



Finding a Path Forward

**ASIAN AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS THEME STUDY**

Edited by Franklin Odo





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Essay 6



Reframe, Recognize, and Retell: Asian Americans and National Historic Sites

Dorothy Fujita-Rony

Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Irvine

Both of my parents worked on Capitol Hill at the Library of Congress for decades. My father was a Southeast Asia Area Specialist in the Asian Division, and my mother was a senior cataloger in the Regional and Cooperative Cataloging Division. I have very vivid memories of visiting the Library of Congress as a young child and, because of my parents' jobs, it was always through the lens of work. I remember the underground network of tunnels enabling workers to go to different Congressional buildings, the busy movement of cataloguers and various administrative staff through the hallways, the people pushing carts of books to be re-filled and sent to their proper places, the cooks and servers in the cafeteria where my parents would treat us to lunch, and the members of the public who were conducting research in all of the various readings rooms. Work, of course, structured our home life as well, from determining when

Bodie, California, is a ghost town that once had a thriving Chinatown. Gold was discovered near Bodie in 1859; the town was abandoned by 1940. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1961 and is a California state park. Photo by Carol Highsmith; courtesy of the Library of Congress.



my parents would leave the house to when they would return, to giving me a whole range of “aunties” who were my mother’s colleagues from her job, to inspiring my own future career as a researcher and as a teacher. For decades, a stack of recycled cataloguing cards, repurposed as note cards for grocery lists or phone messages, stood ready near the kitchen phone, a symbol of how integrated my parents’ workplace was with our daily lives at home.

I begin with this anecdote to ask this question: if, as members of U.S. culture, we all have relationships to national historic sites, how does the history of Asian American labor help us better understand this relationship? For me, this connection between the Library of Congress and Asian American labor history was a profoundly intimate one, because it is where my parents worked. Even in my own case, however, it took me some time to realize this relationship. It was not until I spent a few weeks helping my mother organize her personal photographs this past summer that I realized that a whole segment was devoted to her workplace, even though she has been retired from the Library of Congress for several years.

Writing this essay challenged me to reflect deeply about issues of national culture, historical sites, and Asian American labor. On the one hand, I want to make the argument that all of us in the United States have a linkage to these sites as participants in U.S. culture, as these sites are symbolic representations of our nation’s past and present. As such, we also have a connection to the labor that made these sites possible. Labor was instrumental, not only in creating the actual physical places, but also in making them buildings and sites of work and activity. All of us have been affected by legislation, for example, that was debated over in the House of Representatives or have received letters delivered by the U.S. Postal Service. Labor is an arena in which relations of power get worked out.

But on the other hand, how are these issues qualified when it comes to Asian American workers? Labor has regularly determined the relationship of Asian Americans to nation and has been the terrain where they are judged as belonging to the United States or being seen as outsiders. Often, Asian American workers have been seen as competition by other racialized groups and targeted as “foreign” or “other,” especially if they were

seen as undercutting wages. In the past, Asian American workers were regularly excluded from membership in union activity. In the famous 1903 strike in Oxnard by the Japanese Mexican Labor Association (JMLA), the JMLA enlisted more than 90 percent of the sugar beet workers, numbering over 1,200, in its organizing efforts, despite facing violence and other oppression. When the strike was successful, the JMLA applied for a charter from the American Federation of Labor (AF of L). Although Mexican workers would have been able to join the union, the AF of L denied Japanese laborers entrance into the union. The Mexican laborers refused to abandon their co-workers, despite the cost to their organizing efforts, an example of the extraordinary community solidarity developed through coalition-building.¹

In this essay, I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on how we might tackle the process of locating Asian American labor through these historic sites. This essay is not an exhaustive summary of Asian American labor history. My goal is more focused upon imagining how these landmarks, in themselves, tell a history of Asian American labor as well as gesture towards directions we might want to pursue in the future. I also want to emphasize the important historical reclamation that already has been established for historic sites related to Asian American labor, such as the highlighting of the Colorado River Relocation Center, where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II, or Forty Acres, the United Farm Workers site that had a significant contingent of Filipino workers. As an essay that builds upon previous and ongoing efforts to develop historic sites relevant to Asian American labor history, this is part of an ongoing conversation about the connection of Asian Americans to historic sites.

