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Brittany Kelley
CSUSB

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Book Review: *American History Unbound*

By Brittany Kelley

American history is currently in a phase of revisionism. For centuries there was one narrative; a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant perspective. In recent years however, more diverse narratives have surfaced in academic research. *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, written in 2015 by Gary Y. Okihiro, tells U.S. history that is not commonly taught in K-12 and college history courses, as Okihiro focuses on Asians and Pacific Islanders – only some of which is familiar. Okihiro is a professor of international and public affairs and the founding director of the center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University. He was recruited to Columbia partially as a result of undergraduate students protesting in 1996. They believed the core-curriculum was one of pro-Western biases and wanted an ethnic studies department to provide a counterbalance. He has written several books and articles on historical methodology and theories of social and historical formations, and the history of racism and racial formation in the U.S.¹ In the introduction to *American History Unbound*, Okihiro states that it “is a work of history and anti-history, a representation and a counter-representation. While history purports to be the past, history as written is the historian’s depiction of that past—a representation. While scripting this history of the peoples called Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States, I write with and against existing historical representations.”² *American History Unbound* is a counterbalance to pro-Western history texts, as it sheds light on the darker parts of history and gives voices back to those who have been robbed of them.

While the focus of the book is on Asians and Pacific Islanders, it is also a wonderful source of information regarding other marginalized groups such as Native Americans, African Americans and women. K-12 and college history classes generally teach American history in two sections, using 1877 as the dividing line, with Asians and Pacific Islanders not introduced until the

¹ Gary Okihiro’s website: <http://www.garyokihiro.com/>.

² Gary Y. Okihiro, *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 1.

latter. *American History Unbound* begins with what Asians and Pacific Islanders were doing, how they were living and activities they engaged in, during the time frame in which they are excluded. Included in this section are Guam, Hawai'i, and Samoa; places that were settled long before Europeans "discovered" them.

Among the many things Okihiro writes about is the Coolie trade. Slavery is an extensive topic in U.S. history, most people however, associate slavery with African Americans. The term "coolie" was first used by the Portuguese who used the term to mean "Asian laborer," but by the nineteenth century the word usually meant Chinese or Indian indentured workers. These workers went to South America and the Caribbean, replacing enslaved African Americans in sugar plantations. The treatment they were subjected to en route, often by their employers, is eerily reminiscent of how African slaves were treated. Not all coolies agreed to be laborers – while some were paying off a debt, others were kidnapped. The ships were outfitted like prisons, the coolie passengers subjected to floggings and corporal punishment, and the women raped.

At one point, during a ban on Chinese indentured labor, Peru captured Polynesian workers who "were hunted down and captured, marched in chains to waiting ships, thrust into crowded, unsanitary ships' holds, and sold to the highest bidder. Along the way, many died from violence and introduced disease, ranging from 24 percent of one island's total population to 79 percent of another's."³ Chinese indentures suffered a mortality rate between 12 and 30 percent during the second half of the nineteenth century, "a rate higher than that of the Middle Passage of the African slave trade. In some cases it was as high as 50 percent."⁴

Okihiro introduces Asians and Pacific Islanders as participants in the American Civil War. They had arrived in New Spain around the same time the Jamestown colony was founded, and some were living in the U.S. by the late eighteenth century. In accordance with the Citizenship Act of 1790, they were not considered citizens of the U.S. because citizenship was limited to "free white persons" only. A fact emphasized by the California supreme court case *The People v. George W. Hall* in 1854. George Hall had killed a Chinese miner and was convicted based on the testimony of Chinese witnesses. He then petitioned to have the

³ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 50-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

conviction overturned. In *The People v. George W. Hall*, the Chief Judge, Hugh Murray, ruled that “‘A free white citizen of this State’ had had his rights abridged by having been subjected to a trial contaminated by evidence provided by aliens ‘not of white blood.’ The ‘European white man,’ Murray reasoned, must be shielded from the testimony of ‘the degraded and demoralized caste.’”⁵

