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Beyond Redress: Japanese Americans' Unfinished Business

Eric K. Yamamoto†

INTRODUCTION

I am honored to be here at such a diverse gathering. This Day of Remembrance will likely mean many different things for different people. It will mean one thing for those who suffered the internment, struggled for redress and received an apology and reparations. It will mean something different for children and grandchildren of internees who have lived with the family tremors of the racial incarceration. And it will mean something else for Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Southeast and South Asians, and for Native Hawaiians, Latinos and African Americans as well as for those who are politically active in social justice movements. I hope to speak to all of you today, and especially to those drawn by the theme for today's commemoration: Remembrance Through Action.

I will begin by weaving together three stories that illuminate the experiences we commemorate today.

I. STORIES

The first story provides a brief account of silence, passion and rebirth. In 1984, shortly after the coram nobis case victories nullified the forty-year old convictions of internment-resisters Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi and Min Yasui, a Nisei woman, who appeared to be about sixty-five years old and greatly resembled my mother, came up to me after a forum in a room much like this one. Several Sansei lawyers, myself included, had just spoken about the courts' liberatory rulings in the coram nobis cases and the prospects for redress. The woman said she always felt the internment was wrong. "They imprisoned us without charges or trial because of our race. And we were loyal Americans." But after being told by the military, the President, the Congress and finally the Supreme Court that it was a necessity, after feeling the hatred from so many in the public, she had come seriously to doubt herself. "I couldn't talk about it for all

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these years.” Now the successful court challenges and the “prospects of redress,” she said, “have freed my soul.”

Today we commemorate the anniversary of the President’s internment order and justly celebrate redress and the freeing of our souls. To do that we must also remember the souls still burdened.

So let me recall a second, and darker, story. A story crossing generations. Nine years ago I met a Japanese American man from Kaua’i. A deeply troubled man, Chester attended a talk I gave on the internment. After the talk, he shared his pain. His father had been the first U.S. postmaster of Asian ancestry on Kaua’i. Then, after Pearl Harbor, solely because he was a Japanese American in a responsible position, the government incarcerated him in a series of internment camps. His wife and young son, left behind, struggled to survive, feeling ashamed and living on poverty’s edge. After the war, the former postmaster, now a broken man, tried to reunite with his family, but he could not. He ended up on the streets of San Francisco and died young in the Tenderloin district.

And Chester, the son, now a grown man, carried his family pain. That ache of initial loss and financial struggle redoubled when he learned in 1988 that his father was ineligible for the \$20,000 reparations because he had died before the passage of the Civil Liberties Act. “How could this be?” Chester asked. “We suffered more than most.” Imprisonment without charges or trial on account of race meant more than four years of lost freedom. It meant a family destroyed. How could the redress ignore his family’s pain?

I saw Chester several times over the next year. He was plagued by the same questions and growing anguish. He was suffering immense personal deterioration. Chester said he had exhausted all avenues of appeal, and that he was giving up. He checked into a hospital shortly thereafter and died.

What is the significance of Chester’s story across generations, of frustration with the apology to and reparations for Japanese Americans?

One more related story. In 1991 the Office of Redress Administration presented the first reparations check to the oldest Hawai’i survivor of the internment camps. I attended the stately ceremony. The mood, while serious, was decidedly upbeat. Tears of relief mixed with sighs of joy.

Amidst the celebration I wondered about the impacts of Japanese American redress over time. The process had been arduous. Many Japanese Americans contributed, and our communities overwhelmingly considered reparations a great victory, as did I.

Other racial groups lent support as well. Yet some of that support seemed begrudging. As an African American scholar observed:

The apology [to Japanese Americans] was so appropriate and the payment so justified . . . that the source of my ambivalent reaction was at first difficult to identify. After some introspection, I guiltily discovered that my sentiments were related to a very dark brooding feeling that I had fought long and hard to conquer: . . . “Why them and not me?”¹

1. Vincene Verdun, *If the Shoe Fits, Wear It: An Analysis of Reparations to African Americans*, 67 TUL. L. REV. 597, 647 (1993).

