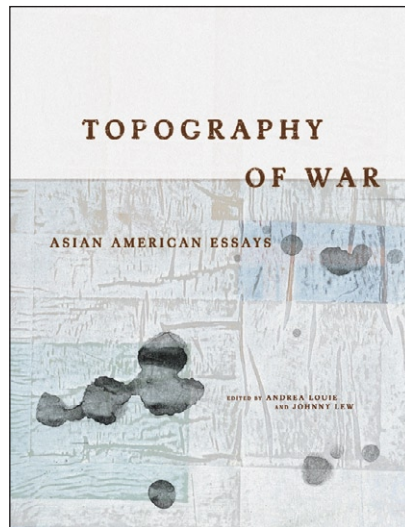


THE TOPOGRAPHY OF WAR

Editors: Andrea Louie and Johnny Lew, New York: The Asian American Writers Workshop, 2006.



Note: This Study Guide has been conceived so that various aspects of The Topography of War can be examined and discussed, in relation to other subjects and thus to a broader context, such as history, politics, culture, contemporary headlines, etc. Moreover, while the contributors are Asian Americans, the ideas and issues they articulate have a much wider import, one that goes beyond ethnicity.

I. PRESENCE

Contributors: Dora Wang / Rahna Reiko Rizzuto / Dang Ngo / Shymala Dason / Xujun Eberlein / Garry Reyes

The idea of presence as developed in each of these essays underscores the fact that war and conflict have been instrumental in shaping the various Asian diasporas in the United States. In wars as different as World War II and Vietnam—one global, the other regional—U.S. involvement came about for particular reasons.

1. Prior to its entry into World War II, how did the United States view Germany and Japan? Discuss how race and history shaped these views.
2. Compare and contrast the impact of World War II on German-Americans and Japanese-Americans.

3. How did U.S. experience in the global war help shape its postwar foreign policy? Discuss too how that foreign policy led to the U.S. getting involved in a war in Southeast Asia.
4. The Communist Revolution in China forced wholesale migrations of Chinese, and led to the creation of the Republic of Taiwan. The Cultural Revolution, on the other hand, caused massive internal dislocations and exile. What impact did these two upheavals have on the Chinese in the United States and how are these reflected in Dora Wang's and Xujun Eberlein's essays?
5. Many of the persons discussed by the writers in this section are no longer alive—Rahna Reiko Rizzuto's great aunt, for instance, and Shymala Dason's grandfather—but they play significant roles in the writers' essays. Discuss the different narratives within which the writers succeed in imparting to the reader a sense of that individual's "presence."
6. In "My Tangerine Childhood," Dora Wang says, "Like an autumn wind, war scatters souls." The "scattering" of course refers to the displacement and dislocation of Asians from different countries due to both internal civil conflict and the wars the U.S. waged in Asia. Examine how the underlying sense of loss brought about by large-scale turmoil continues to haunt Asian American communities.
7. What are some reminders of these losses that linger on in these communities?
8. In two photo essays—Garry Reyes's "The Last Battle," on aging World War II Filipino veterans, and Dang Ngo's "The Karen People," on a minority tribe persecuted by the Burmese government—the viewer becomes acutely aware that soon these

“presences” will become “absences”—if some haven’t already—or are threatened to be such. The war veterans and members of the Karen are clearly excluded from the political, economic, and social spheres of both the United States and Burma/Myanmar—transforming these visual representations into both affirmation and elegy. Discuss the irony and contradictions inherent in these situations.

ABSENCE

Contributors: Luis H. Francia / John Vu / Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi / Maya Lin / Michael Sandoval / Jennifer Estaris / Elsa Arnett / Christopher Lee / Andrew Lam

As developed by the nine contributors to this section, “absence” stands as twin to the idea of “presence” in the previous section—as much as war and civil conflict have helped shape the Asian diasporas in the U.S., they inevitably have also altered them through the losses suffered by the different communities.

1. Beyond the physical disappearances and the deaths of people, to what might “absence” refer?
2. One standard way of commemorating battlefield deaths—the most common and physical of absences—is to build a memorial. Maya Lin’s well-known Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., generated controversy even before its completion. Examine conventional expectations of what a memorial should be and discuss how Lin’s design ran contrary to these.
3. In her essay, “War Dwelling,” A.I. Siddiqi faces up to similar issues, though in a more personal way, as she needs to deal with her father’s serious illness as well. [Ed’s note: Sadly, the author’s father died before this book was published.]

In working on the design for a meditation center, she contemplates the language of architecture and how it can tell forgotten stories. Discuss how she links this to the Women’s Memorial and Education Center and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, two quite different institutions, but both of which relate to the notion of “absence.”

4. Discuss how, for Lin and Siddiqi, architecture and space come together in various ways, to express, and render tangible, human emotion.
5. Individual family members figure prominently in the remembered and/or imagined landscapes of many of the essays included here, e.g., from Michael Sandoval’s grandparents in “Meditations on an Old Love, Enshrouded in Prayer” to Christopher Lee’s uncle in “An Officer and a Chinaman: a War Hero I Never Met.” In what ways do the authors depict how these individuals are still present in the narrators’ lives?
6. The Vietnam War (which the Vietnamese refer to as the “American War”) led to the establishment of the Vietnamese communities in the U.S. in a way that was more direct and dramatic than the beginnings of the Filipino diaspora in the U.S. due to the 1899 Philippine-American War. How have these historical facts affected notions of “home” and “identity” not just for the narrators but for their families and surrounding communities? John Vu says, in “Crossing the South China Sea,” that he uses the short story structure to recount his family’s flight from Vietnam by boat. How does the device of fiction enhance his—and our—understanding of the episode? When in “Child of Two Worlds,” Andrew Lam’s mother expresses the fear that he is becoming a “cowboy,” what in fact is she saying?

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7. Elsa Arnett's comment on her visit to Hanoi, in "A Return to Vietnam," that "this place feels like home but it isn't," expresses an ambivalence shared by Asian Pacific Americans born in Asia but who came over to the United States at a young age. Examine how this ambivalence and even seemingly contradictory situation can be utilized to plumb the depths of both there and here, and thus enrich one's understanding of one's self and one's context.
8. Relatedly, the realities of biculturality, of multiculturalism, affect and complicate profoundly how so many Americans—and, indeed, people globally—think of home. By focusing on one or two essays, examine issues of where one belongs, and how to create a relevant cultural space or spaces that allow for such complexities.
9. Personal, familial histories inform most of these essays. In "Broken Pieces," Jennifer Estaris recounts hearing about the infamous Death March in the Philippines during World War II, from her paternal grandfather, a survivor of that march. Discuss how within the essay that particular memory serves as a catalyst—as indeed do other particular memories discussed in the other essays—to both break the seeming placidity of the present and to strengthen the link between the characters.
10. Beyond the personal, there is "official" history, which assumes the role of a national, collective remembering. And yet, as Luis H. Francia points out in "Light and Shadow," what a nation and its historians choose to remember can often be deceptive, leading to gaps in our understanding of the past and therefore of the present. Using the terminology and analogy of film he examines the role of memory. How does film capture significantly the facts and deceptions of memory? Is proceeding

by analogy a useful way of framing an investigation of memory, and therefore retrieving a deliberately ignored past, rendering it "present"?

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