Similar to African Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, “earned their claims to equality through the blood they shed on the nation’s battlefields during the Civil War. Hawaiians, Chinese, Filipinos, South Asians, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans served in the African American U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), and a few served in white units.” Twenty islanders from Guam served, some in the Union Navy, as well as seaman from Tahiti and Hawaii. “About fifty-five Filipinos and nearly eighty South Asians (from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka)”, and others from Indonesia, Turkey, Japan, Malasia, Myanmar, Persia, Samoa, Singapore and Tonga. “Some seventy-four Chinese served both the Union and Confederate causes,” and one, John Tommy, died after losing both his arms and legs during the battle of Gettysburg.⁶

The Spanish-American War is not as well-known as the Civil War, and giving the way it played out, there is little reason to wonder why. The war between Spain and the U.S. ended in 1898 with the U.S. acquiring Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. President McKinley, at first troubled over the “‘gift’ of the Philippines” came to believe that “he should ‘take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.’” The Filipinos did not recognize the transaction however, and continued to fight for their independence, now from the U.S instead of Spain.⁷

The Philippine-American war officially lasted from 1898 to 1902, and “required approximately two hundred thousand U.S. soldiers and resulted in over 4,300 American deaths. Tens of thousands of Filipinos perished; some figures put the number of deaths as high as nearly a million, including those who died of disease and starvation as a result of the fighting.” Even though the leader of the Filipino republican army, Emilio Aguinaldo, was captured in March 1901, there was still fighting – mainly in the Muslim islands in the south.

⁵ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

The Muslim peoples of the island of Mindanao were especially effective in resisting conquest by both the Spaniards and Americans, and the U.S. Army framed its campaign against them as a war between Christianity and Islam. In March 1906, the army trapped some one thousand Taosug Muslims in Bud Dajo, an extinct volcano, on Jolo Island. For four days troops shot, bayoneted, and threw grenades at the men, women, and children, killing them all. A week after the massacre, President Theodore Roosevelt sent a telegram to the U.S. commander, Major General Leonard Wood, to congratulate him and his men “upon the brave feat of arms wherein you and they so well upheld the honor of the American flag.”⁸

The same year that the Treaty of Paris relinquished control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the U.S., Congress voted to annex Hawaii. The annexation process was decades in the making, beginning with foreign trading companies taking control of Hawaii’s economy and polity and missionaries who attempted to convert “natives into subjects of the kingdom of capitalism.”⁹ In 1824, when Kamehameha III became the King of Hawaii at the age of nine, he was instructed by missionary teachers. Relying on their guidance, “he signed the Constitution of 1840, which installed a constitutional monarchy with executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. From 1842 to 1880, foreigners occupied twenty-eight of the thirty-four cabinet seats and 28 percent of the legislature despite accounting for a mere 7 percent of the population.”¹⁰ In 1845, new legislation was passed permitting foreigners to become naturalized Hawaiian citizens. Commoners did not want the king to lease land to foreigners “who will devastate the land like hordes of caterpillars in the fields.”¹¹

By 1846, “sugar exports rose quickly from 4 tons in 1836 to 180 tons in 1840 and nearly 300 tons in 1847. . . Hawaiian sugar exports ballooned from 702 tons in 1860 to 9,392 tons by 1870. The 1876 Treaty of Reciprocity exempted Hawaiian sugar from

⁸ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

U.S. customs duty. That agreement secured the place of King Sugar in the islands. . . it also tied Hawai'i to the United States so closely that by 1886, the United States accounted for 90 percent of the kingdom's exports and 80 percent of its imports." In 1886, members of the white elite formed the Hawaiian League, taking the name that had previously only been used for the indigenous people. The king at the time, Kalākaua, was forced to sign a new constitution in 1887. This new constitution was known as the Bayonet Constitution, it "reduced the king's powers, gave the vote to white men, limited the power of the Hawaiian electorate, and excluded all Asians from the franchise."¹² Following the death of Kalākaua in 1891 his sister Lili'uokalani became queen. An opponent of the 1887 Bayonet Constitution, she was placed under house arrest by the Annexation League (again organized by the white elite) and U.S. marines when she "announced her intention to abrogate the 1887 constitution."¹³

