Hi! I’m Jennifer Fang, a historian, educator, and curator. I'm taking over @fiveoaksmuseum’s Instagram this week. I'm from Washington, D.C. and live in Portland, where I teach at the University of Portland and am the Director of Education at the Japanese American Museum of Oregon (@oregonnikkei).

May is Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Follow along this week to explore aspects of Asian American history across the country and in the Pacific Northwest.

May 26, 2020

As a child of immigrants, I interpret history primarily through the lens of those who have lived on the margins of society and have thus been left out of the long-standing narratives that Americans have used to talk about their past. I am driven by the idea that we are our individual and collective histories. As James Baldwin wrote: “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.” (Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes, 1966)
Chinese immigrants were one of the earliest non-indigenous migrants to settle in the Pacific Northwest. They arrived in significant numbers beginning in the early 1850s, as soon as word reached China of the gold strike in California. In Oregon, they mined for gold, worked in canneries, built the railroad, and started their own businesses as store owners, laundry operators, pharmacists, and labor contractors.

We tend to think of the settlement/colonization of the West as something done by whites at the expense of Native American populations. But, here is a photograph of Portland’s Front Avenue in the 1850s, shortly after the city’s incorporation. At the foreground is the Hop Wo Laundry. How might the presence of Chinese migrants (and migrants of other racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds) complicate how we decide to remember the “frontier”?

(Photo credit: @oregonhistoricalsociety)
May 27, 2020

What’s in a name? How does the present shape our understanding of the past? The neighborhood commonly known as “Chinatown” or “Old Town” in Portland possesses a rich and multiethnic history. While the Chinatown Gate marks the neighborhood’s Chinese American roots (in 1910, it was the 2nd largest Chinatown in the US), the neighborhood was also the heart of Portland’s large Japanese American community and home to Jewish, African American, Greek, and Roma businesses. While it is important to acknowledge and honor the Chinese American history of the neighborhood, does the “Chinatown” moniker obscure other groups’ claims to the neighborhood?

Image descriptions and credits:
1. Portland’s Chinatown Gate, built in 1984, by Ting Hwa Architects in Taiwan. The characters on the front read “Portland Chinatown.” The back reads, “Four Seas, One Family.” (Credit: Jennifer Fang)

2. Lion Dancers celebrate Lunar New Year in Chinatown, c. 1939. (Credit: @oregonhistoricalsociety)

3. The M. Hachiya Company General Merchandise Store, with the family and employees in front. The store was located on N 4th St in Portland’s Nihonmachi (Japantown). (Credit: Japanese American Museum of Oregon @oregonnikkei)

4. Portland Sumo Club, c. 1930 in Nihonmachi. (Credit: Japanese American Museum of Oregon @oregonnikkei)
May 28, 2020

How can we better center the presence and contributions of people of color in the history of rural life and agrarian labor in the PNW? While Portland's Nihonmachi (Japantown) served as a hub for local Nikkei (Japanese emigrants and their descendants), over a quarter of Oregon's Japanese Americans settled in rural areas of the state, including a Washington County. In 1909, around Portland alone, 400 Japanese Americans worked on vegetable and strawberry farms.

Image descriptions and credits:
1. Ito Iwasaki holds son, George Iwasaki, c. 1913. The Iwasaki family have owned and operated Iwasaki Brothers Farm in Hillsboro since 1913. (Credit: Kira Iwasaki Family)

2. Nikkei Farmers in Hood River, OR, c. 1909. (Credit: Japanese American Museum of Oregon @oregonnikkei)

3. Shin Sato at Sato Farm on NW Brugger Road in Bethany, c. 1939. (Credit: Donald R. Nelson, Bethany: A Community in Transition)
May 29, 2020

What does it take to be considered an American? Why is the criteria greater and more conditional for some than others?

