

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Home is Together: Sounds of Belonging in the Correspondence of Two Japanese American Families Separated by Wartime Incarceration

Alecia D. Barbour

Department of History, English, and Creative Arts, West Virginia University Institute of Technology, Beckley, WV, USA
Email: alecia.barbour@mail.wvu.edu

Abstract

During World War II, Japanese nationals and U.S. residents Shigezo Iwata and Masaru Ben Akahori were arrested and interned while their wives and children were incarcerated separately. Though wartime correspondence sent from Mr. Akahori to his wife and daughter and from Mrs. Iwata to her husband clearly identifies the United States as “home,” the primary emphasis on home is as a marker of familial reunification. This article posits that the memories and sounds imaginatively recollected and conveyed within the correspondence sent from Sonoko Iwata to her husband, Shigezo, and from Masaru Ben Akahori to his wife, Kiku, and their daughter, served to signify and nurture an ongoing sense of belonging to and togetherness with their respective family members with whom they hoped to once again be home, together.

In December of 1941, Masaru Ben Akahori and his wife, Kiku—both Issei, or first generation, Japanese emigrants—were residing in Seattle, Washington, when Mr. Akahori was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He was one of over 1,000 Japanese nationals to be arrested in sweeps immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.¹ The first postcard Mr. Akahori sent to his wife and their daughter is dated December 11, 1941. It appears to have cleared the censor 1 month later, based on the day and month that are visible in the censor’s stamp near the signature (see [Figure 1](#)). By May of 1942, Sonoko Iwata—a Nisei (second generation) U.S. citizen of Japanese ancestry and resident of Thermal, California—was incarcerated with her young children in “Poston,” the Colorado River Relocation Center administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) outside of Parker, Arizona. From Poston, Sonoko posted a letter to her husband, Shigezo, a Japanese national and Issei who, like Masaru Ben Akahori, had been arrested and interned. At the time the postcard was mailed, Sonoko was apparently not aware that, upon denial of his first appeal for parole, Shigezo had been transferred from the Department of Justice camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to the U.S. Army facility in Lordsburg, New Mexico (see [Figure 2](#)).

Japanese Americans were forcibly excluded en masse from their homes in the so-called “evacuation zone” along the West Coast of the United States beginning in the early spring of 1942. The vast majority of more than 120,000 civilian individuals of Japanese ancestry who were involuntarily confined in the U.S. during World War II were held without due process within one of ten “permanent” sites administered by the civilian WRA, often (though not always) following their temporary so-called “assembly” in sites managed by the Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA).² Kiku Akahori and the Akahoris’ daughter and Sonoko Iwata and the Iwatas’ children were amongst those in this category. In 1983, the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians concluded that Executive Order 9066, the order under which this occurred, was “not justified by military

¹James Rowe, “The Alien Enemy Program—So Far,” *Common Ground* 2, no. 4 (1942): 20.

²Two important foundational works within the literature on the Japanese American Incarceration are Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), and Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America’s Concentration Camps* (New York: WM Morrow & Co., 1976).

Figure 1. Excerpt from postcard sent by M.B. Akahori to Kiku and their daughter, December 11, 1941. Akahori Family Papers. Japanese American Research Project Collection (Collection 2010). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA. Fair Use.

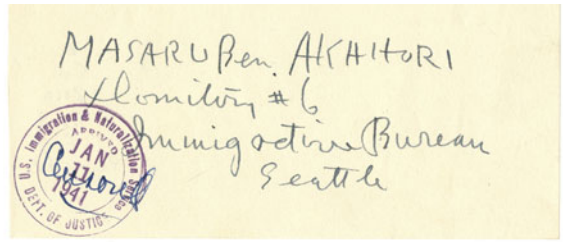


Figure 2. Envelope addressed by Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, June 18, 1942. Shigezo and Sonoko Iwata Papers (Collection MSS053), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. Printed with permission from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

necessity, and the decisions which followed from it—exclusion, detention, the ending of detention and the ending of exclusion—were not founded upon military conditions.”³ The causes of this illegal exclusion, the Commission concluded, were “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership... [G]rave personal injustice was done...without individual review or any probative evidence.”⁴

While “internment” remains a familiar and widely used term, it is more specifically a legal term to refer to the holding of prisoners of war and of resident civilian aliens made “enemy aliens” by war. In a process that was administratively separate from the mass exclusion and detention of the ethnic Japanese from the West Coast, Japanese nationals (and citizens of other countries with whom the United States was at war) were legally rendered enemy aliens throughout the country. A selection of these so-called “enemy aliens,” many of whom were leaders in Japanese American communities, were arrested and legally interned in sites managed by the U.S. Army, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Department of Justice. Ben Akahori and Shigezo Iwata are two of the men who were arrested and removed from their residences, legally interned even before the large-

³U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians: Part 2—Recommendations* (Report for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, chairman, 1983), 5. <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied/>

⁴U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied*, 5.

scale removal and incarceration of the West Coast Japanese American communities commenced.⁵ Though the programs were administratively separate, at least some aspects of the legal internment of Japanese nationals may certainly be considered symptomatic of the same anti-Japanese fervor that was responsible for the cleansing of all ethnic Japanese from the West Coast's "Military Defense Zone" into the WRA's long-term sites of incarceration.⁶ Though I recognize that "internment" may be the more familiar encompassing term for some readers, as I am considering families impacted by both programs, I do endeavor to distinguish between these two categories of involuntary confinement. In line with usage of formerly incarcerated and legally interned individuals and their descendants, I also use the more colloquial "camp" to refer both to sites of incarceration and sites of internment. Although some may hear "camp" as an echo of an enjoyable recreation—which may at times have been an intentional attempt at normalization during a time of fear and suspicion—for others it also immediately and accurately connotes the unspoken and more complete term "concentration camp."⁷

The numerous restrictions placed on resident Japanese nationals who were paroled from legal internment, in addition to the cloud of suspicion already hanging over them, severely curtailed their options, even when parole was granted. Thus, for many of the interned Issei who desired to be paroled from internment within the United States, a clear path—and one sought by both Mr. Akahori and Mr. Iwata—was to seek to parole to a WRA site where family members were held.⁸ While affording governmental authorities the means through which to maintain a continued custodial guardianship over former internees, importantly to many families, parole to a WRA site served to facilitate the reunification of those families separated by the internment of their adult males while also representing a step toward release of the family into the United States beyond the barbed-wire confines of any camp. In the absence of the granting of parole for the interned adult male(s) of the family, reunification was also possible for separately confined Japanese American families through the transfer of all family members to within the single designated family internment site in Crystal City, Texas. Crystal City was thus a legitimate opportunity for family reunification. As it was an internment facility, however, it was also understood to represent a step toward expatriation and repatriation to Japan, rather than toward a release within the United States.⁹

For involuntarily confined Japanese Americans in both sites of internment and incarceration, musical activities and sounds were clearly prevalent and important in daily camp life, which may be understood as both a continuation and a resurgence of musical practice.¹⁰ Scholars have noted the ways in

⁵There was no real pathway to naturalized citizenship for first-generation immigrants from Japan until the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act. Furthermore, significant restrictions on incoming immigration preceded the breakout of World War II. For instance, the Immigration Act of the 1917 established what would come to be known as the "Asiatic Barred Zone" as well as literacy tests enacted for incoming immigration, and the Immigration Act of 1924 instituted a quota system and further restricted any immigration from Japan.

⁶See, for example, Roger Daniels, "Words do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans," in *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Louis Fiset and Gail M. Nomura (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 190–214.

