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Asian American Memory Activism: A Roundtable Discussion

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Abstract: *This edited transcript of conversations among a group of scholars and practitioners is the culmination of a multi-year, multi-platform dialogue intended to capture the work and motivations of memory activists towards addressing both historical justice and current social and political needs of Asian American communities.*

Keywords: *Memory, Memory activism, Comfort women, Rape of Nanking, Asian American*

In 2019, two political scientists, Dr. Mary M. McCarthy (now coeditor at *APJJF*) and Dr. Linda C. Hasunuma, proposed gathering a group of scholars and activists to enter into a dialogue about Asian American memory activism, the products of which could then be disseminated more widely to scholarly and public audiences. We were privileged to be joined by Dr. Jung-Sil Lee, Ms. Kathy Masaoka, Ms. Judith Mirkinson, and Judge Lillian Sing in this endeavor, as we sought to explore the interaction between activism and scholarship and the varied roles of activists and scholars in Asian American memory activism. Intended as a year-long discussion culminating in a roundtable at the 2020 Memory Studies Association annual meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia,[1] the pandemic both upended our plans and made them more critical than ever. The rise in anti-Asian hate incidents and crimes, both in the United States and across the world, from 2020 highlighted how failure to acknowledge history and learn from it has dire consequences for the realities of those in the present and the future (Jeung, 2024).

The impetus behind our dialogue was engagement with Gutman's (2017: 58) conception of memory activism as seeking "to first look backward to intervene in society's dominant understanding of the past in a way that affects the understanding of present problems and projects future resolutions." Therefore, we always sought to look not just at how memory activism can pursue notions of historical justice, but how it can seek to address current social justice issues by changing how a society understands its past, or what it knows about its past. So, remembering, commemorating, or memorializing the past can be an activity that is intended to work towards creating a more equitable present and future.

Asian American memory activism in the United States is representative of the growing political power and visibility of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in U.S. politics and civil society. Collective actions of memory activism have helped build community, solidarity, and identity as AAPI in the U.S. Since its beginning, it's been a movement that's been based on coalitions, partnerships, and alliances. AAPI is a political category whose formation had its origins in the 1960s in concert with other movements for civil rights and greater inclusion in American democracy, intersecting with transnational and global movements for gender and human rights (Spickard, 2007). Women activists, in particular, have played a significant role in these movements in the U.S. and around the world (Hune and Nomura, 2020). We see these dynamics in the varied achievements of AAPI memory activism, and these successes are a testament to the political skill, mobilization, and coordination of activists and women leaders like the ones who participated in our dialogue. History and memory are part of identity formation for the Asian diaspora in the U.S. and show how this demand for greater recognition and

1 The conference was cancelled due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

inclusion in American history, politics, society and the education system are in operation (McCarthy and Hasunuma, 2018).

Linda and/or Mary met each of the activists in this discussion while pursuing their research on the legacies of the "comfort women", a euphemism for women and girls held in sexual servitude to the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in the 1930s and 1940s. And although each of the participants has been engaged in memory activism with regard to the "comfort women", their work spans decades of memory activism and challenges historical injustices on a multitude of issues across the Asian-American community and beyond.

The dialogue below is based on our Asian American Memory Activism roundtable at the 2021 virtual Memory Studies Association annual meeting, as well as our virtual interactions on these and related questions over the course of several months, as we gathered virtually via Zoom, email, text, and Google Docs, from across the United States and even from Seoul, South Korea. It represents the personal and professional experiences of our participants from decades of work in this field, capturing what drives memory activism and what the day-to-day pursuit of it entails.

We start with self-introductions focused on our participants' personal histories and activities in Asian American memory activism, and why memory activism is important to them. Mary and Linda then address a series of questions to the group for their consideration.

Lillian Sing: I was born in Shanghai, China, and came to the United States at the age of 15. I worked hard to achieve the American Dream. I became the first Asian-American female judge in Northern California, and am very proud to dispense justice as fairly and as equally as I possibly can. But I realize justice is not just in the four corners of the courtroom; justice can be everywhere, where people live and where they play.

