Allied with Japanese America: New Stories of Supporters During World War II

December 8, 2018

Hosted by the USC Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture & the Japanese American National Museum

Venue: Japanese American National Museum (100 North Central Avenue)
A symposium exploring allies of Japanese Americans during World War II who defended and supported those living under martial law in Hawaii, in the U.S. military, and behind barbed wire in War Relocation Authority camps as well as in their resettlement once out of camp. Leading scholars, filmmakers, and writers present their findings about Buddhist and Christian clergy, African American and Chinese American leaders, and others who courageously spoke out for the Japanese American community.

10-10:15am Welcome Remarks from JANM and Duncan Williams (USC)

10:15am-12pm Session I: Race Relations and the Mass Incarceration

Screening of *Emily Light: A Light in the Darkness* and Discussion with Kimiko Marr (Filmmaker/ Japanese American Memorial Pilgrimages)

Scott Kurashige (University of Washington) “Multiracial Solidarity in Little Tokyo and Bronzeville”

12-1:30pm Lunch Break

1:30-3:30pm Session II: Asian American Supporters Beyond the Camps: Hawai‘i and the Military

“*Kansha*, Hung Wai Ching, and How Hawai‘i Changed America”
Talk by Director Tom Coffman (Filmmaker/Author) and Screening of *The First Battle*

Edward Chang (UC Riverside) “Unsung Hero: Col. Young Oak Kim Story”

3:30-3:45pm Tea Break

3:45-5pm Session III: Buddhist-Christian Supporters of Faith

Michihiro Ama (University of Montana) “Revisiting Euro-American and Japanese-American Buddhist Interactions in 1930s and 1940s”

Beth Hessel (Presbyterian Historical Society) “Justice, Mercy, and Anti-Racism Efforts - Was it Enough?: White Protestant Allies of Japanese Americans”
Abstracts

Session I: Race Relations and the Mass Incarceration

Screening of *Emily Light: A Light in the Darkness* and Discussion with **Kimiko Marr** (*Filmmaker/ Japanese American Memorial Pilgrimages*)
A short film about a Caucasian school teacher who taught in Tule Lake, Topaz and Jerome concentration camps as told from the perspective of one of her Japanese American students.

“Multiracial Solidarity in Little Tokyo and Bronzeville”  
**Scott Kurashige (University of Washington)**
The forced removal of Japanese Americans during WWII shuttered businesses and community organizations, while creating rare housing openings in a city with a rapidly expanding wartime population. With most areas of Los Angeles blanketed with racial restrictions, African American migrants came to Little Tokyo as a neighborhood of last resort—often living in overcrowded spaces declared unfit for habitation. Black business and community leaders, however, saw this as a unique opportunity to expand their cultural and economic footprint. While the transformation of Little Tokyo into Bronzeville was marked by anxiety, tension, and competition, it also sparked new forms of multiracial unity and solidarity as diverse actors sought to overcome the city’s history of racial discrimination and segregation.

Session II: Asian American Supporters Beyond the Camps: Hawai‘i and the Military

“Kansha, Hung Wai Ching, and How Hawai‘i Changed America”  
**Tom Coffman (Filmmaker/Author)**
I will cover the interracial community roots that helped stabilize and boost Hawaii in the leadup to the war and during the war. I will talk about an ad hoc Council for Interracial Unity and the common denominators that linked people: The public schools, University of Hawaii, YMCA, and Army/ROTC. I will talk about the Hawaii/Navy Intelligence of Questions 27/28 and why these were not an issue in Hawaii. Finally, I will comment briefly on outcomes.