⁷For more on the appropriateness and applicability (if fraught usage) of "Concentration Camp" in this context, see, for instance, Karen L. Ishizuka, "Coming to Terms: America's Concentration Camps," in *Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and the Culture of Collaborations*, eds. Akemi Kikumura-Yano, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and James A. Hirabayashi (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 101–22. See also Abbie Salyers Grubb, "What's in A Word?," in "The Internment of Memory: Forgetting and Remembering the Japanese American Experience During World War II" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2009), 1–26. http://hirasaki.net/Abbie_Salyers.pdf

⁸The Nikkei (Japanese abroad)—natural born citizens and resident aliens, alike—who were incarcerated under the watch of the WRA were generally considered subject to domestic law only, while legal internees were generally treated in accordance with the tenets of the Geneva Convention. For more on this topic, see, for instance, Stephen Seng-hua Mak, "'America's Other Internment': World War II and the Making of Modern Human Rights" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2009).

⁹An overview of the Crystal City Internment Camp is included in Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 119–21. For a discussion of the unique schooling system in the Crystal City Camp, see Karen L. Riley, *Schools Behind Barbed Wire: the Untold Story of Wartime Internment and the Children of Arrested Enemy Aliens* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

¹⁰Susan Miyo Asai, "Transformations of Tradition: Three Generations of Japanese American Music Making," *The Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 429–53; Alecia D. Barbour, "'For the Good of Our Country': Ruth Watanabe and the 'Good That is in Music' at the Santa Anita Detention Center," *Notes* 74, no. 2 (December 2017): 221–34; Minako Waseda,

which the camp environment fostered dedicated training in the playing of Japanese musical instruments, the staging of Japanese theatrical genres (particularly in sites of internment), and (most notably in sites of incarceration) sounds associated with what has been framed as resistance.¹¹ Scholarly, popular, and memorial attention has additionally been paid to more “popular” (often heard as “American”) musical sounds in these settings, many of them youth-driven.¹² I am interested, specifically, in thinking about sonic expression as a way of asserting a “home” that is somewhere “outside” the barbed wire—a home that can be recalled through sounds and memories of sounds. Such a home may have political elements, certainly, but it may also represent a sense of the familiar, of belonging, of familial connection. For incarcerated Japanese Americans, conceptualizations of home, present sounds, and memories of past sounds were intertwined in complicated ways but one thing seems clear: Home was ultimately something *other* than confinement. I find inspiration, in part, in studies that have explored ways in which the memory of musical sounds and voices contribute to other kinds of imaginative (re)constructions where memories of sounds (even if unheard in the present) maintain a kind of influential presence that is felt most strongly within specific settings.¹³ Put another way: Our memories may be punctuated by particular sonorities and, similarly, we may *feel* music or sounds (from our memories) when we enter a certain setting. Additionally, when actually sounded and heard, music may propel the listener into the past: It may simply remind of a past moment, but it may also allow for aspects of it to be re-experienced.¹⁴ An example of this can be gleaned from an interview conducted by Jonathan Pieslak with Erik Holtan, a U.S. soldier in Iraq. Holtan notes that he sometimes listened to music he didn’t particularly like while on deployment in order to remind himself of “home.” He says: “I listened to music to remind me of home, and even sometimes listen to music my kids and wife liked, but not so much to my liking, just to get into thinking about them and pretend I was with them for an instant.”¹⁵

“Japanese American Musical Culture in Southern California: Its Formation and Transformation in the 20th Century” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2000).

¹¹In music, for example, see Minako Waseda, “Extraordinary Circumstances, Exceptional Practices: Music in Japanese American Concentration Camps,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 2 (June 2005): 171–209; and Minako Waseda, “Music in Camp,” in *Densho Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Music%20in%20camp>; Shirley Kazuyo Muramoto-Wong, “Performing Defiance: The Hidden Legacy of Koto Music at a Japanese Internment Camp.” <https://actastories.atavist.com/performing-defiance>; and Shirley Kazuyo Muramoto-Wong (creative director), *Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the World War II Internment Camps* (Murasaki Productions, LLC, 2014). In performance studies, for instance, see Emily Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008); and Emily Roxworthy, “Blackface Behind Barbed Wire: Gender and Racial Triangulation in the Japanese American Internment Camps,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 2 (2013): 123–42.

¹²For a consideration of a kind of sonic and national “hybridity” rendered through attention to a production in the Manzanar camp, see Marta Robertson, “Ballad for Incarcerated Americans: Second Generation Japanese American Musicking in World War II Camps,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 3 (August 2017): 284–312. For broader contextual attention to Nisei identity formation, see Susan Miyo Asai, “Nisei Politics of Identity and American Popular Music in the 1930s and 1940s,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (2009): 92–119. Theatrical productions are too numerous to include here. One of particular note is *Allegiance* (2015), by Jay Kuo, Lorenzo Thione, and Marc Acito, with music and lyrics by Jay Kuo; starring George Takei et al. For a short documentary film that includes attention to Mary Nomura, the “Songbird of Manzanar,” see John Esaki (producer and director), *Words, Weavings, and Songs* (Frank H. Watase Media Arts Center, Japanese American National Museum, 2002). For a memoir written by an incarcerated musician, see George Yoshida, *Reminiscing in Swingtime: 1925–1960* (San Francisco: National Japanese American Historical Society, 1997). The activities of post-war “tribute” bands and performances at reunions and commemorations are also of note. See, for instance, Sojin Kim, “George Yoshida,” in *Densho Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/George%20Yoshida>

¹³Such manifestations may be located in metaphorical inhabitations of memory, such as places previously inhabited by sounds—even if those sounds of the past are un-heard in the present. See, for instance, Philip V. Bohlman, “To Hear the Voices Still Heard: On Synagogue Restoration in Eastern Europe,” in *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 40–69; Philip V. Bohlman, “Erasure: Displacing and Mislacing Race in Twentieth-Century Music Historiography,” in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–23; and Tang Yating with Kay Dreyfus, “Reconstructing the Vanished Musical Life of the Shanghai Jewish Diaspora: A Report,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 1 (January 2004): 101–18.

¹⁴See, for example, Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁵Erik Holtan in Jonathan R. Pieslak, “Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 26 (2007): 149. Regarding relations of this to listening as a kind of music as a “technology of the self,” see Tia DeNora, *Music*

American studies and communications scholar John Howard has argued that the enormous literature on Japanese American exclusion and confinement overemphasizes, amongst other things, "... loyal Nisei citizens and their patriotism," and that "national allegiances for most Japanese Americans were ambivalently held."¹⁶ Historian Brian Hayashi has further argued that previous studies of Asian Americans and military service have paid "inadequate attention to non-ideological and personal factors behind loyalty."¹⁷ This suggests the possibility of a critical engagement with an identification that reaches beyond simple binaries of "American" or "Japanese," especially where "Japanese" was historically synonymous (at least in some circles) with "disloyal."¹⁸ Letters written in English from Masaru Akahori to his wife, Kiku Akahori, and their daughter, and from Sonoko Iwata to her husband, Shigezo Iwata, clearly rhetorically identify America as "home," but the letter writers' prevailing emphasis was unfailingly on family reunification, even if this meant leaving their U.S. home. I posit that Masaru Ben Akahori and Sonoko Iwata imaginatively invoked listening and memories of listening, alongside other shared memories and narratives punctuated by sound, in order to nurture an ongoing sense of belonging to and togetherness with their nuclear family in their national home of choice.

Organization and Source Materials

Following an introduction of the materials in use and of the individuals of focus, this article presents primary source documents of spousal correspondence through which, I claim, Masaru Ben Akahori and Sonoko Iwata emphasized to their respective spouses the goal of reunification of their families. A number of excerpts are reproduced from their letters, after which I hypothesize these collective materials to both signify and represent a kind of "home as together," where family reunification is a clear and overwhelming priority even amidst heightened nationalism and affiliate socio-political divides.

Familial correspondence in this context represents personal communications in a time of extensive governmental oversight. In terms of institutional holdings, such materials are less pervasive yet more diffuse than administrative records and, at times, their provenance can prove frustratingly challenging to untangle. Furthermore, collections of such items may be somewhat fragmented and incomplete (or, as is the case, here, heavily favor letters sent in one direction over the other). Even with these challenges, such correspondence serves to represent interned and incarcerated Japanese Americans in their own words, something that may simply not be otherwise possible, particularly with the passage of time. In the case of the Iwata manuscript and photograph collections, these items were compiled and donated by Sonoko Iwata between the years of 1973 and 1987. She includes additional personal notes, many penned in the 1980s. Although the bulk of the correspondence was originally in English, for many of those items that were originally in Japanese, she provided typewritten translations. The vast majority of the collection is personal correspondence and most of it is written by her. It is clear from the institutional resources that her intent was for her letters to be read.¹⁹ The Akahori

in *Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47. Regarding connections to a kind of a "self-generation of a social agency," see Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

¹⁶John Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 12; 19.