In the 1990s, I met a woman by the name of Iris Chang and read her book, *The Rape of Nanking*, that brought back dark memories of my parents' attitude towards Japan and atrocities that occurred throughout Asia during World War Two. I was amazed how few people know about that chapter of WWII history; most people know about the Nazi atrocities but so few people know about what happened in Nanjing in 1937 when the Japanese Imperial Army systematically raped, tortured, and murdered more than 300,000 Chinese civilians. This rape of Nanjing was referred to by Iris Chang as a forgotten Holocaust (199). Also, few people know about Unit 731's biological tests, injecting germs and bacteria into live human beings and recording their reactions; the most horrific, the most cruel kind of experiments you can ever imagine (Harris, 2002; Tsuneishi, 2005). Furthermore, few know about the hundreds of thousands of women and girls euphemistically called "comfort women," who were kidnaped, forced to serve as sex slaves by the Japanese imperial armed forces in 13 Asia-Pacific countries from 1931 to 1945 (Ruff-O-Herne, 1994; Yoshimi, 1995; Soh, 2008). But what is worse is not only that these atrocities occurred, but that the Japanese government to this day has refused to acknowledge its crimes, refused to apologize or pay reparations and has campaigned to erase history, to deny what's happened.[2]

Memory activism is to prevent revisionists and deniers from rewriting history, from wiping out history, from causing amnesia, not only in Japan but around the world. And this is why I became active in this chapter in my life, when I retired from the bench just so that I could become more involved in memory activism. Another judge, Julie Tang, and I formed the "Comfort Women" Justice Coalition,[3] along with my esteemed fellow panelist, Judith Mirkinson, so that this horrific chapter in WWII history cannot be forgotten.

Kathy Masaoka: I was raised in an area in Los Angeles called Boyle Heights, which was very multi-ethnic when I was growing up. And, so, my world view was shaped by that experience, informing the search for my identity and the issues that I care about. I came of age in the 1960s and was

2 The Japanese government or officials within the government issued a series of acknowledgements and apologies starting in the 1990s. To explore why activists view those actions as insufficient, see, for example, Nishino and Nogawa 2014.

3 https://remembercomfortwomen.org.

also deeply influenced by the anti-war movement and ethnic studies, reinforcing my belief in solidarity. Redress for Japanese Americans was a further critical part of my learning and education, shaping who I am today.[4] And I really love the fact that this is a dialogue among women, because that's also very dear to my heart. My focus on solidarity continues today in terms of supporting the "comfort women" issue, reparations for African-Americans, solidarity with Muslim Americans after 9/11, and many other issues.

So, to start, my parents and grandparents were incarcerated during WWII, along with 120,000 other Japanese Americans who were imprisoned in about 10 different concentration camps and dozens of "justice camps" in places like Bismarck, North Dakota or Fort Missoula, Montana, all in very desolate areas. Growing up, no one told me that my mother's family of 10 children was taken from their farm in Santa Maria, California, to a camp on the Gila River reservation in Arizona. I did not know that my father's family spent three years at the Manzanar camp in California. My parents never talked about this, nor did I learn about it in school. But I was lucky to have come of age, as I said, in the late 1960s, when Third World students inspired by the leadership of the Black community demanded ethnic studies. For many of us, it was the first time that we felt pride in being Asian American, a term coined at this time, and we wanted to know our histories. And I really understood at this point in my life that I belong here in America as an Asian American.

One of the ways we learned about our history was by making pilgrimages to the camps like Manzanar and listening to the few older folks who were brave enough to tell their stories. As a call for redress for the camps grew in the late 1970s, we formed a grassroots organization, the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, now known as Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress,[5] to focus on a legislative campaign, and joined with others in the community, to pass a redress bill. The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was set up to study the incarceration and to propose possible remedies. It was very difficult to get people in our community to testify at this commission. The pain was too great and the fear of backlash was too strong. After all, they had held this experience in for 40 years. It took a great deal of effort to persuade people to speak. But when they finally did, it was overwhelming. The floodgates had opened and our ears were glued to the words. For mothers who had lost their babies at childbirth, children whose fathers had been taken away by the FBI, a woman who lost her brother who was shot in the back at Manzanar. We heard their pain, their anger, and their eloquence. After that, we were never the same. This galvanized a grassroots movement for redress and kept us going until we won in 1988.

The impact that breaking silence and remembering had on our community was both healing and unleashing. And we have become the opposite of quiet, we have become *yakamashii* or noisy. Over time, we learned more painful stories as well as stories of resilience and resistance in the camps. We are continually amazed at how much there is to learn. I regret that there are stories that we will never know from those who passed and others like the single men who labored in the fields but never had families with whom to share their experiences. We would not have won redress without the bravery of those who testified at the hearings. We would not have won redress without the solidarity and support of other communities. Just as we owe our movement for ethnic studies to the Black community, we also owe much to Black leaders like Jesse Jackson and legislators like the Black Congressional Caucus, which supported the bill.