I will argue for three stages to this process. First, I want to posit the need to *reframe* how we understand established historical sites and landmarks and to reevaluate and re-see them in the context of Asian Pacific American history. Secondly, I would like to discuss the responsibility to *recognize* this history, and the kind of categorical analysis we can employ to locate these sites. In particular, I will highlight two industries, agriculture and the military, as two areas that already have a wealth of existing sites. In the third section, I want to argue the need to *retell* the stories about these sites, especially to pass on tales of different forms of resistance as well as

to build continued discussion of what these sites might represent in national culture, including the counter narratives that emerge from these stories.

REFRAMING

How do we find the often “missing” history of Asian Americans in regard to historic sites? When I began this essay, one of the first things I did was to read through the lists and lists of National Historic Landmarks and other historic sites. The difficulty of pursuing this topic, of course, was that Asian Pacific Americans were largely absent in the central narratives being told. Take, for example, the building of the transcontinental railroad completed in 1869. With one group building rail track from the East, and the other group building rail track from the West, the two groups at last met at Promontory Summit in Utah, connecting a rail system that would span the continent of the United States. The group from the West, which included many Chinese workers, had the far more arduous task—they had to dynamite their way through the blistering summer heat and the bitter winter cold of the Sierra Nevada. When the winter snows melted in the spring, some workers were found frozen, still standing upright as if attending to their duties, the victims of a sudden winter avalanche. In 1869, the opening ceremony for the railroad featured dignitaries and officials driving in the “golden spike,” connecting the two sets of tracks.² When they were joined, the cameras went off and the moment was documented for generations to come. Yet, there were no Chinese present

in the photograph, as their foundational labor in railroad building was not considered significant enough to document. Less than a decade and a half later, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Laws cemented their absence.³

Stories like the deliberate erasure of Chinese American workers in the context of the transcontinental railroad challenge us to look further and deeper into past history and to imagine earlier moments in U.S./Asia relations. One place to begin, in documenting U.S./Asia relations in North America, is to consider how importantly Asia figured in the imagination of early explorers in the 15th century, such as Christopher Columbus, who was seeking a westward route to Asia.⁴ Then there was Spain’s Manila Galleon trade, which sailed ships from Spain, to China, to Mexico, and sought valuable imports and lucre to build its economy. Workers were recruited from different parts of its journeys, including what are now India, China, and the Philippines. These workers sometimes abandoned ship in North America to establish new homes. For example, Filipino workers jumped ship in Acapulco in the 18th century, later moving to Louisiana where they worked in the shrimping industry.⁵ Maritime employment took other forms as well: perhaps Filipinos fought with the privateer Jean Lafitte, a likely outcome since Asians were regular crew members in the Manila Galleon trade.

Multinational and multiracial crews made it possible very early on for ships to sail around the world, resulting in the migration of workers to new sites. For many, travelling to the United States was just



A re-creation of the Transcontinental Railroad “wedding of the rails” at the Promontory Point Golden Spike National Historic Site, Utah, where the Union Pacific No. 119 and Central Pacific No. 60 locomotives met face-to-face, and the famous golden spike was driven into the track. The eighty-seven miles of the Central Pacific railroad grade in Utah was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. The Golden Spike National Historic site in Utah recognizes the valuable contributions of Chinese workers. Photo by Carol Highsmith; courtesy of the Library of Congress.

one of many options. More than 30 million Indians, for example, were contract laborers in the Pacific and Indian oceans, as well as in the Caribbean, and another 2-million went to other sites in Southeast Asia, as well as to Hong Kong, Macao, and Shanghai. However, only 80,000 Indian migrants travelled to the United States and Hawai'i, as well as to Canada, Australia, Argentina, Panama, and Mexico. These statistics help us to understand Asian migration to the United States in a more balanced perspective.⁶

