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Fear and Mistrust: The Relationship Among Japanese American Farmers, Organized Labor, and Future Generations

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Introduction

For Japanese Americans in California's Central Valley, giving up their farm land and farming equipment during World War II incarceration was damaging both financially and mentally (O'Brien & Fugita, 1984). Upon returning from the incarceration camps, Japanese Americans who asked neighbors to hold onto land were greeted with hostility and often told that it was no longer their land. Through sheer will and perseverance some Japanese Americans were able to obtain farmland. This property became the livelihood of these farmers and any attempt to take away property was met with strong resentment.

The strong property rights held by Japanese American farmers in the postwar period came to the forefront with the rise of the United Farm Workers (UFW) during the 1960s. In response to the demands of the UFW (e.g. higher wages, seniority placements, etc.), Japanese American farmers formed the Nisei Farmers League (NFL) to advocate for their interests (Fugita & O'Brien, 1977). As a result, the UFW felt the NFL was working against their cause while Japanese American farmers feared retaliation from UFW. This conflict between the UFW and Japanese American farmers reflects an intersection between labor organizing, property, and civil rights.

This working paper will investigate the relationship among Japanese American famers and the UFW by focusing on three main areas of inter and intra-ethnic conflict among Japanese American farmers: 1) the atmosphere of fear and mistrust among Japanese American famers; 2) the generational gap in the Japanese American family; 3) and the current state of racism in the farming industry in Central California. By focusing on these areas, I will use the challenges and contributions of Japanese American farmers in the Central Valley in order to provide recommendations for improving farm labor relations today.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was developed in the late 1980s in response to the lack of representation and acknowledgment of race in critical theories in legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The founders of CRT wanted race to be at the center of the conversation amongst other forms of subordination including classism, sexism, and homophobia (K. Crenshaw, 1991). By centralizing race, these scholars demonstrated the importance that race and racism plays in the subjugation of people. They also believed that by foregrounding race, transformational resistance can be promoted and reduce the effects of racism (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

To investigate the relationship between labor organizations and Japanese American farmers in the Central Valley, it is important to understand the process of racialization through the framework of CRT. In their seminal piece, Omi and Winant (1994) suggests racial formation in the United States occurs through the sociohistorical process of "othering". This process defines racial groups by differentiating them through physical and social attributes. Moreover, this process is contextualized by local society, politics, history, and the physiological positioning of the person (Omi & Winant, 1994). Therefore, to understand the relationship between labor organizations and Japanese American farmers, it is essential to observe the socio-political and economic context of the Central Valley.

During the late 19th century, Asian immigrants were portrayed as the Yellow Peril that would take all the jobs and destroy the American way. Instead of being accepted by U.S. citizens, Asian immigrants were denied equal access to naturalization, schooling, social welfare, and much more. Because of the denial of equal rights, especially naturalization, people of Asian descent were stereotyped as forever foreign. It was a common perception that Asian Americans would return to Asia once they were able to take all the resources away from "real Americans".

The Japanese American community has lived in fear for much of the time they have been in the United States because of their 'foreign status' among the general public. With the first immigrants there was a fear of death from overwork and malnourishment because of the lack and denial of resources. In the 1930s and 40s there was a fear of being called the enemy. The relocation for incarceration of Japanese Americans was a major turning point for the community. Upon returning to the Central Valley after incarceration, there was not much left for the Japanese American community. Many of their farms were sold by the holders or heavily damaged by protesters. In general, Japanese American farmers in the Central Valley feared that life would never go back to normal.

