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# Separate National Apologies, Transnational Injustices: Second World War Oppression, Anti-Japanese Persecution, and the Politics of Apology in Five Countries

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During the Second World War, several Allied countries oppressed Japanese diaspora groups (also known as Nikkei). The United States and Canada apologized in 1988; today, Brazil and Mexico face reparative demands for their persecution of Nikkei communities. There has been no integrated analysis of these interconnected injustices. This article offers a preliminary account, highlighting some of the key transnational factors involved. It also addresses the significant domestic bias of public discussions about the injustices, a bias that ignores the historical centrality of transnational forces in historical processes of anti-Asian oppression. We ask whether the possible spread of apology politics from the US and Canadian cases to Brazil, Mexico, and Australia might help to promote a new political awareness of the transnational character of the wartime oppression of Nikkei civilians in Allied countries. However, our analysis reveals that the politics of apology tends to promote domestic bias in public understandings of anti-Japanese racism. Indeed, to the extent that transnationality emerged in our cases, it was in the perverse form of “White civility” comparisons that chided countries in the Global South to emulate their allegedly more advanced apogetic counterparts from the North. Yet, there remain compelling reasons for domestic political apologies in our cases. The point is not to proscribe apologies but rather to understand their biases and, in the cases at hand, to use the spread of apology debates in our cases to promote a more widespread understanding of transnationality in the production of anti-Asian racism and White supremacy.

Au cours de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, plusieurs pays alliés ont opprimé des groupes de la diaspora japonaise (aussi connus sous le nom de Nikkei). Les États-Unis et le Canada ont présenté leurs excuses en 1988. Aujourd’hui, le Brésil et le Mexique sont confrontés à des demandes de réparation pour leur persécution des communautés Nikkei. Aucune analyse intégrée de ces injustices interconnectées n’existe à ce jour. Le présent article propose un compte-rendu préliminaire qui met en évidence certains des facteurs transnationaux clés à l’œuvre. Il traite également de l’important biais national des discussions publiques concernant les injustices, un biais qui omet l’importance historique des forces transnationales dans les processus historiques d’oppression anti-asiatique. Nous cherchons à savoir si l’expansion potentielle de la politique d’excuse des États-Unis et du Canada vers le Brésil, le Mexique et l’Australie pourrait permettre de promouvoir une nouvelle sensibilisation politique quant au caractère transnational de l’oppression des civils Nikkei en temps de guerre dans les pays alliés. Néanmoins, notre analyse révèle que la politique d’excuse a tendance à encourager les biais nationaux dans la compréhension publique du racisme anti-japonais. En effet, dans la mesure où la transnationalité transparaisait dans nos exemples, elle le faisait sous la forme perverse des comparaisons de « civilité blanche » qui servaient à réprimander les pays de l’hémisphère Sud pour qu’ils imitent leurs homologues désolés, supposément plus avancés, du Nord. Pourtant, il subsiste des raisons convaincantes de formuler des excuses politiques nationales dans nos exemples. L’objectif n’est pas de proscrire les excuses, mais plutôt de comprendre leurs biais et, dans les exemples étudiés, d’utiliser l’expansion du débat sur les excuses afin d’encourager une compréhension plus généralisée de la transnationalité dans la production du racisme anti-asiatique et de la suprématie blanche.

Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, varios países aliados oprimieron a los grupos de la diáspora japonesa (también conocidos como nikkei). Estados Unidos y Canadá se disculparon en 1988; hoy, Brasil y México se enfrentan a demandas de reparación por su persecución de las comunidades nikkei. No ha habido ningún análisis integrado de estas injusticias interconectadas. Este artículo ofrece un análisis preliminar que destaca algunos de los principales factores transnacionales implicados. También aborda el importante sesgo nacional de los debates públicos sobre las injusticias, un sesgo que ignora la centralidad histórica de las fuerzas transnacionales en los procesos históricos de opresión anti-asiática. Nos preguntamos si la posible propagación de la política de disculpas desde los casos de Estados Unidos y Canadá a los casos de Brasil, México y Australia podría ayudar a promover una nueva conciencia política del carácter transnacional de la opresión de los civiles nikkei en los países aliados durante la guerra. Sin embargo, nuestro análisis revela que la política de disculpas tiende a promover el sesgo nacional en la comprensión pública del racismo anti-japonés. De hecho, en la medida en que la transnacionalidad surgió en nuestros casos, fue en la forma insidiosa de comparaciones de «civismo blanco» que reprendían a los países del sur global para que, en sus

