

Hope and California: Two Minority Perspectives

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This composition explores the notion of hope and the migration to California by people of African and Japanese descent. It is a broad view of the vicissitudes of the two groups with regard to their western ingress and acculturation. It may not be readily apparent but the two cultures share significant experiential commonality, as will be elucidated in this treatise.

The story of ethnic minorities in the U.S. is usually characterized by misfortune, indomitable spirit, hard work and heartache, and above all else *hope*. While not the exclusive domain of people of color, hope seems to be an endemic quality. Throughout American history, ethnic groups have often been the victims of discriminatory practices and inequitable legislation, and the state of California was no exception. There appears to be, however, little appreciation or acknowledgement of the groups' strengths and how they established and defined themselves in all aspects of their lives. Rarely is their spirit fully depicted.

This disquisition hypothesizes that “hope” was (and still is) a primary motivator for the transplantation of African and Japanese ethnicities to California — even though their odysseys to the Golden State met with considerable encumbrances and formidable challenges. Long before Horace Greeley's exhortation to “go west,” the myths, legends and a swirl of hopes lured people to this mysterious new territory — giving birth to the California dream. And like the vastly diverse populations who have made the trek, African and Japanese peoples were not immune to the state's beguilement.

Data from the U.S. Census of 2000 reflect the following demographics: African Americans comprise nearly 7% of California’s population (compared to 12% for the country overall); and Asians make-up nearly 11% of the population of the state (compared to 3.6% nationally). Before exploring the psychology of hope and its relevance to the migration of these groups to California, an apposite historical perspective seems in order. An examination of the antecedents of their residency in the state should provide some insight into the catalyzing factors for the groups’ westward excursion.

California and African Americans

It is ironic that a state purportedly named for a Black person — a mythological African queen named Califa* — should have such an ignoble legacy of racial discrimination and bigotry. A history permeated by a prevailing attitude of disdain for its darker complected denizens. According to California State Archives, the presence of African descendents in the American West dates back to the 1600s. Predating by more than 200 years the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that formally ceded the colonized Spanish territory known as California to the United States. Hence, by the time California was a state, African Americans were vital members of its communities. And even though they mined, farmed and operated businesses, in the pre-Civil War years they were nevertheless denied most civil rights.

California was admitted into the Union in 1850 as a “free” state. This meant that, unlike most other states (especially in the southeast), slavery was not the law of the land. Although, within two years the State adopted a law to return “runaway” slaves to their masters. And in 1858, per documentation

* The California State Military Museum reports that the history behind the name of California begins when it was first used in a romance novel published in Spain circa 1510. Califa’s life and land were described in a novel entitled “Las Serges des Esplandian” by a Spanish writer named Garcia Ordonez Rodriguez de Montalvo. He wrote of Califa, a mythical African queen who ruled the island paradise of *California*, where gold was the only metal and pearls were as common as rocks. This document is asserted to have precipitated the Spanish hunt for gold in North America. When the explorer Cortes landed thirty years later with his crew in what is known today as Baja California, it is said that he announced to his men (300 of which were of African descent) that they had arrived in Califa’s land. By 1770, the entire Pacific coast controlled by Spain had been given the name California.

from the California State Archives, Chairman of the Committee on Federal Relations, Isaac Allen, introduced the Negro Exclusion Bill — AB 395 (also known as the “Nigger Bill”) to the assembly. It was described as “an Act to restrict and prevent the immigrations to and residence in this State of Negroes and Mulattoes.” The bill asserted:

“The position of the free negro in this state is a peculiar one, he is not the equal of the white man, socially or politically, he can not testify in our courts or exercise the right of suffrage. Hence, in our judgment it is not good policy on our part to encourage the immigrations of any class of persons incapable of appreciating and enjoying, to the fullest extent, our institutions.

The negro is by nature indolent and in a state of freedom becomes a ready prey to vice, particularly in our large cities. We deem it unnecessary to refer to the conditions of the free Negro, in portions of our union as a proof of the evil of harboring them here in our midst.