Judith Mirkinson: When I was very young, in my 20s, I went to Okinawa, Japan, as an organizer against the Vietnam War. That experience of being in Okinawa, being the occupying army, really changed how I looked at history and how I understood internationalism. When I got back home to the U.S. two years later, I joined political organizations and I was very fortunate to be invited to the first international meeting of Gabriela Philippines.[6] Since then, I have

4 In 1942, Executive Order 9066 led to the mass incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps, most of whom were US citizens. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided individual compensation and federally funded public educational programs about the internment as a means of redress (Reeves 2015, Wood 2014).

5 https://ncrr-la.org.

6 http://gabrielausa.org.

worked with Gabriela Philippines around the issue of gender violence. In 1993, I co-sponsored and facilitated the first tour of a former Filipina "comfort woman" in Canada and the US. And that experience galvanized me around this particular issue.

I think the issue of memory activism is always important, but it has particular resonance today, for all of us, especially those of us who live in the United States. We've seen the links between what happens to women and what happens to people of color, especially Black people. And we can see how important it is in these struggles to analyze our own histories, and to analyze the histories of women around the world and around colonialism and imperialism. I think it's very important that we always link what's happening now and what's happened in the past.

In 2015, I was asked to participate in hearings about building a statue to the "comfort women" in San Francisco. It was a huge coalition made up of Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, anti-war activists, feminists, the whole breadth of the San Francisco Bay Area movement. And we won. But it was a struggle. And each and every time that we had to go to public hearings, we were confronted with Japanese denialism. I think this was a real eye opener for all the people who were involved in this struggle. We also realized that this Japanese denialism, this refusal to admit what happened in World War Two, was something that wasn't unique to Japan. Well, first of all, I think we have to realize, obviously, that our own history in the United States is one of denialism because we have this mythology of the founding fathers. We have this mythology of freedom. When we realize now that actually so much of our history is based on racism, genocide, and discrimination. And that's what we're trying to deal with here at home. And we can use this example of another country's denialism [that of Japan], so that it's not so emotionally fraught.

The other thing I would say is that when we look at the "comfort women", we have to look at the sexual enslavement of maybe half a million women in the context of history and also in the present. We can use this example of how women have been treated during war to look at how women are treated today. We can use the example of gender violence in the past and the fact that people have just accepted it as normal as a way of looking at history today. So, when we think about the "comfort women", we can't just think, oh, these poor women who were in the past. We have to think of their struggle for justice. Our demand for their justice is also a demand for the justice of the Rohingya, for the women in Latin America, for the women in Bosnia. So, this is a global issue that's not just located in one particular place. We're struggling really to overturn hundreds of thousands of years of history. And this is why I think it's so important that we build a transnational movement with women all over the world. But it has to be a transnational movement that both recognizes our similarities and also our differences, and that understands that each country and each particular set of people have their particularities and their own culture and that we blend this all together for a demand for justice for women.

Jung-Sil Lee: I began my art history career focused on Western art, but expanded to non-Western art with a global perspective in order to redefine the traditional canon of art history. I study public sculpture and related healing rituals to resolve historical trauma and to build a positive discourse and public identity. My doctoral thesis focused on Auguste Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* and investigated the ways in which Rodin rebuilt national pride and healing ritual in France after defeat in the Franco Prussian War. Since then, I have researched memorials in the East and the West to see how public memorials capture historical trauma and create desirable public memories and activism around those past events.

As feminist art history is my minor area, I discovered the "comfort women" issue through my extensive curatorial experiences. I curated several "comfort women" themed exhibitions in Washington D.C., New York, and Seoul. And I joined the DC-based nonprofit, Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues (WCCW),[7] where I served for over a decade as vice president, president, and now chairperson. WCCW was founded in 1992 right after the first visit and testimony of former "comfort woman" Hwang Keum Ju in New York and Washington D.C.

7 https://comfort-women.org.

It is the first organization of its kind in the U.S. and we emphasized informing members of Congress about "comfort women"'s history.

It was the first achievement of Asian American grassroots activism that led to passage of House Resolution 121 in 2007, which called on Japan to acknowledge, accept their wartime wrongdoings, and apologize to "comfort women" survivors. Afterwards, WCCW has been dedicated to a few dimensions. The first is ongoing grassroots activism, for example, promoting a Maryland State Senate Resolution on "comfort women" and current human trafficking (which was passed in 2015). Second, education of students and the public, through lectures, conferences, webinars, and internships. Third, introducing artistic representation of the trauma such as organizing exhibitions, film screenings, international film festivals, and support for musicals and operas. Fourth, the building of "comfort women" memorials. We built two memorials, one in Fairfax County, Virginia (2014) and the other in Annandale, Virginia (2019). Fifth, digital archiving projects and publications. As a result, WCCW sponsored my edited volume, *Comfort Women: A Movement for Justice and Women's Rights in the United States* (2020)and *Comfort Women: New Perspectives* (2019). And we have finished a documentary film, which is the visual version of those books.