As a colony of Great Britain and then in its independence, the United States was vitally interested in the China trade, as well as in spreading Christianity, and actively gained access to the Chinese economy, as evidenced by the bustling commerce in New England ports like Salem, Massachusetts. During the Revolutionary War, tea and porcelain were highly desired as marks of status.⁷ The Boston Tea Party was fought in 1773, after all, over a tax on this valuable Asian import: tea.⁸ These early histories not only remind us of how the past is racialized but also



Ruins of the Old Sugar Mill, Koloa, Kauai, Hawai'i, 2009. The site of the mill and associated ruins were designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Photo by Joel Bradshaw; from Wikimedia Commons; released into the public domain.

how selective U.S. history might be, even in accounts of our national origins.

RECOGNITION: INDUSTRIES AND COMMUNITY SPACES

Asian American laborers traversed a geography that was determined and organized by larger forces, including U.S. militarism, economic interests in the Pacific region, rapidly developing agricultural and extractive industries in the U.S. West, and stringent racialized legislation which constrained their ability to find employment. In light of these forces, two particular industries became valuable locations for Asian American workers with national significance: agriculture and the military.

In order to understand the relationship of Asian Americans to the workplace, i.e. the actual physical location where Asian Americans were employed whether in the public or private spheres, it is important to understand the relationship of Asian Americans to the processes that shaped people's relationship to resources.

These structures included, for example, racial discrimination, unionization, U.S. political ties with areas of family origin, and gender privilege. Thus, analyzing Asian American workers in relation to historic sites, especially for previous eras, demands that we take a wider, expanded view of how and why Asian Americans were located in these work sites and, in many cases, why they were confined to particular kinds of labor or banned from finding employment in other locations.

Labor was one of the key places where racialization of workers happened. David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch argue that racialized management, i.e. ascribing certain characteristics to particular groups and then pitting them against each other, was developed in the U.S. West—as seen by the employment of Chinese workers to build the western half of the transcontinental railroad.⁹ Certainly, these characterizations were used to confine different groups of workers into particular economic sectors,

their status reinforced through prohibitions to permanent settlement because of race and nationality.¹⁰ In the

late 19th and early 20th centuries, common laborers were essential to the developing infrastructure of the U.S. West, and Asian Americans were a key part of the labor force. Agriculture, timber, canning, and other industries all developed into “big business,” requiring large groups of workers to cull the earth’s products. With intensive development from the U.S. economy, as well as interests in transportation, electricity, communication, and water, business owners were able to develop large agricultural concerns.¹¹

A number of agricultural places are already represented as historic sites. In Hawai‘i, sugar plantations became a key job site for Asian American workers. Trade in the Pacific and interest in the valuable products of sandalwood and whaling oil led U.S. businesses to establish footholds in Hawai‘i. The establishment of the Old Koloa Mill in 1835, which became the first commercially viable sugar mill in the region, heralded the new rise of sugar capitalism.¹² As American corporate businessmen established domination in the agricultural fields, radically reshaping land ownership and economic practices, they developed sugar into a major business. By the 1870s, business owners realized that sugar would be a profitable crop and consolidated their interests in a corporate oligarchy that would be known as the “Big Five” after the five major companies that dominated Hawai‘i’s economy and society.¹³

