"Let It Not Happen Again"

New Narratives and New Motives in Memorials to Japanese American Incarceration

By Eliana Chavkin

ABSTRACT: This article describes and interprets three twenty-first-century monuments memorializing Japanese American incarceration during World War II. The author proposes that the change in focus from one pairing the heroism of the Nisei who served in the U.S. military with the injustice inflicted in "relocation," to two more recent memorials focused on the experience of the individuals incarcerated and on their communities may indicate a trend.

KEY WORDS: National Memorial to Japanese American Patriotism; Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial; Juneau Empty Chair Memorial; Japanese American incarceration; Executive Order 9066

Introduction

In 2000, the United States opened a new memorial in Washington, DC: the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II. Initially imagined as a memorial to the members of the largely Japanese American 442nd Infantry Regiment, the memorial showcased the challenge of representing a coherent narrative about the Japanese

American experience during the war.[1] Anchored by a quote from President Ronald Reagan ("Here we admit a wrong," taken from the day he signed off on reparations for former incarcerees), the memorial was intended to acknowledge and provide closure for what it presented as a misstep in American history. It did this by condemning and praising American actions all in the same crowded space: while it called incarceration itself a wrong, it celebrated America's ability to acknowledge (and thus, implicitly, atone for) such sins, and while it celebrated the heroism of Japanese American soldiers, it left little space for the larger Japanese American community.[2]

The memorial presented the issue as closed on the national level, but in the coming years, efforts to acknowledge the legacy of incarceration would continue on the local level. These efforts received support from Congress in the passage of Public Law 109-441 in 2006, which created funding for those who wanted to memorialize the history of incarceration in their communities.[3] These funds aided in the construction of a new wave of memorials, which offered new angles on the issue of

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1 Following the policy laid out by the archivists at Denshō, this paper will preference the term "incarceration" over "internment," "incarcerees" over "internees," "forced removal" over "relocation," and "concentration camp" over "relocation camp." This is done in recognition that using euphemisms for unjust policies and actions helps to hide the full breadth of injustice done in those moments. This is not the practice of the National Park Service at this time, and thus when quoting directly from NPS sources, this paper will use the language they offer. The NPS tends to prioritize "internment" and "relocation camp" in their official literature, although they previously articulated their policy on the issue as follows: "Instead of selecting certain words or sets of terminology as either 'acceptable' or 'correct' the NPS encourages reflection, education, and discussion about this aspect of American history." For more information, see: Denshō: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment, "Terminology," accessed August 22, 2022, https://densho.org/terminology/, and National Park Service, "Bainbridge Island Japanese American Memorial: Study of Alternatives/Environmental Assessment," 2005, http://npshistory.com/publications/miin/bainbridge-island-sa-ea.pdf, 9.

2 Most notably, its central image of a crane behind barbed wire—rather than, as scholar Kristen Hass has suggested, an eagle, or an eagle and a crane—serves to otherize Japanese Americans even as it apologizes for the crime done to them. Kristen Hass, *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 138–39. Furthermore, while the memorial celebrates this acknowledgement of a wrong at great length, it dedicates little space to addressing the steps the government took to right the wrongs committed to individual survivors, most notably reparations.

3 Public Law 109-441, Preservation of Japanese American Confinement Sites, 120 Stat. 3288, 109th Congress (2006).

problematic narrative that the National Memorial had encountered. Of these new memorials, two of them, the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial (2011) and the Juneau Empty Chair Memorial (2014), demonstrate a different kind of commemorative project. In focusing entirely on the experiences of incarceration and the responses of the local communities, they set aside the fixation on patriotic service that plagued the national memorial. This paper examines the conception, creation, and execution of these two memorials in Bainbridge, Washington, and in Juneau, Alaska, to explore the advantages and the limits of this new approach. When the model of the patriotic Nisei soldier is left behind, space is created for a more inclusive memorial that discusses Japanese American communities as a whole.[4] But the complicated legacy of the National Memorial remains: memorialization does not serve as absolution for the crimes of history.

Public Memory of Incarceration and Memorial Theorization

Modern American memorial culture is generally agreed to have started with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM), which upended traditional forms of honoring warfare and instead focused on grief.[5] The National Memorial to Japanese American Patriotism during World War II is a product of this larger memorial trend in many ways, from its placement near the National Mall to its fixation on military service, as if it could only challenge American history through the lens of war. It owes an equal debt, however, to memorials honoring victims of human rights

4 Nisei is the term used for second-generation Japanese Americans; Sansei for third-generation; Nikkei is the term for all persons of Japanese ancestry. On the Nisei soldier, see: Denshō: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment, "Japanese Americans in Military during World War II | Denshō Encyclopedia," accessed August 22, 2022, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_Americans_in_military_during_World_War_II/.

5 John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Of course, as Bodnar notes, this struggle between patriotism and grief was hardly new to the VVM, but the interruption it brought to the National Mall can hardly be overstated. See also, Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Harriet Senie, *Memorials to Shattered Myths: Vietnam to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

crimes and violations. Crucially, the space the memorial gives to the concentration camps focuses on the camps as a whole, listing them by name, and not on individual victims. This decision echoes Holocaust memorials across the globe and other monuments dedicated to remembering tragedies that resist the search for meaning.[6]

Yet incarceration memorials as a whole do not quite belong to the latter category either, for, without neglecting those who did die in the camps, they largely honor survivors. Japanese American efforts to build memorials to their experience of incarceration, therefore, offer a helpful case study about what memorials can look like when they are created by and reflect the views of those who endured the historical event in question. While the early choices made in the creation of the National Memorial suggest a desire to tell stories easily compatible with the demands of the American national narrative, more recent memorials suggest that within individual communities, there is ample room for nuance. These newer memorials offer pushback to the national understanding of incarceration and continue to shift historical memory of the event for their visitors.