¹⁷Brian Masaru Hayashi, "Loyalty's Janus Face: The Office of Strategic Services and Asian Americans during World War II," *Doshisha American Studies* 48 (2012): 21.

¹⁸Much has been written about the so-called loyalty questionnaire and about attempts to assess "loyalty" in general in this context (and the undergirding nationalist assumptions, thereof). See, for example, Eric Muller, *American Inquisition: The Hunt for Japanese American Disloyalty in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Brian Masaru Hayashi, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 207–39.

¹⁹The repository for the collection, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, has digitized a sampling of the Iwata materials, both photographs and letters, and made these available within their Digital Library. A selection of Sonoko's letters to Shigezo from within the collection are featured within a published and edited collection of other World War II letters marking familial separations: Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 213–23. A further reduced selection of these were then reprinted in a

collection as a whole, meanwhile, is a component of The Japanese American Research Project (JARP), which is an expansive, important, and widely utilized collection.²⁰ Only relatively few folders and albums (about ten folders across two boxes of the nearly forty complete boxes) of the Akahori materials represent familial correspondence during the family's separation under confinement, with the bulk of these items written by Masaru Ben Akahori.²¹ Given the scope and the legacy of the host collection, it certainly seems that Mr. Akahori donated these materials with the intent that they be utilized.²² In the context of this article, I have deliberately relied primarily on letters written by the donors. I utilize full, given, and family names, occasionally including the more formal titles of "Mr." and "Mrs." when positioning them specifically within the roles they held within their respective families. I do omit the given names of their children, as they were minors at the time. I recognize that these communications are not represented in this article as part of a complete bilateral set, but that they instead largely represent one voice, each, from two distinct families.

The Akahoris and the Iwatas

Masaru Ben and Kiku Akahori

Masaru "Ben" Akahori, born in 1884, arrived in the United States in 1904.²³ He was a writer and an entrepreneur. He moved multiple times and returned to Japan at least once. Before the war, he lived in northern and southern California, and then in Seattle, Washington. He was accomplished in the English language. Prior to the war, he worked for newspapers in both Japan and the United States including under various pen names, and he continued to write and to publish after the war.²⁴ As an internee, he contributed to internee publications in at least the site at Santa Fe, where another internee recalled him as a "gifted writer and speaker."²⁵ While interned, Akahori also drew on his background and language skills to aid other internees in communications with administrators.²⁶ In Santa Fe and Crystal City, this included Japanese nationals transferred from Peru.²⁷ He had been

collection focused on postwar American women: Harriet Sigerman, ed., "'Please Come Back To Me Soon': Letters from the Home Front," in *The Columbia Documentary History of American Women Since 1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 70–3.

²⁰For some history of this collection, see, for instance, Brian Niiya, "Japanese American Research Project," in *Densho Encyclopedia*, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_American_Research_Project/. Also notable is Eiichiro Azuma, "The Making of a Japanese American Race, and Why Are There No 'Immigrants' in Postwar Nikkei History and Community?: The Problems of Generation, Region, and Citizenship in Japanese America," in *Trans-Pacific Japanese American Studies: Conversations on Race and Racializations*, eds. Yasuko Takezawa and Gary Y. Okihiro (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 270–75.

²¹The Akahori papers are somewhat unique in scope, even within the JARP collection. As part of a larger discussion about the relative dearth of Issei community leaders' personal papers from the 1930s, Yasuo Sakata notes a meeting with Akahori in reference to his donation of his family papers to this collection, and relays that in that conversation Akahori noted that a number of his personal papers predating the war (including diaries, letters, etc.) had been seized by the FBI upon his arrest and were only reclaimed after the war through his own actions and initiative. He hypothesized that this experience might explain the hesitancy of other former internees in donating their own papers. Yasuo Sakata, *On a Collision Course: The Dawn of Japanese Migration in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2020), 27.

²²This was confirmed in personal correspondence with Eiichiro Azuma (June 21, 2019).

²³Biographical information throughout this section is drawn from Ryoko Onishi, Susanne Mari Sakai, Megan Hahn Fraser, and Caroline Cubé, processors for University of California, Los Angeles, "Finding Aid, Akahori Family Papers," Japanese American Research Project Collection, Collection 2010, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, 2020, <http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/ucla/mss/akah2010.pdf>

²⁴For instance, Fitts incorporates information from a 1956 publication by Akahori on Japanese Americans and baseball in Southern California: Robert K. Fitts, *Issei Baseball: The Story of the First Japanese American Ballplayers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

²⁵Yasutaro (Keiho) Soga, *Life Behind Barbed Wire: The World War II Internment Memoirs of a Hawai'i Issei*, translated by Kihei Hirai (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 137.

²⁶Assertions regarding Masaru Ben Akahori's work with internee publications and internee translation assistance are gleaned from the author's 2013 consultation of the Akahori Family Papers.

²⁷For more information about the internment of the Peruvian Japanese, see, for instance: Thomas Connell, *America's Japanese Hostages: the World War II Plan For a Japanese Free Latin America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group 2002); C. Harvey Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate: The Peruvian Japanese and the United States* (Seattle: University of

previously married in Japan and his children from that marriage apparently remained there. He and his second wife, Kiku Ishizuka (1900–1961), also an Issei, welcomed a daughter in November 1935. In the months following Masaru Ben's arrest and internment, Kiku and their daughter were—as part of the mass exclusion of ethnic Japanese from the West Coast—first sent to the Puyallup Assembly Center in Washington State (“Camp Harmony”) and then to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Hunt, Idaho.

Masaru Ben Akahori was legally interned as an “enemy alien” in all, for over 4 years. Prior to his eventual internment at Crystal City, Texas, where he was reunited with his family after more than 2 years of separation, a number of his transfers—from temporary holding at an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center in Washington State to camps under the Department of Justice and the U.S. Army in New Mexico and Montana—generally indicated more stringent jurisdiction and a diminished likelihood of parole. The lengthy separation and tenuous prospect of when and where family reunification might be achieved were surely difficult for the Akahoris, and expressions of concern for his wife and child in his absence may be found throughout Masaru Ben's writings to them. Also present are frequent references to prayer, which perhaps represent a kind of attention to the sonorous presence of the voice as calling for and even contributing to the family's reunification. Masaru Ben, writing to Kiku, says:

It is announced by the official bulletin here that I was one of the group who are to depart here for Crystal City within ten days from the date. *Your prayer is heard.* As far as I am concerned, I did the best not to be sent in an Internee Camp if my child should be mingled together with those who are not loyal to the United States of America. But as the government feels that *we shall be reunited together* under the circumstances, I have no choice but appreciate whatever granted to me and to us. Please do not expect to hear from me but *we soon meet together* at the Crystal City Camp. Take a good care of yourself ... God bless you all.²⁸

With the transfer of Kiku and of the Akahori's daughter from Minidoka in the spring of 1944, the family met at Crystal City for the first time since December 1941. They remained in Crystal City until the spring of 1946. The family then resettled in Los Angeles.