Aoki and Chang (2012) describe the social area of the person as a racial microclime. Racial microclimes are further described as "local settings with particular social and political dynamics that affect racialization processes" (Chang, 2012, p. 1924). Additionally, Chang (2012) contends "race has multiple contingent meanings. Racial orderings are multiple and contextual, temporal as well as temporary. Attention to the local microclime is crucial for understanding how discrimination operates and what kinds of interventions would disrupt or remedy this discrimination." (p. 1924). This is especially pertinent for the Asian American community in California. For instance, Asian Americans are only mentioned three times in the social science and history content standards for California. Therefore, "we need to "re-vision" history to include Asians in the history of America and to do so in a broad and comparative way" (Takaki, 1998). By re-visioning California history through the lens of Japanese American farmers, a conversation about the contributions and struggles of Japanese American farmers can shed light on contemporary farm labor issues in the Central Valley. A re-vision of history will also provide lessons for contemporary labor organizing practices by learning from the past.

Data & Methodology

A majority of my data set was collected through document analysis from archival research. Because most of the negotiations between the NFL and the UFW occurred during the 1960s and

70s, many of those that were involved have died. I used multiple archives focused on Asian American history and the Central Valley including those located at the following locations: University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles, Stanford University, National Japanese American Historical Society, and Japanese American National Museum. Through these archives, I looked at newspapers, past interviews, magazines, speeches, and family documents during the 1960s and 1970s to understand the context of the time and the relationship between NFL, UFW, and the Japanese American communities.

Through family and community member contacts, I accessed Japanese American farmers and Central California Japanese American organization leaders to talk about their own experiences of the UFW and the NFL as well as the atmosphere of the community during the 60s and 70s. Through oral testimonies, I focused on the meaning the events hold for the interviewees rather than the events themselves. These in-depth interviews will promote the stories of the often neglected Japanese American farming community.

Seven data sets were collected for this study: 2 interviews, 2 observations, and 3 document data sets (about 100 individual documents and audio recordings). One interview was conducted with a researcher that covered the NFL during the 1970s and the other interview was with a third generation Japanese American farmer. Both observations were conducted on a small Japanese American farm in the Central Valley. The three document data sets were collected from archival material from Stanford University, University of California, Los Angeles, and University of California, Berkeley. Document data sets were categorized by the name of the special collection. Most of the documents were local and ethnic newspapers from the San Francisco Bay Area. These newspapers covered the political climate of the Central Valley, opinions from leaders in the farming community, and propositions that affected famers and laborers. Also an interview conducted in the 1970s with a Nisei Farmers League leader was collected. Finally, photographs from the collection of Senator S. I. Hayakawa were collected for this research study. The Appendix provides listing of the data sources used in the development of the working paper.

Interview data was collected and housed on my computer. Categories were developed using prominent codes focused on race, class, and locality. Once categories were produced, member checking and consultations with Professor Lane Hirabyashi was conducted to ensure all stories are told with the upmost respect and accuracy.

With analysis completed between the observations and interviews, I used critical race theory to interpret the data. Asian American critical race theory allowed me to place race at the center of the analysis as well as be able to intertwine the experiences of these teachers without silencing their voices. Finally by using this theoretical framework, I was able to foreground the importance of narrative to the Japanese American community in the Central Valley.

The United Farm Workers and Nisei Farmers League in the Central Valley

> I think when we were told to take our belongings and the first thing I picked is my mitts and my ball, and maybe my underwear and stuff like that, but not knowing what you could bring but it's only what you could carry… And the

> things we stored, well, we never got back, because the place we stored it in Seattle, you know, it was all stolen after we came back from camp. (Fujii, 1997)

Frank Fujii was a young child when the President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Like Mr. Fujii, Japanese Americans were given a very short time to pack up their belongings into two suitcases before relocation (Takaki, 1998). Belongings that did not fit or could not be carried needed to be stored or sold before the relocation, this included stores and farm land. For Japanese Americans in California's Central Valley, giving up their farm land and farming equipment during World War II incarceration was damaging both financially and mentally (O'Brien & Fugita, 1984).

Upon returning to the Central Valley, there was not much left for the Japanese American community. Many of their farms were sold by the holders or heavily damaged by protesters. There was a fear that life would never go back to normal. The hatred many people had towards the formerly incarcerated left a lingering thought that Japanese Americans were bitter that Japan lost and would take it out on local people. This time period was dominated by a culture of fear and mistrust of Japanese Americans. The perception of mistrust forced Japanese Americans to become isolated (Spickard, 2008). Through this isolation some Japanese American farmers began to fear that a culture of anti-Japanese sentiment was still occurring and might become worse.