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disculpas, emularan a sus homólogos supuestamente más avanzados del Norte. Sin embargo, siguen existiendo razones de peso para las disculpas políticas internas en los casos que analizamos. No se trata de proscribir las disculpas, sino de comprender sus sesgos y, en los casos que nos ocupan, utilizar la difusión de los debates sobre las disculpas, en los casos que analizamos, para promover una comprensión más amplia de la transnacionalidad en la producción del racismo antiasiático y la supremacía blanca.

## Introduction

During the Second World War, at least six countries waged similar domestic campaigns of racist oppression against Japanese diaspora groups (also known as Nikkei) within their borders.<sup>1</sup> By Fall 1988, the United States and Canada had apologized to their victims. At the time of this article's writing, Brazil and, to a lesser extent, Mexico faced reparative demands for their similar persecution of Nikkei communities.

There has been no integrated scholarly analysis of these diverse yet interconnected injustices. One purpose of this article is to begin to address this lacuna by considering collectively the cases of Second World War wrongdoing against Nikkei in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, and Australia.<sup>2</sup> We also highlight some of the key transnational factors involved. Shared White supremacist discourses of Asian incompatibility with democratic citizenship spread across the immigration-receiving, White-dominated settler states in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Lake and Reynolds 2012; Lowe 2015). From the beginning of the twentieth century, Washington pursued geopolitical rivalry with Japan by stressing White supremacy and US leadership as fundaments of hemispheric solidarity (Lee 2007); by the early 1930s, anti-Japanese measures had become a requirement of friendly relations with the United States throughout the Americas (Peddie 2006; Quintaneiro 2006).

There is widespread scholarly recognition of the historical centrality of transnational forces and relations in historical processes of anti-Asian oppression (Jung 2005; Lee 2007; Lake and Reynolds 2012; Lowe 2015). However, this scholarly recognition does not seem to have produced a corresponding political consciousness among mass publics that the wartime injustices against Nikkei stemmed from internationally connected discourses and processes. The spread of Nikkei apology politics from the United States and Canada to Brazil, Mexico, and Australia thus raises the prospect of change. Might the nascent presence of similar historical justice debates across deeply connected national cases begin to redress this relative lack of public knowledge about the transnational forces and connections behind what have been traditionally treated as discrete episodes of domestic wrongdoing? At bottom, this is a question about the kinds of public knowledge that political apology processes promote. In the following text, we pursue it by asking whether the diffusion of apology politics across our cases might help to build a new political awareness of the interconnected, transnational character of the wartime oppression of Nikkei civilians in Allied countries.

## Theorizing Political Apology and the “Separate National Apologies, Interconnected Injustices” Phenomenon

Scholars distinguish between different types of apology based on the formal relationship between apologizer and addressee (e.g., Gibney et al. 2008). In this schema, political apologies are domestic, international, or transnational. The so-called domestic political apologies revolve around considerations pertaining to the membership of historically oppressed recipient groups in national political communities (Nobles 2008). They are a relatively new development, reflecting complex intersections among social movement equality struggles, state legitimation strategies, and the governance norms of the postwar human rights revolution (Cunningham 2014). International apologies, in contrast, are as old as international relations itself—regretful explanations, retractions of misstatements, and promises of non-repetition being the perennial stuff of diplomacy (Bagdonas 2018).

Transnational political apologies (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001) combine elements of both types. Like domestic apologies, they affirm the equal dignity of a group or some segment thereof; the difference is that the group in question does not reside in the apologizing state. One example is the US apology to the people of Guatemala, which indirectly acknowledged Washington's Cold War support for right-wing death squads and complicity in the Mayan genocide (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001, 914). Other instances can be found in Japan's various expressions of regret to the Korean women enslaved by its Imperial Army in the Second World War (Weber 2018) and the assorted remorseful proclamations of European powers to populations victimized by their colonial depredations (Bentley 2015). Black diaspora groups and nations have also sought transnational apologies. At the time of this article's writing, leaders and activists across the English-speaking Caribbean were demanding that the United Kingdom take regretful responsibility for organizing, propagating, and benefiting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Beckles 2013).