Shigezo and Sonoko Iwata

Shigezo Iwata and Sonoko, who was 11 years his junior, were married in 1937, having eloped without parental approval. They had been living in Thermal, California for about 6 months at the time of Shigezo's arrest. Sonoko was an American citizen and a Nisei. She was born in Los Angeles in 1911

Washington Press, 1981). For a first-person account available in English translation, see Seiichi Higashide, *Adios To Tears: The Memoirs of a Japanese-Peruvian Internee in U.S. Concentration Camps*, translated by Elsa H. Kudo et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

²⁸Masaru Ben Akahori to Kiku, February 22, 1944, my emphasis, Akahori Family Papers, Japanese American Research Project Collection (Collection 2010), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA. As the Akahoris were writing to each other in English at this time, purportedly, in part, to practice the language, I've retained text as written rather than insert edits or commentary (with occasional exceptions where punctuation edits may support clarity of meaning). Specifically, in a letter from Masaru Ben (Lordsburg Internment Camp, New Mexico) to Kiku (Minidoka Relocation Center, Hunt, Idaho), he switches between Japanese and English. In English, he notes: “Spelling is the most important factor in studying the English language. If you know how to spell you can compose correct sentences. I am a bad speller and I wish to compete with you.” Masaru Ben Akahori to Kiku, April 15, 1943, Akahori Family Papers. Based on the author's consultation of archival materials, it is clear that there was at least the perception that items written in English tended to clear the censors more quickly. For an example of how some of this was perceived by the Iwatas, see, for instance, Shigezo Iwata to Sonoko Iwata, March 30, 1942, 1:00 PM, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko (Collection MSS053), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. It is also worth noting that, while regulations shifted at various times throughout the war, items written in English were generally permitted to be lengthier than those written in Japanese. For more on the origins of the censorship program and a brief discussion of early length restrictions as well as of Japanese-language censors brought in during the later war years, see Louis Fiset, “Return to Sender: U.S. Censorship of Enemy Alien Mail in World War II,” *Prologue Magazine* 33, no. 1 (2001): Part 1: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/mail-censorship-in-world-war-two-1>; Part 2: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/mail-censorship-in-world-war-two-2>

and had briefly lived in Japan as a young child. Shigezo Iwata was a Japanese citizen, and a younger than average Issei. In addition to serving as secretary of the Thermal Farmer's Cooperative Association, Shigezo Iwata was a Japanese language teacher and he was accomplished in *Kendo*, a Japanese martial art.²⁹ He was arrested and interned in March 1942, separated from Sonoko and their children for over 1 year. In May 1942, Sonoko Iwata and their three young children (under the age of 4) were amongst those who were involuntarily excluded from Thermal, California, and placed directly in the WRA's center in Poston, Arizona.³⁰ As she dealt first with the logistics of packing up their home while caring for their children and then with life under incarceration at Poston, Sonoko wrote frequently to Shigezo about daily challenges while also regularly expressing affirmations of their bond. For instance, after a few months in Poston, she wrote:

I miss you so and yet you are always close to my thoughts as I work and go about my daily routine that I feel as if you are not far.³¹

Following the initial denial of Shigezo's appeal for parole, the Iwatas' correspondence makes it clear that they realized reuniting the family might only be achieved by petitioning for transfer to the Crystal City Internment Camp (the same site where the Akahoris were ultimately reunited). A common theme in letters Sonoko sent from Poston is her consistently encouraging Shigezo not to give up hope for parole and to hold tight to the possibility of their family having a continued future in the U.S. For instance, from Poston, she wrote:

I shall appeal for your parole until I'm convinced that there is nothing more I could do about it. So, please keep on hoping and not think of anything else.³²

The Iwatas made multiple appeals for Shigezo's parole even while eventually mentally preparing for the possibility of relocating the family to Japan.³³ They were finally successful, and Shigezo Iwata was paroled to Poston in July of 1943, where the family remained until it closed in 1945. Following the closure of Poston, the Iwatas permanently relocated to Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, where many formerly interned Japanese Americans and Japanese Peruvians obtained residency sponsorship and affiliate employment with the frozen food conglomerate (see [Figure 3](#)).³⁴ They had two additional children during this time.³⁵

Home is Together

I offer a focus on the English-language correspondence sent by Masaru Ben Akahori and by Sonoko Iwata to their respective spouses as a type of focused case study and I reproduce large sections of the original and unedited correspondence here for a number of reasons.³⁶ First, each collection is rich in description and volume, and the correspondence of focus spans more than one year. Masaru Ben

²⁹See, for instance, the photo, "Shigezo Iwata's kendo class at Waseda University photograph, 1923" which includes a parenthetical note written by one of the family, most likely Sonoko, that reads "spared from confiscation by the F.B.I." Iwata Family Photographs (PG087), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁰Biographical information throughout this section is drawn from Sarah Newhouse, "Finding Aid, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko."

³¹Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, August 4, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

³²Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, August 12, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

³³See, for instance, Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, January 1, 1943; February 3, 1943; and April 5, 1943; and see Shigezo Iwata to Sonoko, March 27, 1943, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

³⁴For a brief introduction to Japanese Americans and Japanese Peruvians at Seabrook Farms in the World War II years and beyond, see Kelli Nakamura, "Seabrook Farms," in *Densho Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Seabrook%20Farms/>

³⁵For more on the Iwatas in the postwar years, see the oral history materials in Volume 1 of the Oral Histories collected from Seabrook Village, see Paul H. Noguchi, Rei R. Noguchi, John M. Seabrook, and Milli Poldma, eds, *Seabrook Village New Jersey, Oral Histories of a Community* (Seabrook, NJ: Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, 1997).

³⁶I wish to thank Kassandra Hartford for helpful commentary on an earlier draft of this section.



Figure 3. Iwata family photograph, circa 1950, Seabrook, New Jersey. Iwata Family Photographs (PG087), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Philadelphia, PA. Printed with permission from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Akahori and Sonoko Iwata wrote their spouses regularly throughout their separation—he from an internment facility to a so-called “relocation” center and she in the reverse—and each continuously attempted to encourage their loved ones and to maintain a familial connection. The extensive depictions of daily life and of the trials of confinement and of family separation included within these letters are arguably illustrative of experiences shared by a great many people in these settings. Second, though there is a wealth of scholarship on the Japanese American incarceration, there has been relatively little attention to spousal communications.³⁷ Third, for all that the Akahoris and Iwatas were subjected to treatment that targeted them due to their ethnic ancestry, these two nuclear families made specific choices in terms of things like their volume of correspondence; their privileging of the English language; their assertion of their devotion to their professed faith; and their avowed commitment to the well-being and priorities of their nuclear family within its nation of origin, despite familial ties in Japan. Within such a vast and densely experienced and described historical landscape, attention to the experience of individuals may illuminate larger processes (or exceptions to these processes) in clear and evocative ways.

The authors and intended recipients of these letters were far from the only readers of these communications. Given that both the Akahori and Iwata heads of household were legally interned, government censors were closely reading, censoring, and recording information from many if not all of these documents prior to their reaching the intended recipient. As the censors’ intervention into the physical materials is often frustratingly hard to avoid, it is clear that the Akahoris and the Iwatas would have had a certain awareness of this scrutiny and that they may have even altered their prose accordingly.

³⁷Spousal and familial correspondence remain an arguably underutilized source of data. Two notable exceptions are Louis Fiset, *Imprisoned Apart: The World War II Correspondence of an Issei Couple* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2012); and Heidi Kim, ed., *Taken from the Paradise Isle: The Hoshida Family Story* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015).

These letters offer an opportunity for further critical readings of patriotism (including its seeming affiliation with assertions of the Christian faith), performance for captors, and gendered familial roles. For instance, with his professional background, it seems particularly plausible to consider that Masaru Ben Akahori's letters may have been penned in part to selectively perform an identity of a unified, nuclear, Christian, American family to the captors who were separating him from his wife and young child. This is not meant to suggest that the letters were insincere, but it seems reasonable to consider that these families may have made certain deliberate choices in light of the scrutiny they were under. Meanwhile, with Sonoko Iwata having been raised in the United States, her letters seem to convey an innate sense of her holding on to what is familiar and seeking to share this with her husband who was imprisoned apart from her. My reading here, though, is quite literal. To my knowledge, with the exception of the very rare telegram, these communications served as the sole method of direct communication available to these separated families in a time of great uncertainty that stretched indefinitely before these families in the day-to-day across what turned out to be months and even years.

