Introduction

Relocation – A Racial Obsession

> Asian-American Studies must move beyond the bounds of racism as its organizing principle to interventionist practices that defy those conventions of race.
>
> Gary Okihiro, *Storied Lives: Japanese American Students in World War II*

The Japanese Empire and the American Republic seemed on a collision course from almost the beginning of Japanese immigration to the United States. The Japanese began coming to the United States in conspicuous numbers from the 1880s, at about the same time as the New Immigrants of Europe did. But the presence of Asians in the American West stretched back to the California Gold Rush. Many Chinese came to what they called "the Golden Hill" to search for its precious metal, then eventually stayed on to build its railroads, to man garment shops,[1] and eventually to help grace the tables of San Francisco with the finest cuisine west of the Mississippi River.

Yet the presence of peoples of Asian origin was never uncontested. With the advent of economic hard times in the 1870s, the onset of competition from eastern products due to the completion of the Central Pacific Railroad, and the rise of the Irish-led labor movement, their presence was increasingly resented. Demands for exclusion or restriction led to informal bans on their immigration to America in 1882 and 1892 and their formal exclusion by congressional legislation in 1902. But that still left railroads to build, immense farms and ranches to tend, and the homes of the railroad, Comstock, shipping, real estate, and other millionaires to look after.

[1] This early Chinese immigration was almost entirely male.

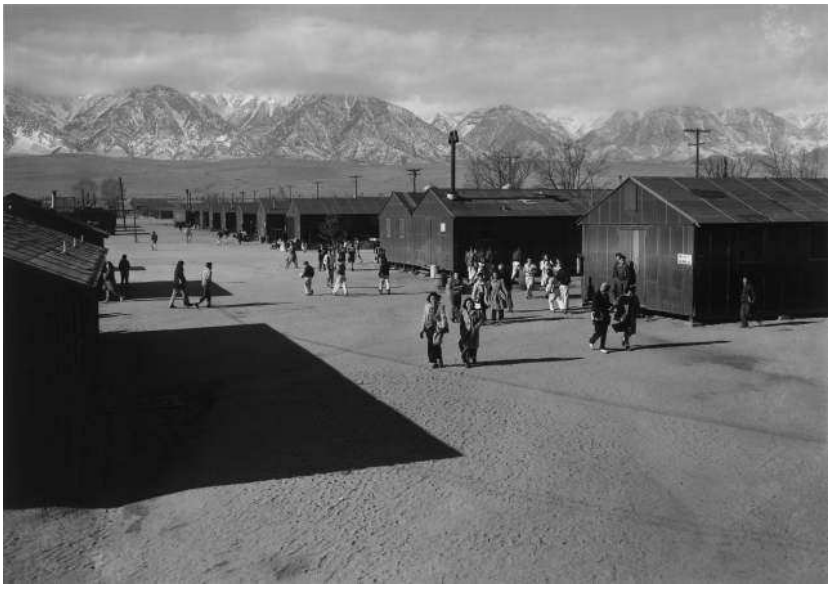

FIG. 1. High school recess period, Manzanar Relocation Center, California. The figures in this book are intended to offset the typical gloomy picture of relocation. Every center functioned as a small town. This figure is an overview of the barracks and mountains. Photograph by Ansel Adams. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppprs-00338.

That economic development demanded hands to replace the Chinese ones, including those of native white Americans,[2] Filipinos, and Japanese Americans, to do the agricultural work. The Japanese became a noticeable presence from the 1890s onward. Luckily for them, their own background in agriculture helped them become valued manual laborers. But they did not intend to remain so for long and soon graduated to small-time proprietors. And as the great landholders came to value Japanese services, they began to collaborate with them economically. First, the Japanese worked for others as sharecroppers, foremen, or laborers, but soon worked for themselves, developing niche crops like strawberries and vegetables. They sold these as market gardeners to an exploding urban California market, especially to Los Angeles, the

[2] For American and immigrant labor as farm workers, see M. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

"impossible city."[3] The Japanese would undoubtedly have come into conflict with the other American farmers, laborers, and nationalists sooner or later, but international relations rudely jolted them into it.

This story has been told often and well, so only the highlights will be touched on here. The first serious episode grew out of the insistence of San Francisco anti-Japanese militants that Japanese students be taught in segregated schools rather than with other Americans. This raised a furor in Japan to match that in San Francisco and required the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt to settle the matter. He persuaded the San Francisco school board to revoke the segregated schools order, and in return the Japanese Government promised to regulate carefully further migration from that country to the United States. But that "gentleman's agreement" did not bind other anti-Japanese militants in the rest of California, who in 1913 persuaded the State Legislature to pass a land law that prohibited aliens who were ineligible for citizenship from owning land. Since, by congressional legislation of 1790 and 1870, only white, black, or African aliens were eligible for citizenship, the measure essentially banned Japanese and Chinese aliens from owning land.