The cases we examine are more ambiguously situated. Each is clearly domestic in terms of the citizenship relation between the prospective or actual apologizing government and Nikkei recipient group. However, the underlying injustices also have significant transnational elements that may not be adequately grasped via modes of response tethered to individual Westphalian states (Fraser 2007). This concern signals our interest in domestic political apology as a mediating form that shapes public knowledge about historically significant injustices and harms. In the cases at hand, we are interested specifically in the potential of domestic apology processes to generate knowledge about the transnational aspects of the injustices with which those apology processes are concerned.

Political apology is a complex, multilayered phenomenon (Smith 2008) on which this article has no interest in pronouncing “for” or “against.” However, we assume that political apologies have at least the potential to promote awareness of historical injustice and to reinforce values that

<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to Saige Motkoski for excellent research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Nikkei were also persecuted in other Latin American countries, perhaps most notably Peru, a case beyond the scope of our research expertise. However, when treating US anti-Nikkei injustices and present-day responses, we will discuss the case of Japanese Latin Americans who were sent to the United States for internment, most of whom hailed from Peru.

might help to militate against future wrongdoing.<sup>3</sup> By indicating what injustices have been committed, how, and by whom, a minimally adequate apology provides a public record of wrongdoing that may “narrow the range of permissible lies” (Ignatieff 1996, 111). Beyond this narrative function, political apologies also affirm norms (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001). By stating that some important moral standard was transgressed, the apologizing government or state offers critics a lever of discursive accountability against other transgressions of the norm. Indeed, policymakers and activists have used the 1988 US apology for the incarceration of Japanese Americans in precisely this way (Izumi 2019). These narrative and norm-affirming functions can help build public knowledge and drive social and political accountability in response to inadequately addressed instances of injustice and harm (Stanger-Ross and James 2020). But how might they serve the transnational complexities of this article’s cases?

Let us consider the distinctive scenario at issue. It involves the accretion of domestic political apologies or calls for apology in similarly situated cases that share important transnational roots. Two opposite dynamics seem possible. On the one hand, a proliferation of domestic apology discussions in similarly situated cases could generate a basic understanding among implicated publics (Rothberg 2019) that similar wrongs were committed elsewhere at similar periods against similar victimized populations.<sup>4</sup> Historical justice advocates, that is, activists, group leaders, and public intellectuals concerned to promote truth, apology, and reparation, could then build on this initial understanding to bring to public attention more specific knowledge about the transnational connections and injustice processes behind the traumas and wrongs concerned. This dynamic, then, involves a proliferation of apology discussions sparking a nascent cross-case awareness of similarities and proximities, which activists and advocates might then leverage to forge deeper and more widely shared public knowledge about transnational connections and processes in historical injustice. Schematically, it highlights what we refer to as the transnational injustice knowledge potential of domestic political apology. On the other hand, such a dynamic might not materialize; after all, the relevant apology processes will involve separate nation states, distinctive protagonists, autochthonous political agendas, and in many cases different languages.

Absences of cross-case connection making would seem particularly worrisome where racism is concerned. Historical and ongoing racisms certainly have distinct roles in the political development and social hierarchies of different countries (Omi and Winant 2014). However, racialization and White supremacy are also global phenomena with transnational histories and dynamics. They cannot adequately be confronted as the happenstance results of discrete wrongs committed separately by individual states (Winant 2001; Lake and Reynolds 2012; Lowe 2015). For example, the injustices with which we are concerned must not be exceptionalized as temporary national deviations stemming from the accidental shared fact of war with Japan. As we noted at the outset, they have deep roots in anti-Asian

hate and settler state White supremacy, fomented transnationally from the late-nineteenth century and nurtured assiduously by US diplomacy and foreign policy over the first half of the twentieth century.

