated by the titles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 A Sampling of Nisei Soldier film titles between 2001–2010.

<i>Forgotten Valor</i>	2001
<i>Journey of Honor</i>	2001
<i>Uncommon Courage</i>	2001
<i>A Tradition of Honor</i>	2002
<i>Going for Broke</i>	2005
<i>Going for Honor, Going for Broke</i>	2006
<i>Medal of Honor</i>	2006
<i>Only The Brave</i>	2006
<i>Most Honorable Son</i>	2007
<i>Valor with Honor</i>	2010

Indeed, when the titles of the more than fifty films are entered into a word cloud generator, what emerges is a picture of “American Honor” (fig. 3.07). As a collective cultural response to the racial state violence of ethnic cleansing and structural assimilation, the self-identification with dominant discourses of US nationalism and militarism constitutes a striking demonstration of governmentality that further extends to other arenas of JA cultural production such as museum exhibitions.⁶⁵ The governmentality of Nisei soldier discourse is symptomatic of internalized colonialism⁶⁶ and brings to mind the words of Albert Memmi:

Willfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized [...] It is a hoax. It is common knowledge that the ideology of a governing class is adopted in large measure by the governed classes. By agreeing to this ideology, the dominated classes practically confirm the role assigned to them.⁶⁷

The thematic redundancy echoes Memmi’s characterization of the culture of the colonized as “calcified”:

The colony’s life is frozen; its structure is corseted and hardened. No invention is possible [...]. The result is either to revolt or be calcified.⁶⁸

No longer a subject of history and removed from a diasporic past and hybrid flow of the present that extends back to Japan, the colonized JA subject is reduced to an object of settler past, present, and future, or what Memmi refers to as “a social and historical catalepsy.”⁶⁹ The history that is taught to the colonized is not their own, Memmi reminds us, and they only avoid their own past.

Tule Lake troubles JA Governmentality

Given the choice between revolt or calcification, those at Tule Lake chose the former. The WRA’s conflation of culture and loyalty through its coercive, assimilationist

construction of citizenship produced a dominant mode of Japanese American subjectivity that is overdetermined by the state's framing of loyalty to nation, as demonstrated by the monotonous abundance of Nisei soldier discourse. The lone site of exception was Tule Lake, where, unlike the nine other concentration camps, there was no self-government in accord with the interests of the state, American schooling was not compulsory, and residents were allowed to establish Japanese-language schools.⁷⁰ Among the ten camps, resistance to the loyalty questionnaire was highest at Tule Lake, where 49 percent of eligible Nisei responded "no" or refused to answer⁷¹ and 140 were arrested in the process.⁷² Consequently, the WRA sought to isolate resistance at Tule Lake by converting it into a maximum-security segregation center for "disloyal" Japanese Americans. Resistance thwarted governmentality, and segregation was followed by mass demonstrations, violence, and martial law involving army tanks and a two-month military occupation.⁷³ By thwarting governmentality, Tule Lake also refused the WRA's conflation of culture and loyalty, providing cultural space for the dignity of an alternative, hybrid futurity of Japanese American subjectivity that maintained diasporic ties to ancestral culture, language, and religious practices.⁷⁴ The racial paternalism that fueled belief in the contradictory improbability of democratic self-governance in concentration camps did not take kindly to Tuleans looking the gift horse of state benevolence in the mouth, and thus resistance was met with the congressional retribution of a renunciation policy that legally "allowed" citizens to renounce their citizenship during wartime. As Mirikitani testifies in *The Cats of Mirikitani*, this renunciation was highly coerced. Just as the failed loyalty questionnaire was intended to facilitate assimilation and reintegration into white society, the renunciation policy was expected to identify the truly disloyal so that everyone else could be released from the camps. And again like the questionnaire, due to the racial hubris that inspired both, it did not go as planned, provoking not only confusion and opposition but also far more renunciations than expected, resulting in 85 percent of citizens over the age of seventeen at Tule Lake renouncing their citizenship.⁷⁵ More than four and a half times the number that volunteered for the Nisei combat team after the loyalty questionnaire renounced their citizenship, and many, like Mirikitani, were further segregated at Justice Department detention centers and held captive until 1947.

