LOYALTY TO EMPIRE

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In May 2003, shortly after George W. Bush launched the US invasion of Iraq, Arundhati Roy and Howard Zinn held a public conversation at the Riverside Church in Harlem, the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s remarkable speech against the Vietnam War back in April 1967. Zinn seemed to assume that he and Roy shared similar worldviews, on the left and critical of America's latest war. At one point, Zinn attempted to defend US nationalism by pointing out its different iterations. "And when people—and I have been accused of being anti-American, and I respond to that, you know, by saying, 'You know, we must disagree about what America is,'" Zinn said, to much applause. "America is not Bush. . . . America is not the government." After commenting on the Declaration of Independence and "the basic principles of democracy," he inferred a political and intellectual camaraderie. "So, I know—I know, Arundhati," Zinn declared, "that you are pro-Indian in the best sense, and you are pro-American in the best sense. Yes."[1]

Roy let out a kind laugh, but she refused to play along. "Well, I try not to think in these categories, actually, you know?" she replied. "I'm actually not a nationalist of any kind. You know, I believe that we—I think it's very important to stop . . . our minds coming up short against these artificial boundaries. And I think nationalism really does lie at the root of a lot of the troubles of this century and the last one. And . . . we really need to question that, because . . ." Zinn interjected at that point to suggest and insist that they shared a critique of US wars. If afforded a chance to elaborate, Roy might have said what she said in a speech the next night. "Speaking for myself, I'm no flag-waver, no patriot, and am fully aware that venality, brutality, and hypocrisy are imprinted on the leaden soul of every state," she said. "So may I clarify that tonight I speak as a subject of the American Empire?"[2]

The brief exchange might have appeared jovial and inconsequential, but the difference between Zinn and Roy represented a huge gulf in how we might

approach the United States and US history. Zinn hoped to direct America toward its progressive traditions and inclusive ends; Roy saw no hope in America because it was an empire terrorizing the world. For Zinn, the American nation, beginning with the Declaration of Independence, held a universal promise that wayward leaders like Bush endangered. It may be tempting to believe in Zinn's vision of a better America, to imagine working toward a more perfect union and a more inclusive past, but it is based on a fatally flawed premise: that it is possible to disaggregate the American nation from the US empire. That nationalist impulse has made it perhaps easier to insert Asian American history into dominant narratives of US history, but it has rested on erasing and thereby fortifying the colonial roots of US nationalism. In the process, our field has largely reproduced nationalist histories, hoping against hope that such accounts will make Asians finally into full-fledged Americans.

SEARCHING FOR A TEXTBOOK

When I prepare for a course, I think long and hard about which books to assign because I know that choosing the right books can transform how students see and engage the world. For me, reading Vincent Harding's *There Is a River* (1981) as a fledgling undergraduate decades ago awakened me to new possibilities. Harding, who had drafted King's antiwar speech, made studying the past exciting and relevant and motivated me to approach US history critically. He laid out the intellectual and political stakes of Black history, in a kind of urgent prose that I had not encountered in a history course.[3] Reading Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989) in my very first Asian American Studies course, taught by Gary Y. Okihiro in the fall of 1990, likewise left a deep impression. For the very first time in an academic setting, I read about people whose backgrounds resonated with my own.[4] I eventually abandoned my plans to apply to law school and decided to become a historian. Books can change lives.

Back in the 1990s, Asian American history, as a field, was struggling for recognition—in US history courses, in department hires, in professional organizations. Takaki's book attracted a lot of attention. For many years, it was *the* book that introduced Asian American history to undergraduate students, American historians, and general readers. When I stepped into the role of an instructor, however, I no longer found *Strangers from a Different Shore* inspiring. Takaki's presentation of Asian Americans as prototypical Americans—immigrants "overblown with hope" but struggling to overcome racial oppression and generational and cultural divides to join a wider community of national belonging—undermined

my pedagogical objectives. I was hoping that students could begin to see history and Asian American Studies as powerful heuristics to raise questions about the United States, about the US empire, and about nationalism in general. But Takaki's nationalist narrative got in the way. "The history of America is essentially the story of immigrants," he had concluded, "and many of them, coming from a 'different shore' than their European brethren, had sailed east to this new world. . . . Their dreams and hopes . . . have been making history in America."[5]

