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Asian American History for Today

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Around this time last year, I made plans to preach a sermon today for Asian American Heritage Month, inspired by the book The Making of Asian America (Simon and Schuster 2015) by Erika Lee, a professor of history at the University of Minnesota. I did not know at that time that learning to better understand the history of Asian Americans would feel far more relevant to current events than I could have imagined. And a year ago, I could not have predicted the sharp increase of anti-Asian discrimination, bullying, and xenophobia that has arisen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So let me say explicitly what should be common sense, but too often is not: **Asian Americans are not responsible for either the Chinese government's or the U.S. government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 response.** The large numbers of Asian Americans on the frontlines of combating the pandemic make coronavirus-related bigotry against Asian Americans even more ironic and offensive. Although the 19.5 million Asian Americans in this country today comprise only 6 percent of the population (Lee 1), Asian Americans make up **“18 percent of our country's physicians and 10 percent of our nurse practitioners”** (The Washington Post).

To highlight one other essential point that should be common sense, but too often is not: in the words of the social justice activist George Takei (1937-), **“Asian Americans are Americans.** Certain segments of the Asian American community have been here since the 1840s....” Takei continues by emphasizing that for many of his

Chinese American friends, “it's their great-great-grandparents that came from China.” As for George Takei himself, where is he from? Yes, he’s Japanese American, but he would tell you that he’s *from* Los Angeles, California, USA (9). That’s where he was born. That’s where he grew up.

I remember the first time a similar truth struck home for me. I was at a weeklong orientation to serve as a summer camp counselor in North Carolina, and I was introduced to a fellow counselor who was Chinese American. But when he opened his mouth he had the one of the strongest southern accents I have ever heard. In getting to know him over the course of that summer, it became clear, that he identified as being *from* Mississippi.

Before moving on, let me say one more word about George Takei. Although he is best known for being cast in 1965 to play the *Star Trek* character Lieutenant Sulu, it is also significant to know that more than two decades earlier in 1942, when Takei was five years old, the U.S. government imprisoned both George and his parents—all U.S. citizens—in internment camps during World War II.

Takei has shared that even after their release three years later, “Our bank accounts were taken, our home was taken, our business was gone, and the only place where we could find housing was on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, which to us kids — I mean, I was eight by then — was as traumatic as the day that the soldiers came and took us away” (CBC).

A few weeks ago, we reflected on the anniversary of the Kent State Shooting as a “sacred story of sacrilege,” a story of *desecration* that reminds us of what it looks like when there is a violation of what our UU First Principle calls “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Such stories stir within us, calling us to do everything in our power to prevent such a desolating sacrilege from happening again.

In the case of Kent State, that tragedy reminds us to do everything we can to prevent loaded rifles from ever again being issued to soldiers confronting student demonstrators. (That story is newly relevant regarding calls today to use military force against the racial justice uprisings around the country.) The wrongful imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II is another sacred story of sacrilege.

Imprisoning approximately 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry—two-thirds of

them U.S. citizens—in concentration camps without trial and for no other crime than the ethnicity one is born with is “one of the war’s greatest human rights atrocities” (Lee 212, 216).

The internment camps:

were often hastily refurbished fairgrounds or racetracks where the inmates were kept in former animal stalls and barracks. Barbed wire fences and guard towers surrounded the centers.... Entire families were kept in rooms no bigger than twenty by twenty feet with flimsy partitions that separated one area from another but offered no privacy. Inmates were forced to make their own mattresses out of bags and straw. Dining facilities and bathrooms were all communal (232).

This all happened only 80 years ago in The United States of America.

It is also important to emphasize that official U.S. government reports from investigations into Japanese American communities prior to the internment camps stated that, **“The vast majority of Japanese Americans were overwhelmingly loyal to the United States.”** But fear and racism led our government to wrongfully imprison Japanese Americans anyway. Even more perversely, it turns out that of the “nineteen American who were arrested during World War II for serving as agents of Japan, *all were white*” (213). Japanese Americans were not responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor then, and Chinese Americans are not responsible either for Chinese politics, or for the mismanagement of COVID-19 in China or America today. The memory of these concentration camps is a sacred story of sacrilege that calls us to resist fear mongering, lies, and xenophobia today against Asian Americans and other minority groups.

The Asian American historian Erika Lee has said that she does take some solace from witnessing people over the past few months denouncing acts of discrimination and racism against Asian Americans. **Taking the long view, she says, “That’s new.... When the Chinese were excluded in 1882 and when Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes [in 1942], there was very little public response**

and public support for those Asian American and Asian immigrant communities”
(WBUR).