The provisional government which was installed while the queen was under house arrest applied for U.S. annexation. President Grover Cleveland, however, "withdrew the treaty of annexation from the U.S. Senate and directed an investigation into the queen's removal and arrest." Sanford Dole, president of the provisional government, refused to return power to the queen and accused Cleveland of "interfering in 'our domestic affairs,'" (a strange claim from Dole, the son of American missionaries). The queen was finally released in 1896 and traveled to the U.S. "to plead her case and that of her people." Cleveland was no longer president and when he was succeeded by William McKinley "Congress stood ready to embrace a tropical empire."¹⁴ Nearly a month after annexation Queen Lili'uokalani returned to her . When she "stepped off the boat, 'it was strange because it was so quiet. Nobody cheered. But when the queen raised her hand and said Aloha! A great shout of Aloha came from the crowd. But that was all. Most people were crying.'"¹⁵

Most people have probably heard stories about immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, but fewer are likely familiar with Angel Island, an immigration station where about half a million immigrants passed through as they either departed or arrived in the

¹² Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

U.S. through the port of San Francisco. Angel Island Immigration Station was designed primarily for the Chinese, but the detention cells were also used to hold Japanese, South Asians, Koreans and Filipinos. Prior to its opening in 1910, Chinese migrants were held in a facility called “the shed;” of which missionary Ira Condit noted, “merchants, laborers, are all alike penned up, like a flock of sheep, in a wharf-shed, for many days, and often weeks, at their own expense, and are denied all communication with their own people, while the investigation of their cases moves its slow length along. The right of bail is denied. A man is imprisoned as a criminal who has committed no crime, but has merely failed to find a white man to prove his right to be here.”¹⁶ At Angel Island Chinese migrants carved their thoughts and feelings into the barracks walls. A partial example is:

America has power, but not justice / In prison, we
were victimized as if we were guilty / Given no
opportunity to explain, it was really brutal / I bow my
head in reflection but there is nothing I can do.
Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day, /
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about
it? / I look to see who is happy but they only sit
quietly. / I look to see who is happy but they only sit
quietly. / I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall
asleep.¹⁷

Continuing with rights being infringed on, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor some “120,000 Japanese-two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, and the remainder excluded from citizenship under U.S. law-were summarily removed from their homes and placed in concentration camps for the duration of the war.”¹⁸ This is something usually included in history texts, however, this is only part of the story. Another part is the fact that the FBI did not even wait until December 8th to start apprehending Japanese. A gardener from Los Angeles, Ichiro Shimoda, was taken on December 7. In March 1942, he was shot and killed trying to escape from Fort Still.¹⁹ Another part of the story is that Henry

¹⁶ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 269.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 270-271.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 341.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 342.

L. Stimson, Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of war, "announced on January 20, 1944, that the Nisei, formerly classified as 'aliens not acceptable to the armed forces,' would be subject to the draft."²⁰ The fact that some innocent individuals were not just forcibly removed from their homes, but were also killed, paints this dark chapter even darker. The fact that these innocent individuals had been denied rights of citizenship, but were still expected to fight for the country which had denied them these rights, is also outrageous.

The Civil Rights Movements are predominately associated with African Americans, and to a lesser extent, Chicanos, and Native Americans. The Asian American Movement has often been left out, due to the fact that Asian Americans are often portrayed as "a model minority. . . winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work."²¹ However, Okihiro writes about the Asian American Movement of the 1960s which was in response to, "the U.S. war in Southeast Asia and the domestic freedom struggles that were. . . intimately tied to imperialism and anticolonialism abroad. . . within the United States, peoples of color shared a history of exclusion and segregation not only with respect to land and labor, but also with respect to the U.S. nation-state and people."²² Another movement many people are probably unfamiliar with, which Okihiro addresses, is the Hawaiian Movement. The goal of this movement is to achieve sovereignty "based on a rejection of the illegal U.S. overthrow of the kingdom and an affirmation of the right to self-determination," and the movement is still active today.²³

American History Unbound proves that history is more than just names and dates. It is about people, and in this case, people who have been abused and neglected. Okihiro tells a valuable and insightful side of the story, one everyone should know. To paraphrase former radio newscaster Paul Harvey, once it is read you will feel like "you know the rest of the story."

²⁰ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 349.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 427.

²² *Ibid.*, 415-416. For more information on the Asian American Movement, see Karen L. Ishizuka's *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*.

²³ Okihiro, *American History Unbound*, 410.

Author Bio

Brittany Kelley is a graduate student in the Social Sciences and Globalization program. She hopes to have a fulfilling career using her knowledge and love of history to inspire others. She wants to thank Dr. Jones for the opportunity, and Heather Garrett for all of her support and assistance.