The actual impact of national apology processes on public awareness about the transnational origins and character of historical injustices is unclear. Consider political apologies to Indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. These are obvious instances of the “separate national apologies, interconnected injustices” phenomenon, which we just introduced as a possible spur to the dynamic that we schematized as the transnational injustice knowledge potential of domestic political apology. Each of these settler-colonial states has issued one or more political apologies for injustices against Indigenous nations (Lightfoot 2015). The wrongs are transnational in that they stem from the centrality of Indigenous dispossession to the global development of the British empire and from the ensuing processes of usurpation that left White-dominated settler states in formal empire’s place (Russell 2005). Anishinaabe political scientist Sheryl Lightfoot (2015) explains that Indigenous nations have sought political apologies in order to advance intersocietal negotiation processes oriented toward returning stolen land and jurisdiction to their members. Although Lightfoot (2015) found severe limitations in actually existing settler-state apologies, occluding the specifically global character of settler-colonial dispossession was not notably among them. Decades of international Indigenous activism had already produced the distinct array of networks, discourses, and mechanisms comprising “global Indigenous politics” (Lightfoot 2016). Thus, the transnational injustice knowledge potential of domestic political apology in similarly situated cases would seem at least an open question.

Focusing on racism and public knowledge, this discussion has established the novelty and significance of the “separate national apologies, interconnected injustices” phenomenon. At this early stage of the phenomenon, there seems relatively little to be gained by attempting to measure the possession of transnational injustice knowledge among publics and, say, to rate the relevant levels as low, medium, or high. We are instead more concerned with whether such knowledge is being created and spread for implicated publics to consider. Therefore, we examine the political apology demands, debates, and state responses in our cases in order to gauge their potential to forge transnational injustice knowledges that might someday become more socially prevalent. We ask, in other words, whether the accumulation of similar Nikkei apology demands and cases seems to be leading to public claims and official responses that seem capable of promoting awareness among publics of the transnational origins and dimensions of these once putatively separate national wrongs. Or do serially discrete domestic political apology debates appear to militate against such awareness, even when the cases involve deeply interrelated processes of racialization and racist injustice? Discussing these possibilities in relation to our topic requires understanding the relevant injustices and their connections, itself a significant goal of this article. We thus begin by sketching the transnational history of twentieth-century anti-Nikkei injustice to frame our more detailed accounts of the individual injustice and political apology cases.

### Interconnected Injustices: The Japanese Diaspora Cases

As historian Erika Lee (2007) and others (e.g., Jung 2005; Lake and Reynolds 2012; Ngai 2021) have shown,

<sup>3</sup>This limited assumption leaves aside, *inter alia*, debates about the role of political apologies in promoting reconciliation, transforming the state, promoting dignity for survivors, and effecting material reparation. For surveys, see Cunningham (2014) and Mihai and Thaler (2014).

<sup>4</sup>By saying “implicated,” we follow Rothberg in stressing that those of us who are neither perpetrators nor direct beneficiaries still face the choice of whether to confront or accept the continuing legacies and manifestations of the assumptions, ideologies, and relations involved in instances of historical injustice.

governments, opinion leaders, and social movements in countries such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand fomented a New World discourse of anti-Asian White supremacy for decades before the onset of the Second World War. This discourse is one historical example of the global processes of othering and oppression that continue to operate as conditions of possibility for the enlightenment, equality, and freedom claimed by White liberal modernity (Lowe 2015; Stoler 2016).

Among other things, the New World discourse of anti-Asian White supremacy categorized Japanese migrants as an inassimilable menace to liberty and democratic self-governance in settler-colonial states. As these states began to experience large-scale migration and nascent industrialization in the late-nineteenth century, they initiated what historian Ethan Blue (2021, 21) calls the “second-order process of settler colonialism,” namely “regulating who might be permitted as a settler and eventually, perhaps, a full citizen, and restricting or expelling the rest.” Determined to make “white man’s countries” (Roy 1989), anti-Asian activists and policymakers alike presented exclusion and second-class citizenship as requisites of settler independence and freedom (Lake and Reynolds 2012). This New World discourse of White settler liberalism was soon reified in law (Stanger-Ross and James 2020), assigning to Japanese migrants in diverse contexts the liminal status of what Mai Ngai (2004) calls the “alien citizen”: a person bearing a status of legally diminished rights, enduring a legally stigmatized identity, and facing legally circumscribed economic possibilities.