Mary: One thing that I've noticed in each of your activism is the way in which you engage with the hegemonic power of the state. You are presenting a counter narrative to that of the state, whether the U.S. or, in some cases, another state such as Japan. But you are also working *with* the state, for passage of legislation or resolutions or a memorial on public land. So, I have two questions. First, why do you think it is important that collective memories are not solely the purview of the state/government, and that these counter narratives are presented? And, second, is working with the state a positive or a negative (is it a necessary evil or do you actually find it beneficial to interact with the state this way)?

Kathy: Well, you know, we depended on the government for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. And at first, to be honest, many of us said we don't need this commission. We don't need the government to go around and find out if there was a wrong committed. And, so, we were actually very much against it. But we started to realize that there was a value, there was a value in the government setting up this commission and of going around and hearing the stories of people. So, we came to fully embrace it and we encouraged our community to testify and to speak up. And as I said earlier, it was very difficult to get people to speak up. But because it was a governmental commission, I think it was seen as legitimate. And I think it probably encouraged people to feel, the government is listening to me. And, so, in that way it did help.

On the other hand, the way the government wanted to set up the commission was that they were going to have experts and scholars speak only in Washington, D.C. We spoke up against that idea and said that, no, you have to go to the cities where Japanese Americans are and get their stories. You have to listen to the people who were in the camps and experienced the suffering and hear from the regular ordinary folks. You can hear from experts as well, but you need to hear from those who experienced the camps. The state was not ready to embrace that; we had to push for that.

Also, in some ways we are limited by the way the state frames things. We depended on the government to pass a bill to apologize and to give reparations, a symbolic amount. But I think looking at the camps only as the result of a legal action is very limiting. I'm learning now from the fight for H.R. 40[8] and the reparations for African-Americans and what they're looking for in reparations. I think I was rather naive and not as educated on what reparations could be. We should see these issues as moral issues and human rights issues and violations of humanity.

It is irrelevant whether it was legal. It was morally wrong.

Finally, in terms of education, our bill called for education but the funding was very small. I think that if this country truly did accept the fact that it had

8 For details of this resolution, see "H.R. 40, Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act" Congressional Budget Office. May 17, 2021. https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57224.

committed a wrong and really wanted to make up for that, education would have been key. But that wasn't done. And it was left up to us to do the education. So, I don't think depending on the state, especially the one that commits these wrongs, works.

Lillian: You pose a very interesting question. Do we adopt the official narrative by the government or do we define our own narrative? If we accept the narrative as defined by the government, that would be really sad. Because the government in the United States never talked about its atrocities. The governments in other countries do not either. The government of Japan has completely denied what happened during WWII in Asia; it wants to rewrite history and wants to cause amnesia in people's memories. We cannot afford that. We need to define our own memory. That's what empowerment means.

Therefore, in San Francisco, we were very active in making sure the history of "comfort women" was accurately told and not defined by the revisionists. Also in Washington, D.C., just like Professor Jung-Sil Lee mentioned, in 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted House Resolution 121. And the international community, including the United Nations Human Rights Council and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also have strongly condemned Japan and demanded that the government officially apologize to the survivors and their families. In San Francisco, our Board of Supervisors in 2013 passed a resolution condemning Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto for his remarks denying the existence of the "comfort women" and having the audacity to say that it was a necessity for the Japanese army during WWII. Then, in 2015, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution enabling us to build this wonderful memorial. And our president, Judith Mirkinson, has already explained what kind of ordeal we went through in order to get that. And also recently, there was a Harvard Law Professor, Mr. J. Mark Ramseyer, who published an article to deny that the "comfort women" were kidnapped and sexually enslaved and who tried to rewrite history again, by calling "comfort women" willing prostitutes and citing a 13 year old girl as evidence of his position.[9]

That's how outrageous governments, professors, and institutions can be in defining the narrative and why it is so important that we define our own narrative. And we must pursue activism and preserve memories so the past cannot be forgotten and the present maintained so the future generation can be better.