The notion that the United States is a "nation of immigrants" is, of course, a social construct. If Asian Americans could not identify readily with the British colonists and white settlers of the eighteenth century, the rewriting of US history in the second half of the twentieth century created a multicultural opening. With John F. Kennedy's popular book, *A Nation of Immigrants* (1958), a new timeless national figure capacious enough to transcend racial boundaries soon eclipsed all others: the immigrant. In Kennedy's hands, even enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples of North America could be transfigured into "immigrants"—Americans all, filled with a pioneering spirit that made America the fabled haven of mobility and diversity.[6] In that sanitizing process, *settlers* and *colonists*—sanitized as those terms are already—morphed into *immigrants* to remove colonialism and slavery from the nation's founding. If most of us cannot trace our bloodlines to the Founding Fathers, Asian Americans could at least join the "nation of immigrants." That nationalist narrative sounds like a fairy tale, but it has become the backbone of almost every synthesis of Asian American history.

In my search for a textbook to replace Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*, I have come across the same issue over and over: American nationalism is everywhere. Stressing the global contexts to Asian migrations and struggles, Sucheng Chan's *Asian Americans* (1991) read very differently from Takaki's text in tone, approach, and content. Chan hoped to present Asian Americans as victims and agents of history, specifically "on how Asian immigrants themselves have fought against the discrimination they faced, as they tried to claim a rightful place for themselves in American society." *Asian Americans* nonetheless subscribed to the notion that US history was fundamentally about sanctioning immigration and overcoming racism. "As immigrants, many of their struggles resemble those that European immigrants have faced," Chan stated, "but as people of nonwhite origins bearing distinct physical differences, they have been perceived as 'perpetual foreigners' who can never be completely absorbed into American society and its body politic." In the end, she implied a future resolution of that irreconcilable contradiction in national inclusion: for Asian Americans to work toward becoming "full participants in American life" through "public service—activities that improve the larger commonweal."[7]

As a wave of new PhDs churned out monographs in the 1990s and 2000s, no synthesis emerged to rival Takaki and Chan in our field's introductory courses until the publication of Shelley Sang-Hee Lee's *A New History of Asian America* (2014). Lee meticulously integrated a wealth of new scholarship, but she consciously did not seek to supplant older histories of "immigrant America." She wished instead to supplement that narrative with "a history about American power and inequality, interethnic tension and competition, glass ceilings and racial profiling, and economic, racial, and patriarchal privilege." Like Takaki and Chan, Lee noted different moments of US imperial violence, but they were largely presented as episodes to contextualize Asian immigration to the United States. Despite intellectual trends toward "transnationalism," she decided not to adopt "post-national or transnational frameworks" because Lee believed that "the US nation and issues of national identity and policies remain highly salient and merit continued focus." Lee aspired to write a national history of race through "the distinctiveness of Asian American experience," an approach that could not but reify the American nation.[8]

Transnationalism did not necessarily afford a radical break with the past. Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America* (2015) attempted to place Asian American experiences and US history globally. Although Lee's stories and places were at times more expansive, her central narrative unabashedly promoted Asian Americans as embodying the American Dream. Millions of Asians, she stated matter-of-factly, "have come in search of work, economic opportunity, freedom from persecution, and new beginnings that have symbolized the 'American Dream' for so many newcomers." In recent times, Lee noted that Asian Americans were less bound to a singular national identity, but not in Roy's sense. Asian Americans today, Lee wrote, "might shop at Walmart as well as the local Korean grocery store, contribute to their children's local parent-teacher association and to their alma mater in the Philippines, or vote in both the United States and Taiwanese national elections." In Lee's analysis, Asian Americans' "transnational" search for socioeconomic mobility rechristened them as "quintessentially American" and simultaneously helped everyone else to "become global Americans."[9] Within that imagined American nation, there was no room to see, let alone to critique, the US empire.