California agriculture was another important site for Asian American labor. In the 1880s, the railroad was key in stimulating a national demand for California agricultural products like truck crops and citrus, with the advent of the transcontinental railroad connecting the country and the development of refrigeration for railway cars.¹⁴ Through consolidating land properties and promoting irrigation, California growers were able to amass major holdings and profits by industrialization. By the end of the century’s third decade, more than 75 percent of California’s agricultural output was in cotton, vegetables, and fruits, with citrus crops as a dominant crop from around 1890 to 1940.¹⁵ The largest industry in California, agriculture, was responsible for promoting other allied industrial fields, like canning and packing, as well as the development of transportation systems, financial organizations, and a political structure to support growers.¹⁶ By depending on transitory workers, California agribusiness was able to keep wages low, as

new groups of workers regularly entered the market. Workers of Filipina/o and Mexican descent also found other groups, such as Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Portuguese, Armenians, Asian Indians, and Koreans.¹⁷ Because of the seasonal demands of specialized crops, growers established higher profit margins by employing non-unionized workers who formed a moveable labor pool.¹⁸

Agriculture has remained a critical industry in California in the modern-day United States. Among the most famous strike participants were Filipino farmworkers in the 1965 Grape Strike. In 1959, the AFL-CIO organized the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in Stockton, and in 1962, the National Farm Workers Association was established in Delano. On September 8, 1965, Delano farmworkers, who were primarily Filipino, decided to walk out for a 10-cent hourly raise, so they could earn the \$1.40 an hour paid to Mexican bracero workers.¹⁹ On September 16, 1965, eight days after the walkout began, the three-year-old National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) led by César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Gilbert Padilla decided to support the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee strike.²⁰ In August 1966, the AWOC joined with the NFWA to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO (UFWOC).²¹ To balance the interests of different communities, César Chávez became director and Larry Itliong, a Filipino activist, became assistant director.²²

Due to U.S. domination in the Pacific, militarism was also another key field for Asian American labor. At the end of the 19th century, the United States gained its first real possessions in the Pacific as a result of defeating the then-fading Spanish empire. In 1898, the United States emerged as an imperial power in its own right, with claims not only on Puerto Rico and Cuba but also in Hawai‘i, Guam, and the Philippines. The rapid growth of cities like San Francisco during this period was predicated on the booming military trade, especially as San Francisco became a crucial site for U.S. soldiers deploying overseas. Military expansion further consolidated economic growth, redefining the significance of U.S. West Coast ports as transportation networks connected global shipping to domestic rail systems, enabling the movement of goods from Pacific ports to the rest of the country.²³ Hence, during this time, the Pacific became



A drydock in the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, California. The shipyard employed many Filipino workers. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Photo by William Dewey; courtesy of the Library of Congress.

simultaneously “domestic” and “foreign” space for the United States, following Supreme Court decisions in the early part of the 20th century regarding the U.S. colonization of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Guam, for example, became an “unincorporated territory” of the United States, in a liminal position between statehood and independence.²⁴ Through these political processes, formerly “foreign” spaces became “domestic,” as evidenced by U.S. control over Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base in the Philippines.²⁵ All of these sites remained important in the following decades for the incorporation of workers into the United States’ strategic plans for the Pacific.

The migration of Asian workers into the U.S. economy was one result of the United States’ sustained interest in Asia. Indeed, in the case of groups like the Filipina/os, they already were part of the U.S. economy as the Philippines formerly constituted the farthest edge of the U.S. West during the colonial era. Militarism formed a fundamental part of the growth of cities like Seattle, Long Beach, and especially San Francisco, as the United States prepared for multiple wars in the 20th century

Pacific. Importantly, military sites on the U.S. West Coast need to be framed within this developing political and military infrastructure. All of these sites are integral to Asian American labor history. Not only are they representative of the United States’ burgeoning interests in Asia and reflective of the United States’ consolidated interest in the Pacific and Asia, but they are themselves sites for Asian American workers, whether as construction personnel or military workers. For example, after colonization, the U.S. implemented a new formal political and military administration, recruiting Filipinos as troops and as other workers in support of U.S. military aims. Subic Naval base, for example, always relied on Filipina and Filipino personnel to build its infrastructure as well as to populate its staff. Gaining access to the U.S. Navy became a coveted prize for thousands of Filipino men who vied for those opportunities and resources. Due to racial segregation, however, Filipinos were confined for many years to serving as naval stewards, essentially performing the domestic work of cooking and cleaning on board naval vessels.²⁶

RETELLING: RESISTANCE AND COUNTER NARRATIVES

In Asian American labor history, historic sites are important because of the impetus they give to the retelling of stories of struggle and resistance. Often, these sites mark community formation, as well as highlighting local campaigns of resistance and organizing.