In a similar vein, a supporter of Hawaiian sovereignty asked in the early 1990s, “Why the Japanese Americans before the Native Hawaiians; we had our country taken illegally by the U.S. a hundred years ago?” And there is the Japanese Latin American Ogura family, abducted from their home in Peru and held by the U.S. as hostages in the Crystal City internment camp for two years and later denied reparations because they were “illegal aliens” in the U.S. They filed suit last month still seeking equal justice.²

Listen carefully to their collective questions. “Why others and not my Dad?” – Chester. “Why them and not me?” – the African American scholar. “Why the Japanese Americans before the Native Hawaiians?” – the Hawaiian sovereignty advocate. “Why not full reparations for Japanese Latin Americans?” – the Ogura family?

None of these speakers is angry or resentful. None is denying the justice of Japanese American redress. Each supports the telling of the internment story. Each, if here today, would be moved by the music, dance, poetry, politics and candlelight march. So why do their questions nevertheless tug at our heartstrings, gnaw at our gut? There are, I suggest, two reasons. First, the questions make us examine the extent to which Japanese Americans, the beneficiaries of redress, are now contributing to a more just America. And second, in light of this, the questions reveal that the legacy of Japanese American redress is unfinished business – it is yet to be determined.

II. REDRESS LEGACY

Let me underscore what I just said with stronger words. I ask you this time to quietly feel what is behind the words. Some people involved in other current reparations movements have felt that “as a whole, Japanese Americans benefiting from redress have offered relatively little financial aid and political and spiritual support [to their] justice struggles.” And a Nisei, a former 442nd veteran, recently said, “Educational memorials are important. But we [Japanese Americans] are spending all our social conscience money on building memorials to ourselves” (referring to the \$100 million spent on the DC monument). “That has dried up contributions for live justice projects.” Are these perceptions completely false, or partially true?

Of course, Japanese American activists have worked with others to advance social justice in many arenas. And Japanese Americans do give to a range of causes. But what does the essence of these perceptions tell us? Have Japanese Americans, as a whole, as some imply, “largely closed up shop because we got ours”?

Overall, I think not. But that perception exists *out there*. And rather than simply dismiss it, we can use it as an opportunity for looking

2. See generally, Eric K. Yamamoto, Address at the “Cycles of Hatred” Symposium (Nov. 19, 1999) (on file with Author).

thoughtfully and forthrightly *in here*. In doing so, we need to ask this larger question: is Japanese American reparation, which we rightfully commemorate today, solely about redress for Japanese Americans? Or is it also about racial justice, indeed social justice, for all suffering harsh societal discrimination?

These words may sound hard. So allow me to reframe what I have just described.

How many of you have heard, or said, “We will never let *it* happen again, we must be vigilant”? Most of us probably have, myself included. In Hawai’i, two years ago, every speaker at the Day of Remembrance said those exact words, Congressperson Patsy Mink and Acting U.S. Attorney for Civil Rights Bill Lan Lee included. By “it” each speaker meant the internment. We will never let the internment happen again. And the speakers were congratulatory: we have gotten a formal acknowledgment the internment was wrong and we have achieved redress; now we will be vigilant.

I find myself reacting in two ways. My initial reaction is that this is correct. Knowing what we know, and what we have legally achieved, Japanese Americans will never be interned again. That is truly good. Yes, we can publicize the internment and vigilantly insure “it” does not happen again to us.

But my second reaction is that something very important is missing from this thinking. It is too satisfied and too passive. It sounds as if it is enough for us to tell the internment story, commemorate our achievements and stand guard against future broad-scale mistreatment of Japanese Americans. All of these things are important. But, instead of saying “we will never let it (the internment) happen again to us,” should we not be saying, more broadly, “we will never let deep injustice under the false mantles of ‘necessity’ or ‘security’ or ‘protecting the American way’ happen again – to us, or to anyone”?

If this is so, it changes everything. It refocuses how we think and what we do. It refocuses us on the future, and on ourselves as well as others. We become present-day social actors, agents of justice, because real, hard injustices are occurring all around us every day to Asian Americans and other racial communities and beyond.

You can tell by now the path I am walking: Remembrance Through Action. Remembrance is important. It gives voice to those who are silent. It makes history live. It links the many of us. It provides lessons for the future. Yet memory is most powerful when it leads to action. Remembrance through ACTION.