That there are here in California many worthy and industrious free negroes, your Committee do not deny. In fact we know many who for industry sobriety and good conduct, would be a good example to many of our white citizens, but these are exceptionable instances.

The Bill does not interfere with those free negroes already here, but simply requires them to procure a certificate of Registry, from the County Recorder in the County of their residence, to show that they were residents of this state prior to the 1st day of October 1858. This portion of the Bill is necessary to render it Effectual.

Believing therefore that the further immigration of free negroes and Mulattoes into this state, is not desirable, we beg leave to report the Bill back to the Senate and recommend its passage without amendment.”

The bill was passed overwhelmingly in the state assembly and was then sent to the senate. Uneasiness about the bill was more evident in this body. Nonetheless, its passage was to be ratified (by a vote of 21

(A portion of the original novel was translated by Edward Everett Hale for The Antiquarian Society and the story was printed in the Atlantic Monthly magazine in 1864.)

to 8), with some minor revisions. These revisions required the bill's return to the assembly for approval. The assembly had, however, in the meantime adjourned and the bill therefore died.

There was brief respite in this overwhelming sentiment of prejudice in 1865. It was in this year that the California State Legislature voted to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery as a legal institution.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the number of African Americans in California increased dramatically. California's major metropolitan areas — San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego – collectively absorbed nearly 70% of the increase in the region's African American population. Fueled by their hope for a better day and a better way, these were a people in pursuit of the age-old twin desires for opportunity and freedom. One can't help but believe that the same aspirations were imbued in generations to follow.

Despite the persistence of old patterns of prejudice, African Americans made substantial advances in politics, business, sports and entertainment. In their pursuit of racial justice, they helped launch a much larger expansion of rights for all Westerners by contributing to the onset of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. And in their pursuit of economic opportunity, they became a crucial element in the dramatic rise of the national standard for all Americans (Taylor, 1998).

California and Japanese Americans

The Library of Congress (per the State of California website) states the earliest Californians were adventurous Asians who made their way across the Bering Straits to Alaska thousands of years ago when a warmer climate and an erstwhile land bridge allowed such travel. These men and women and their descendants settled in North and South America, and spread out to form the various nations and tribes whom the first European visitors to this hemisphere dubbed "Indians." Thus, it is speculated that the indigenous people of California were of Asian lineage. This illuminates the dichotomy of the Asian experience in California, though not unlike the plight of many indigenous peoples through the annals of history.

As with African Americans and other people of color during the 19th century and beyond, Japanese Americans were often segregated and proscribed admittance to restaurants, theaters and other establishments throughout the state. Growing up, many Japanese American children faced persistent and pervasive discrimination. Even with exceptional grades, leading to college or professional degrees, they were often denied access to certain professions, unions and apprenticeship systems due to the legally permitted discrimination of the times.

The first documentation of Japanese persons on American soil dates to 1851. This is when shipwrecked Japanese sailors were taken ashore in San Francisco. One of the first groups of American settlers from Japan was the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony under the leadership of John Schnell. These first immigrants brought mulberry trees, silk cocoons, tea plants, bamboo roots and other agricultural products. They arrived at Gold Hill in El Dorado County, California in June 1869. Additional colonists arrived in the fall of that year.

Census data of 1870 showed that there were 55 Japanese in the United States. Of those, 33 were in California, with 22 living at Gold Hill. Within a few years of the colony's founding, the colonists had dispersed — their agricultural venture a failure. Yet, they were undeterred. Twenty years later, the census reflected 590 Japanese residing in San Francisco. There was also a scattering of residents throughout the state, with the smallest number in Southern California.

As with most people of color, Japanese Americans suffered a variety of restrictions and discrimination. Perhaps this could have been expected considering the initial conditions under which Japanese were originally enticed to immigrate to the United States — as a source of labor, with no plans for them to stay and participate actively in the life of the society. Even as a source of labor, however, Japanese immigrants were criticized for being too numerous. They were seen as inassimilable and potentially capable of overrunning the state. Similar to the state legislature's attempt to abate the influx of African Americans via the Negro Exclusion Bill of 1858, the Asiatic Exclusion League was formed

in San Francisco in 1905. It quickly mounted a campaign to exclude Japanese and Koreans from the United States.