US leadership was particularly influential in spreading anti-Japanese sentiments and measures across much of the Western hemisphere. From the first decades of the twentieth century, Washington aimed to weaken Japan as a geopolitical rival. In the Americas, it offered benefits of security and solidarity to states that pursued its preferred anti-Japanese immigration and second-class citizenship policies (Peddie 2006; Quintaneiro 2006). Following Japan’s December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, these processes culminated in interlinked projects of wartime oppression, sometimes involving significant US direction. Coalescing around mass incarceration and concentration, the wartime projects catapulted Nikkei communities into the rightless state of exception that self-designated liberal democracies often create for despised Others in times of crisis. As seen more recently in the case of Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, this intersection of the politics of emergency with longer-run processes of racialization turns vulnerable populations into “dangerous internal foreigners” (Dhamoon and Abu-Laban 2009).

The following individual case analyses reveal important variations. Although each country incarcerated persons of Japanese ancestry, Brazil’s approach was relatively ad hoc and decentralized. Brazil was also distinct in contending with violent intracommunal Nikkei conflict after the war. For its part, only Canada settled upon a policy of total dispossession. While Canada independently organized its internment, Mexico did so with considerable US cajoling; Mexico also negotiated internment conditions and, later, token reparations, with Japan. Alone among our cases, Australia expelled virtually its entire Japanese-ancestry population, depriving that country of a basic stimulus for a subsequent politics of redress.

However, the similarities are more striking. All countries participated in transnational discourses of White supremacy and Japanese alterity. All stigmatized Nikkei and marked them out for discriminatory treatment before the war. All did so in geopolitical alliance with the United States. All

used wartime policies of mass internment to deprive Nikkei of liberty, livelihoods, and property. All caused unconscionable loss and trauma. Last, and perhaps most significant, while all justified their wartime policies in terms of the Axis threat—that is, the threat posed collectively by the so-called Axis powers of Italy, Japan, and Germany—none subjected Italian or German communities to such categorically discriminatory treatment, save for the partial exception of Brazil.<sup>5</sup> This basic fact underscores the profound significance of the transnational, anti-Japanese discourses institutionalized via law and policy in diverse settler polities in the decades before the war.

### *The United States*

Immediately following the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack, the United States uprooted “all persons of Japanese ancestry” (e.g., *Wartime Defense Command* 1942) from its West Coast, incarcerating them in camps organized for that purpose. Over 120,000, roughly two-thirds of them citizens, were affected (Irons 1993). Despite the obvious Axis menace, persons of German and Italian ancestry were not subjected to similar categorical persecution. This is not to deny that members of the latter groups were oppressed but simply to stress the profound racism of the categorical approach. For example, not only were all “Japanese” targeted simply and solely on the basis of race, but also decades of prior legislated racism had prepared the ground for this treatment by, among other things, denying “Japanese” even the possibility of naturalization or citizenship (Ichioka 1988).

The coastal exclusion and incarceration orders were callously executed, leaving victims only days to decide what to do with their homes, businesses, farms, and personal belongings. Although their property was not systematically confiscated or dispossessed, many Japanese Americans were forced to abandon it or sell cheaply in desperate circumstances. The majority never returned to their prewar homes. Confined in inhumane conditions, Japanese Americans were sent to local Assembly Centers before being moved for the duration of their incarceration to War Relocation Centers.<sup>6</sup> The Assembly Centers were unfit for human dwelling: livestock pavilions, fairgrounds, and the like. The War Relocation Centers were remote, consisting of military style barracks with cramped conditions lacking kitchens, bathrooms, laundry spaces, and privacy (Okubo 1946, 2014). Military guards with bayonets stood on watchtowers overlooking barbed wire fences. At some concentration sites, unrest led to violence, injuries, and arrests.