Recent scholarship has shown that diplomatic disagreements between Washington and Tokyo roiled relationships between the two nations and the two nationalities in the United States during the subsequent Wilson administration of 1913–1921. The California legislature stirred them up again in 1920 by passing another land law prohibition aimed at the Japanese, and then the status of the Japanese got tangled up with the general legislation to regulate American immigration. As a part of that process, in 1924, Congress banned all Japanese and other Asian immigration to the United States. That action created additional uproar in Japan and an outcry against the legislation by the friends of the Nikkei in America.

The argument that the 1913 and 1920 laws were either discriminatory, racist, or even anti-Japanese is fraught with peril. The laws of Imperial Japan contained the exact same supposed discriminations, forbidding alien land ownership, alien citizenship, and, for a time, immigration to that country as well. The American laws treated the Japanese exactly as Japanese law treated Americans. In addition, naturalization legislation in

[3] For the Japanese in agriculture, see J. Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900–1942* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

1940 granted citizenship rights to Native Americans from North and South America.

Thus, when World War II occurred, aliens who were white, black, brown, and red could become US citizens. Only Asians of the five racial groups could not. So if four out of the five racial groups could be naturalized, the explanation for that provision was not racial. Most racial groups were eligible. Whatever the original opposition to Asians might have been, it seems to me to have been based on social class, economics, and, ultimately, nationalism by World War II.

Still, in the most important and ironic sense, the 1924 legislation did the second generation a favor. The law did prohibit immigration from Japan, but that meant the Issei, ineligible for citizenship, would steadily diminish in number and the Nisei citizens group would continue to grow. The law lessened the power of the issue as the Issei passed away. The anti-Japanese lobby had less ammunition with which to inflame the public with each passing year. And the law did contribute to the rising power of the Nisei within the Japanese American community. It is no accident that the Japanese American Citizens League, the political representative of the second generation, was founded in 1928, shortly after the landmark restriction legislation, nor that some former supporters of exclusion, like the American Legion, began to work with the Nisei thereafter.[4]

Nonetheless, the Japanese, like other immigrant groups, organized to protect themselves from the anti-Japanese actions of others. However, unlike many other nationality groups, who took the next step to organize in the United States for Cuban, Irish, Polish, or Albanian independence, Israeli nationhood, or the Mexican revolution, the Japanese did not use America as a base to alter old-world political realities. But one way or another, they kept up their ties to their motherland.

The Japanese Americans were precocious organizers and they created in America a dense network of clubs, associations, temples, chambers of commerce, language schools, and prefectural associations, almost one on top of another. Through them, they cemented their ties to each other, to America, and to their fatherland. None of this organizing would have put them in danger had it not been for the behavior of that country. Almost alone among American immigrant homelands, that of the American-Japanese laid claim to continental American territory. That set them apart from the other immigrants' fatherlands – China, for example – and at the same time put the Issei and Nisei on a collision course with

[4] See Chapters 2 and 3.

their new homeland. By the luck of the draw, Imperial Japan and republican America came of age economically, militarily, and mentally at the turn of the 1800s. Each was flexing its muscles, collecting colonies, and exercising its vocal cords jingoistically. In addition, they came of age as competitors for power and influence in Asia. Each created mini-empires there and elsewhere; in the case of the United States, in the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Samoa; and in the case of the Japanese, in Korea, Formosa, and eventually Manchuria.

These were relatively modest empires by the standards of the time. The Europeans, especially the British, French, Germans, and Dutch, had fortunately grabbed up most of the militarily weak territories of the world before the Americans and Japanese could fall out over them. But the Japanese made the mistake of doing so anyway, lusting for the modest empire the Americans had acquired before the Americans got over their unpretentious case of imperialism. Japanese workers flooded onto the Philippine island of Mindanâo and Japanese capital followed where laborers had led, buying up large quantities of land. They did enough of both to come soon to regard Mindanâo as a "pre-war colony."[5] And by the same token, they also hankered after the US-controlled territory of Hawaii, one of their war aims when World War II broke out.[6] Those goals were damaging enough to Japanese–American relations, but some Japanese went so far as to make similar claims on the territorial United States.

Japanese American historian Eiichiro Azuma explains that prewar Japanese governments and elites thought of the Issei in California as colonists, representing the expansion of Imperial Japan. To my knowledge, Americans never laid such claims to the territory of the Japanese Home Islands as places to colonize, but these Japanese claims carried the maximum potential for later misunderstanding. A new "colonial discourse on emigration" grew up in the 1890s in which "the main theme ... revolved around the control of a foreign land through mass migration." And elites left no doubt as to which foreign land would be involved when they discussed the American West as a "new Japan," a "second Japan," a "new home," and "an imperial beginning," and Japanese migration as "extending national power."[7]

[5] L. Horner, "Japanese Military Administration in Malaya and the Philippines," unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Arizona (1973), pp. 38–41.