President Theodore Roosevelt sought to appease those Californians who were agitating for the cessation of Japanese immigration, without offending the Japanese government. Consequently, he negotiated the 1907-08 Gentlemen's Agreement, whereby the Japanese government agreed not to issue passports to laborers immigrating to the United States. Although the parents, wives and children of laborers already in the U.S. were permitted to immigrate.

The effect of this agreement, however, was counter to the goals of the anti-Japanese movement. Rather than cutting off immigration from Japan, the agreement resulted in a steady stream of Japanese women entering California. Soon thereafter children were born; thus, increasing the Japanese population, rather than decreasing it. Arranged marriages were the cultural norm for Japanese society. The practice allowed male issei (Japanese born) immigrants to marry and summon their brides to join them in this country. For those disposed to such prejudicial sectarianism, this bolstered the stereotype of Japanese being sneaky and untrustworthy — even though the provisions of the Gentlemen's Agreement were being scrupulously maintained.

Beginning in January 1909 and continuing through World War II, every year saw the introduction of anti-Japanese bills to the California legislature. As the Japanese American population increased through the immigration of male issei brides and the birth of nisei (American born) children, anti-Japanese forces alleged that the Japanese birth rate was three times as high as the general population's. The fact that Japanese females in prime childbearing years were compared with white women from ages 15 to 45 was not mentioned. Again, their inability to assimilate was charged and the resultant Immigration Act of 1924 was passed, with a complete cessation of immigration from Japan. This cultural embargo was in effect until 1952 and the passing of the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act. This Act, which passed in Congress over President Truman's veto, allowed Japanese and other Asian immigrants to become naturalized citizens for the first time.

In the wake of the Japanese military attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt enacted the most egregious legislative perpetration on Japanese Americans — akin to the institutionalized slavery of Blacks (albeit much abbreviated by comparison) — with the signing of Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. Borne from the baseless fear of internal espionage, this Executive Order granted the Secretary of War authority to designate “military areas” from which to exclude certain people (i.e., those of Japanese descent). This set into motion the eventual incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans. Executive Order 9066 was rescinded in 1944, and the last internment camp was closed in March 1946.

A key figure in the orchestration of the removal of persons of Japanese descent to internment camps was California Attorney General Earl Warren; subsequent Governor and eventual Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In his autobiography (2001), Warren confessed, “I have since deeply regretted the removal order and my own testimony advocating it, because it was not in keeping with our American concept of freedom and the rights of citizens. Whenever I thought of the innocent little children who were torn from home, school friends and congenial surroundings, I was conscience-stricken.”

Per historians LaFontaine and Wang (1995), in the entire course of the war, ten people were convicted of spying for Japan — all of whom were Caucasian.

Two Individual Viewpoints

Following are the individual perspectives of two members of the groups discussed in this paper. These testimonials are intended to provide insight into hope and its affect on their personal migrations to California. They also speak to the legacy of their ancestors and the role of hope in their personal lives:

Tom H. (African American)

“I was born in a small town in Alabama in 1959 — the advent of the Civil Rights movement. It’s interesting being from that place at that time. People often assume that I was engulfed in tense race

relations and that my youth must have been tainted, if not scarred, by the overwhelming prejudice that dominated the South. However, my experiences growing up were hardly adverse and minimally impacted by the burgeoning Civil Rights struggle and its attendant difficulties. I'm not sure if it was because of a sheltered upbringing or my extreme denial, but I recall a fairly normal childhood and adolescence. In fact, the only time I've been called the "n" word to my face was when I was involved in an altercation in California.

Growing up, our family never spoke as if race was a barrier — just another issue to contend with in the pursuit of a goal. My two siblings and I were inculcated with the belief that we could achieve anything that we wanted, if we put our minds to it. The cardinal values of honesty and integrity, and the notion that right wins out over might, were instilled in us. With regard to hope, along with humor, they are the glue that binds our family together.