The letters, which might include strategies for finances or for the seemingly endless paperwork involved in incarceration, internment, and seeking of parole, nearly always intensely amplify attention to the family and to the keenly felt absence of the one(s) missing.³⁸ In writing to Kiku, Masaru Ben often enclosed items for her to read to or otherwise share with their young daughter, who would turn 6 years old in the month prior to his arrest. For example, in 1942, in honor of their daughter beginning school in camp, he included with a letter on one side of a page a series of sketches of a "growing girl" and on the other side sketches of her parents: Kiku, as he recalled from when he "departed," and himself, whom he depicted as "getting fatter" (see Figure 4). That same year, in the month after Shigezo's arrest, Sonoko noted to him their children's perceptions of his absence, and her attempts to address their longing for his return:

[The children] say that you are with the men who look like the mailmen. A few days ago they wanted me to call you over the phone and ask you to return. I had to tell them you were so far away, I couldn't reach you. When I receive word from you, I let them know. At other times I don't speak of you unless they mention you first because I don't want them to know how I feel.³⁹

Thus, even bearing in mind the strong likelihood that at least some of these letters may well have been written for more than one audience and in service of more than one purpose, they are nonetheless evocative and informative as historical points of access to these people in these places in their own words. Regardless of the multiplicity of performative stances that might be interpreted within the text, these letters, which are remarkably consistent in tone and content, represent Masaru Ben's presence to his wife and child, and Sonoko Iwata's to her husband.

Sonoko Iwata and Masaru Ben Akahori frequently affirmed their Christian faith in these letters, and it appears they were active members in Protestant churches before, after, and during the war. For Sonoko, her expressions of Christian faith to her husband at least indicate that she feels they are united in their faith and that this is part of what propels them forward together. While still in Thermal, she describes Easter Sunday morning, writing:

So, the Easter has come and gone. I was very glad to be given the opportunity of meditating upon the meaning of Easter when *we are truly concerned with beginning our life anew*. Did you have any services at the camp? If ministers are there now, I imagine you did. It isn't possible for me to go

³⁸In a letter from Thermal (CA) sent after Shigezo's arrest and before removal of Sonoko and the children from Thermal, Sonoko, on receiving word from Shigezo, notes "Somehow, now you seem much nearer" (Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, March 17, 1942). Later, from Poston, she muses: "This forced separation has given me lots of time to think about things about us—things I just didn't know or realize. Whenever we are united again, I know I shall be more matured and less selfish than I was before" (Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, October 3, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko).

³⁹Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, April 18, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.



Figure 4. Handwritten sketches sent by Masaru Ben Akahori to his daughter with captions reading “Your mother when departed!” and “Daddy—getting fatter!” Next to his cap are arrows and the caption “Furnished by government.” Masaru Ben Akahori to his daughter, January 5, 1942. Akahori Family Papers. Japanese American Research Project Collection (Collection 2010), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Fair Use.

out so I got up early and listened to services coming over the air. I especially liked the “Holy City” played on the trumpet to herald the program held somewhere in Berkeley. It was *good to listen to other familiar music*, too. The reception wasn’t so good and it was rather disturbing to have everything interrupted by static and by other stations. Just as I heard the strains of “Ave Maria,” one Spanish language station came in with news or something and just about drowned the music out. Although one can hear it anytime practically, it meant so much to me today and I wished I could have heard it without being disturbed...⁴⁰

In this letter, the depicted sonorities are very striking, particularly when one thinks of the contextual setting within which they were written.⁴¹ Sonoko expresses a deep longing to be able to hear the familiar “Ave Maria” (“one can hear it anytime practically”) on what will be the last Easter holiday she will spend in Thermal. Her observing this opportunity to meditate on the meaning of this holiday, while

⁴⁰Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, April 5, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁴¹I am grateful to Douglas Terry and Jason Roberts for their comments on this section, which served to enrich my reading and analysis.

the Iwatas find they are “truly concerned with beginning ... life anew,” clearly indicates a kind of recognition that as her husband is detained away from the family for the foreseeable future, and as she prepares without him to comply with the exclusion orders and to be “evacuated” with her children to Poston, the family is essentially beginning again. Just as these events are bringing a great disturbance to the Iwatas and raising questions for their future, for Sonoko, this seems to be echoed in her struggle to clearly hear the beloved “Ava Maria” underneath the competing static.

The following month, she reflects on and calls forth lyrics to a favorite hymn, “Largo,” that she shares with Shigezo.⁴² She writes:

Father in heaven, Thy children hear
As they adoring bow,
O Though Almighty One, our weakness heed;
Strengthen our faith;
With hope inspire our hearts;
Quicken our souls with love like unto Thine.
Then shall Thy works abound,
Men shall proclaim that God, our Lord is God alone
And hold, holy His name,
And hold, His name.
God, our Lord is God alone,
And hold, holy his name.⁴³

“Largo” is mentioned multiple times in Sonoko’s letters. In at least one instance she clearly indicates that, to her, it serves as a reminder of Shigezo:

Last night, over station KSL, Salt Lake City, Utah, I heard “Largo” twice—once it was organ music, and then just shortly before that, it was played by a string orchestra. Naturally, *it reminded me of you*.⁴⁴

In addition to the shared memories that she holds with Shigezo in reference to this music, the lyric emphasis on strength and hope may have represented an important touchstone for her. Her letters, meanwhile, demonstrate a continued attempt to bolster her husband’s spirits and also to maintain a familial connection in sharing both depictions of her daily life and in making connections to their previous shared life. In one case, she described that the first book she checked out from the Poston library was an American music songbook because of its inclusion of “Largo.”⁴⁵

There’s a small library in our block office. While all the three children were napping (a little unusual now that ... [eldest son] feels grown up and won’t take one) I went to get a book and for the first time I saw music books on the shelf. They had been donated by one of the schools. I saw “Largo” the first thing and so I checked the music book out although the office assistant

⁴²Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their questions about this work, which led me to look for an example of a printed edition. Based on posts made to an online forum (namethathymn.com) for the sharing and searching of hymn lyrics and subsequently informed searches on the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP), my most educated guess at this time is that this text was set as a contrafactum to the music of the Largo from *Serse* (*Xerxes*), by George Frideric Handel. Although I cannot authenticate the online images available from IMSLP, the text aligns well with the tune. This would also explain Sonoko’s recollection of its being sung by Marian Anderson, and her utilization of the title “Largo” to stand, seemingly interchangeably, for both the hymn and for what seems likely to have been concert settings (or arrangements) of the original.

⁴³Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, May 13, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁴⁴Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, October 16, 1942, my emphasis, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁴⁵For more on libraries in sites of Japanese American incarceration, see Andrew B. Wertheimer, “Japanese American Community Libraries in America’s Concentration Camps, 1942–1946” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2004).

looked a little puzzled. Aside from the fact that you like “Largo,” my hearing it sung by Marian Anderson ... is still fresh in my memory and I tried to follow the notes. Perhaps my neighbors thought something was wrong with me today.⁴⁶

For Masaru Ben Akahori, expressions and exhortations of Christian faith within letters to his family, no matter how rhetorical, were often linked explicitly to expressions of American allegiance.⁴⁷ For instance, in a letter to his daughter, again invoking prayer as an intercession (and potentially one that sounds), he wrote:

How are you? Your daddy prays you may be happy and healthy ... Tell me what you are willing to be when you grown. Pianist? Soldier? God bless you American as He does America.⁴⁸

And in an Easter greeting:

I am a very proud daddy because you are doing nicely for everything. I am so happy for you are growing as a good American citizen. I wish to greet you for Easter. I wish to greet your Sunday school teacher, daily school teacher, pastor, piano teacher and all of your friends an Easter greeting through you.⁴⁹

This kind of language specifically articulates to Kiku and, via her, their young daughter, his situating of this child as an American citizen, one surrounded by teachers and other authority figures (including musically influential ones)—who are presumably contributing to her development as a citizen—to whom her father could send Easter holiday greetings through her mother, while also having blessings bestowed to her in the same breath as they are offered for her country.

