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Interrogating Japanese American Knowledge Production and Narratives of “Success”

BY WENDI YAMASHITA

At the Japanese American National Museum’s 2011 annual gala dinner, before the late Senator Daniel Inouye comes to stage, he is introduced by his wife, Irene Hirano, a past president of the Museum. Introducing him means that she must list all of his accomplishments and his continued investment in the museum that forces us to honor him as well. And of course she cannot help but include how Inouye is third in line for the presidency as she proudly jokes that this is reason why there are secret service agents running around. And after Inouye narrates his life story that should never be forgotten he begins discussing “how far Japanese Americans have come” by relating statistical information to the audience about our law abiding nature, our low crime rates, our high intellectual rates, and that we are among the “three ethnic groups with the highest per capita income.” He then goes on to incorporate his own life into this “success” narrative saying, “today I stand before you, when I was first declared an enemy alien on December the 7th and today I am president pro-tempore, third in line for the presidency.” And then he looks affectionately at the crowd and states, “that’s not too bad” to which the audience enthusiastically applauds him.

WANTED TO BEGIN with this moment that troubled me then and has continued to haunt me even now.¹ It is this moment that has propelled my dissertation project—one that is interested in the way Japanese Americans choose to narrate themselves and their World War II experiences in opposition to other groups of color. By incorporating us into this logic of “success” Inouye situates Japanese Americans as exceptional citizens who are worthy of state recognition and thus affirmation. “Success” is only measurable in relation to the “failures” of these other groups and is in fact predicated on that. This logic of celebratory success institutionalizes affects within the Japanese American community that allow for and teaches us to abandon people. This success narrative as a strategy for survival allows Japanese Americans to hold on to the very things that protect us from state violence but allows for the death of others. This is the way in which the state can mobi-

1. This moment is not an isolated incident but instead is one that happens over and over again.

lize Japanese Americanness to do “its repressive work and its policing of civil society” and ourselves.²

For my proposed dissertation research, I am interested in looking at how Japanese American knowledge production and modes of memory inevitably reproduce forms of surveillance and carcerality operating during Japanese American incarceration that are predicated on even more brutal forms of death and destruction of “deviant” populations. I want to think about the way in which Japanese Americans are legitimated with “value” because they perform masculinity and femininity in “proper and respectable ways that redeem, reform, or counter their racialized “deviancy” in a post Redress era.³ Other groups are positioned in opposition to Japanese Americans and are marked as “deviant, illegal and criminal” and are unable to “circumvent the devaluing process of race and gender by citing other readily recognizable signs and signifiers of value, such as legality, heteronormativity, American citizenship, higher education, affluence, morality, or respectability.”⁴ I am interested in how this devaluation occurs in conjunction with the valuation of Japanese Americans as “productive, worthy, and responsible citizen[s].”⁵ By turning to Japanese American modes of memory and knowledge production, I hope to show the complexities of racial-

ization where Japanese Americans, particularly after Redress, illuminate the way contemporary power relations no longer simply operates through exclusionary measures but now also relies upon the affirmation and recognition of certain differences. Below, I briefly outline two different historical moments where this disidentification begins to take root via Japanese Americans’ racialization by the state.

Japanese American incarceration is simultaneously a site where technologies of carcerality work to demonize and dehumanize Japanese Americans in ways that legitimize punishment and imprisonment but it also happens to be a site of rehabilitation and normativization. As Jodi Kim argues in *Ends of Empire*, incarceration is articulated as a space where Japanese Americans “could learn to be productive subjects without ‘damaging’ the environment, becoming hyper-competitive in any field, or contributing to California’s ‘maladjustments.’”⁶ In this way, I want to think about Japanese American incarceration as a racialized spatial-social enclosure to see the links between the past (Japanese American incarceration) and the present (mass incarceration). However, I also want to pay close attention to the differences that exist between these enclosures, including how Japanese American incarceration is spatially and temporally different from mass incarceration. One of these differences is the way that Japanese Americans take on notions of rehabilitation and how they have

attempted to assimilate to “prove their ‘Americanness’” so that “a similar fate of being singled out as a racial group and incarcerated would not befall them again.”⁷ As Inouye’s speech shows, Japanese Americans’ rehabilitation not only becomes an integral part of their identity but also how this very particular racialization of Japanese Americans provides the building blocks for the way the current prison regime looks. Expanding upon Kim’s analysis of rehabilitation, I want to think about the ways in which the notion of rehabilitation is tied up with the way Japanese Americans were and continue to be racialized as “successful.” This discourse of “success” that stems from Japanese Americans rehabilitativeness ultimately produces feelings of innocence/guilt and criminal/non-criminal that sustain carceral logics. This disidentification is constituted by claims to whiteness in opposition to blackness that allows for one to become free/mobile because one is not a “true” criminal. Rehabilitation allows for Japanese Americans to obtain this mobility.