Our genealogy is rife with religious practitioners and devout observers, antedating at least four generations with roots in the soil of the South. Religion: a quixotic amalgamation of faith and hope. I believe that it was the indelible religious beliefs of our progenitors that endowed my family with its intrepidly optimistic outlook. An attribution that has helped to buoy us through many troubling times. And while I am not an observer of any formalized dogma, I have been unquestionably influenced by this familial trait.

I first moved to California at the age of 18 to attend the San Francisco Art Institute. And though I attended art school for only one year, I stayed in the area and adopted San Francisco as my home. The ensuing 27 years have been enthralling and infuriating; joyful and miserable; and, at times, actualizing achievements beyond my wildest expectations and disappointments that pierced my very core. In other words, a fairly typical existence.

The significant difference, however, is the environs of the aforementioned existentialism: a golden state where the sunset can take your breath away; where the overwhelming might and majesty of the Pacific Ocean can infuse you with a sense of humility that makes the most monumental problem

seem trivial; where the diversity of people serves as a constant reminder of the multiplicity and richness of life. This is what compels me to stay — through the ups and downs of drought, earthquakes, El Nino, dot-com and dot-gone — and impels me forward. It is this state of hope (also known as California) that sustains me.”

Donna U. (Japanese American)

“My grandmother was a picture bride who came to America to create her future. To sense the allure of chasing dreams, one only has to visit Angel Island — the Ellis Island of the West — and view the photos of the Japanese and Chinese immigrants hoping for a better life. My grandparents eventually settled in Colorado. They epitomized the strength of spirit that became part of my mother, who passed it on to me.

I first visited California when I was a young child. Coming from land-locked Colorado, the vastness of the Pacific Ocean made me feel the power of possibilities and I decided right then and there that I was going to live in the Golden State when I grew up. Consequently, I moved to California in the early 1980s; went back to Denver for a decade and then headed back to California to raise my son.

For me, California represents hope on many levels — especially the San Francisco Bay Area. Having been the one who was ‘different’ throughout my childhood (Denver having a rather homogeneous population), it is nice to blend into a community where I am one of many people of diverse backgrounds, cultures and nationalities. San Francisco has a strong Asian community and, while I’m not Asian enough to feel a sense of belonging, it’s nice to feel that I’m part of a larger whole. Plus, I can blend into a crowd, which continues to amaze me.

In raising my son, he benefits partially from the more progressive times we live in but also from being in California. I was raised being told I was different and therefore had to exceed to succeed. My mother was the first in her family to leave the farm and pursue an education. She pushed me to do better than she did and is proud that I’ve achieved my own level of success. My son, however, faces less

pressure to perform — a benefit for many yonsei (fourth-generation Japanese Americans) — because just being ‘normal’ is not considered underperforming.

Living in San Francisco invokes a pervasive optimism that you can achieve your dreams. Being able to call one of the most beautiful cities in North America home is not only cool, it’s also permission to extend the boundaries. For my son and me, nothing is prescribed and anything is possible.

Even after all these years in the area, as I drive to work each day across the Golden Gate Bridge, I am awestruck. I continue to hope for the future, while living the possibilities of today. Hope does indeed spring eternal.”

Conclusion: The California Dream

California is more than a geographical location; it's a state of mind, a way of life, and an ever-evolving dream. Countless argonauts have made the expedition west in anticipation of riches, while others have made the perilous journey fueled only by hope and the desire for a more peaceful existence. As evidenced by the aforementioned accounts of African Americans and Japanese Americans, the ensuing existence of these two groups was anything but peaceful. Yet they remained. And through their perseverance, not only survived but thrived. Often times sustained only by their hope.

According to C.R. Snyder (1995), hope is defined as the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals and the means for their achievement. What is it about the construct of hope that enables a group of people to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles with a sense of purpose and dignity intact? Is it scientific, with the answer residing in their collective limbic system? Is it spiritual, where the answer dwells in the hearts and minds of group members and their unwavering belief in a power greater than themselves? Although this tractate does not endeavor to address such polemical issues, maybe the answer resides in the junction of the two.

References

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