In many ways, the National Memorial was also the culmination of a generation of Nisei and Sansei activism dedicated to telling the story of incarceration. Early scholarship on the concentration camps relied heavily on the narrative of the patriotic Nisei soldier, one who would serve his country even when it had put his family behind barbed wire.[7]

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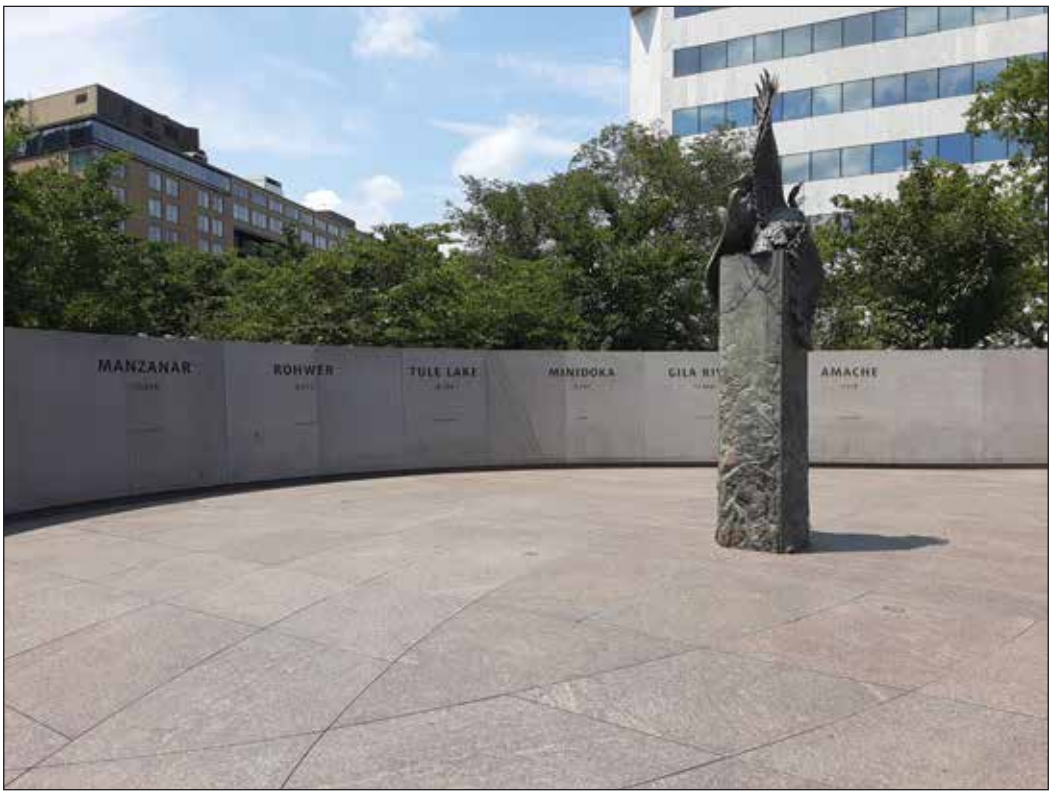
6 For the resistance to focusing on individual victims and faces, see Jay Winter, *War beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 22, 143-171. Winter sees these monuments as part of a "horizontal" trend in memorial geometry that echoes Maya Lin's slicing of the earth in the VVM as a way of honoring war's victims without honoring war itself.

7 This activism started soon after the war with the film *Go for Broke!* in 1951, memorializing the 442nd Infantry on film, and continued with the early scholarship of the burgeoning Asian American studies movement. Early books that mentioned incarceration, both by white scholars, such as Orville C. Shirley's *Americans: The Story of the 442nd Combat Team* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1946) and John A. Rademaker's *These Are Americans: The Japanese Americans in Hawaii in World War II* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1951), as well as Japanese American scholars, such as Bill Hosokawa's *Nisei: The Quiet Americans: The Story of a People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1969) and Masayo Umezawa Duus's *Unlikely Liberators: The Men of the 100th and the 442nd* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press,1987) emphasized the Nisei as loyal, patriotic citizens above all else. See Eiichiro Azuma, "Internment and World War II History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 145–47.



The National Memorial to Japanese American Patriotism during World War II, Washington, DC, by artist Nina Akamu, unveiled in 2000. *Photo: E. Chavkin, July 2021.*

Although fully embraced by President Reagan when he signed the reparations bill in 1988, this narrative left little to no space for the everyday Japanese Americans who were put into the camps.

Recent years, however, have seen burgeoning scholarship emerge about the public memory of incarceration among the Japanese American community.[8] Memory in this context can refer, as historian Alice Yang Murray has used it, to the different ways that incarcerees have recalled and made meaning of their experience as the years have passed, and the way those individual memories have been transformed into a narrative recollection shared by a group of people.[9] As incarcerees share their recollections in the public sphere via engagement with researchers, museum exhibits, and memorials, they help shape the general American public's memory of incarceration. This has become a more urgent task in recent years, as the survivors of the camps have begun to pass away.[10] And indeed, by the time the National Memorial opened, the focus had begun to shift. More people were interested in speaking about their personal experiences of the camps, which often did not include patriotic military service, and in focusing on the American-ness not of the people in the camps, but of the camps themselves.[11] Even before the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the Japanese American activist community had begun to use their experiences to advocate that no other group,

8 See, e.g., Alice Yang Murray, *Historical Memories of the Japanese American Internment and the Struggle for Redress* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Abbie Lynn Salyers, "The Internment of Memory: Forgetting and Remembering the Japanese American World War II Experience," (PhD diss., Rice University, 2009) for scholarship; Todd Stewart, *Placing Memory: A Photographic Exploration of Japanese American Internment* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008) for a visual approach; and the extensive oral histories recorded at Denshō's Oral History Archive for another approach to capturing incarcerees' memories (Denshō: Japanese American Incarceration and Japanese Internment, "Oral History Archives," accessed August 26, 2022, https://densho.org/category/oral-history/).

9 Murray, 8–14.

10 Interestingly, however, this has not been paralleled by scholarship around the memorials put up to commemorate those memories. In some ways, this reflects the same challenge that the National Memorial met: the urge until recently has been to commemorate Japanese American soldiers, but not Japanese American incarcerees. Perhaps most strikingly, the Denshō Encyclopedia includes an entry for *military* memorials, but no general entry for *incarceration* memorials. Thus far, the scholarship that has focused on the memorials has come from those like Hass and Erika Doss (see below), who are outside the field of Asian American studies and who use incarceration as one example among many to identify trends in American memorial culture. See: "Table of Contents—A–Z | Denshō Encyclopedia," accessed August 26, 2022.

11 Azuma, "Internment and World War II History," 147–50.

particularly Arab Americans, should have to suffer the same injustices.[12] Thus, when the memorial finally went up, it was already out-of-date: the Japanese American community was no longer content to let the symbol of the Nisei soldier alone speak for them.