Furthermore, in my research I think about how the demise of the social wage has allowed for the proliferation of prisons as a form of racial subordination and class rule, where the state strategically utilizes Japanese Americans, incarceration and redress as a moment of national redemption that not only rights a past wrong but justifies the demise of the social wage. However, exactly at this moment of dismantling, the Civil Liberties

2. Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Feminism and Black Common Sense” from *The House that Race Built* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 235.

3. Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 148.

4. *Social Death*, 148.

5. *Social Death*, 148.

6. Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 119.

7. *Ends of Empire*, 120.

Act of 1988 passed, where the state not only acknowledged that internment did happen but that the U.S. was wrong for incarcerating Japanese Americans and that it would compensate former incarcerated with \$20,000. I examine the ways in which Japanese Americans' particular racialization and knowledge production about its own incarceration history inadvertently supports this neoliberal logic wherein prisons are the geographic solution to political and economic crisis.⁸ Despite being incarcerated Japanese Americans are articulated as having achieved "success" and are "deserving" of redress, which allows for the state to "celebrate diversity and achievement often at the cost of the vast population of unemployed, underemployed, or highly exploited people of color."⁹ In other words, Japanese Americans are given redress and reparations because they were wrongfully incarcerated that ultimately means that others are "deserving" of it. In this way, Japanese Americans are not only acknowledged and compensated for their rehabilitated status but they also function to rehabilitate the state from its racist and violent past by narrating racism as officially over.

In these moments we are able to see how Japanese Americans create distance from blackness that inherently legitimize the state's simultaneous defunding of the social wage and the proliferation of prisons. And yet, on February 18, 2015, the 2015 Day of Remem-

brance (DOR) event titled, "EO 9066 and the [In]justice System" was held at the Japanese American National Museum and highlighted the urgency of recognizing that the U.S. "justice system continues to imperil communities of color with police violence, profiling, and mass incarceration."¹⁰ Recognizing police brutality, anti-black racism, and mass incarceration as contemporary forms of state violence, DOR 2015 sought to place the deaths of black men by police within the context of Japanese American history. In other words, speaking to "the importance of remembering the Japanese American struggle during World War II" means that "we seize today's opportunity to begin a conversation in our community about the interrelated yet distinct injustices other communities face."¹¹ In this presentation, Japanese American history was re-narrated to highlight black and Japanese American interaction, coexistence, and shared spaces (neighborhoods and work places) to prove that we should care about black lives. However, drawing from a discourse of multiculturalism, this dominant imaginary for imagining interracial solidarity nostalgically remembers moments of connection as only being fruitful ones. While this re-narration is powerful, it is ultimately the moments of disconnect that highlight exactly where our histories diverge and our connections are missed or broken that reveal much more about state

violence and the possibility for solidarity. Even as this program made important strides in thinking about other groups of color it ultimately fell short in conflating black and Japanese American experiences.

My work seeks to expose the ways in which disidentification with blackness occurs and the logics it produces as well as to consider how identification problematically neglects the very different ways the state racializes us. As I continue working on this project, I ask: how does acknowledging our contradictory location (as former incarcerated and subjects of redress) inform our relationships to other communities? What does it mean to make Japanese American privilege visible when narrating our experiences of incarceration and racialized violence? I believe that by tracing our genealogy to something other than these moments where we position ourselves as "ideal" citizens and acknowledge our contradictory location, then we can imagine a future that is ethical to all and not just some Japanese Americans.

Wendi Yamashita is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Gender Studies. Her proposed dissertation interrogates Japanese American modes of memory and knowledge production for reproducing forms of surveillance and carcerality operating during internment that are predicated on even more brutal forms of death and destruction of "deviant" populations. She received CSW's Paula Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship in 2014.

8. Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 26.

9. Vijay Prashad, "Second Hand Dreams," *Social Analysis* 49:2 (Summer 2005): 196.

10. EO 9066 and the [In]Justice System. Program. 1.

11. EO 9066 and the [In]Justice System. Program. 1. Helen Ota. EO 9066 and the [In]Justice System. Multimedia Presentation.