Mr. Akahori’s letters to his wife and daughter additionally grounded citizenship in sacrifice, situating the camp experience and resultant familial separation within this necessity and one regarding which the family and larger community might, even in their separation, join in prayer. As the family grew increasingly anxious to reunite, he wrote, again, text addressed to his daughter via Kiku:

It is wartime now ... Everyone in America shall sacrifice. We all meet together pretty soon. You must not forget to pray for me for I am always praying for you and your mother and our country—America.⁵⁰

Earlier, on Christmas Day of 1941, in expressing both joy and consternation at the sight of his family when they visited the detention center in Seattle looking for him (though they apparently did not have

⁴⁶Sonoko Iwata to Shiegezo Iwata, March 13, 1943, Iwata Papers, Shiegezo and Sonoko.

⁴⁷For Christianity and assimilation in Los Angeles in the years leading up to the war, see, for instance, Brian Masaru Hayashi, *For the Sake of our Japanese Brethren: Assimilation, Nationalism, and Protestantism Among the Japanese of Los Angeles, 1895–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Importantly, while tracing the arguable relationship of Protestantism to perceptions of assimilation within the Japanese American community in Los Angeles in the decades prior to World War II, Hayashi is nonetheless very careful not to situate Christianity as “American.” Rather, he considers generational leadership and influence more broadly, such as in his assertion that 1930s Protestantism in Los Angeles could actually result in a “Japanizing” influence on members in some situations (Hayashi, *For the Sake of our Japanese Brethren*, 7; chapters 3 and 4). Certainly, for Japanese Americans living under internment and incarceration, perceptions of the moment were important. For Christianity as a perceived sign of Americanness amongst involuntarily confined Japanese Americans, as assessed by U.S. authorities during World War II, see, for instance, Eric Muller, *American Inquisition: The Hunt for Japanese American Disloyalty in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For practices of Buddhism and particularly Shintoism as explicit resistance against Americanization, see Gary Okihiro, “Religion and Resistance in America’s Concentration Camps,” *Phylon* 45, no. 3 (1984): 220–33.

⁴⁸M.B. Akahori to his daughter, March 13, 1943, Akahori Family Papers.

⁴⁹M.B. Akahori to his daughter, April 20, 1943, Akahori Family Papers.

⁵⁰M.B. Akahori to Kiku Akahori and their daughter, February 18, 1944, Akahori Family Papers.

a chance to speak with him), he concluded his letter by saying, “[T]here are several believers sincerely we are praying for[,] you all Americans.”⁵¹

For Masaru Ben Akahori, like Sonoko Iwata, music and song also provided important connections to and moments with which to exhort his family. In his case, though, they were frequently linked to a projection of American citizenship. Following the removal of Kiku and the Akahori’s daughter to the temporary camp at Puyallup, Mr. Akahori posted a letter to them in which he emphasized the importance of their daughter’s schooling to her becoming fully Americanized—even in the songs that she knew. He wrote: “Next when I meet you *you will sing so many American songs for me.*”⁵² In reference to a song that Kiku wrote for the Nisei soldiers departing her WRA camp at Minidoka he stated:

One of my barrack mates received a letter from his wife [with] whom you live together in your community. And I felt so proud of you who composed the encouraging song for those three hundred volunteers.⁵³

It is likely significant that he noted hearing this from a fellow internee. Rumors, or “news” of just about everything traveled quite quickly, and wives who were physically separated from their husbands by internment could anticipate that their neighbors would closely scrutinize and report on their activities and behaviors. If the family was attempting unification via parole of the internee, they could also anticipate that camp authorities were aware of their actions. Thus, in the seeking of Masaru Ben’s parole and in their being understood as “American” in this context, it would undoubtedly have been in the Akahori’s best interest for Kiku to be recognized as contributing her talents to boost American soldiers’ morale in a camp-wide event. It is also notable that music is itself viewed as a contribution and an expression (e.g., “encouraging”) by the Akahoris—something that may have both patriotic and vocational purpose (cf. the earlier cited letters from spring 1943 that send greetings to the daughter’s piano teacher; and that place “pianist” next to “soldier” in seeming reference [if perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek] to the daughter’s possible choices as an adult). Perhaps even more striking is that Masaru Ben also emphasized the text of the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem in letters dated as early as December 25, 1941, and in such enclosures, there are included invitations to edit—to have Kiku alter his text—through which they both inscribe their presence onto a single, shared document. While in Missoula, he joined the camp chorus. He included the following description in a letter to Kiku, and the bracketed text appears to be in her hand in response to him:

yesterday afternoon, our radio reported that all Americans in patriotic spirit are urged to join corus and I happen to remember school age and joined the corus even though my tone and pronunciation are not so sweet as you ... I wish you read the following song I tried to gather up. *Please correct partial errors on the song in printing and mail me some day when you remind this...*

Oh say can you see
By the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed at the
Twilight’s [last] gleaming
Whose broad stripes and bright stars
Through the [perilous] night
[Were] so [gallantly] [streaming]

⁵¹M.B. Akahori to his daughter “and her mother,” December 25, 1941, 7:00 AM, Akahori Family Papers. Though they do not appear to have had physical proximity to one another from Masaru Ben Akahori’s arrest until their reunification in Crystal City, it appears that Masaru Ben, at least, had a line of sight to Kiku and their daughter when they attempted to visit him at the INS holding facility in Seattle on December 24, 1941. About this sighting, in the same Christmas Day letter as cited above, M.B. Akahori wrote to Kiku Akahori: “I know you came here yesterday for I saw you from the building. You, sweetheart!”

⁵²M.B. Akahori to his daughter, August 3, 1942 my emphasis, Akahori Family Papers.

⁵³M.B. Akahori to Kiku Akahori, April 3, 1943, Akahori Family Papers. While she was involuntarily held in Minidoka, Kiku Akahori wrote a song to send off the Japanese American soldiers departing the camp en route to fight on the European Front. (cf. Kiku Akahori, draft affidavit, circa 1945–1946, Crystal City Internment Camp, Crystal City TX. Akahori Family Papers.)

[And] the rockets red glare
 [The] bombs bursting in air
 Gave proof through the night
 That [our] flag was still there
 O say does [that] Star Spangled
 Banner yet wave
 Oh [the] land of the Free
 And the home of the Brave⁵⁴

When thinking of this as being written from within an internment facility and sent to family members who might only reunite by returning to Japan (which, in this case, seems counter to their wishes), there seems a new sense of urgency and vitality to the familiar lyrics. Following this presumably nationalist sentiment, Mr. Akahori then continued by exhorting his wife to continue to raise their daughter as a “good American citizen.” He also, perhaps, can be understood as leaning into the language of “indivisibility” as an affirmation of family unity, and as a reminder of the commitments of marriage. He wrote:

My dear sweetheart, in “the land of the free” you will keep on “the home of the brave” until I come to meet you soon. I am happy because I can always trust you. *I am happier because you are the only good girl that will lead our only child properly and be a good American citizen forever* ... America, “as nation indivisible,” and “justice for all.” So you and ... [our child] are American and would never forget the sacred oath!⁵⁵

Sonoko Iwata, on the other hand, provided her husband with descriptions of songs the children learned in school, and asserted that she found it very worthwhile to spend a few funds on a small portable record player to entertain them as they were cooped in each day (she also opted to purchase an air cooler, given that daytime temperatures were exceeding 110 degrees Fahrenheit).⁵⁶ Following the eldest child’s birthday, she wrote:

[Eldest child] was four yesterday. The phonograph and the records had come two days before on Saturday—just in time really. I told him it was a present from you... There was a Mother Goose record that I got for him especially for the occasion but he let it fall accidentally and it was broken into tiny pieces so that we didn’t get to hear it even once. It was just too bad... [the two younger children] are learning new songs at school. From what they were singing I recognized “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb” but when I sang with them so they would [unclear] the words clearly, they said I wasn’t singing right. Perhaps the words are a little different nowadays.⁵⁷

With the brokenness of the record, there is an inability for it to be sounded, and no hope of repair. She is also being corrected by her children, as she “wasn’t singing right.” Though embedded in a description of an everyday event, her observation recognizing that, “perhaps the words are a little different nowadays” may also be read as revealing that, in addition to a generational difference, she is also finding that their intensive education in camp is bringing about other, subtle changes and emphasizing a kind of unanticipated distance from her children, even as they remain with her. It is tempting to think of these collected descriptions of a kind of a disconnect as a metaphor for the disconnect she feels from her previous life and identity, even as a kind of subtext for letting go of a previous life.