Linda: Thank you, Kathy and Lillian for sharing your thoughts about these power dynamics and who controls the narrative and is trying to regain control of it. Although we have been focused on Asian American memory activism, each of you has also engaged in coalition building beyond the Asian American activist community. This includes transnational coalitions. Are there particular situations in which broad coalitions are helpful? On the other hand, are there situations where they can undermine or unnecessarily complicate your goals?

Jung-Sil: The national coalition for historical justice for the "comfort women" was first formed in the U.S. during the preparation for the hearing for H.R. 121 because the supporters wanted to persuade members of Congress at the time, and for this they needed to gather signatures and the voices of all possible constituents of the nation. Other than the Washington, D.C. area covered by WCCW, there was also a new organization formed called Coalition 121, which was founded only for the February 2007 hearing, in collaboration with the National Korean American Association and Korean American Civic Empowerment. There were so many groups and individuals involved in creating this big coalition in advance of this hearing.[10]

After the passage of House Resolution 121, there were many similar resolutions passed at the state, city, and county levels. All are very important. But those are not easily accessible by the public. Memorials are different. They are a physically prominent presence as a constant reminder of past wrongdoing by perpetrators. So, memorial-building is widely encouraged among activists. Currently there are 15 "comfort women" memorials in the U.S. and one more is being built in Philadelphia. Whether it is famous, like the Statue of Peace, or other types

9 See Stanley, et al. 2021.

10 See Lee and Halpin 2022.

of memorials, the memorial is the perfect site to which we can draw the attention of the public and the media to create a stronger and salient coalition around the issue. In the cases of San Francisco and Virginia, for example, memorials functioned to unite several local "comfort women" organizations. The nature of a memorial made it possible to put together the different views and positions toward the issues as a coherent whole. More than anything, it offers a ritual site of reconciliation for victims, activists, and supporters all together.

In spite of the formation of a transnational coalition, unfortunately, rivalry and conflicts between activists or organizations still exist, derived from different political stances, diverse positions, attitudes, and perspectives toward the Korea-Japan relationship. The confrontation also happens simply out of emotional discord or judgmental views of each other. It eventually undermines the activism because outsiders view these groups as one coalition and judge them as combative and divided. It is no use at all to the global coalition.

Judith: I wanted to go back a minute, to combine this with the question about the state, because they're actually completely interrelated. States and legislatures by their very nature are conservative. Plus, they want to stay in power. The only way to change the status quo is by mass activism where you change the public narrative. And we can really see that from what happened in 2020 in the U.S. with the uprising around the killing of George Floyd, that those uprisings really powered questioning and propelled a different way of looking at our national history.

And I think the importance of coalition is that you begin to build a mass. It's not just that you build with other people, which is essential, but you build mass consciousness. And that was certainly true in the building of the "comfort women" memorial in San Francisco. Our memorial has a Korean young woman, a Filipina and a Chinese young woman. And they're standing there together, looking defiant. And looking up at them is a statue of Hak-sun Kim, who was the first to publicly talk about her experiences as a "comfort woman", in 1991 in Korea. And, so, this statue is very interesting because on the one hand, it shows the power of one person. But that one person testified because she had an organization and a movement, at that time, of Asian women, telling her, "we need to speak out, we need to break the silence." She's gazing up at these young women and she's viewing her past and her present and her future. And they're saying to her, we're going to resist and we're going to demand justice. They're defiant. And so that in a lot of ways shows the relationship between the individual, the state and the people working together. And I think in the building of this statue, you really saw the power of coalition.

Mary: One of our goals in this dialogue is to talk about how memory activism isn't just about memory or the past, but about current-day social injustice and other challenges we face. Can each of you talk a little bit about why or how your memory activist work goes beyond memory to help us understand and confront current issues faced by society?

Judith: The reason that we continually look at history is to right the wrongs of the past and change our future. And that's the only way. I've been reading a lot about the narratives of colonialism and imperialism. And, certainly, in this country we have a mythology that influences how people look at the present, and it's that mythology that's actually pushing anti-Asian violence and anti-Black violence. It's that mythology, especially white supremacy, that makes all these people think that they're losing something and they *are* losing something. But it's something based, as Kathy talked about, on immorality, on racism. And certainly, for women, when we talk about the "comfort women", it's the same thing. It's thought to be completely normal and what should happen that, during war, women can get raped. And it's really interesting to me that opponents of historical justice for the "comfort women" say, well, they were just prostitutes, as if any woman, no matter what, should be raped, or as if prostitutes at any time have a choice.