The memorial was unveiled in 2000, during a wave of commemoration that swept the country during the 1990s and 2000s—part of what scholar Erika Doss has called a period of "memorial mania."[13] Doss classifies the National Memorial to Patriotism as belonging to the category of memorials driven by shame: with its centering statement of "Here we admit a wrong," it focuses on the remorse Americans are meant to feel for this chapter in their history.[14] But this is not quite the whole story, for its very shaming of the United States government is a kind of celebration, as scholar Kristen Hass has noted: in the presentation of the memorial, the acknowledgment of a wrong is enough to undo it, and to absolve future Americans of this burden of their history.[15] The wording of Public Law 109-441 reflects some of this same tension:

> The Secretary shall create a program within the National Park Service to encourage, support, recognize, and work . . . for the purpose of identifying, researching, evaluating, interpreting, protecting, restoring, repairing, and acquiring historic confinement sites in order that present and future generations may learn and *gain inspiration* from these sites and *that these sites will demonstrate the Nation's commitment to equal justice under the law.*[16] [emphases added]

What this says, essentially, is that by allocating funds to recognize this historic injustice, the United States demonstrates its own moral authority. These are places where citizens can visit not necessarily to be shamed, but rather to be inspired about the uprightness of their nation: because the nation admits to its mistakes, one need not be shamed by its history. Both the Bainbridge and the Juneau memorials respond to this theme, albeit in different ways.

12 Hass, 130; Azuma, 148–50.
13 Erika Doss, 1–60.
14 Ibid., 298–99.
15 Hass, 122–51.
16 Public Law 109-441.

The Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial

Bainbridge Island claims the dubious distinction of being the very first site of deportation in the incarceration program, owing largely to its proximity to U. S. naval bases in the Pacific. President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, and the Bainbridge community was forcibly removed on March 30, 1942. Their experience also provided an early hint of what exactly the government was planning: a ferry's ride from Seattle, Bainbridge itself would have been an excellent place for incarcerees if the government had been interested in keeping them near major cities and thus somewhat connected to the larger world. Instead, incarcerees were sent down to the desert site of Manzanar, in eastern California, the first of the concentration camps, and then to a brand-new site in Minidoka, Idaho. Of the 276 Japanese Americans who lived on the island, 227 were incarcerated, the rest having been off the island at the time of the roundup. After the war, only 150 returned.[17]

Bainbridge was also unusual for how soon after the war the community made the decision to speak loudly and publicly about what had happened to them. They formed the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community Association (BIJAC) in 1952, which initially focused on recreational events within the island community.[18] But by 1975, BIJAC was putting out educational materials about incarceration, an effort spurred by the fact that the children of incarcerees were learning nothing in school about their parents' experiences during the war. This work, which was entirely community-driven, owed its inception to Frank Kitamoto, who had been a child when his family was forcibly relocated to the camps. While many in his community did not want to speak about their experiences, Kitamoto remained adamant that this was something that his children and his community—Japanese American and everyone else—should know about. By the early 1980s, BIJAC had assembled a traveling museum exhibit called "For the Sake of Our Children" to provide the information that the schools would not, drawing attention not only to Bainbridge's Japanese American community, but also to its

17 For a detailed version of the summary given here, see Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial (BIJAEMA), "About," accessed August 22, 2022, http://bijaema.org/about/.

18 BIJAC, "Exclusion Memorial," accessed August 22, 2022, https://bijac.org/exclusion-memorial/.

Filipino and Indigenous residents.[19] They also conducted an oral history project in 1983, created a film about their experiences in 2002, and broke ground for a memorial in 2002, well before government involvement.[20] Thus, by the time the National Park Service arrived, there was a rich list of resources to work with.

Because it was the first site of mass deportation, Bainbridge Island had been under consideration as a memorial site even before the passage of Public Law 109-441.[21] The challenge at the time was not the question of *if* the NPS should bring the island memorial into the parks system, but *how*. Turning the site into its own NPS site required more money than the Park Service had. The NPS proposed a hybrid solution: since the occupants of Bainbridge Island were sent to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho, they could create a "satellite" NPS site, which would allow for the NPS to provide direct funding to the island memorial without as many bureaucratic hurdles.[22] Today, the Bainbridge Island Memorial is officially part of the Minidoka National Historic Site in Idaho, though they are ten hours apart by car.[23]

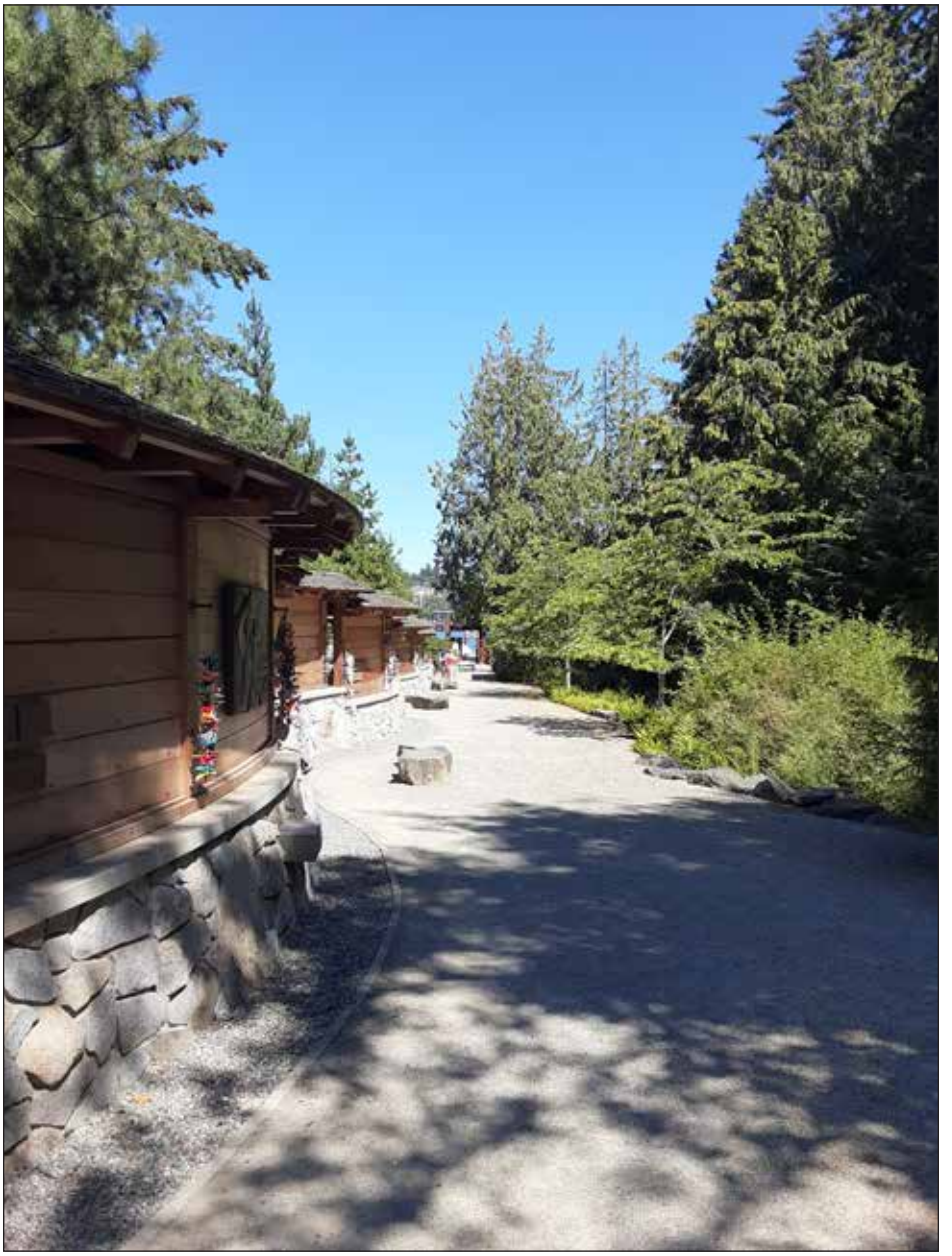
19 Bainbridge Island had long been the home of other ethnic communities, including Indigenous peoples. Some flourished as a direct result of the removal: a number of families identifying as "Indipino," with Filipino fathers and Native American mothers, were born in the summer of 1942, when the two groups were brought in to work Japanese American farms in their absence. Lilly Kodama, "Fletcher Bay in the 1940s and 1950s," interview by Tom Arnold, *Oral History Collection*, Bainbridge Island Historical Society, https://bainbridgehistory.org/explore/oral-histories/, accessed August 22, 2022; and Gina Corpuz, "The Indipino Community on Bainbridge Island, 1940s," *Oral History Collection*, Bainbridge Island Historical Society, https://bainbridgehistory.org/explore/oral-histories/, accessed August 22, 2022.