These historic sites, as fixed points in workers' geographies, lend themselves to further designation as key places and potential repositories for community history. Even if workers were migratory, they typically had particular places they visited regularly to find employment or seek support. At the same time, these fixed sites usually had permanent residents as well, whether they ran community businesses for migratory community members or were lucky enough to attend local schools. In addition to rural areas, Asian American communities have regularly formed in large urban centers around the country, especially New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. In part a result of the role of port cities as entry spaces, communities have organized, often in spaces relegated to working-class people of color. Within the Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, and Manilatowns, often positioned in close proximity to one another because of racialized segregation, entrepreneurs and professionals alike set up businesses, including restaurants, grocery stores, newspapers, and doctors' offices. In addition, these sites served as hubs for family associations, churches, temples, and other organizations serving ethnic communities. For both the established, stable population and the migratory population, these centers served as home base. The Panama Hotel in Seattle, King County, Washington was an important stopping place for migrating laborers of color, where they could hope that a network of family and friends could provide a meal or a night's lodging.²⁷ The same was true for other major centers, like Stockton and San Francisco.

One of the most thriving centers for the Japanese American community was Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. At a time when Japanese immigrants were constrained by exclusionary legislation like the California Alien Land Law of 1913, Little Tokyo was a vital community base for Japanese Americans living and working in the surrounding regions.²⁸ The effort to recognize Stockton's Little Manila as a historic site, as chronicled by Dawn Mabalon, reminds us of the urgent need to mobilize community members, administrative agencies, and historic

preservationists in the struggle to reclaim historic Asian American community sites.²⁹ Vivek Bald has documented early community formations of Bengali workers in sites like the Tremé neighborhood in New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the Bengali Muslim community in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁰ And in the present day, Asian American entrepreneurial businesses have continued to thrive in places like Little Saigon in Orange County, California. Little Saigon, which is home to over 200,000 Vietnamese Americans, is the largest Vietnamese community site outside of Vietnam, featuring a dense constellation of grocery stores, restaurants, travel agencies, and other businesses.³¹

In addition to developing organizations within community spaces, resistance on the work site was another way that workers could protest, from slowing down one's pace of work on the job, to disobeying the boss's orders, to extended absenteeism, to deciding to move to another job. Within these scenarios, striking was an



The Little Tokyo Historic District in Los Angeles is a National Historic Landmark. In 1942, the shop window of the Asahi Dye Works in Little Tokyo reminded patrons to pick up their clothing before the owners were forced to leave under Executive Order 9066. Photo by Clem Albers, April 1942; courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Buildings under construction at what will become the Poston War Relocation Center on the Colorado River Indian Reservation near Parker, Arizona, April 1942. The school complex in Unit 1 was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2012. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

extreme form of resistance because of the possibility of losing one's livelihood and job, the physical danger involved in direct confrontation, and the fact that companies usually relied on private security as well as law enforcement officials to maintain order in the workplace. Despite the great risks involved, Asian workers have undertaken strikes for better wages and conditions, even in the most desperate of conditions.

In 1867, thousands of Chinese railroad workers struck for more pay and an eight-hour work day.³² Strikes in 1909 and 1920 in Hawai'i underscored the importance of mobilizing for better wages and conditions, in a sugar industry dominated by an entrenched oligarchy. Despite their geographical isolation and the pressing need to earn money for themselves and their families, workers united in several major strikes to effect better conditions. First coalescing around ethnic identities, as seen in the case of the Japanese workers in 1909, workers later unionized across race and ethnicity to develop a stronger base for resistance. In 1920, 8,300 Filipina/o and Japanese workers went on strike, despite the ruthless attempts of owners to intimidate them. Not only did the owners bring in over 2,000 strikebreakers, but they also evicted 12,000 people from their homes on plantations, resulting in the deaths of 95 Filipina/os and 55 Japanese from influenza. In their protests, these workers freely drew on political resources in the United