So, when we look at the "comfort women", for instance, we are really unraveling memory and we are unraveling what's thought of as normal. And I

think that if we do not use the power of these statues that Jung-Sil talked about, combined with actually challenging history and making a new narrative, there's no point in memory. We can go over and over different memories and people have forever. But if we don't combine it with activism and if we don't combine it with demand for justice and a demand for change, then we haven't really reached our goal. We owe it to the survivors who are passing away, we owe it to our grandmothers, and we owe it to our granddaughters to actually challenge this narrative and begin to make violence against women and gender violence not normal. We really have to have a commitment to justice, and I hope that in the commitment to end gender violence, that we really do create a very different—and I would say transformative—situation. You don't change history that quickly. But I feel like we're part of that continuum.

Jung-Sil: This is a very important question as we are facing the post-victim era[11], when it comes to WWII atrocities. So, what can we do with victim's legacies and the relevant history now and in the coming years? We should relate the "comfort women" history to current issues of equity, racial and gender justice, efforts of decolonization, and democracy, but more than that, we should create a new discourse in relation to "comfort women" activism as suggested by Marianne Hirsch. She calls our memorialization post-memory because we didn't experience the war or the same trauma experienced by the "comfort women"; we know it only through stories and images without direct encounter. Because we experience the historical trauma only indirectly, Hirsch suggests that we connect with the past not by recall, but "by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (339). So activists or artists "reframe the archival images so as to grant them multiple afterlives in which they continue to develop, making past injustices and atrocities newly visible in future presents" (342).

This is what we are working on now and in the future. Sometimes we need to break the paradigm set up by a few opinion leaders of "comfort women" activism in terms of how we look at and understand the issue. We have to actively reconsider possible ways to reconcile and apply it to resolve current problems. We should be creative in our own ways to pave the way for the next generations. We experimented with this through our directives to our WCCW interns in 2019 and they produced several new perspectives and interventions on the issues.[12] We have this responsibility to deal with past events and recontextualize them in the current society in novel ways and through new media. By doing so, the new generation looks at them not just as events from the past, but from them glean more fundamental truths about human nature, history and beyond.

Linda: Anti-Asian hate incidents increased dramatically from 2020 on. Many have emphasized that these incidents have not materialized from nowhere but from historical injustices and historically-rooted discrimination and racism. What role can memory activism play to confront these issues today? What needs to be done, what can we do today, through memory activism, to achieve change?

Lillian: Racism against Asians has been going on throughout the history of the United States, from when Chinese immigrants first came to the United States to work on the railroads and anti-Chinese immigration laws were passed. History seems to repeat itself and people do not remember what happened in the past. I have been in America for 60 years and I have never felt so much fear, so much hate and violence towards Asian Americans. I'm afraid to walk down the street and be assaulted without any reason, simply because of my race and my age. I really wish we had a more effective way to control these issues today.

But memory activism is important to recall the past and to preserve the present. You know, today we actually have a better system in fighting this racism and violence because of social media. Social media is playing a vital, a crucial, role in bringing memory activism to us. It is a powerful medium to convey messages. TV, Instagram, YouTube, Zoom meetings can capture something and instantly send it to every living room in America. George Floyd's image

11 The "post-victim era" refers to the fact that most of the victims are now deceased and so we are moving into a period when no one will have first-hand knowledge of these experiences.

12 See Kim and Lee 2019.

crying out, "I can't breathe" more than 20 times and the knee of Derek Chauvin are forever imprinted on Americans. Floyd's death sparked outrage all over the world and protests across the country demanding changes. Derek Chauvin's guilty verdict and sentencing could not have happened without the powerful images that were captured on an iPhone by a bystander. This is why it is so important to capture memories immediately and to imprint them on people's minds forever. I'm especially impressed with the young people these days who are rising and speaking out.

Before I became a judge, I used to specialize in immigration law and I represented some Chinese Americans who were victims of the McCarthy era. During the McCarthy era, China was the enemy, and anyone with ties to China was considered a potential spy against the United States. Of course, most of us Chinese Americans have families, relatives and friends in China. So, the FBI regarded the entire Chinese community as a place where spies were bred and/or Chinese Americans would be distrusted. Guess what, this is happening again in the United States. Christopher Wray, the director of the FBI, issued a dire warning in 2018, that the whole of China is a threat to the United States. He said, "One of the things we're trying to do is view the China threat as not just a whole-of-government threat but a whole-of-society threat."[13] So, in ordinary parlance, it means all persons of Chinese American descent and a whole society are to be distrusted and be regarded as potential spies for China. Whole of society means every aspect of American society, whether it's a business, science, academia or government. This is really a dangerous time [for Chinese Americans]. And as a result, why are we surprised that Chinese American hate crimes are on the rise?