In the same year, Gary Okihiro, a contemporary of Takaki and Chan, offered his comprehensive synthesis through a comparative and relational history of Asians and Pacific Islanders. *American History Unbound* (2015) wrote against liberal narratives of immigration and assimilation by foregrounding Marxist framings of imperialism, world-system, migrant labor, and dependency. Okihiro emphasized that the first phase of Asian American history was defined by migrant labor, made possible by European and American expansion of capitalism and

its uneven development around the world. It was through the systemic flows of goods, discourses, and workers, he argued, that Asians and Pacific Islanders moved to the United States, principally as cheap laborers that the white nation recruited, exploited, and excluded. Curiously, Okihiro stopped short of interrogating the nation and citizenship. He stated: "Through their struggles for sovereignty and the full rights of citizenship and membership, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and indeed all peoples of color in the United States . . . have transformed, and revolutionized, the nation." But was it possible to realize "the nation's past and promise of equality in their fullness and entirety" by demanding liberal citizenship in the United States?[10]

COLONIAL ROOTS OF SEDITION AND "DISLOYALTY"

Integrating Asian Americans into a progressive national history to contest what it means to be American—essentially what Zinn was calling for—could be understood as a strategic maneuver to make Asian Americans visible and legible in a racist society. To be treated like a perpetual foreigner does not feel good. But writing critically about the past should be different from responding to hostile encounters on the street or engaging in political campaigns for progressive reforms. We can strive for something radically different from demanding our rights as Americans. It is not enough to imply or to infer America's capacity for national inclusion because we know that the terms of that inclusion have been pathetically provisional, not fundamentally transformative. If particular Asians were ever deemed worthy and deserving of state protection, others were deemed unworthy and deserving only of state violence.[11] Racial inclusion and racial exclusion, state protection and state violence, operated hand-in-hand. That is the logic of liberal citizenship, rooted in a promise of universal equality to justify and perpetuate grave inequality.

American nationalism and liberal citizenship, in turn, nourished and sustained the US empire, very much part and parcel of historical processes that shaped the modern world. The nation-state, Mahmood Mamdani argues, can be traced to 1492 when the Castilian monarchy championed national homogenization and global colonization. Expelling Muslims and Jews out of Christian Spain and backing colonial expeditions abroad rested on state-sponsored violence, the underbelly of the liberal state that an endless series of universal declarations could never displace. Armed with the "doctrine of discovery," European explorers unilaterally claimed lands for their Christian monarchs in the name

of "civilization" and set out to conquer the peoples already there.[12] In relation to that wider history, through innovative critiques of liberal philosophy and state violence, Asian Americanists over the last quarter century have raised fundamental questions on the constitution of the United States, revealing the inextricable and racial links between the American nation and the US empire. Studying Asian American history could serve as a means to understand colonialism and slavery, the founding institutions that the American nation and the US state were created to disavow and to uphold.[13]

But, in the field's textbooks and in countless other texts, American nationalism has set the parameters of historical study, in part as a reaction to longstanding depictions of Asian Americans as permanent aliens. The Chinese were rightful "immigrants" unjustly attacked and excluded from the "nation of immigrants"; the Japanese were "loyal" Americans falsely accused of being "disloyal." The problem before us is deeper than Asian Americans being viewed and treated as aliens and foreigners. The problem is that our field cannot seem to escape that binding logic, as if demonstrating our Americanness through history, our historical presence in North America, will transform us into model Americans—immigrants and citizens—and as if being allowed to join the American nation will set us free. In accounts of Japanese Americans and World War II, for example, it is customary to underscore that two-thirds of those incarcerated were "loyal" US citizens. From that perspective, even Nisei draft resisters in US concentration camps have come to be represented as superpatriots fighting for constitutional rights denied them, as if the American nation could and should define our horizon of political possibilities and historical interpretations.[14]