“Unsung Hero: Col. Young Oak Kim Story”  
**Edward Chang (UC Riverside)**
The life of Young Oak Kim can be painted in two broad strokes: a legendary war hero of both WWII and the Korean War and a pioneering humanitarian activist. Born of parents who were among the earliest Korean immigrants to the USA, Young Oak Kim was taught that Japan was the enemy of the motherland, Korea. In an ironic twist, the young U. S. Army Officer of Korean descent was assigned to an all Japanese-American Army unit. The now-famous 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team fought in Europe during 1943-1945. Their leader’s Korean origin made him a suspect in their eyes and Young Oak Kim would have to win the men over while winning their respect. Largely due to Young Oak Kim’s brilliant leadership in field operations and his undying dedication to his charges, this group of Japanese American fighters quickly came to respect and trust its Korean-American leader. With astonishing heroism and courage, the
combat unit led by Young Oak Kim won battle after battle and emerged from the war as one of the most decorated units in American history. Still suffering from multiple battle injuries, Young Oak Kim was honorably discharged in 1946. While Young Oak Kim had revealed his deep compassion for humanitarian causes early on through his orphanage work in the war-torn battleground of the Korean War, his real work as one of the most humane, effective and dedicated community leaders started after his retirement from the military in 1972. The freshly retired Colonel Young Oak Kim disregarded multiple tempting offers from political and business fields. Instead, he was instrumental in starting energetic wave of movements with the purpose of establishing and guiding Asian-American community organizations in newly settled immigrant neighborhoods. This task was undertaken at a time when immigrant community activism was stillborn.

**Session III: Buddhist-Christian Supporters of Faith**

“Revisiting Euro-American and Japanese-American Buddhist Interactions in 1930s and 1940s”  
**Michihiro Ama (University of Montana)**

During World War II, Caucasian Buddhist priests affiliated with Nishi Honganji organizations supported persons of Japanese ancestry interned in interior parts of the United States. Although the relationships between Euro-American and Japanese-American Buddhists were generally amicable, Caucasian Buddhists were not just helping fellow Buddhists. They had their own objectives—to promote the basic teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha in the United States. They were not interested in the sectarian teaching of Nishi Honganji—that is, Shinran’s teaching. Through three case studies, I will demonstrate a tension between Universal Buddhism and ethnic sectarian Buddhism underlying the relationships between Euro-American and Japanese-American Buddhists during the 1930s and 1940s.

“Justice, Mercy, and Anti-Racism Efforts - Was it Enough?: White Protestant Allies of Japanese Americans”  
**Beth Hessel (Presbyterian Historical Society)**

Leaders of several ecumenical organizations viewed the incarceration of Japanese American citizens and residents as a failure of our democratic processes. Using national influence, the Young Woman’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the Protestant Church Commission for Japanese Service fought for justice and a vision of a racism-free society, Church, and YWCA for Japanese Americans during World War II. This presentation examines the successes and limits of their efforts.
Bios:

**Michihiro Ama (University of Montana)**
Michihiro Ama is the Karashima Tsukasa Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Culture at the University of Montana. Previously he taught at the University of Alaska, Anchorage as Assistant/Associate Professor of Japanese. He specializes in the study of modern Japanese Buddhism. His research interests include trans-Pacific development of Japanese Buddhism, Buddhism in modern Japanese literature and film, and Buddhism and Japanese language. He is the author of *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).

**Edward Chang (UC Riverside)**

**Tom Coffman (Filmmaker/Author)**

**Beth Hessel (Presbyterian Historical Society)**
Based in Philadelphia, Dr. Beth Shalom Hessel is the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Historical Society, the national archives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). With a PhD in history from Texas Christian University and a M.Div from San Francisco Theological Seminary, her research and writing focuses on religion, ethnicity, and U.S.-transpacific relationships. Her dissertation and publications examined the relationship between ecumenical Protestant missionaries, incarcerated Japanese Americans, and the federal government around questions of religious freedom, assimilation, citizenship, and the future of our society.

**Scott Kurashige (University of Washington)**

**Kimiko Marr (Filmmaker/ Japanese American Memorial Pilgrimages)**
Kimiko Marr is hapa yonsei (fourth generation, half Japanese). Her own family was incarcerated in Topaz, Utah. After working in television for over 12 years, she decided to make documentary films about the Japanese American incarceration during WWII. She has been interviewing and filming survivors for over 4 years. Currently she is working on a project that deals with the various pilgrimages to the Japanese American Confinement Sites.