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a China Initiative,[14] which was a directive to all federal agents to set their sights on fettering out economic spies operating in America. [At that time,] there was a professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Department of Aerospace and Biomedical Engineering, Dr. Anming Hu.[15] For twenty-one months, the FBI tailed and spied on him, following him from work and even the grocery store, to build a case against him. This is the first case that the FBI actually took to trial, so it was a very important case. The trial ended in a hung jury in June 2021, leaving the judge to declare a mistrial. One of the jurors said, "It was the most ridiculous case. If this is who is protecting America, we've got problems."[16]

So, like the McCarthy era, we have problems in the United States right now. Hate crimes are all over the place. What can we do to prevent it? I don't know. But social media is very important and activism is extremely important. We cannot be silent. We need to be involved. We need to stand up and speak up when we see hate, when we see crimes of violence and talk about it, and not stay quiet. I think this is what memory activism is all about: collect memories, be active, so that we do not forget. And hopefully we're able to teach our present generation and future generations of what happened in the 2020s during the pandemic era and the horrors that occurred to Asian-American communities, to prevent it from ever happening again.

Unfortunately, I'm not optimistic. We did not learn from the McCarthy era in the 1950s. We did not learn from what happened to Japanese Americans during WWII. We did not learn after 9/11 with what happened to the Muslim communities. But I'm hoping very much that we will learn. And I think we can only do this by continuing to teach, by continuing to talk, by continuing to participate in dialogues like this, and hopefully the message will get out and we will learn and we will have a better country, a better society, and a better world.

Kathy: I think we learned a lot in 2020, especially after seeing George Floyd being murdered by the police and being in the pandemic. I think we're focusing very clearly on the inequities of this country. And I think that frames my understanding of anti-Asian-American violence and hate, because we saw fundamentally that this country has an issue with racism and that it has to be rooted out and that we are all part of receiving that racism. It doesn't matter if you're a good citizen. It doesn't matter if

13 Quoted in Redden 2018.
14 Yam 2024.
15 For reporting on this case and the China Initiative, see, for example, Redden 2021.
16 Quoted in Hvistendahl 2021.

you follow the law. During WWII, it didn't matter that you were quiet Japanese Americans and you didn't do anything wrong. It didn't matter. The law did not matter. What you did did not matter. The incarceration of Japanese Americans was considered expedient and necessary. And racism was the motivating reason for the camps, a racism that is embedded in the foundation of the country.

2020 forced a lot of us to do that study of history, to look at the history of slavery and Jim Crow and to see that we're all part of that continuum of history and that all of the racist laws, the exclusion acts, the internment camps, the killing of Vincent Chin… all of these are not mistakes. They're not surprises. They're there because there's a problem in this country with the fundamental system and all of us, in order to fight anti-Asian violence and crimes, have to come together and recognize that the only way forward is through solidarity with other communities. To see that we're all suffering because of the same systemic racism; it affects people at different times to different degrees, but affects all of us.

But what do we do daily? As Lillian said, we are afraid as older Asian women. We're taking self-defense classes. We don't want our community to become unwelcoming places and to be on guard all the time. We want to welcome people. We don't want to depend on the police unless we really need to. And our young people are also teaching us that there's different ways to look at things. We have to really fight hard to find another way.

Linda: Preserving memory is connecting the past with the present and the future. How are you using technology or other tools to bring your memory activism to future generations?

Kathy: I'm going to describe some of our materials, starting with some old-school things and then coming to the present. In 1981, as I said, we videotaped the commission hearings. That was innovative at the time because video was not utilized broadly. We worked with a group called Visual Communications that had the skills; carrying these big tape decks around, with these big cameras and videotape; it was a massive task. We were able to preserve the hearings on Beta tape, then VHS, then DVD, under the title Speak Out for Justice. And now we're going to be streaming it online. So, the voices and words of the people have moved since 1981 to the present through all those different forms.

The other thing that we did was we created, again, an old-school DVD, Stand Up for Justice, about the solidarity of people supporting Japanese Americans during WWII. And we have a study guide which we developed for high school students. I was a high school teacher at one time and we really wanted to highlight a story about a Mexican American teenager who went to the concentration camp with his Japanese American friends.

I know that books are also kind of passé. But *NCRR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations* is a book we produced that teaches about the lessons that you can learn from grassroots efforts and struggle and not just from top-down efforts, but really from the bottom up, the mass movement.