To flip that nationalist narrative on its head, we might look at the colonial origins of sedition, often presumed to be a self-evident crime against the nation, the polar opposite of "loyalty" and patriotism. About a century after fears of revolutionary ideas and revolutionary peoples from France and Saint-Domingue (Haiti) infiltrating the United States had led to the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, the US colonial regime in the Philippines decreed the Sedition Act in 1901. In the throes of a brutal war for colonial conquest, the law prohibited "any person to advocate orally or by writing or printing or like methods, the independence of the Philippine Islands or their separation from the United States whether by peaceable or forcible means." To utter anticolonial thoughts or to engage in anticolonial politics marked Filipinos as seditious, "un-American" or "anti-American," the same charge that would haunt generations of Asian workers and activists. Arrested in 1917 as part of a dragnet targeting South Asian revolutionaries, Bhagwan Singh explained that he simply wanted "to see India enjoy freedom and happiness like other countries." "If this is a crime," he told US immigration authorities, "then let me be a criminal."[15]

Against that historical backdrop and against the recent surge in anti-Asian violence, many Asian Americans and Asian Americanists have insisted that Asian Americans be accepted as fellow Americans. In the wake of the mass killing in Atlanta in March 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris challenged Americans to learn from the past when, for instance, "as Japanese American soldiers defended our nation, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced to live in internment camps—an obvious and absolute abuse of their civil and human rights." She hoped for a better America. "Ultimately, this is about who we are as a nation," she said. "Everyone has the right to go to work, to go to school, to walk down the street and be safe, and also, the right to be recognized as an American—not as the other, not as them, but as us."[16] In Catherine Ceniza Choy's very recently published synthesis, she ends the preface with a similar hope for a better America. She avows, "I write with the desire to see our nation move forward with a sense of collective purpose that emphasizes compassion and care for all."[17]

But has there ever been a moment in US history when American nationalism did not reinforce the US empire? In his inimitable candor, Malcolm X used to mock Black people who wanted to be identified as Americans. "Because . . . if I could stand up here and speak to you as an American we wouldn't have anything to talk about," he said. "The problem would be solved. So we don't even profess to speak as an American." In a later speech, toward the end of his life, Malcolm X pleaded with his audience to stop domesticating racism as "an American problem." It was not possible "to really see it as it actually is," he said, outside of colonial violence around the world.[18] To embrace the category "disloyal" may be counterproductive, but so is insisting on our "loyalty." Uncritically championing American nationalism will inevitably lead our field down a self-defeating path of advancing the US empire. The challenge before us, I believe, is to move beyond "loyalty" and "disloyalty," to expose the racist and colonial roots of American nationalism and liberal citizenship, so that we can imagine other ways to define and pursue our collective visions of history and justice.

NOTES

1. "Howard Zinn and Arundhati Roy: A Conversation Between Two Leading Social Critics," *Democracy Now!,* May 28, 2003, accessed October 12, 2022, https://www.democracynow.org/2003/5/28/howard_zinn_and_arundhati_roy_a. I thank Moon-Kie Jung and Mary Lui for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. "Howard Zinn and Arundhati Roy"; Arundhati Roy, "Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free)," May 13, 2003, accessed October 12, 2022, http://www.csun.edu/~sm60012/Roy/Roy%20-%20Instant%20Mix%20Imperial%20Democracy.htm.

3. Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1981); Matt Schudel, "Vincent Harding, Author of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Antiwar Speech, Dies," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2014.
4. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).
5. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 491. Takaki's book also elicited bitter controversy within the field about scholarly integrity. See *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (1990): 63–154.
6. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants": Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), xiii–xv.
7. Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), xiv, 187–88.
8. Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2, 3.
9. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 1, 10, 11.
10. Gary Y. Okihiro, *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 18.
11. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); T. Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).
12. Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 1–2.
13. For some recent examples, see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); Eiichiro Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Juliana Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
14. See, for example, Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Eric L. Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

15. Moon-Ho Jung, *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 38, 147.
16. "Remarks by Vice President Harris at Emory University," March 19, 2021, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/19/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-emory-university/.
17. Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Asian American Histories of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), xviii.
18. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 27, 152.