20 National Park Service, "Bainbridge Island Japanese American Memorial: Study of Alternatives/Environmental Assessment," 32–34. Their film very deliberately linked the need to understand historical discrimination against Japanese Americans as a bulwark against the mistreatment of Arab Americans after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, a theme that would remain present in the presentation of the memorial (see below).

21 Public Law 107–363, 116 Stat. 3024, 107th Congress (2002).

22 National Park Service, "Bainbridge Island Japanese American Memorial: Study of Alternatives/Environmental Assessment," 12–14, 49–50. There was a precedent for this practice: the NPS offered as an example the Cape Henry Memorial in Virginia Beach, VA, which is a satellite of Colonial National History Park in Yorktown, VA. In that case the two sites are only an hour's drive apart, but the NPS was willing to apply the same principles across a far greater distance if it meant cutting down on funding costs.

23 Public Law 110–229, 122 Stat. 754, 110th Congress (2008). Judging by the sparse information on the actual memorial but copious directions given about how to get to the memorial on the NPS's official Bainbridge Memorial website, this decision has caused considerable confusion around navigating the two sites for NPS tourists. See: National Park Service, "Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial," Minidoka National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service), accessed August 22, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/miin/learn/historyculture/bainbridge-island-japanese-american-exclusion-memorial.htm.



The "story wall" of the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial on Bainbridge Island, Washington, opened in 2011. Artist: Johnpaul Jones. *Photo: E. Chavkin, August 2022.*

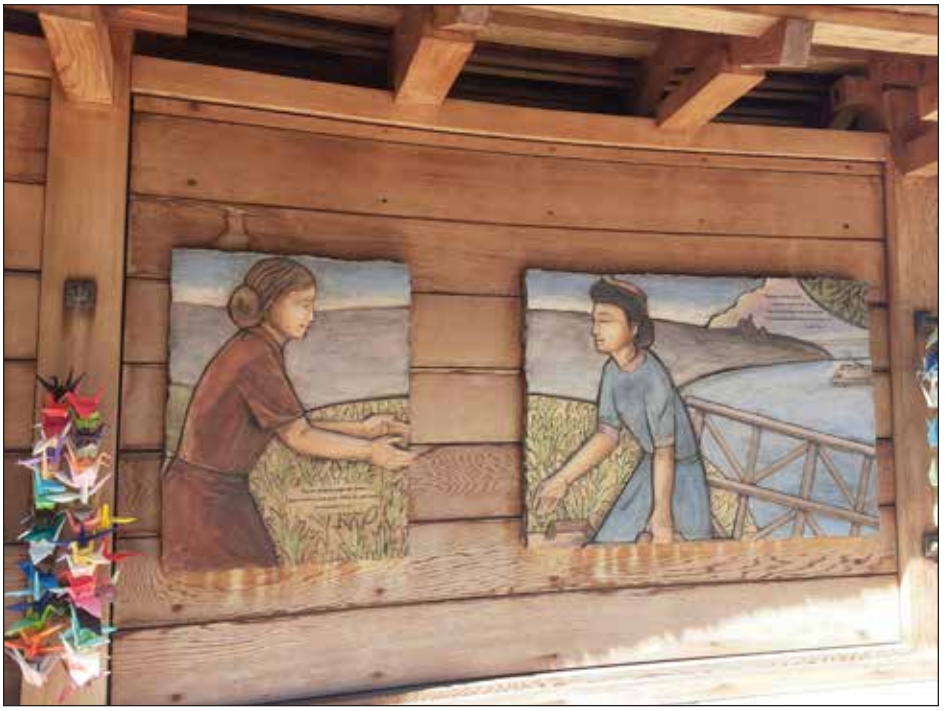
In the following years, Kitamoto and others acted as liaisons with the NPS, and ultimately formed BIJAEMA, the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial Association, in 2008.[24] This group would help raise the money for and handle the creation of the memorial. But when the time came to raise the money not covered by the NPS grant, Lilly Kodama (Kitamoto's sister) noted that the whole community, Japanese American and not, gave. This, she argued, reflected the ties that had sustained this community beyond the borders of race, ethnicity, and national origin during and after the war.

