Theories and Methodologies

Rethinking Asian American Exceptionalism

JOSEPHINE PARK

Beginning in spring 2020, invitations to speak about anti-Asian racism flooded my in-box—from organizations across my home campus, local network affiliates and cable news outlets, and national and international news magazines. This was a common experience among Asian American studies scholars in the waning months of the Trump administration. We were suddenly called on to provide lessons in Asian American history and culture to an American mainstream stunned by a wave of violent attacks against a formerly invisible minority.

I remember a comment in the *Zoom* chat in the first panel I spoke at on campus: an Asian American student frustrated that his white friends didn't believe he experienced racism. This comment surprised me then—but a version of it would appear in every such engagement, until the publicized onslaught of anti-Asian racism finally exceeded the gaslighting denial of it. It has been a particular tendency of anti-Asian racism to fly under the radar, to be discounted or deemed harmless, in large part because it has been so widely tolerated.

For the previous administration, anti-Asian racism featured prominently in its failed campaign for managing the pandemic. Its contradictory efforts to minimize and attack a foreign invasion deemed at once weak and noxious, mapped onto Asian bodies at home: all of it was familiar, drawn from a well-worn political playbook. The contours of this xenophobia expose a history of wartime ascriptions, and in this reconsideration of Asian American exceptionalism, I examine the racist workings of a continuing state of exception in the United States, from the wartime emergency of Japanese incarceration to our present political and economic battles.

The legal historian Mary L. Dudziak's meditation on the time of war explains that wartime is "the only kind of time we have" (8). Dudziak's catalog of American conflicts underscores the legions of small wars that run through our military history, particularly in

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hemispheric skirmishes. But the hottest wars took place in Asia, in periodic and deepening quagmires that ranged from the Philippines to Japan, and then to Korea and Vietnam before settling into the Persian Gulf and our recent retreat from Afghanistan.[1] "It is in war that citizens see the state," Dudziak writes (22), and in the case of these conflicts, it is in war that the state sees its Asian American citizens.

It is worth underscoring the novelty of Japan as an enemy of the United States. As the anthropologist Ruth Benedict puts it in her influential study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the Japanese were "the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle" (1). The new melding of political enmity with racism that emerged during the Pacific War was deemed by Giorgio Agamben in *State of Exception* as the "most spectacular violation of civil rights (all the more serious because of its solely racial motivation)" in American history (20). The intensity of anti-Japanese sentiment spurred the construction of the prison camps that dotted American hinterlands, from repurposed public arenas and detention facilities to freshly manufactured cities of barracks designed to house large populations of American-born subjects.

The experience of these camps, submerged for decades, has instigated a significant body of literature. Mitsuye Yamada, incarcerated at Minidoka at the age of nineteen, critically led the feminist call to break the silence that had encased this past. Her first collection of poetry, *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, published in 1976, details the different experiences of the camps for issei and nisei, first- and second-generation immigrants, as in the portrayal of enemy subjects in the poem "Inside News":

> A small group
> huddles around a contraband
> radio.
> What?
> We
> are losing the war?
> Who is we?
> We are we the enemy
> the enemy is the enemy.
>
> Static sounds and we
> cannot hear.
> The enemy is confused
> the enemy is determined
> and winning.
>
> Mess hall gossips
> have it that
> the parents
> with samurai morals
> are now the children.

"Inside News" offers a telling glimpse of the "inside" of carceral space. The distinction between this interior and an inaccessible outside is rendered through the contraband radio. Recording and transmitting devices were confiscated from Japanese American homes in the first sweeps conducted by military and local police in advance of the United States' entry into the Pacific War. In presenting a group arrayed around this particular wartime proscription, the scene stages the complexities of enemy identification and the material conditions of suspended liberties.

The poem plunges us into this small group through a series of questions. The first "What?" sounds like a question common to the group, but the "we" that follows effects a break—and the enjambed line marks a divide that launches the core question of the poem: "Who is we?" It is striking that this question can't be "Who are we?" Who we are is not the question, because the possibility of working as a group, even for this small assembly, has been foreclosed. "Who is we?" triggers a bifurcating response, between "We are we the enemy" and "the enemy is the enemy." The options are political identification with the enemy or a "we" cut off from the closed circuit of "the enemy is the enemy."

The idea that "we" is "the enemy" comes from outside news, poorly transmitted and contradictory. But while the distant battlefield crackles over the airwaves, the inside news is clearer, transmitted through the far more effective medium of gossip. This distinction between news and gossip stages a division between discursive levels and modes of circulation, and the shift from the "we" of Japanese loyalists to these gossips poses what "we / cannot hear" about the progress of the war against what everyone

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knows inside the camps. Every account of the camps laments the loss of family life in the regime of mess halls and latrines. The enforced public domesticity of military detention, shot through with the static of the war, reshuffled families along political lines. The news from the mess hall finally defines who we "is" in the poem: "the parents / with samurai morals." To associate the parents with Japanese warrior codes paradoxically debilitates them: they "are now the children."