With this in mind, I suggest that the legacy of Japanese American redress can and indeed should be this: Japanese Americans achieved deserved redress for a grave historical injustice, and, *in addition*, we Asian Americans collectively turned the lessons learned, the political and economic capital gained, the alliances forged and the spirit renewed, into many small and some grand advances against continuing social injustices across America. That would be a legacy based on what is right. It would be worthy of who we are as Asian Americans and who we can be, acting

firmly and appropriately in our own interests, and then beyond, in the justice interests of others. We can be agents of restorative justice, rebuilding material living conditions and moral spirit of both our own and multiracial communities.

III. AGENTS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

What does it mean to be an agent of restorative justice? How do we make this real for daily life? Many of you here know better than I do. But allow me to make some suggestions for action. I will break the suggestions down into five slices of a large pie.

Japanese in America

Starting closest to home, the first slice is “Japanese in America.” Notice I am not referring only to Japanese Americans. I say “Japanese in America” because not only are there those Japanese Americans like Chester, whose families still feel the internment’s pain but have received no redress, there are also Japanese Latin American families like the Oguras still excluded from basic justice. They need our immediate political, spiritual and financial support.

Also needing our support is the Soko Bukai – the Japanese American Churches. They are seeking to ensure that the San Francisco YWCA building they worked so hard to build in the early 1900s on Sutter Street remains in service of the Japanese American and Western Addition communities. You heard Mari Matsuda last year speak eloquently about this “Issei Women’s Legacy.”

Asian American Justice

The next slice of the pie of “what we can do” is to focus on “Asian American Justice.” This is broader than Japanese American justice. It means that we must engage across Asian ethnic lines.

Here in the larger Bay Area, how have we responded to the anti-Asian violence against Kuan Chung Kao, shot dead in his Rohnert Park driveway because police thought he might be an Asian martial arts threat?

Moving beyond the Bay, how have we fought injustice in Wen Ho Lee’s case? On a small scale, it reminds many of the World War II Korematsu/Hirabayashi/Yasui cases, this time involving a Chinese American. Targeted because of ethnicity, tarred with a charge of disloyalty, fired from work, incarcerated indefinitely without bail or trial and without any evidence of disloyalty, Wen Ho Lee has been the object of apparent Justice Department mistreatment. The media-splashed Wen Ho Lee prosecution taints all Asian Americans as less than American in the eyes of mainstream public. While all the facts are not yet in, “it” appears to be happening again. Asian American groups are rallying. What is our collective response to what looks to be ethnic-based persecution under the false mantles of “necessity”, “security” and “protecting the American way”?

Think also about the Hmong mother who strangled her children to end their and her misery and then failed at suicide. What does this say about the hard struggles of poor Asian women immigrants without strong support communities? Do we engage, recoil or distance ourselves? Is this our struggle too?

Let me pause to say that no individual, no group, could possibly act on all of these issues. Nor is there any single appropriate Japanese or even Asian American posture. My point is simply that these are compelling justice issues all around us, calling our name.

Interracial Conflict and Reconciliation

The third slice is a difficult one: interracial conflicts and prospects for group-to-group reconciliation. How do we, as Asian Americans, responsibly address deep tensions with other racial communities that often make so difficult the day-to-day interactions? Consider the long-standing public housing controversy at Bay View-Hunters point, where we witnessed violence and intimidation against Vietnamese immigrants placed there to integrate the housing, as well as vilification and arguably inappropriate use of civil rights rhetoric and law against the African American residents. Also consider the African Americans who allege that Korean immigrant merchants refuse to hire blacks and then take profits from inner-city stores and live in up-scale neighborhoods.

And think about the brutal apparently racial attack on Asian American girls in the Western Addition here in San Francisco. Japanese Americans, police and Mayor Brown's representatives convened to assure future protection, which is very important. But what about also addressing the effects on African American youth in the area of sustained poverty, violence and racism – and the forthcoming Nihonmachi redevelopment?

How are we responding to these complex and emotionally charged interracial struggles? What lessons of "restorative justice" are we bringing to the mix?³

Reparations for Other Racial Communities

The fourth slice of the action pie involves "Reparations for Other Racial Communities." It responds to the "why them, not us?" tensions. Just last week, the Tulsa Race Riot Study Commission recommended reparations for the town's white members' shooting, lynching and torturing of over 200 African Americans in a spree set off by a newspaper's 1927 headline "Lynch a Negro." Have we actively supported this effort? Or Congressperson John Conyers' resolution (introduced every year since 1989) to create a U.S. Commission on African American Reparations (patterned after the Commission that recommended Japanese American redress)?⁴ Two weeks ago I spoke to Representative Conyers, a strong

3. See generally, ERIC K. YAMAMOTO, *INTERRACIAL JUSTICE: CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION IN POST-CIVIL RIGHTS AMERICA* (1999).