The end result was a long "story wall," built from cedar, which features the names of all 276 Japanese and Japanese American residents who lived on the island in 1942 and dotted with cranes folded by former incarcerees and community members. Interspersed between these are five terracotta friezes, representing five moments in the removal of the islanders: immigration, inclusion, exclusion, incarceration, and "welcoming return." This phrase highlights the positive memories of return—those who, like the Kitamoto family, returned to find that friends had kept their farms intact for them and who took up residence on the island again in an effort to, as Kodama put it, "move on." It lends less space to those who lost property, those who found themselves unable to talk about their experiences and saw their history ignored, and those who did not return at all.[25] Basalt rocks are scattered along the memorial's edges. The memorial's final design eschewed abstraction in favor of focused detail: the architect, Johnpaul Jones, was clear that he focused on the knowledge that the incarcerees did not want a "Japanese temple" but rather something that would focus on who *they were* as a community.[26] Jones, an American Indian, emphasized his desire for the memorial to

24 BIJAEMA, "About." BIJAC and BIJAEMA work closely together and share several board members, but they are separate organizations, with BIJAEMA directing funds specifically for the memorial and BIJAC coordinating other events within the community. Both have 501(c)(3) status. See BIJAC, "Exclusion Memorial."

25 Kodama, "Fletcher Bay in the 1940s and 1950s." The quote on the frieze panel on the left reads, "We put the farm under Mr. Baker's name while we were gone. When we came back, he returned it to us. —Noburo Koura." The quote on the panel on the right reads, "My father and his brother worked so hard to build up Bainbridge Gardens. When we returned there was nothing left. It must have broken him. —Junkoh Harui."

26 Sallie Maron, "Arriving at the Design," http://bijaema.org/history-2/, *Oral History Collection*, BIJAEMA, accessed August 22, 2022. See also: Frank Kitamoto, "History of the Concept," *Oral History Collection*, BIJAEMA, http://bijaema.org/history-2/, accessed August 22, 2022.

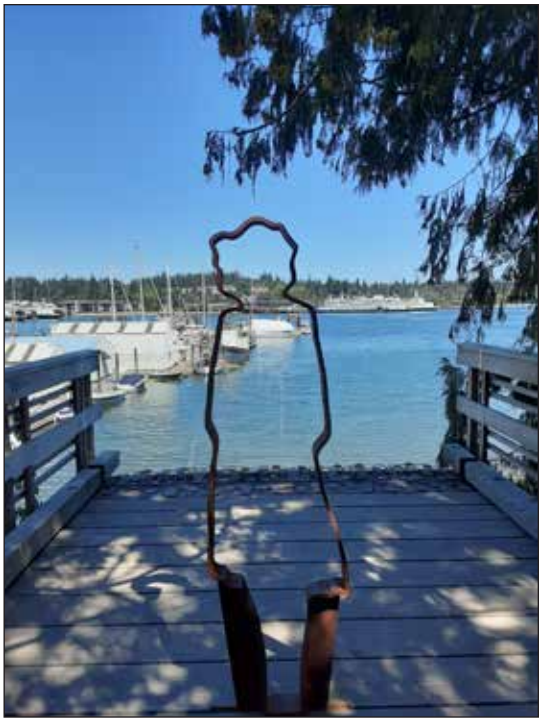


The panels of the frieze depict scenes of everyday life among Japanese American returnees, some able to "move on," others who had lost everything. Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial. *Photo: E. Chavkin, August 2022.*

respect the Nikkei islanders' specific experience *and* the way that experience fit into the larger trend of American history: "I understand being sent away from your homeland. . . . I consider the wall a place to honor them for what they lost."[27]

While the memorial wall is meant to reflect both the "sinuous" line of time experienced by the islanders and the disruption of incarceration, its roots are heavily local: it is built primarily with cedar wood and granite (materials native to the Pacific Northwest), with largely native vegetation. Japanese style and flora feature lightly: the cedar is connected

27 Johnpaul Jones, quoted in Katharaine Q. Seelye, "A Wall to Remember an Era's First Exiles," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2011, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/us/06internment.html.



(*right*) Empty silhouettes represent the departing incarcerees looking back as they are being taken away. Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial. *Photo: E. Chavkin, August 2022.*

(*below*) Representations of the footsteps of the incarcerees as they leave the island's shore. Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial. *Photo: E. Chavkin, August 2022.*

using traditional Japanese joinery, and the site is dotted with cherry trees. Only the basalt rocks, brought from Idaho, are an interruption: their intrusion is meant to invoke Minidoka.[28] Too high to step on and too low to sit on while gazing comfortably at the memorial, the rocks instead force the visitor to move carefully around them, slowing their progress. Built on the water's edge, the memorial asks visitors to walk in the footsteps of those leaving for the camps: a new addition leads them past looming iron rifles to join empty silhouettes of the departing incarcerees.[29] These silhouettes invoke deep senses of both empathy and absence, as the visitor is left to imagine the story that fills the physical space left behind by the silhouette, while simultaneously facing the grim fact of that story's inevitable end. Currently the installation ends with a glass wall at the water's edge framed by iron footsteps. There are plans for a ferry dock to be built in the coming years.[30]

The memorial's title is "*Nidoto Nai Yoni*," which the islanders translate as "Let It Not Happen Again." This fixation on the future as well as the past was and continued to be a focal point for those creating the memorial. Their goal, as articulated clearly by Lilly Kodama, was "not to place blame or shame or guilt but to make sure it never happens again."[31] Kitamoto, too, emphasized the need to "protect the future"—in looking backward, this memorial would bring the visitor's gaze forward. His anxiety was tied to current concerns: specifically, discrimination against Arab Americans after 9/11. "What is happening to the Muslims is very similar to what happened to us," he said at the opening of the memorial. "That will continue until we decide not to let fear dictate our response to events."[32] He and others in the community hoped that the Bainbridge Memorial would be a bulwark against that fear.

28 See: Maron, "Arriving at the Design," BIJAC, "Exclusion Memorial," and BIJAEMA, "About."

29 Margaret Millmore, "The long-awaited Departure Deck is now open at the Japanese American Exclusion Memorial," *The Island Wanderer*, July 20, 2022, https://theislandwanderer.com/the-long-awaited-departure-deck-is-now-open-at-the-japanese-american-exclusion-memorial/.

30 Bainbridge Island received further funding from the NPS for this project in 2022, and work is ongoing for both the ferry dock and an open-air arena; see National Parks Service, "National Park Service awards $3.4 million in grants to preserve and interpret World War II Japanese American confinement sites," June 21, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/national-park-service-awards-3-4-million-in-grants-to-preserve-and-interpret-world-war-ii-japanese-american-confinement-sites.htm.

