

CONNECTING HISTORY TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

2020-21 ALPHA EDUCATION WEBINAR SPEAKER SERIES

In his book, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans*, Professor Takashi Fujitani looks closely at American and Japanese military policies, as well as at representations of the Japanese and Korean soldiers who served in their armies during World War II. By using soldiering as a lens through which to examine the larger operations and structures of the two empires, Fujitani notes striking similarities between the ways that both regimes managed their racialized colonial subjects and national minorities.

He points out that, unlike the Nazi regime, which undertook a policy of extermination as its solution to managing undesirable populations in the conduct of the total war, the US and Japan experimented with post-colonial models of imperialism. He notes that both the "Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" and the "Atlantic Charter" reflected a disavowal of racism that operated on the principle of the right to self-determination of all peoples and fitted with declarations of "racial equality."

By placing these "soldiers of color" within their larger social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, Prof. Fujitani is able to draw attention to a dramatic wartime shift in the type of racism that characterized these two regimes: namely, a turn towards an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary type, or what he calls a shift away from "vulgar racism" towards a more "polite racism."

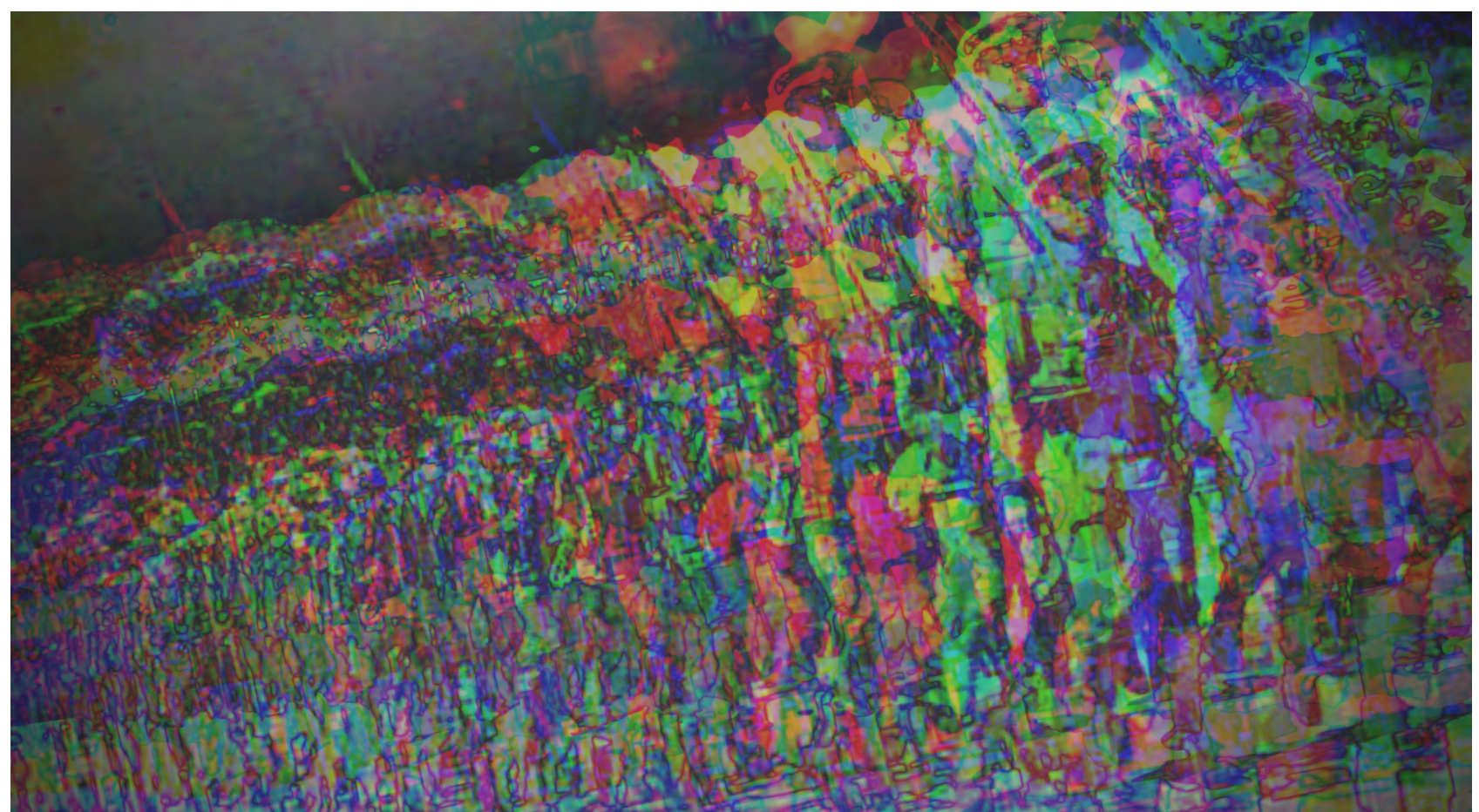
Prof. Fujitani writes against the grain of the dominant scholarship on World War II which tends to portray the United States and Japan as polar opposites – one liberal-democratic and egalitarian, and the other fascist, totalitarian and ultranationalist. By thinking deeply about how disavowals of racism were actually crucial to the war agenda of both states, his work invites us to re-examine the trajectories of conventional narratives of World War II history.

While his work bears an affinity with John Dower's book, *War Without Mercy*, Fujitani challenges the ahistorical culturalist analysis of racism that portrays an unchanging and coherent national culture. He takes particular issue with the ways in which Japan's otherness is contrasted to American modernity. In his words, such an approach "obstructs the possibility of fully disclosing racism as a problem common to modernity and hence, to modern nation-states, societies, and empires."

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Digitally enhanced and manipulated photo of an archival wartime photograph of Korean Soldiers in the Imperial Japanese Army. Original from: Japanese book "Asahi Historical Photographs Library: War and People 1940-1949 Vol.2" published by Asahi Shimbun Company.



RACISM AND MILITARY AGGRESSION: WORLD WAR II AND THE COLD WAR

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Transnational perspectives emphasize interconnectedness and thereby enable an important critique of nationalisms, particularly in their extreme forms. What distinguishes Prof. Fujitani's transnational approach from previous historical accounts of World War II history in Asia?
2. In his analysis, Fujitani discusses how disavowals of racism were part and parcel of both the USA's and Japan's strategies to mobilize their diverse colonial subjects within the context of waging total war. How did Koreans (particularly the men who enlisted) respond to government propaganda? Likewise, how did Japanese-Americans (those who enlisted to fight on the side of the Allied forces) respond?
3. Fujitani's discussion of "vulgar" and "polite" racism draws attention to the complexity of racism. It also raises questions about how nations (and their citizens) tend to buy into an imagined coherent national identity that is supposedly "anti-racist" (or simply not racist). What role does one's understanding of history play in the formation of such notions of the state?
4. Think about examples of contemporary instances of "vulgar" and "polite" racism. How might thinking about racism as a problem common to many modern states produce different outcomes from thinking about racism merely in terms of "cultural difference"?



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