Members of the Iwasaki Family have owned and operated Iwasaki Brothers Farm in Hillsboro since 1916, when patriarch Billy Iwasaki purchased the original 50-acres of farm under the name of his 3-year-old son, George (the baby pictured in yesterday’s post). At the time, citizenship laws prevented non-whites and non-blacks from becoming naturalized and alien land laws in Oregon prevented non-citizens (particularly Japanese Americans) from land ownership. The farm started as a dairy and moved to strawberries and truck crops. Today, it is one of the largest wholesale nurseries on the west coast and is managed by James Iwasaki, grandson of Billy Iwasaki. During WWII, the Iwasakis, along with nearly all west coast Nikkei, were incarcerated in concentration camps. In 1942, Billy, Ito, their five youngest daughters, and eldest son were sent to the Nyssa camp in Maheur county, a farm labor camp where incarcerated Japanese Americans performed critical agricultural work. Billy and Ito’s two other sons, Art and Ike, enlisted in the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team and served in Italy and France. The 442nd Infantry Regiment, comprises almost entirely of American-born Nikkei, would go down in history as the most decorated military unit of its size. Nearly all soldiers had families who were incarcerated.

The last photo in this post is a scan of a letter written by Pvt. Art Iwasaki to the Hillsboro Argus in 1942. In it he asserts, “surely it is ironical to expect these Nisei boys...to defend democracy yet not be able to enjoy its freedom. America cannot continue to teach and talk democracy unless it gives equality to all citizens of this land. Let us bridge the ever-widening chasm between our theory and practice of our way of life.” How relevant his words still are today.

Descriptions and credits:
1. Iwasaki Family in front of newly-built farm house, 1942. Two weeks after moving in, the Iwasakis were sent to Portland Assembly Center and then to Nyssa. (Credit: Kira Iwasaki Family)
3. Art & Ike Iwasaki in military dress uniform, date unknown. (Credit: Kira Iwasaki Family)
4. Ike Iwasaki in Europe during WWII, date unknown. (Credit: Kira Iwasaki Family)
5. Bundles of Japanese newspapers mailed to Billy Iwasaki, c. 1925 (Credit: Japanese American Museum of Oregon @oregonnikkei)
Letters from Service Men

American-Japanese Viewpoint Expressed

Dear Mr. McKinney—I am one of 11 American-Japanese boys from Washington county now in the armed forces. I have been receiving the Argus for some time and I really enjoy keeping up with the news about home and the folks I know.

Since my entering the army, however, there have been some conflicting issues apparent on the west coast regarding the Japanese evacuees. I have been reading accounts in the papers, which seem to indicate that they will never return to their homes; that certain groups in the west are demanding legislation against their ever returning.

The most important thought in the mind of every American soldier is to get back home. He is preparing to fight for that right, for that freedom; surely it is ironical to expect these Nisei boys (American born Japanese) to defend democracy yet not be able to enjoy its freedom. America cannot continue to teach and talk democracy unless it gives equality to all citizens of this land. Let us bridge the ever-widening chasm between our theory and practice of our way of life.

I am enclosing some snapshots of a few of the Nisei boys from Washington county. The 11 American-Japanese boys now in the service...
May 29, 2020
Becoming American: Jennifer Fang in Conversation with Sankar Raman

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought Anti-Asian racism and xenophobia once again to the surface, and these prejudices have been exploited and exacerbated by the President and others at the highest levels of the American government. Rooted in longstanding fears and anxieties about Asia, Asian cultures, and people, this form of racism pivots on the notion that people of Asian descent are fundamentally foreign and unable and/or unwilling to assimilate to (white) American cultural and social norms. These ideas shaped American immigration, citizenship, and land ownership policies and laws against Asian Americans, which in turn have reinforced stereotypes of perpetual foreignness. Of the many inequities that this pandemic has laid bare, one is that the acceptance of Asian Americans in this nation is utterly conditional and remains tied to centuries-old stereotypes of foreignness and belonging.

I was honored to converse with Sankar Raman of @theimmigrantstory about the historical processes of "becoming American" for this year’s @vanportmosaic festival. We talk in depth about a lot of the questions raised in this week's Instagram posts. Watch the video here or via the link in bio.

(Image credit: "Rough on Rats" anti-Chinese tradecard, c. 1880. Library of Congress)

Watch video here: https://www.vanportmosaic.org/immigrant2