Before moving on, I want to share with you one representative story: that of Fred Korematsu (1919 - 2005). On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt made the reprehensible decision to sign Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War to create internment camps. Fred Korematsu is one of a number of Japanese Americans who refused to comply with this unjust law, and within a few months, he was discovered, arrested, and imprisoned. He was twenty-three years old. In his words, **“I didn’t feel guilty because I didn’t do anything wrong.... Every day in school, we said the pledge of the flag, ‘with liberty and justice for all,’ and I believed all that. I was an American citizen, and I had as many rights as anyone else”** (234).

The ACLU (the American Civil Liberties Union) aided him in challenging Executive Order 9066 as unconstitutional, and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court. In December 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Korematsu v. United States* that the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans was a “military necessity” and therefore constitutional. I should hasten to add that that majority opinion (joined by four other justices) was written by Hugo Black, “a former member of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.” Three justices wrote a dissenting opinion that the internment camps had been unconstitutional and that the treatment of Japanese Americans in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attacks resembled **“the abhorrent and despicable treatment of minority groups by the dictatorial tyrannies which this nation is now pledged to destroy”** (235).

Fred Korematsu died in 2005, so he did not live long enough to witness the abhorrent *Korematsu* decision finally overturned—which did not happen until two years ago as part of the *Trump v. Hawaii* decision in which the Supreme Court rejected President Trump’s anti-Muslim travel ban. But Korematsu did live long enough to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 in recognition of his lifelong advocacy for human rights. In his final years, for instance, he advocated on behalf of prisoners being held in Guantanamo Bay without trial following 9/11 (396). And if he

were alive today, I suspect we would be hearing him denounce the concentration camps on our own southern borders today, which are sometimes euphemistically called “immigrant detention facilities” ([Vox](#)).

Now, as I begin to make my way to my conclusion, I should hasten to add a few more important points. First, although there is a lot to be gained from study of Asian American history as a whole, it is important to acknowledge the tremendous diversity often collected under the extremely large umbrella “Asian American” that includes at least twenty-four distinct ethnic groups. When you hear or use the word “Asian American,” keep in mind that it includes people from:

- *East* Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea
- *South* Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka
- *Southeast* Asia countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines (3).

And this isn’t even getting into the history of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

If you want to learn more, I recommend Erika Lee’s book [The Making of Asian America](#). Or if you prefer to watch instead of read, you could check out the recent three-part PBS series on [Asian Americans](#), available to stream.

I also wanted to spend at least a little time debunking the harmful stereotypes that all Asians are good at math and were raised by Tiger Moms. On the one hand, it is true that, “More Asian Americans (49 percent) have college degrees compared with all other U.S. adults (28 percent).” On the other hand, it is also true that Asians are also overrepresented on the other end of the spectrum: “A greater proportion of the Asian American population (8 percent) has less than a ninth-grade education than the total U.S. population (6 percent)” (376-377). It’s important to keep in mind that the achievement in some areas of the Asian American community can mask the ways that racism, poverty, and other oppressions continue to devastate other parts of the Asian American community (Lee 376). If you are interested in learning more or getting involved locally, I highly recommend volunteering at our local [Asian American Center of Frederick](#), which does incredible work under the expert leadership of their Executive Director Elizabeth Chung.

And I want to end with two quick case studies of how complex Asian American identities can be, as an invitation to really get to know someone rather than making

easy assumptions. Take, for instance, professional golfer "Tiger" Woods (1975 -). Although he is often described as African American, he speaks of himself as "The product of two great cultures, one African-American and the other Asian." He says, "**I feel very fortunate, and equally proud to be both**" (297). Woods's mother is from Thailand, and is of Thai, Chinese, and Dutch ancestry. His father is of African American, Chinese, and Native American descent.

Or consider Kamala Harris (1964-), the junior U.S. Senator from California. Harris too is often described simply as black, but the reality is more complex. Her mother immigrated from India, and her father immigrated from Jamaica. Her middle name is Devi, the Sanskrit word for "goddess" from the Hindu tradition, and she grew up attending *both* "a black Baptist Church *and* a Hindu temple," (LA Times). She is a member of *both* the Congressional Black Caucus *and* the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

For now, I'll close with a quote from Jose Antonio Vargas (1981 -), a Filipino American journalist and immigration rights activist. In 2013, on the fiftieth anniversary of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech," Vargas published an "Undocumented Immigrant Version" of Dr. King's speech in which he declared:

I have a dream...of citizenship, in a country I call my home, to a nation I want to keep contributing to. I have a dream...of not being judged by the pieces of papers I lack, but by the content of my character and the talent and skills I offer.... **I have a dream of being a free human being.**" (Lee 401)

May we each do what we can within our spheres of influence to turn such dreams into deeds: to co-create a world of Collective Liberation in which we all get free—a world of peace, liberty, and justice, not merely for some, but for *all*. Together we can help build the world we dream about.