31 Kodama, "Fletcher Bay in the 1940s and 1950s."

32 Kitamoto, quoted in Seelye, "A Wall to Remember an Era's First Exiles."

Missing from the Bainbridge Memorial are references to patriotism or to military service: the focus is centered on the community, and the community alone. The National Memorial, Kristen Hass has noted, sends a one-word lesson to groups suffering discrimination: "Enlist."[33] That is not the message given here. Instead, as the memorial creates a space for mourning, it also demands accountability from the community: the viewer, having mourned and remembered, is asked to take an active role in prevention moving forward. The space also challenges the limits of memory: as visitors walk through, the memorial's designers note, they walk in the shoes of those who were being removed, but they can only imagine what that must have been like.[34]

Taken with the memorial's refusal to focus on shame or guilt, this physical limit to the uses of memory is illuminating. We cannot know exactly what it was like, of course, because we were not there. But one must avoid taking the next step that might follow from that thought: that visiting the memorial and trying to imagine the experience acts as historical absolution for America and its citizens. The memorial and the history of Bainbridge Island owes its story not only to the wrongs committed by the state, but to those who stepped up in the state's absence: in particular those who made possible the incarcerees' economic recovery when they returned to the island, and the incarcerees' real concern for the treatment of Arab Americans in the present. "Let it not happen again" cannot be confused with "it will not happen again." Visitors to the memorial must take care to understand the difference.

Juneau's Empty Chair Memorial

Though their stories bear some resemblance, the situation looks quite different today in Juneau, Alaska. Juneau's community of fifty-three Japanese Americans, along with the rest of the Japanese American population in Alaska, were ordered to assemble for removal on April 20, 1942.[35]

33 Hass, 151.

34 Maron, "Arriving at the Design."

35 Karleen Grummett, *Quiet Defiance: Alaska's Empty Chair Story* (Juneau, AK: Empty Chair Project, 2016), 34, 38. Some uncertainty surrounds the actual date of their departure due to Army attempts at secrecy—it has been variously given as April 23rd and April 25th.

Like the Bainbridge Islanders, they were sent to Minidoka. When their time in the camps ended, most of their small community returned home, but many moved away over the years.[36] Even those who remained spoke little about their experience. The Tanaka family, who ran a restaurant called the City Cafe before the war, was able to reopen with the help of neighbors, but even though nearly everyone in Juneau knew and ate at the café, the incarceration of its owner hardly ever came up.[37] Perhaps eager to move on, the former incarcerees remained silent. The rest of Juneau's population chose not to challenge this decision.

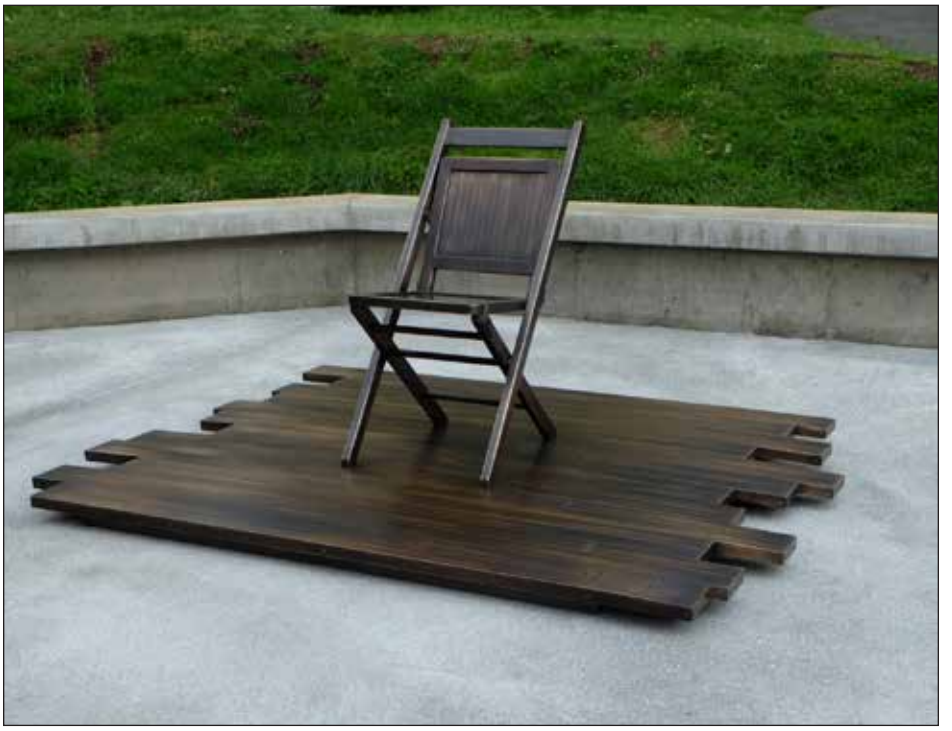
The idea for Juneau's memorial to its Japanese American incarcerees was sparked by the power of seeing a name printed on the page of a book. In the summer of 2010, sisters Margie and Karleen Grummett were at a presentation about Minidoka and found their friend Mary Tanaka Abo listed among the incarcerees. Both knew something about Abo's experience: Margie, a longtime friend of Mary, said she had recently begun to talk about her experience after "decades of silence," and Karleen, benefitting from the growing literature on Japanese Americans, had learned about incarceration from Bill Hosokawa's *Nisei: The Quiet Americans*.[38] Karleen Grummett was later to write that it was seeing Abo's name printed there alongside other members of the Juneau Japanese American community that spurred the sisters to action.

The memorial they ultimately helped create, with the help of Abo and other members of Juneau's community, benefitted tremendously from both the NPS grant program and the existence of other new memorials to incarceration. One of Margie Grummett and Mary Abo's first steps was to visit the new memorial at Bainbridge Island. Without the funding or the public recognition that came with Bainbridge's particular historical significance, their goals were smaller: initially, they envisioned just a simple plaque. But as Karleen Grummett researched, she learned from the local Juneau historian, Marie Darlin, that there had never been any kind of recognition about the forced removal in the community, and

36 Ibid., 63.

37 Ibid., 142–43.

38 Ibid., 133–44. Whether Hosokawa's *Nisei* served to give Grummett an accurate, unbiased understanding of incarceration is dubious, but perhaps in this instance it is worth noting that without the book she might not have encountered this history at all. See Azuma, "Internment and World War II History."