4. See Shawn D. Lewis and Oralandar Brand-Williams, *Closing the Racial Gap*, *DETROIT NEWS*, Jun. 20, 1997, at C1 (writing about the Conyers Bill).

supporter of Japanese American redress. He indicated that Japanese American political leaders have been supportive of African American reparations for slavery and Jim Crow violence and segregation, but the larger Japanese American community has not.

What about our support – financial, emotional and legal – for Native Hawaiian reparations for the now concededly illegal U.S. aided overthrow of the Hawaiian nation and the confiscation of Hawaiian homelands?⁵ And what about pending Native American claims for lands stolen through countless treaty violations? To what extent, if at all, are we reparations activists?

Broader Social Justice

The final and biggest slice of the pie is “Social Justice,” that is, struggles for justice beyond race. This includes the effect on workers of the globalization of capital, the state initiatives banning bilingual education, the anti-gay initiatives in Hawai’i, California and, indeed, across the country, the attacks on the Violence Against Women Act and the pending Prop. 21 here in California that is likely to lock up large segments of youth, particularly youths of color and the poor.

In the context of this broader category of social justice, have you heard Al Nakatani speak? He grew up in Hawai’i and was educated on the continental U.S. While living in California and raising a family with his wife, Jane, he learned from friends and neighbors about the harsh injustice of the internment. Yet he ostracized his gay sons and denied their struggles in a largely homophobic society. And they died. He now speaks poignantly about the pain of his blindness – about his refusal to connect the injustice of the internment to the vilification and discrimination against gays. And he now acts politically to defeat anti-gay measures.

IV. CLOSING

So what kinds of actions must we take to serve as agents of restorative justice? They are different for everyone. Organizing events like this; working with a community group; building political coalitions with racial communities, including white Americans of good will; writing op-ed essays or letters to politicians; teaching or dancing politically; supporting key lawsuits; demonstrating at bureaucracies and in businesses; donating money. These are all actions that we can take. More concretely, how about supporting the Oguras’ lawsuit? How about participating in the February 24th “California Day of Action to Reverse the Ban on Affirmative Action”?

The legacy of Japanese American redress is still wide open. Will it be a legacy based on doing the right things? It depends on what we do. Will

5. See 100th Anniversary of the Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, Pub. L. No. 103-150, 107 Stat. 1510, enacted S.J. Res. 19 (1993) (joint resolution acknowledging 100th anniversary of January 17, 1983 overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai’i and offering an apology to Native Hawaiians on behalf of the United States for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai’i).

we be able to say five years from now: Japanese Americans achieved deserved redress for a grave historical injustice, and, *in addition*, Asian Americans are collectively turning the lessons learned, the political and economic capital gained, the alliances forged and the spirit renewed, into many small and some grand advances against continuing harmful discrimination across America?

We have started, but only started, down that road. I will conclude by naming just a few of the people here who have worked actively in multiple communities, who have transformed the lessons of the internment and redress beyond the Japanese American community into movements, small and large, for social justice. Yuri Kochiyama (forty years working on African American justice). Kim Miyoshi (statewide coordinator for "No on Prop. 21" campaign). Carole Hayashino (longtime activist and now candidate for the state assembly). Art Shibayama and Grace Shimizu (Japanese Latin Americans). Beckie Masaki (Asian Women's Shelter). Helen Zia (journalist, author). Anthony Brown (Asian American Jazz Orchestra). Donna Ozawa (co-founder of LYRIC, a gay/lesbian youth group). Diane Wong (journalist, playwright). Cathy Inamasu (Nihonmachi Little Friends). Jabari Sekou (hate crimes committee). Dina Shek (scholar, organizer). Dana Kawaoka (poet, activist). Brother Jahahar (Black Radical Congress). Oscar Rios (Watsonville Mayor and civil rights activist).

Remember then act.