Our younger generation is into using art and music in political work and some of them have really taken it to another level and created a performance piece using trapeze and using a lot of the videotape footage. The recordings of the commission hearings inspired them to create this piece called "Tales of Clamor, Breaking Silence." And they connected it to what's going on today. They hope to take it around to the 10 different cities across the country where the commission hearings were held. It's really exciting, really moving and incorporates discussion in the community about what is going on today. So, it's not just about the past.

And finally, I think Zoom is a great way for us to connect. I feel that, in a way we must get back, and I think Judith talked about this, to an international view. In the 1960s, it was very internationalist. We were learning from each other and connecting to other struggles around the world. And I think that Zoom provides an opportunity for us to do that and to connect to each other, to learn from each other and to support each other.

Judith: In addition to many of the things that Kathy talked about in terms of videos and reference books,

talking about the "comfort women" in novels has become something of a trend. You can find a list on our website (remembercomfortwomen.org), which we are currently updating.

The other thing that we're doing is this very exciting project which we're calling Eternal Testimony. It's been pioneered by the Shoah Foundation and we're working with them and it's amazing. You film a survivor, in this case, a "comfort woman" survivor, and you ask them a thousand questions, trying to think of all the questions that somebody might ask. It all goes into a computer. When you access the computer, you see the image of the person and you ask that image a question and the person answers back. So it's sort of like a hologram, except it's in a computer. And that means that for generations to come, people will actually see "comfort women" survivors and have them answer their questions: Where were you born? What was the experience like? And so on and so forth. And that's why we call it Eternal Testimony. It's sort of the next step from what Kathy did with the recording of the hearings.

I think we have to also continually study and reflect and continuously tie what happened in the past to what's going on in the present and say, see, if we continue to deny what happened in the past, we're never going to be able to resolve these issues. And it's interesting because right now we see a right-wing resurgence all around and people are rewriting, still rewriting, WWII. This is coalescing with this mythology of the narrative in the United States, in Europe, and in Japan. So, we have to challenge that as well. We have to challenge these colonialist and imperialist mythologies and really challenge ourselves because it's hard. But we have to challenge ourselves and that will also preserve the future.

Jung-Sil: First, diversifying the media and disciplines through which we teach "comfort women" history and activism is necessary. Now several disciplines teach about "comfort women" history through their own interpretations and settings: History, Korean or Asian studies, Political Science, Human Rights, Art History, Women's or Gender studies. Many English departments include Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* as a required reading. I created a new course "Historical Trauma and Cultural Healing in Post-1950s Korean Art" both for the Art History and East Asian Languages and Literature Department of George Washington University. Diversifying the perspectives is important when it comes to learning about the past and creating a dialogue, especially, in an interdisciplinary way.

Diversifying the media to transmit and to teach "comfort women" history is important as well. The tools we commonly use to educate, such as written material, artwork, films, and webinars, might not be enough for the next generation. In South Korea, practically every person is holding a cell phone and watching it all the time, wherever they go. So, for instance, the creation of related educational apps is mandatory. Actually, I requested my interns to create some software for an app or interactive media platform, including artificial intelligence. For sure, the Eternal Testimony project, Judith mentioned, speaks to that as well. So, using and involving all this kind of technology for the next generation, is strongly recommended.

Second, educational venues should be expanded to be more effective and easily accessible by the larger public—not only educational institutions, but also educational venues such as museums, where the visual and textual content of these histories needs to be securely implanted and broadly disseminated. There is a paucity of museum content when it comes to Asian-American historical trauma and activism. I'm currently in discussion with the school board of Fairfax County, VA and the curators of the Smithsonian museums in Washington, DC about this inclusion.

Lillian: In China, there are fewer than 10 "comfort women" survivors today. So, it's really important to preserve history and to do it in such a way that it could be used in the future. In addition to what Judith said about Eternal Testimony, another way of doing this is to have the world theater recognize these atrocities. In 2015, UNESCO added the rape of Nanjing to its Memory of the World Register, but inclusion of the "comfort women" history was fought vehemently by Japan, and right now it's in limbo. A lot of international communities are still going forward to try to force UNESCO to include

the "comfort women" into the Memory of the World Register. Grandma Yong Soo Lee, a former "comfort woman" in South Korea who is 95 years old, said her last wish is to bring the "comfort women" issue to the world theater, to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and not leave it to Japan, Korea, or the United States. So, these are some things that we are doing for the future.

Note: *Please download the Nikkei Progressives & NCRR Joint Reparations Committee: Reparations Educational Resources' current Google Doc here:*

NP_NCRR Reparations Resources Handout 2024Download

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