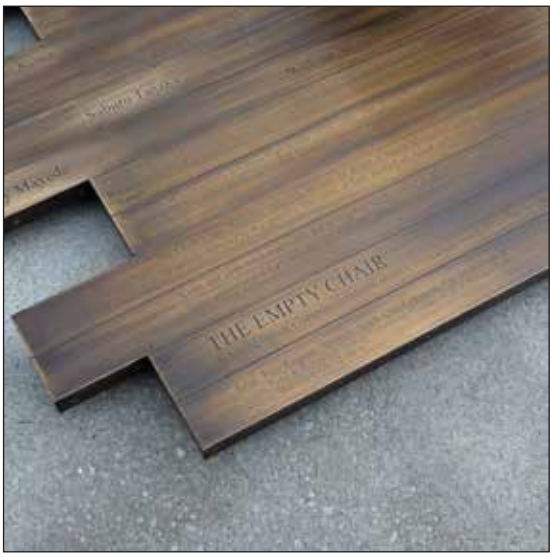


The Empty Chair Memorial in Juneau, Alaska, dedicated in 2014. Artist: Peter Reiquam. *Photo courtesy of The Empty Chair Committee.*

her vision grew to encompass a larger statement of memory: a memorial, perhaps.[39] Then Darlin gave Grummett a file she had been saving over the decades, and their exact plan for the memorial crystalized.

The file contained the story of a small but meaningful display of resistance shown by the local community. John Tanaka, Mary Tanaka Abo's older brother, was to be valedictorian of Juneau High School's 1942 graduating class but was told that he would be removed with his family just weeks before graduating. In a quiet protest, the school held a special ceremony on April 15th just for him so that he could receive

39 By contrast, compare this to Bainbridge's oral history and educational projects, many of which were fully in swing by the 1970s.

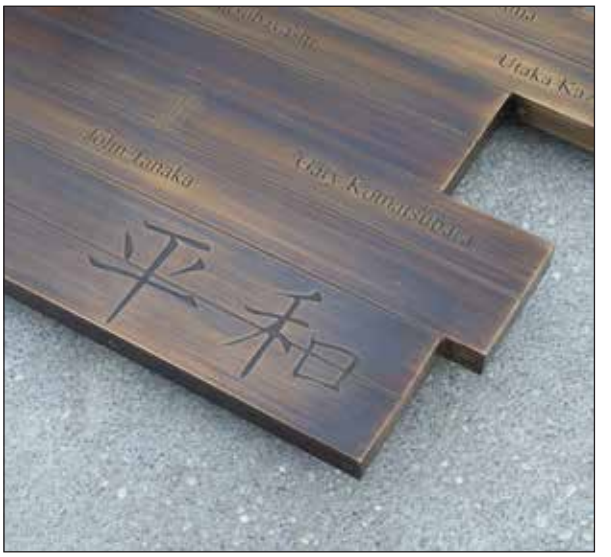


The bronze planks beneath the empty chair carry the message the memorial was intended to convey. Detail: Lower left corner. *Photo courtesy of The Empty Chair Committee.*

his diploma. At the ceremony, his academic accomplishments were recounted and *The Star-Spangled Banner* was played. One month later, at the graduation ceremony for the other students, Tanaka's teachers left out a single empty chair in John's place, reminding the community of who was missing.[40]

This story was to become the anchor and the inspiration for Juneau's memorial, a memorial effort that, unlike Bainbridge's, was largely driven by Juneau's white community, though with full support of the few remaining incarcerees and their families. The project faced two challenges that the Bainbridge project had not: size, and lack of any historical preservation work done to promote the memory of the event before this point. Still, the event's nearing 75th anniversary and the awareness that little knowledge existed about "the once vital pioneer Japanese community in Juneau," let alone what had happened to them during the war, acted as motivators for white community members and Japanese American descendants alike.[41] In 2012 the project received an

40 Grummett, 25–44.
41 Alice Tanaka Hikido, quoted on the back cover of Grummett.



There, the names of the 53 Japanese Americans of Juneau who were taken away in 1942 are listed. Detail: Lower right corner of the bronze planks under the empty chair. *Photo courtesy of The Empty Chair Committee.*

$80,000 matching gift from the NPS grant program.[42] The memorial they planned was small and simple: an empty chair made of bronze, seated on bronze planks, located in Juneau's downtown Capital School Park. The site was unveiled in 2014 with several former incarcerees, their families, and a large number of Juneau residents and Alaska government officials in attendance.[43]

John Tanaka, the valedictorian honored with the original empty chair, served in the 442nd Infantry Regiment, as did one of Juneau's other Japanese American residents, Tooru Kanazawa. A third, Joseph Akagi, served in an elite shooter unit of the highly decorated Third Infantry Division.[44] Yet the memorial makes no mention of their military service. Rather, the text engraved on the bronze planks beneath the chair lists

42 See Historic Resources Advisory Committee Minutes, May 2, 2012, https://juneau.org/community-development/hrac?pagenum=7, accessed August 22, 2022; and National Park Service, "2013: A Year in Review—Preserving and Interpreting World War II Japanese American Confinement Sites," 2013, https://www.nps.gov/jacs/downloads/newsletter8.pdf.

43 Jeremy Hsieh, "Empty Chair Project Recognizes Juneau's Japanese WWII Internees," KTOO, July 13, 2014, https://www.ktoo.org/2014/07/13/empty-chair-project-recognizes-juneaus-japanese-wwii-internees/.

44 Grummett, 61–65.

the names and nicknames of all 53 incarcerees, with a description of Tanaka's graduation ceremony and an enjoinder to remember: "A time may come when these names will be forgotten, but the symbol of the empty chair will remind future generations of the lessons learned from this compelling and poignant story."[45] As with Bainbridge, the focus is not on correcting the past, but on the future. This shift in perspective turns attention away from the lengths that some Japanese Americans went to prove their patriotism and returns instead to the trauma and injustice inflicted on the incarcerees—and, it should be noted, to the loss their community felt when they left.[46] Just after the description of Tanaka's graduation, and before the above cited paragraph, the memorial includes the sentence: "The Empty Chair Memorial represents the void the people of Juneau felt for their friends and neighbors impacted by this injustice. The names of those interned are etched on the bronze floor."

This quote and its arrangement reveal a challenge in Juneau's Empty Chair memorial: on some level, it is not difficult to argue that it was almost wholly spearheaded and supported by the non-Japanese American community because it paints Juneau's white community in a positive light. There are, of course, many motives for memorialization, including a genuine desire to acknowledge injustice and to bring some belated recognition to the terrible experience of community members. But one wonders whether support for this memorial would have been quite as strong had the empty chair narrative not grounded it so wholly. After all, one might say, that symbol is not really about John Tanaka, but about what the white community of Juneau did for him. Though the memorial takes important steps forward in the commemorative process in some ways, it might risk enabling further silence about incarceration—as if, now that the experience of incarceration has been acknowledged and atoned for, there is nothing more to say.

Nor was the empty chair gesture unique to Juneau. In fact, the Bainbridge memorial makes mention of something similar: one of the memorial's friezes features a quote from Nobuko Sakai Omoto. "Back home at graduation they had thirteen empty chairs on the stage. That

45 Emptychairproject, "The Empty Chair Project," the Empty Chair Project, accessed August 22, 2022, https://emptychairproject.wordpress.com/.