States and claimed membership in U.S. space, despite their racialized status. On April 3, 1920, for example, some 3,000 Japanese and Filipina/o workers demonstrated, carrying American flags, pictures of Abraham Lincoln, and banners with slogans like, "77 Cents—This Is Our Pay for Ten Hours of Hard Labor," "We want to live like Americans," and "How can we live like Americans on 77 cents? All we want is \$1.25." Other demands included an eight-hour day and resources for maternity leave and child care.³³

The Great Depression in the 1930s led to increasing worker resistance, as conditions became increasingly desperate because of poor wages and few options. The year 1934 marked a time of tremendous unrest, as strikes throughout California underscored the need for workers to mobilize. The Filipino Labor Union, for example, organized in December 1933 and grew into seven locals and about 2,000 members. By August 1934, 3,000 Filipina/os began a strike in Salinas, California, lettuce fields, which resulted in serious repression, including the burning down of a labor camp; seven hundred Filipina/os were forcibly evicted from their homes.³⁴ Even under the most oppressive of conditions, however, when tens of thousands of Japanese immigrants and their American-born children were imprisoned in remote facilities in the inland United States, Asian American workers still struck. In 1942, in the Colorado River Relocation Camp popularly known as Poston, workers objected to their pay and work conditions and staged a general strike. Soon after martial law in World War II, Hawai'i was lifted in 1944, thousands joined in a general strike in 1946, despite large challenges to coalition-building. The ILWU (International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union) soon emerged as a significant political presence in the Territory, after obtaining significant contracts for workers in the sugar and pineapple industries, as well as on the docks.³⁵

Sites like New York City, with large numbers of immigrant residents, continued to be critical areas for organizing. In 1982, 20,000 Chinese women garment workers struck in New York Chinatown, protesting factories with antiquated equipment, with child care as one of the most important demands. Bearing multiple roles

as full-time workers and parents with family responsibilities, women struck for fair pay and better conditions. So too did taxi workers, striking in 1998 through the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, which fought on behalf of its immigrant constituencies³⁶

Grassroots and community-based labor organizations continue to be key places for articulating the needs and aspirations of Asian American workers. Even as activist groups like the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance and the Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates continue organizing, recognizing Asian American labor continues to be an uphill struggle. Yet, the efforts continue. In Los Angeles, the Korean Immigrant Workers Association organized Korean and Latina/o workers who were in the garment, construction, and janitorial industries. Based in Northern California, the Asian Immigrant Workers Association organized hotel workers in Oakland and electronic assemblers in the Silicon Valley, as well as garment workers. The Thai Community Development Center assisted Thai workers in their battle against exploitative conditions in El Monte, California.³⁷

More organizations have emerged to articulate causes and to advocate for change. Some notable cases can be linked to unrest about the U.S. economy and fears about competition from other countries. For example, during an economic downturn in Detroit's auto industry, Chinese American Vincent Chin was beaten to death in a hate crime just weeks before his wedding because of prevalent fears and anger about the auto industry losing the competition to Japan.³⁸ Joseph Iteito, a postman who was delivering mail when he was approached by a white supremacist and shot, was another Asian American who was murdered as he tried to go about his work, as was Balbir Singh Sodhi, one of the first casualties after 9/11 who managed a gas station in Mesa, Arizona.³⁹ Sodhi's story is chronicled in "Divided We Fall," a film directed by Sharat Raju and narrated by Valarie Kaur, who has emerged as a national activist for storytelling, justice, and peace. We remember these stories to honor people's lives as well as to underscore the continuing need to support and protect Asian American workers.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION: REFRAME, RECOGNIZE, AND RETELL