This generational reversal was a thoroughgoing effect of the wartime incarceration. Because Asian immigrants were ineligible for naturalization, the issei had to stay Japanese. But a notorious 1943 loyalty questionnaire administered in the camps included a question that asked detainees to renounce allegiances to foreign states, posing statelessness as the impossible alternative to identifying as an enemy. A second—and more controversial—question about willingness to engage in military service installed a political partition between those who answered yes to both questions and those who said no. The minority of respondents who refused to accede were cordoned off—shipped to separate facilities, including federal prisons—and shunned from the broader community, but the fate of these so-called no-no boys in subsequent decades shifted with political winds until they eventually became the heroes of the activist period of the 1960s and 1970s.

The sociologist Harry H. L. Kitano's 1969 study *Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture* critically demonstrates this changing perception. Kitano's watershed study—Karen Tei Yamashita writes that it laid "the sociological foundations for what we popularly define to be us, Japanese Americans" (47)—is deeply inflected with his first-person experience: Kitano was incarcerated while in high school, and his study documents the transformation of his community. Kitano repeatedly describes the wartime docility of the Japanese: "The evacuation was rapid, smooth, and efficient, primarily because of the cooperativeness of the Japanese population" (33). A near-obsessive return to this obedience runs throughout the study, and Kitano ultimately resignifies the meaning of yes and no responses, of good and bad subjects:

> During the Issei period, the Japanese were not popular in America. Early complaints against them alleged, in particular, dirtiness, disease, and poor living conditions, irreligion (after the manner of the "heathen Chinese"), and, most serious of all, reluctance to keep to a modest lower-class place in the white society. The Japanese, it was thought, were too pushy and ought not to have wanted the things that white men want—to own land, to be a citizen, to be treated as equals. For all these reasons they were regarded as undesirable immigrants.
>
> Since that time, however, the behavior of the Japanese has generally been described as "good." Goodness means different things in different contexts, of course. To the schoolteacher it means that Japanese students are quiet, obedient, and diligent. An employer considers his Japanese employee good because he is well trained, well educated, and highly motivated to work. Public health officials now find the Japanese clean, disease-free, and living in sanitary housing. In terms of the general society, the Japanese are good because they don't get into trouble and keep in their place.
>
> But conceptions of goodness and badness often lead to peculiar generalizations. For example, the Japanese behavior during the evacuation could be considered good because it was so docile, just as, from the Nazi point of view, the Jews were very good about Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Conversely, the current Negro revolt is not characterized by "good" behavior because it is nonconformist and uncooperative. And, of course, to be labeled "good" by the dominant culture is often fraught with danger—in previous eras, the good Indian was the dead Indian, the good "Chinaman" was the one who packed up his belongings and went back to China. (116)

Kitano presents a searing critique of the dangers of goodness. But how did the Japanese learn not to want "the things that white men want—to own land, to be a citizen, to be treated as equals"? The alien land laws that barred land ownership, the rulings against naturalization, and then the culminating fact of war: this is how a population that was "too pushy" became "good" enough to disappear alongside the vanishing Indian and deported Chinese. At the heart of this metamorphosis from

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bad to good Japanese are policies of a repressive and then an enemy state. Kitano's critique of the fraught dangers of goodness anticipates later scholarship on the politics of the model minority, but his indictment of Japanese American behavior also displaces state policies. In skewering our own goodness, we must expose, too, the state of exception that perpetually threatens to suspend our citizenship.

The term *model minority* was coined in 1966 to capture this Japanese American goodness by the sociologist William Petersen, who marveled at the triumph of a population that suffered "the most discrimination and the worst injustices" (20): "By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born white" (43). The contest with whites that characterized Kitano's "pushy" Japanese resurfaces here, even after the Japanese have become good. While they are no longer political foes, their wartime demonization as alternately sub- and superhuman lingers.[2] In bringing out the wartime foundations of the model minority myth, I want to underscore a continuing battle with whiteness: the myth is most pernicious when it is weaponized against other racial minorities, but the perpetual competition with whites sustains the conditions of war.

The long afterlife of the political demonization of Japan extends into our present. In the wake of the Pacific War, the battles of the Cold War rehashed the racial enmity of the wartime state of exception. The historian Mae M. Ngai emphasizes the "foregrounding of state relations in midcentury Asian immigration and race policy" (169), and the state of exception in the early Cold War was an ever-present threat for Chinese Americans, who navigated immigration reforms laced with political restrictions that contained the potential for reprisals. Ngai reminds us that rumors of concentration camps were abundant in Chinatowns in the 1950s (213), even as these spaces were touted on the global stage as evidence of Western liberal integration. Pitched against the villainy of Red China, American Chinatowns were remade into exhibits for Cold War civil rights: good against bad Chinese.