Queering the Figure of the Lost Child / Unsettling the Frame of Liberal Sentimentality

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch writes how feminism and other scholar activist movements "scrutinize and refuse the sentimentality attached to the figure of the lost child that often mediates traumatic stories, enjoining us to queer that figure."⁷⁶ In following the wisdom of Isao Fujimoto and Sylvia Wynter by turning our gaze away from the formerly unhoused artist

as victim in need of state benevolence and toward the systems of oppression that continue to racially victimize, we can queer the sentimental racialization of Mirikitani as lost child through the agency of *unsettling*. As a disruptive form of action, unsettling functions to destabilize the current order by engaging in truth-telling about settler colonial violence and contesting the ongoing romanticization of genocidal missions and its naturalization of colonialism.⁷⁷

Through white savior narratives, sentimental biopower cultivates passive and superficial feelings of empathy that lead not to transformative action but only to the generation of "good feeling" for empathizing with Others,⁷⁸ a positive affect that has been historically bound up with the pain of marginalized groups.⁷⁹ In the realm of digital culture, Lisa Nakamura uses the term "toxic empathy" to refer to technologies that enable white viewers to feel that they have experienced authentic empathy for the racial other as a substitute for social and institutional responsibility and change.⁸⁰ At the level of pedagogy, this demands that we "must resist at all costs the desire to protect white feelings [...], for this protection is impossible without a simultaneous delegitimization of the feelings of black, brown, and other racialized subjects."⁸¹ When we do tell the truth about the systematic marginalization of BIPOC affects, Cathy Park Hong writes, our feelings "are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent, affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider out of line. Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural inequity are not commensurate with their deluded reality."⁸²

Not unlike the so-called troublemakers at Tule Lake, I have had the experience Hong describes multiple times when I dared to intervene in JA governmentality—itsself an extension of white coloniality—through my art and documentary work, but instead of whites considering me out of line, it has been self-regulating and tone-policing Japanese Americans. These experiences serve as proof of both the potential for art practice rooted in subjugated community knowledges to unsettle settler colonial feelings⁸³ as well as the imperative need to unsettle JA governmentality for the sake of our own racial dignity. Again, the choice is either revolt or calcification, and dignity survives oppression through resistance, not acquiescence. Instead of waving the American flag and self-racializing a generation of Japanese Americans as blindly obedient to the racial state, Mirikitani's drawings of Tule Lake repeatedly depict a red sun behind Castle Rock, its rays radiating forth on gravestones of prisoners who died in unjust confinement. By working in a hybrid space of diasporic Japanese American subjectivity, Mirikitani and his work exceed the bounds of liberal sentimentality and colonial petrification to resume contact with the rich flow of time and history interrupted by the settler violence of racially targeted deportation, family separation, mass incarceration, and structural assimilation that remain ongoing today.