⁵⁴M.B. Akahori to Kiku Akahori, January 3, 1942 (with undated edits presumably by Kiku), Akahori Family Papers.

⁵⁵M.B. Akahori to Kiku Akahori, January 3, 1942 (with undated edits presumably by Kiku), Akahori Family Papers.

⁵⁶Descriptions of the decision to purchase a phonograph record player and of temperatures in the barracks can be found in summer and fall 1942 correspondence. For the phonograph, cf. Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo, July 25, 1942; for the temperatures, cf. Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo, June 28, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁵⁷Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, August 4, 1942, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

In her correspondence with her husband, Sonoko Iwata makes it clear that her inclusion of songs and sounds from her pre-camp life with Shigezo and from her in-camp life with her children is an attempt to try and encourage her husband and to remind him of memories they hold together and the desires and dreams that they share for their future as a family. Her letters (both those sent before she left Thermal and then eventually from within Poston) frequently draw on descriptions of radio broadcasts as a way of marking time, remembering times she and Shigezo spent together, and imaginatively connecting with him even while separated. On April 19, 1942, from Thermal, she wrote:

It's ten o'clock now. Everything is quiet but for once I have the radio turned on—to KSL, Salt Lake City, to a program of recorded music. Just now they're playing the last moments of one of Brahms symphonies as interpreted by Weingartner. These days we seldom listen to radio as something or the other keeps us busy and I forget to tune in. The announcer just informed us that it was the Symphony No. 2, D Major and was performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Weingartner. If you tune in a great deal, and you do seem to have lots of time, *it might be that there are times when we listen to the same programs*. At what time do you retire at night? Are you able to listen to some of the same programs you used to enjoy at home? I hope so. Now they are playing Handel's "Gods Go Begging" as performed by the London Symphony led by Beecham. I'm not familiar with the music but it's certainly beautiful.⁵⁸

On September 11, 1942, from Poston, she wrote:

Tuesday night being the 101st anniversary of Anton Dvorak, over one of the stations, they had a program devoted to his compositions including New World Symphony, Slavic Dance, Humoresque, and Songs My Mother Taught Me. You remember New World Symphony—we heard it at Hollywood Bowl. *Recall it?*⁵⁹

On February 9, 1943, also from Poston, she wrote:

Do you ever listen to radio music? On Mondays there's telephone hour sponsored by the Bell Telephone Company featuring famous artists. I'm not sure of the exact time but it's around 7:30 at evening and I try not to miss it... It's a really good program.⁶⁰

Sounds of Belonging

Letters sent from Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata and from Masaru Ben Akahori to Kiku Akahori both demark and are demarked by a particular context of wartime imprisonment. They serve as a site of intermediation through which these letter writers affirm or frame both their respective families as belonging together as well as their conceptualization of that togetherness as an indicator of a sense of home. It is through this frame the censors would have recognized the letter writers and recipients as to be regarded with suspicion and yet it is also through this same frame or context that the separated letter writers and recipients would have recognized one another as familiar loved ones separated not by choice but by circumstance.⁶¹ Handwritten letters on paper are fixed, inscribed, tangible. While as objects physical letters are themselves inaudible, in being touched and read they may become animate and sonorous. For the censors, these and similar letters served as representative and palpable objects for interception and intervention. For the intended recipients, these letters, beyond presenting a

⁵⁸Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, April 19, 1942, my emphasis, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁵⁹Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo Iwata, September 11, 1942, my emphasis, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁶⁰Sonoko Iwata to Shigezo, February 9, 1943, Iwata Papers, Shigezo and Sonoko.

⁶¹For recognition in this context, cf. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

physical talisman of the sender, additionally served to evoke memories, feelings, and sensory experiences (including sonic experiences) that signified home.⁶² That is, the letters essentially served as a kind of a specter and an incomplete cipher, signaling a sense of presence and common feeling while rendering obvious and tangible the absence wrought by physical distance and, increasingly, time.⁶³ In their very tangibility and spectrality, these letters might facilitate a sense of belonging and a construction of togetherness of an imagined, remembered family in an imagined, inhabited, constructed home—one demarked by memories and punctuated by sounds.⁶⁴

Sounds, memories, and depictions of daily life—including of music, within—ultimately seem to have served as a way to hold onto the idea of a life “before” and “after” camp for the Iwatas and the Akahoris. For Sonoko Iwata, this meant her life with her family. Similarly, for Masaru Ben Akahori, sonic expressions and memories were a key factor utilized to assert expressions of a particular family unity—an American, Christian, fully loyal and patriotic unity that would keep his family together and in place in the national home of the only child they raised, together. I do seek to heed the important caution not to “overhear.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, I also find that while in this context the sounds of war were perhaps punctuated by the noise of artillery within *song lyrics* (such as in the Akahoris’ writing out of the lyrics of the U.S.’s national anthem), in general, for these two separated families on the domestic home front, their war’s soundscape seems to have been demarked by subtle shifts rather than by sheer cacophony. For the Akahoris and the Iwatas, the sonorities of this moment appear to have been the resonance of the lyrics of children’s songs, of memories of wedding music, and of the active and ongoing hope that loved ones might be “together” in their ability to hear *the same sounds at the same time via the same radio broadcast*. Perhaps even more notable than the sounds are the silences rendered by absence. Masaru Ben reached across such a silence into a shared memory of an emplaced soundmark from his and Kiku’s life before the war in order to evoke memories of their life together while also painting evocative pictures of his current environs as a means of maintaining a connection with her. Upon an early transfer to Santa Fe, he described the location of the camp and of the barracks by drawing connections to their old home in the Seattle, Washington area, while also vividly evoking sounds that recall special moments in their life together:

How is my sweetheart and our ... [daughter]? Man is man, cat is cat, and I am the same old Ben. Wherever I go[,] wherever I am, you will find me... As I arrive in this most wished and blessed town, the Holy Faith City, or Santa Fe, how am I enjoying the traditional atmosphere, lording scenery, moderate climate of no storm no hot sunbeam and everything! Imagine our old Beaconhill home! Where our home sat facing eastward looking down the Rainier Valley is exactly where our messhall is here located. Where the valley foothill that you and I hiked up is where our barrack 67 is located; or extreme east low hill foot and nearest to the Santa Fe Catholic church

⁶²For theorizations of approaches to writing sound in other contexts, see Deborah Kapchan, ed., *Theorizing Sound Writing* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

⁶³In this context, I would offer that these letters, specifically for their intended recipients, were affective: See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). They might even be able to be understood as something akin to a kind of a punctum through which different temporal moments intersect, coalesce, and are made tangible: See Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 353–83, as an application of Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

⁶⁴Sharon Luk has noted the importance of letters in this and related contexts of separation under racially motivated incarceration, attending to the letter as an object through which connections are indexed but also a means through which alternative realities might be imagined and created. Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 4. Regarding the Japanese American incarceration, for instance, she notes that “letters mediated collectivity in the interned context” (Luk, *The Life of Paper*, 130).