As Japanese American farmers started to regain some of the land after relocation and began to produce a crop to make a profit, a new perceived threat to their property started to unfold with the formation of the United Farm Workers Union. As the UFW gained power, farmers became afraid of what this would mean for their farms and their labor. Even though Japanese American farmers experienced similar labor and civil rights violations as those in the UFW, many farmers advocated for the racial and economic status quo during the 60s and 70s. In response, Japanese American farmers built community labor organizations to support and protect themselves from perceived outside threats. Harry Kubo and other Japanese American farmers formed the Nisei Farmers League (NFL) (Woo, 2006). The NFL was meant to advocate for increased growers rights on behalf of small Japanese American famers.

Japanese American farmers felt that they were targeted by the UFW for ignoring the boycotts and continuing their daily routines ("Chavez hurls threat at Nisei farm league," 1972, "Violence Breaks Out in Reedley Farmer Trouble," 1971). One NFL leader said, "We had one grower with two acres of plums, they put 150 pickets around him. Scared the daylights out of him. He was one of our strawberry growers and 'cause they said you grow strawberries we will fix you up next year, he didn't grow any strawberries. We lost a strawberry grower. All of this talk of nonviolence sickens me because it is not true" (Loftis, 1974). The UFW denied that they were targeting Japanese American NFL farmers. However, Japanese American farms were still being vandalized and farm equipment was being sabotaged at a high rate ("More on Vandalism at Nisei Farm in Reedley," 1971). For example, tractor tires would be slashed, farmers would be boycotted, and threats of violence were made if things continued as they did. One farmer recalled that "they have a thing called Mexican Star. It is a barbed wire deal that they throw into the drive way and no matter which way it lands it points up and punches your tires" (Loftis, 1974).

On September 1, 1976 the NFL ran a full page ad in California newspapers, including the San Francisco Chronicle, advocating for farmers rights with opposition to Proposition 14. Proposition 14 would have given more representation to farm laborers and potentially harm farm owners. The NFL drew analogies from incarceration experiences to what was happening with the UFW: "34 years ago I gave up my personal rights without a fight… IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN" (Kubo, 1976). Kubo gave a personal narrative of the Tule Lake concentration camp and why he must fight Prop 14 to ensure his rights would not be violated again. This ad drew a large amount of controversy. Some said that this was an unjust representation of the camp experiences while others praised Kubo for making the connection for the general public.

This ad did more than make an accurate analogy or gross misrepresentation of WWII incarceration; it showed to the public the fear amongst Japanese American farmers that their civil, economic, and social rights were being violated. The fear of becoming a target again because of race is more than enough to create animosity towards the perceived oppressor (in this case the oppressor was another oppressed group).

A major concern of the UFW was the control of the NFL by outside influence. Some in the UFW believed that big corporations were using the small Japanese American farmers. According to one researcher studying the NFL, if corporate interests could make the public feel as if the UFW were hurting small businesses and the hard working Japanese American farmers then the public may side with the corporations rather than the UFW (S. F., personal communication, January 2015). This would counteract the claims by Cesar Chavez that the UFW was not targeting or hurting the small farms; rather the UFW was trying to get fair representation in the larger more corporate farms.

Harry Kubo claimed that the NFL was not being controlled by big corporations. Rather, the organization was only controlled by the small Japanese American farmers who wanted protection of their rights. However, which Japanese American farmers were able to make the decisions is still not clear. The NFL was not made up of small Japanese American independent farms. There were also larger cooperative farms in membership as well. A Japanese American farmer pointed out that large Japanese American cooperative farms were able to set prices and wages to ensure maximum profits. Through price fixing, large co-ops were able to act similar to the larger corporate farms like the farms Chavez wanted to reform.