[6] J. J. Stephan, *Hawaii under the Rising Sun: Japan's Plans for Conquest after Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 55–88, 135–66.

[7] E. Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 22, 25.

Azuma also describes one of the Nikkei organizations, the Japanese Association of America, as a "virtual arm of the Japanese Government,"[8] which was a part of "Tokyo's policy of extraterritorial nation-building."[9] As Azuma also notes, the Empire began to walk back such comments in the 1930s, but the words were already out there. And nationalists have long memories, as witnessed in the Balkans and a host of other places in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.[10] When World War II broke out, these unfortunate Japanese words were what many American elites remembered. They were no more likely to forget them than the Japanese were prepared to disregard the words of the anti-Japanese Caucasians[11] of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Politics, whether domestic or international, is about perceptions as much as about realities, and no savvy persons would have given the opposition such opportune talking points.

But before these obviously heedless comments of the fatherland elites could do them harm, the Japanese Americans were making steady progress in the West, advancing toward economic security and developing toward political and social acceptance. They were well on the way to both[12] when World War II intervened on December 7, 1941. At first, the other Americans defended the Japanese Americans and insisted that they should not be blamed for the actions of the mother country. But with the publication of the *Roberts Report* on January 25, 1942, which revealed the full extent of the American military failure at Pearl Harbor, the tide turned against them.

The Japanese Americans came to be seen as a defense liability – not just a minority liked by some and disliked by others, but a national security threat. Fifth columns were very much in the news before the war, especially in Norway in 1940. And disloyal nationality groups, like the Austrian and Sudeten Germans, were the essential levers that Hitler used to pressure Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland in the run-up to war. The American Government feared that an Imperial attack on the United

[8] Ibid., 42. Professor Azuma's perceptive and thoughtful book is full of these discussions of Imperial Japanese and overseas Japanese associations.
[9] Ibid., 47.
[10] Balkan nationalism, often considered its quintessential variety, is treated sensitively in M. Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804–1999* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. xxi–xxviff.
[11] I have employed this term "Caucasian" as equivalent to the term "white" because the Nikkei themselves used it. See B. J. Grapes, *Japanese American Internment Camps* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2001), p. 143.
[12] See Chapters 2 and 3.

States was possible and that if and when it came it would be aided by a significant number of Japanese Americans. In brief, they feared another Pearl Harbor aided by another fifth column. Whether the Japanese would have used Japanese Americans in this way is not known, but many US officials thought that they would do so.

That conviction led the Franklin Roosevelt administration to take the unprecedented step of moving all of the Japanese Americans, citizens and aliens alike, away from a defense zone along the Pacific Coast that included all of California, western Washington, western Oregon, and southern Arizona.

From there, the government relocated/evacuated them first to assembly centers near their homes and then to ten centers in seven western states plus Arkansas. Since this story is more than a little confusing, a clear timeline is in order. The two restricted zone orders of January 29 and March 2, 1942 (those banished by EO9066) specified first that some Issei then all Nikkei must leave the coast. At first, they were expected to do so voluntarily, but when the Army recognized that not all Nikkei would have the means or be able to leave voluntarily, the military set up *reception centers* to house, feed, "and otherwise care for" such people. Simultaneously, to speed up the evacuating of the banned zones, the Army created *assembly centers*, which eventually housed some 89,000. Yet voluntary leaving was not working out, since the 8,000 and others who tried it were running into "local opposition." The Army quickly realized that loosing 100,000 more Nikkei into the face of this local opposition would be dangerous to them. A conference of western governors seemed to confirm this danger with firm opposition and some wild statements about lynchings. So when voluntary evacuation failed, the government committed to building *relocation centers* for all the Nikkei, to be under the authority of a newly created War Relocation Authority (WRA).[13]

From the beginning, defenders of the Nikkei claimed that the relocation centers were really "concentration camps" and that that the government's motivation for placing them there was racial rather than national security.

Despite the near consensus on the matter, that charge has never been proven. The relocation centers were nothing like any historical concentration camps or any of the ones proposed at the time, and the main motivation for relocation was national security and not racism. But the

[13] This timeline comes from "Supplementary Statement by Mr. D. S. Myer [restricted] to the Senate sub-committee on Military Affairs."

FIG. 2. Mother and child evacuees of Japanese ancestry on train en route from Los Angeles to the relocation center at Manzanar, California. The train trip was often comfortable, as in this picture. Central Photographic File of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–45. Record Group 210: Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1941–89. Courtesy US National Archives and Records Administration.

motivation for creating the centers was complex from the outset, including military, political, economic, emotional, and racial factors stressed by Milton Eisenhower, first director of the WRA, to which we must add government policy, religion, and the role of individuals. If one must choose the most important, nationalism was the principal one.

Racism is a more important twenty-first century concern to historians; nationalism was to the 1940s governments. In arguing this point, I have sought to encourage a "civil and considered discussion" of the relocation episode.[14]

[14] "Reader's Report" by Z. L. Miller, December 19, 2012.