⁶⁵Gavin Williams, “Introduction: Sound Unmade,” in *Hearing the Crimean War*, ed. Gavin Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xxxvi.

which visible cross on the roof tops where the charming chimes as you and I enjoyed to hear at U.W. campus or the Catalina Bell—the sweetest memory of our meeting!⁶⁶

For the Akahoris and Iwatas, home—in this wartime context of separation, imprisonment, and under the shadow of permanent removal—signified the time they had been and yet again would be, together.⁶⁷ Mr. Akahori's and Mrs. Iwata's wartime letters to their families may, then, be understood as an endeavor to nurture an ongoing connection and facilitate a sense of a shared present through the evocation of sounds and memories (and sounds of memories and memories of sounds). This ability for these separated family members to feel a sense of being “together” in this way underscores the importance of musical sounds and music lyrics (and recollections of them) in effecting a temporal collapse for a transient yet shared experience.⁶⁸ This musical and memorial effect can be understood to have been harnessed by these involuntarily confined and separated Japanese American families in two complementary but distinct ways. First, if sounds such as bells or favorite songs that were reminiscent of the past were heard in the present, the triggered memory took the letter writer “back” to their shared past with their family. Second, in trying to create a sense of familial togetherness, the letter writer would relate a given experience from their individual present—including the sounds of their children's voices—to their shared past in order to not only emphasize a kind of shared memory but to harness the reliving of that memory in a physically separated yet unified familial present through which they might imagine a common future. For instance, written descriptions, song titles, and lyrics might be written out from one spouse to another as a way to propel the reader back in time through their shared memories and to encourage imaginative re-listening to and re-experiencing of moments from their past, together, even in separation.⁶⁹

In a sense, even as they were imprisoned and racially othered, the Iwatas and Akahoris may have marked a kind of an “ideal” family for their captors in the sense that they presented a nuclear, ostensibly heterosexual married couple with children, functioning as a reasonably independent unit, wherein gendered and domestic expectations were complicated by separation but largely aligned with the socialized normative behavior privileged by social scientists of the time.⁷⁰ Being recognized as a family, Bourdieu asserts, can imply a symbolic privilege of “normality.”⁷¹ In fact, one might argue that through careful presentation of this nuclear unit through their letters, within and from their imprisonment, Sonoko Iwata and Masaru Ben Akahori crafted a performative representation of a “normal” family that was thus specifically recognizable and sympathetic to their

⁶⁶M.B. Akahori to Kiku Akahori, June 6, 1942, Akahori Family Papers. Given their time in Seattle, “U.W.” likely refers to the University of Washington. The “Catalina Bell” is presumably referring to the chimes on Catalina Island, 22 miles southwest of Los Angeles. According to the website maintained by the Love Catalina Island Tourism Authority, the Catalina Chimes Tower has housed the Deagan Westminster Chimes since 1925, and they chime daily from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM.

⁶⁷For a nostalgic longing that takes one out of time, is multi-sited and multi-temporal, and through which the future might be imagined, cf. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Svetlana Boym “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 7–18. <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>

⁶⁸On perspectives on and applications of a kind of temporal collapse through sound that were informative to early conceptualization and formations of this project, see, for instance: Philip V. Bohlman, “Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, eds. Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 139–62; Daniel M. Neuman, “Epilogue: Paradigms and Stories,” in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, eds. Stephen Blum, Philip V. Bohlman and Daniel M. Neuman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 268–77; Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “Music, Memory and History,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 1, Special Issue: “The Past in Music” (2006): 17–38.

⁶⁹For recorded music and “daily acts of remembering,” see Ben Anderson, “Recorded Music and Practices of Remembering,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, no. 1 (2004): 3–20.

⁷⁰For a broader context, via a consideration of social welfare policies and Americanization initiatives in the decades prior to the war, see, for instance, Christina A. Ziegler-McPherson, *Americanization in the States: Immigrant Social Welfare Policy, Citizenship, and National Identity in the United States, 1908–1929* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009). Conversely, for considerations of sexual and social behaviors observed as abnormal and “contagious” in the early twentieth century by public health and other official amongst populations in San Francisco's Chinatown, see Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁷¹Pierre Bourdieu, “On the Family as a Realized Category,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 3 (1996): 23.



Figure 5. Kango Takamura. Santa Fe Internment Camp, June 1942, Kango Takamura Paintings (Collection Number 433). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Watercolor and ink on paper. Printed with permission from the Takamura family.

captors.⁷² Within their families, both Sonoko and Masaru Ben specifically espoused clear alignment with the Christian faith and American patriotism, which were actively construed as mutually constitutive components of being fully “American” in this time and place. This adherence to a perceived set of “American” values and mores further lent the Akahoris and Iwatas a recognizability to their captors of the sort that continues to reverberate in much of the public memorialization of the incarceration.

Masaru Ben Akahori was denied parole so he could not join Kiku and their child in the “relocation” center where they were held in Idaho. Instead, the family gained permission for a transfer to the “family” internment camp for “enemy aliens” in Crystal City, Texas, prioritizing reunification even though it could mean they would be sent to Japan. Along with Kiku Akahori, as well as tens of thousands of other Japanese Americans, Sonoko Iwata and her children were excluded and incarcerated because they were perceived as more “Japanese” than “American.” Yet, Sonoko Iwata and her children were American citizens by birth and a sense of affinity to this national locale resounds in Sonoko’s letters to her husband. Sonoko’s husband, Shigezo, was marked as Japanese not only by his ethnicity but also his citizenship. In spite of initially being denied parole, he eventually was released from the Santa Fe Internment Camp to the Poston Relocation Center where Sonoko and the children were; that is to say that he paroled from an enemy alien holding facility to a Japanese American one. A painting by Kango Takamura, another internee of the Santa Fe internment camp, portrays just such a transfer (see Figure 5). It shows a bus of formerly interned men leaving Santa Fe, with a large group of other internees who remain behind cheering and waving in celebration of the hope they have to return “home.” The text reads:

⁷²Even as it is relevant to contextualize perspectives and approaches in the camps against the backdrop of racialized social work and social science programs implemented within Asian American and other U.S. immigrant communities in the decades prior to the war, it is also instructive to bear in mind the social science (and particularly anthropological) trends of this moment. Consider, for instance, the emphasis the anthropological fieldworkers in the camps placed on lineage, kinship, and domestic habits as an indicator of both their own training and of the expectations of what anthropological data entailed. See Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, *The Politics of Fieldwork: Research in an American Concentration Camp* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999).

Ending months of uncertainty, we were released from Santa Fe Internment Camp to return to our families at Relocation Centers. Everyone cheered as we left camp. *Now there was hope we would return home.*⁷³

Conclusions

Masaru Ben Akahori and Sonoko Iwata sent their families letters during the war in which they strongly rhetorically identified America as their family home. Their children were born and were to be American, and assertions within their letters indicate hopes that their collective residence would be, as well. However, ultimately, their priority was on reuniting their families; that is, something other than a sense of national identity was central for these families' sense of collective belonging and was a crucial point of how they identified to and with one other. For the Iwatas, this meant reconciling to the possibility of moving to Japan even as they fought for parole for Shigezo. For the Akahoris, it meant accepting a transfer to Crystal City, which they had every reason to believe meant being sent to Japan, even though this was counter to desires seemingly expressed by Masaru Ben in his letters to his family. Masaru Ben Akahori and Sonoko Iwata sought to keep a sense of their family alive across an indefinite period of separation and uncertainty and they did so, in part, by imbuing their letters with the sounds of their pasts and presents in order to both recall shared memories and enliven a sense of active presence amidst the silence of absence. Each located and identified a sense of home in discursively constructing their sense of belonging based on a shared past and on a compelling desire to join in a shared future together with their respective families. In the letters to their spouses from whom they were involuntarily separated, Masaru Ben Akahori and Sonoko Iwata drew on memories, scenes, and sounds from their shared past lives with their spouses and children in order to willfully insert hope for reunification into the present, while imagining a future where they could be home, together.

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⁷³Kango Takamura, Santa Fe Internment Camp, June 1942, my emphasis, Kango Takamura Paintings (Collection 433), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

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Alecia D. Barbour is an associate professor of music at West Virginia University Institute of Technology. Her current research focuses on sonic elements of Americanization in the United States during World War II, demonstrating her interest in convergences and spaces between music, memory, history, and constructions of belonging. She has published a related article in *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* and has an essay forthcoming in the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*.