46 emptychairproject, "The Empty Chair Project."

day, I felt so empty and sad. I sat on my bunk and cried."[47] But while in Bainbridge this quote shares the perspective of the incarceree and reveals some of the deep pain and shame felt by those who were forcibly removed from their community, Juneau's records remain silent about how Tanaka and his family might have felt at the special graduation ceremony that school officials arranged in his honor, nor do they share what might have passed through their minds on the day of the real graduation one month later. For unlike at Bainbridge, the records that preserve this effort to memorialize are mostly produced by (or processed through) white voices: it is much harder here, overall, to know what exactly the Japanese American community of Juneau thought of their original experience or the subsequent commemoration efforts.[48]

But while by itself, the memorial might risk pointing to the possibility of a kind of absolution, the Juneau community has instead used the memorial to restart the conversation around incarceration. Since then, they have worked to collect forgotten history, educated schoolchildren about the local experience of incarceration, built exhibits about the empty chair, and used their funds to further awareness of the project.[49] Although acknowledging the incarcerees' names and honoring the community spirit shown in 1942 skirts over the fact that the community had been silent on the issue until 2010, they have largely abandoned that silence. In this way, rather than using the memorial to place a cap on their history, Juneau's residents have allowed it to restart conversations.

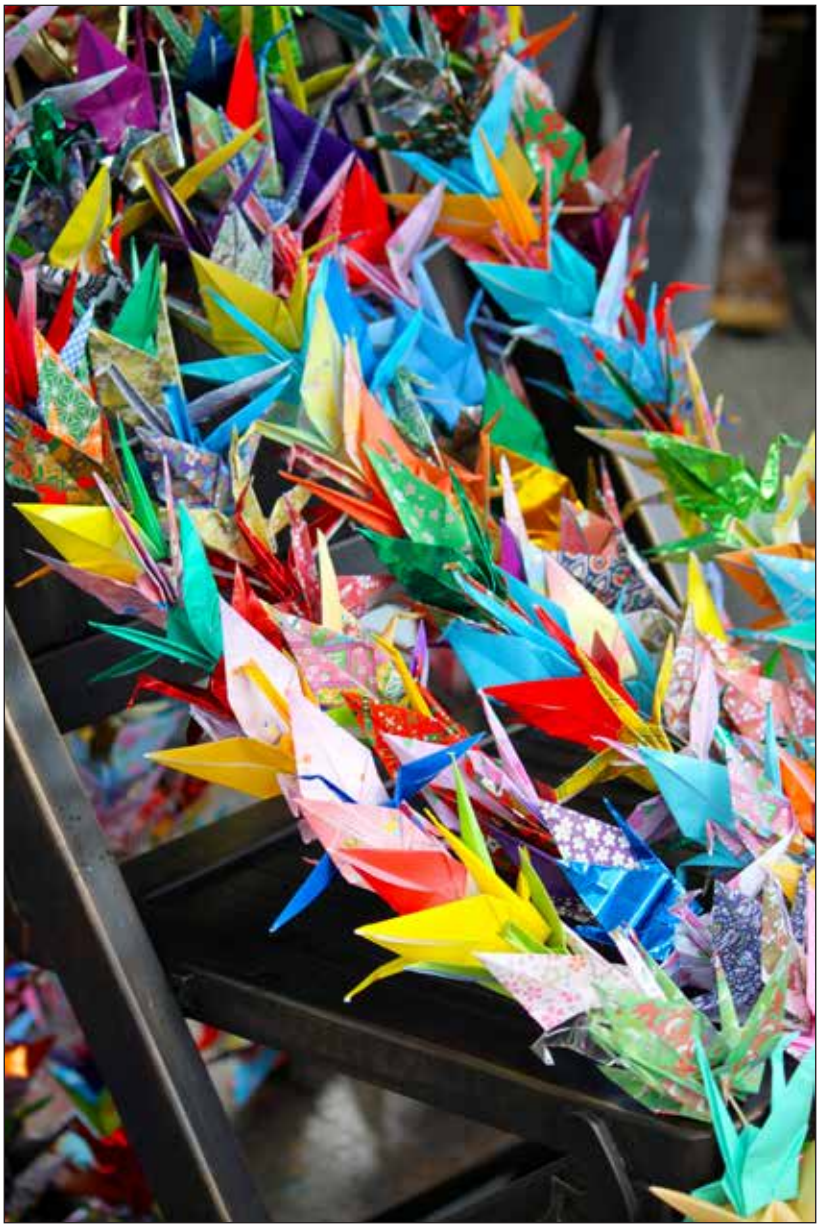
Conclusion

In their focus on their local communities and the individual lives of the people who were removed to concentration camps, both the Bainbridge Island and the Juneau Empty Chair memorials represent a new step not only in the memorialization of Japanese American

47 Frieze, Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial.

48 Grummett includes in her book the first-hand testimonies of many of the children of incarcerees, but by the time the project was begun many of the incarcerees themselves had passed away, and it is unclear how Grummett recorded these testimonies. We might also assume that those giving interviews moderated their responses based on Grummett's status as a white Juneau resident.

49 These efforts and others are recorded on the project's website: https://emptychairproject.wordpress.com/.



Origami cranes made by former incarcerees and other community members on the Empty Chair Memorial when it was dedicated in 2014. *Photo courtesy of The Empty Chair Committee.*

incarceration, but in the direction of the broader American memorial landscape. Both sites reject the fixation on the patriotic Nisei soldier, and instead tell a story of everyday lives unjustly interrupted. Both reject the national push for absolution and a claim to citizenship through patriotism in favor of centering particular communities' stories and claiming them as fully American in their own right. Though the Bainbridge Island memorial was driven first and foremost by the Japanese American community, the Empty Chair builds both on wartime community activism and on subsequent decades of silence; both received support from former incarcerees and the NPS. Ultimately, these are the memorials that may help us move forward.

When we build memorials to "admit a wrong," we run the risk of seeing memorials as sites of absolution: believing that by creating or visiting a site, we have sufficiently learned and repented enough that we ourselves need no longer engage with the crimes of our shared history. But this approach does a disservice to those who were harmed and those who are visiting the memorials alike. When we can create memorials as sites of mourning, education, and nuanced engagement with the past, we equip ourselves to engage more fully with the present. As we continue to reckon with this injustice in our history, we should remain mindful that no memorial will ever right the wrong that was done to these communities. All we can do is hope that our commitment to understanding the past will help us build a more just future.

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