The Japanese American farmers feared of an outsider taking away their land, property, and freedom created a sense of hostility towards the UFW. The UFW's mistrust of the mission of the NFL helped fuel the hostility between these two organizations. The dichotomous conflict became one based on the threats, protests and violence that became a strained relationship between farmer-owner and farm worker.

The Generational Divide in the NFL

The debate over the NFL and the UFW was a conflict that produced deep loyalties on both sides. This debate is unique in that the line of demarcation was generational in the Japanese American community. For example, the second generation (Nisei) experienced incarceration while the third generation (Sansei) grew up in the time of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Many of the

Nisei farmers were stanch supporters of the NFL, while the Sansei were supporters of the UFW. This generational divide was most prominent within California, but also extended to areas like Chicago and the Northeast (Honda, 1971). In opinion pieces, a Japanese American Sansei leader, Warren Furutani, would debate and write opinions about how Japanese Americans needed to continue to build coalitions with other communities of color (Furutani, 1971). His critics claimed that he did not understand the plight of the farmers and did not respect the generation of farmers in the Central Valley (J. Y., personal communication, February 2015). On the other hand, many Nisei felt that they needed to support the Japanese American farmers in the Central Valley because they were like family. A third generation farmer believed that the Nisei generation probably felt a bond because of the camp experience and the extreme isolation they felt when their parents emigrated from Japan.

Based on a review of newspaper articles, it does not appear that the Nisei or the Sansei in the Central Valley were able to come to an agreement or compromise about the role of the NFL and farming (Honda, 1971). This strained generational relationship contributed to many Sansei not willing to follow into their parent into farming. An NFL leader and farmer felt disappointed that Sansei were not taking over the land of their parents: "They could make more money on the farm than in corporate but they don't want to because they want to get away from the land… They don't want to return to the land. They think it is demeaning to work on the farm" (Loftis, 1974). Many Sansei did not believe that the amount of work put into a farm will lead to a better life. One Sansei who grew up on a farm said, "You can't survive on just this. You always had to do something else. Only big time farmers wanted their kids to stay." This generational divide continues today. In the Central Valley, there are fewer and fewer Japanese American farmers. For Japanese Americans today, farming is seen as a fall back option: "The only person I know that is farming is the Nakashima family. Maybe his kid will take over the farm because he didn't finish college. So your options are limited. So the thinking is I don't need a degree." (J. Y., personal communication, February 2015)

As the Japanese American community moves away from farming and the older generation passes away, support for the NFL has become less of an issue. Moreover, support for the NFL in the Japanese American community has fallen to the point that now the NFL leadership is no longer from the Japanese American community. With the decline in support for the generational divide has shifted to debates over selling farm land to other farmers and developers or keeping the land. The Nisei, Sansei, and later generations will probably continue to debate the importance of keeping the land to hold on to a part of their family's history.

Contemporary Racial Divisions in the Central Valley

The Fresno area is not one to always welcome change from the "forever foreigners". When Japanese Americans started to arrive in the early 20th century, there was great hostility towards them because of their race. This hostility led to Alien Land Laws, incarceration, and other citizenship laws to try and drive them from the Central Valley. Over the past century much has changed and migration to the area has been steady and extremely diverse. Recently, there has been an increase in the migration of South Indian immigrants to the area. Many come from the Punjab region of India and brought along with them their agricultural skills and cultural customs. Since the attacks on September 11th, the Fresno area has been less welcoming to people from a

different region especially toward ethnic and racial groups from Central Asia and the Middle-East. This fear of the "stereotypic terrorist" has mirrored the fear that Japanese Americans felt after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This fear has led to the South Indian farmers' facing similar discrimination as Japanese Americans.