In this essay, I have emphasized the perspective of Asian American labor history as an important way to understand historic sites and processes of U.S. national

culture. To do so, however, we must maintain a wider lens and dislodge a history that upholds established ways of seeing that result in the erasure of the history of different groups. If, instead of seeing Asian American labor history as specific and particular, we consider the larger frames that it illuminates, we can better recognize not only the pervasive relations of power that organize our understanding of these different sites, but we can also see how the histories of different groups, are actually quite central to our national story. Perhaps one of the most important reasons to analyze Asian American labor history in relation to historical sites is because this process not only bears testimony to people's experiences but also opens up a space for dialogue in a history that is too often uneven or marked with ambivalence. Hence, counter-narratives can arise that help us challenge established stories and open new ways of seeing.

First, in the spaces outlined in this essay, my focus has been on sites in the public realm. How would our viewpoint change if we added private spaces as well, for example, in terms of the double day faced by so many Asian American women workers? Nearly all women employed outside their homes worked a "double day," with responsibility in their workplace and more duties within the house. Additional labor burdens usually fell on women because of the challenge of balancing paid and unpaid labor, as well as the typical reliance on women for the reproductive labor of maintaining a family. Work was not simply about outside employment but also the uncompensated work in their private spheres. Household management and child care were sometimes undertaken by men, but more often than not, were handled by women and older children, especially the older daughters.⁴¹

Here is another continuing issue that shapes the relation of Asian American workers to national historic sites: why are so many Asian American workers still perceived as "foreign"? In the post-World War II era, the United States gave special preference to professionals and other intelligentsia through exchange programs and major legislation like the 1965-1968 immigration laws, which encouraged professionals to migrate.⁴² One of these professionals was Wen Ho Lee, a scientist who was recruited during the Cold War and who worked for over two decades at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory. Students of Asian American labor history know about

the historic site of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, not only because it was a test site for the nuclear bomb but also because of the accusations levied against Wen Ho Lee who was unfairly accused of espionage. Lee spent 278 days in solitary confinement before a federal judge apologized to him and ordered his release.⁴³

And then there is the Wards Cove case. This case began in 1974 when Frank Atonio, a Samoan American, and nine other salmon cannery workers began a class-action employment discrimination case on behalf of two thousand Samoan, Alaska natives, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese workers. Wards Cove was a canning enterprise in Ketchikan, Alaska, in which almost all of the higher-paying jobs were filled by whites, while almost all of the lower-paying and unskilled work was performed by people of color. Housing and dining hall segregation was prevalent: separate and unequal. In 1981, union leaders Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, who had been organizing for economic justice for cannery workers as well as against the Marcos regime in the Philippines, were slain, through a chain of orders that eventually was traced in court to the Marcos administration. Eight years later in 1989, the Supreme Court narrowly found for the company, and ruled that the burden of proof regarding alleged workplace discrimination landed on the employees and not the employers. The Civil Rights Act of 1991 sought to rectify this; however, it carried a provision that excluded the Wards Cove case, a result of powerful lobbying of Wards Cove and other business and political interests. In 1993, then President Clinton gave his support for removal of this exemption. However, although House Representative Jim McDermott (Democrat, Washington State) has repeatedly introduced legislation to change this exemption, most recently in 2013, the exemption still remains.⁴⁴

Reframe, recognize, retell. In this essay, I have argued for the possibility of utilizing Asian American labor history to interrogate our relationship to historic sites in U.S. national culture. As an educator, I also want to argue that perhaps the truest accomplishment is when we can get young people not just to recognize their connections to a national past but also encourage them to question and challenge how social justice can be achieved. Paradoxically, younger generations today have wider access to information instantly and easily and, at the same time, might feel more connection to sites in

cyberspace than in physical space. Assessing labor history in relation to national sites not only gives us a chance to reframe past erasures and highlight worker resistance, but it also gives us a chance to assess how much is left to be done to support Asian American workers and those from other communities as well.

Endnotes

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