The Cold War installed partitions to mark off friend from foe, and the Korean War, the early and defining hot war of the era, set a policy of containment drawn up by the superpowers. The grueling and uneasy victory of containment in Korea was designed to disappear in the heyday of domestic prosperity, and yet this war persists; the ongoing demonization of North Korea locks both states in a wartime footing. But while Korea was being forgotten even as fighting there continued, Vietnam took center stage. This second test of containment policy, designed to follow the standard of Korean division, extended into decades and ensnared multiple states in a nightmare of militarization—and triggered decolonizing movements in the United States. Cast as a loss of American innocence, the war in Vietnam effected a dramatic and dark maturation in popular discourse and culture, which came to understand that creating states of exception was standard operating procedure in the jungle.

Amid the political awakenings fueled by the war in Vietnam, the Asian American movement was especially attuned to the body counts of the war. The cause of Third World liberation was integral to the call for a panethnic solidarity: Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American activists in the late 1960s agitated to transcend ethnic divisions—themselves bitter by-products of war—to create a new racial formation. Asian America is a radical and synthetic creation: pitched against the dehumanization of the Third World, the movement fabricated a racial solidarity that would fold in diasporic subjects from vast swaths of the globe. In Asian American literary studies, scholars have grappled with the conditions of this solidarity, but throughout the shifting contours of the field runs a consistent scholarly commitment to the foundational work of decolonization—which has grown more pressing in the new century.

Asian America is a wartime construction through and through: the racial consciousness it birthed was a riposte to a history of imperial warfare. From the domestic suspension of civil rights in World War II to the ungovernable GIs of Vietnam, the state of exception has imprinted the twenty-first century, from the inaugural emergency of 9/11 onward. In the conduct of the war on terror, we have come to assume the suspension of every

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political, social, and human propriety; domestic civil rights violations have become routine; and the end of our war in Afghanistan was awash in the heartbreak and cruelty of 1975 Saigon. Our last days in Afghanistan were faithful to that devastating script: journalists on the ground reported that it felt like a movie—one that we've all seen before. Like Vietnam, this longest war has eroded popular faith in American exceptionalism, but it has also deepened a pernicious belief in its most mythic dimensions.

The harrowing experience of the Trump presidency was a daily state of exception, whose nonstop suspensions of civil liberties missed actual fascism only because of the regime's thorough incompetence and lack of interest in the work of governance. The exclusions and incarcerations long understood as failings that our democracy had overcome became policy objectives. As so many of us looked on in disbelief, the administration revived racist bans and attacks, abetted by all branches of government—and applauded by a surging mass who undertook to enforce these new orders of hate.

The unleashing of anti-Asian hate in the last season of Trump's presidency demonstrated the longing for open war with China. The order of things has been reversed from the era of the great wars, when wartime propaganda was marshaled to teach the citizenry whom and how to hate; our domestic hatreds can now drum up imperial warfare. The contest with China has been waged on economic and cyber fronts, but the emergence of the "China virus" allowed the Trump administration to seize the popular front. The particular inhumanity of the attacks against the most vulnerable members of our community recalls the cruelty of the war zone: these subjects have become wartime targets, picked off for their weakness. American exceptionalism dictated a national immunity from the vulnerabilities of the rest of the world; states of exception permit these others to be exterminated.

I will conclude with the Atlanta shootings, in which a young white man and self-described sex addict waged war on Asian women. The white sheriff who notoriously described the killer as having a "bad day" resorted to Vietnam-era GI victimhood, invoking the lost innocence of another baby-faced American in combat (qtd. in Kornfield and Knowles). The gunman's sex addiction is inseparable from American military engagement: servicing American soldiers was part and parcel of Cold War alliance, and the sex trade that built up around military bases throughout East and Southeast Asia created a global industry. The storefronts in Atlanta were rendered outposts of this imperial history, and the working-class Asian American women murdered there lay bare the long arc of wartime subjectivity.

The state of exception undoes the myth of American exceptionalism: it is the nightmare to the American dream. Asian American exceptionalism is a product of modern imperial warfare, itself shackled to the founding bloodshed of settler colonialism. In these times of resurgent nativism, we must contend with the wartime dimensions of the model minority, fashioned out of a suspension of civil rights to curtail the rights of all racial minority groups. Being good was never enough, and our longing to be bad subjects must attend to the wartime strictures that dictate these divisions into yes and no, model minority and alien enemy.

Notes

1. The United States' annexation of the Philippines and the brutal Philippine-American War launched this history of imperial warfare. My discussion must bypass this foundation in favor of a more sustained focus on the Japanese case, but this earlier history underlines the perils of Cold War alliances between Asian nations and the United States.

2. In his landmark study of the demonization of Japan, Dower writes, "Subhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman—all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like oneself" (9).

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