Some local farms have grown to loath these new immigrants to the area because of the change they have brought (Singh & Singh, 2012). Sikh temples have been built in rural towns across the Fresno area and local farmers are not happy to see the change. For example, a local farmer was looking for his dog after a nearby Sikh temple set off fireworks the night before. As a former police officer, he was not happy to see and hear what he perceived to be illegal fireworks going off and scaring his dog away. "I would bet that their fireworks are illegal. You can get a permit from the county, but I bet they didn't get it." (J. Y., personal communication, February 2015). He went on to talk about how the big rigs go to the church trafficking illegal fireworks from North Carolina and how the heavy trucks were destroying the country roads. He claims that they need to learn the customs of America and understand that there are laws to protect the integrity of the roads and safety of the community.

Farmers like this are not rare in the Fresno area. Mistrust of new immigrants and the perceived threat of change continue today in the Central Valley. The thought that a person might lose the land their family has protected and inhabited is enough to create a sense of animosity toward new people coming in. This is similar to how the Japanese American farmers felt when the UFW brought change to the way things had been done previously. Their way of life was being challenged.

Resolving Generational and Racial Conflict in Japanese American Farming Communities

The first recommendation toward building a strong multi-ethnic coalition is a strong intergenerational coalition in the Japanese American community. The debate in the Japanese American community took many forms but it was usually between the second and third generations. Having experienced incarceration, the second generation feared a recurrence. As a result, the second generation prioritized an underlining sentiment of property rights related to the need retain gains that could be taken away at any moment. The third generation grew up during a time of radicalization, which shaped their arguments against the NFL. The third generation tended to side with UFW and see the second generation as failing to adapt to changing circumstances. The current debate in the Japanese American community has shifted from the second generation to the fourth generation. As the fourth generation has become a growing part of the community, many third generation Japanese American have been unwilling make a transition to include the fourth generation in leadership position or address fourth generation community issues.

Because of this disconnect between generations, the ability to work out difference and provide a united front is lost in a battle of intergenerational power. If a multi-ethnic coalition is going to include Japanese Americans, it must first deal with the issue of power embedded within generations in the Japanese American community.

The second recommendation is that there needs to be dialogue with the small farmers to build buy-in for a farm worker union. Getting information to small farmers about labor issues is the key to building farm workers' rights. The NFL was able to spread information for their cause faster and more efficiently than the UFW. This was for many reasons including the ethnic solidarity among the Japanese American community and the small area they covered. It also helps that Japanese American farmers felt that the NFL supported their goals because they are a part of the community. Therefore it is up to farm worker unions to become a part of the community. With community buy-in it is much easier to disseminate information and have it be accepted in the community.

The third recommendation is to continue to support research that looks at these inter-ethnic labor conflicts. Such conflicts may stem from purely economic reasons, but more often there are issues of institutional racism or historical legacies that are at the heart of a conflict. We cannot know for sure until we investigate. Without investigating what causes these conflicts, the work climate will become more hostile until we have another Haymarket riot. It is up to researchers to find the root cause of conflict and deflate the situation as effectively and efficiently as possible.

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Appendix

Type of Data	Date/Time	Location	Interviewer	Interviewee	Type of Doc	Audio?	Keywords	Follow-up	Comments
Observations	1.10.2015	Fowler, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	No	Farm, Sikh, Freeze	None	
Document	1.28.2015	Los Angeles, CA	N/A	N/A	Newspapers	No	Newspapers, interviews, opinions	None	About 100 documents
Interview	1.28.2015	Los Angeles	MI	SF	N/A	No	Econ, JACL, mobilization	JANM, Rafu, Chicago, JACL	
Observation	1.31.2015	Fowler, CA	N/A	N/A	N/A	No	Labor, tying vines	None	
Interview	2.26.2015	Fowler, CA	MI	JY	N/A	No	Hiring halls, labor, Armenians	Find the Japanese American Coop	
Document	2.27.2015	Berkeley, CA	N/A	N/A	Audio Recordings	Yes	Fear, intimidation, Chavez	Transcribe the rest of the tape	About 1 hour and 45 minutes
Document	2.27.2015	Stanford, CA	N/A	N/A	Photographs	No	Republicans, politics	Look for documents linking the NFL with Rep.	About 15 pictures