Endnotes

- 1 Excerpted from the poem "A Meeting at Tule Lake," written and read at Tule Lake, California, April 19, 1975. Hiroshi Kashiwagi, "A Meeting at Tule Lake," in *Second Kinenhi: Reflections on Tule Lake*, ed. Tule Lake Committee (San Francisco: Tule Lake Committee, 2000).
- 2 This stigmatization resulted from the mandatory subjection of incarcerated aged seventeen and older in all ten War Relocation Authority (WRA) concentration camps to a loyalty questionnaire in 1943. While intended to identify potential recruitment candidates for a racially segregated all-volunteer Nisei unit of the US Army, the questionnaire unexpectedly became a formal means by which incarcerated could register their resistance to the unlawful incarceration. As expressed by refusal to respond or negative answers to either of two loyalty questions, resistance was highest at Tule Lake, where nearly half resisted, resulting in the designation of Tule Lake as a segregation center for those deemed disloyal by the state, and the colloquial labeling of resisters as "No-Nos." Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1976).
- 3 Ellen D. Wu, "The Invention of the Model Minority," in *The Routledge Handbook of Asian American Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016); Chris K. Iijima, "Reparations and the Model Minority Ideology of Acquiescence: The Necessity to Refuse the Return to Original Humiliation Symposium: The Long Shadow of Korematsu," *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 19, no. 1 (1998): 385–428.
- 4 Consistent with Foucault's concept of governmentality as a form of state power in which subjects govern themselves and their peers in accordance with state interests, the WRA's assimilationist policy sought to establish self-government of the concentration camps by the incarcerated, despite the political contradiction of democracy among the forcefully confined. Arguably, this internalized governmentality continues to be expressed in contemporary Japanese American incarceration discourse, as I explore in this essay. Note that Tule Lake differed from the other nine WRA camps in that there was no self-government. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, Michel Foucault: Lectures at the Collège de France (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mae M. Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans and the Citizenship Renunciation Cases," in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 179–180, 185.
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- 6 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1st ed., (New York: Grove Press, 1952).
- 7 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>; Michalinos Zembylas, "Sylvia Wynter, Racialized Affects, and Minor Feelings: Unsettling the Coloniality of the Affects in Curriculum and Pedagogy," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54, no. 3 (2022): 336–350, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1946718>.
- 8 Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 9 Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 10 Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Writing Past Colonialism Series (London/New York: Cassell, 1999).
- 11 Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*.
- 12 Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*; Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004).
- 13 Erich Steinman, "Unsettling as Agency: Unsettling Settler Colonialism Where You Are," *Settler Colonial Studies* 10, no. 4 (2020): 558–575, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2020.1807877>.
- 14 Steinman, "Unsettling as Agency."
- 15 Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans," 177.
- 16 Robert T. Anderson et al., *American Indian Law: Cases and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: West Academic Publishing, 2010).
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- 18 Brian Baker, "Imaginary Indians: Invoking Invented Ideas in Popular and Public Culture," in *Introduction to Ethnic Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Brian Baker et al. (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 2011).
- 19 Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans," 179.
- 20 John W. Dower, *Japan in War and Peace* (New York: New Press, 1995), 550.
- 21 Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans," 179.
- 22 Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 225–276.
- 23 Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xii.
- 24 Maisie Conrat and Richard Conrat, *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1972).
- 25 Brian Niiya, "Executive Order 9066 (exhibition)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (website), updated 2024. [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Executive%20Order%209066%20\(exhibition\)/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Executive%20Order%209066%20(exhibition)/).
- 26 Dorothea Lange, *Members of the Mochida Family Awaiting Evacuation Bus. Identification Tags Were Used to Aid in Keeping a Family Unit Intact during All Phases of Evacuation. Mochida Operated a Nursery and Five Greenhouses on a Two-Acre Site in Eden Township., May 8, 1942*, National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the War Relocation Authority, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/picturing_the_century/port_lange/port_lange_img55.html.
- 27 Alan Trachtenberg et al., *Reading American Photographs: Images as History; Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 88.
- 28 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 16–24.
- 29 Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 30 Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."
- 31 Conrat and Conrat, *Executive Order 9066*, 113. This racial convention of dehumanizing by omission is continued throughout the catalogue, where among the annotation of the forty-six photos depicting human subjects, most of which Japanese Americans, the Conrats properly name the only two white subjects who appear while omitting the names of all but two Japanese Americans, despite the availability of names documented by WRA photographers in the records of the National Archives.
- 32 Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming*

- Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 30–31.
- 33** Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*.
- 34** Marita Sturken, "Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment," *Positions* 5, no. 3 (1997): 687–707.
- 35** Roderick A. Ferguson, "A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 185–192.
- 36** Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 37** Conrat and Conrat, *Executive Order 9066*, 50; Brandon Shimoda, *The Afterlife Is Letting Go* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2024), 142–143.
- 38** "Ribbon-Cutting Held for Memorial at Site of WWII Assembly Center," *Rafu Shimpo*, September 1, 2022, <http://rafu.com/2022/09/ribbon-cutting-held-for-memorial-at-site-of-wwii-assembly-center/>.
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- 41** "Ribbon-Cutting Held for Memorial."
- 42** Shimoda, *The Afterlife Is Letting Go*, 142–143.
- 43** Wu, "The Invention of the Model Minority," 287.
- 44** Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.
- 45** Wu, "The Invention of the Model Minority."
- 46** Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Department of the Interior et al., "Nisei in Uniform," US Government Printing Office, 1944, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/sources/en-denshopd-p155-00019-1/>.
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- 48** Iijima, "Reparations," 405.
- 49** Iijima, "Reparations."
- 50** See note 2.
- 51** Eric L. Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 55–57.
- 52** Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans," 184.
- 53** Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*, 154.
- 54** Wu, "The Invention of the Model Minority."
- 55** "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free": Speech Delivered at the Founding of the National Women's Political Caucus, Washington, D.C., July 10, 1971, in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks et al. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781604738223.003.0017>.
- 56** Wu, "The Invention of the Model Minority," 295; Greg Robinson, "Clifford Uyeda," *Densho Encyclopedia*, August 2, 2024, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Clifford_Uyeda/#cite_ref-ft-nt_ref5_5-0.
- 57** Iijima, "Reparations."
- 58** Iijima, "Reparations," 409.
- 59** Iijima, "Reparations," 409.
- 60** Eric K. Yamamoto, "Friend, or Foe or Something Else: Social Meanings of Redress and Reparations," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 20, no. 2 (1992): 223–242.
- 61** Thomas S. [D-WA-5 Rep. Foley, "H.R.442 - 100th Congress (1987–1988): Civil Liberties Act of 1987," legislation, August 10, 1988, 1987-01-06, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/442>.
- 62** "Go For Broke: World War II Forever Stamp Honors Japanese American Veterans," accessed January 26, 2025, <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/national-releases/2021/0603-go-for-broke-world-war-ii-forever-stamp-honors-japanese-american-veterans.htm>; Gil Asakawa, "Finally, a Salute to WWII Nisei Soldiers," *Discover Nikkei*, November 2021, <http://dev.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2021/11/25/wwii-nisei-soldiers/>.
- 63** My count is based on my observations as a member of the Asian American media arts community since the mid-1990s. A list of these projects by title and year of release can be found at https://foothilldeanza-my.sharepoint.com/:x:/g/personal/10952012_fhda_edu/EeNX-PNJlBkhPqGwYvLL_BABrwl2vLi2mCcMm_i3r-VPz?e=nZrjpk. Titles and descriptions for many of these films can be found at the *Densho Resource Guide*: <https://resourceguide.densho.org/browse/media-type/films/>. In most cases, the theme of martial patriotism is self-evident in the film titles, as indicated in Table 1 and fig. 3.07.
- 64** "Nisei Film Poster," *GoldPoster*, 2023, <https://www.goldposter.com/movie/13806014/mediaviewer/>.
- 65** Takashi Fujitani, "National Narratives and Minority Politics: The Japanese American National Museum's War Stories," *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997): 99–112.
- 66** E. J. R. David, ed., *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups* (New York: Springer Pub. Company, 2014), 15.
- 67** Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, expanded ed., reprint (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 131–132.
- 68** Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 142.
- 69** Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 146.
- 70** Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans and the Citizenship Renunciation Cases," 185.
- 71** Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country*, 57.
- 72** Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*, 151.
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- 74** My maternal grandfather, a twelfth-generation Buddhist priest, served as principal of a Japanese-language high school at Tule Lake.
- 75** Ngai, "The World War II Internment of Japanese Americans," 189.
- 76** Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 16.
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- 82** Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 46.
- 83** Injeong Yoon-Ramirez and Benjamin W. Ramirez, "Unsettling Settler Colonial Feelings through Contemporary Indigenous Art Practice," *Studies in Art Education* 62, no. 2 (2021): 114–129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2021.1896416>.

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Street Nihonga

The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani

Edited by Maki Kaneko and Kris Imants Ercums

With assistance from Daisuke Murata

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Imprint

Front cover image: CAT. 073 (detail) Untitled (“Mt. Fuji” and flames in homage to Hayami Gyoshū), after 2001.

Back cover image: CAT. 019 Untitled (*Mirikitani’s ID card, keys*), date unknown.

Page 2: CAT. 039 (detail) Mikiko Matsuzaki 松崎美紀子 (b. 1970). *Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani on the streets*, 2000–2001. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist. 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm)

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