The US War Department used a “loyalty questionnaire” to determine which Japanese Americans it might accept in military service or allow to resettle beyond the West Coast. Tule Lake (Ross and Ross 2000) became a so-called special Segregation Center because it had the largest number of inmates who answered their loyalty questionnaires in ways that concerned authorities. “Disloyal” inmates were sent there, while “loyal” ones were transferred elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup>By categorically discriminatory, we mean treatment that discriminated against all group members on the basis of their perceived race or ethnicity, regardless of factors such as length of residence, citizenship, or alleged individual choices or behavior. We treat Brazil as a partial exception to this observation because that country’s lack of a single, clear internment policy makes judging its comparative treatment of Axis-linked populations difficult.

<sup>6</sup>The *Japanese American Citizens’ League* (2013) advises against using these terms except as proper nouns, preferring the less euphemistic “temporary detention centers” and “American concentration camps.” It also rejects “internment,” a term often associated with incarcerating foreign nationals, not citizens. We follow the JACL guidance in the American case, while using “internment” in national contexts where Nikkei movements employ the term.

Families whose individual members responded differently to the questionnaire suffered emotional rifts and then physical separation after being taken to different camps. Significant and in some cases irreparable psychological damage resulted (Ross and Ross 2000). Eventually, a substantial number of Tuleans sought to renounce their American citizenship because they expected that doing so would facilitate their “repatriation” to Japan. However, Japan’s postwar devastation led most of these so-called renunciants to stay in the United States, where they remained effectively stateless, in some cases into the 1960s (Collins 1985). In theory, lifting the military exclusion order on December 17, 1944, freed Japanese Americans to return to the West Coast, but rampant racism prevented many from returning. The majority had to rebuild their lives in places and occupations utterly different from before (Robinson 2012).

The United States also targeted Nikkei residents of other countries. For example, although Peru responded to US diplomatic pressure by confiscating Nikkei homes, businesses, and assets, Washington itself also engineered the coercive removal of thousands of Japanese Latin Americans, primarily from Peru, in what amounted to a scheme of international kidnapping. After securing Lima’s cooperation in placing the abductees on transport ships, the US navy took them to camps in Texas for use as bargaining chips for American Prisoners of War (POWs) in Japan (Masterson 2004; Schmitz 2021). Equally brazen was the US approach when it came to redress. Even though many abductees eventually became permanent residents or citizens, Washington excluded them from the 1988 Civil Liberties Act (Congress 1988), which provided apologies and compensation to Nikkei internees, on the ground that they were not legal residents when they first entered the country (Sun 1998).

#### *Canada*

Starting in Spring 1942, Ottawa interned the 21,460 persons of Japanese ancestry then resident within 100 miles of the West Coast of British Columbia. Roughly three-quarters were citizens by either birth or naturalization.<sup>7</sup> Although the availability of naturalization contrasts with the US case, for most Japanese Canadians the difference meant little. For example, in British Columbia, where the vast majority lived, the provincial government disfranchised all persons of Japanese ancestry between the years 1885 and 1949, a measure that had the further consequence of barring those affected from holding provincial or municipal office or employment; serving on juries; entering the fields of law, pharmacy, or policing; or holding liquor licenses (Roy 1989; Backhouse 1999). And much like the United States, Canada’s prior history of legislated racism shaped its wartime approach. Although what we might now call “racial profiling” was certainly used against individual German and Italian Canadians, Canada’s internment legislation, which ignored official investigations concluding that the Nikkei posed no security threat (Adachi 1979), targeted all persons “of the Japanese race” (Adams and Stanger-Ross 2022).

In the face of such persistent and extensive racism, Japanese Canadians had nevertheless managed to build a prosperous and stable community on the Pacific coast (Sumida 1935), which the internment destroyed. The Canadian federal government seized, and eventually sold, the property it forced internees to leave behind; indeed, it required them to use the proceeds to support themselves in

their internment (Stanger-Ross 2020). In 1946, roughly 20 percent of those initially interned were expelled to Japan. For those remaining, legal restrictions were not lifted until 1949, meaning that, for most of their duration, Canada’s internment policies lacked even the most minimally plausible connection to exigencies of war (Roy 2005). Implemented via executive orders and the emergency provisions of the War Measures Act, these policies were also insulated from parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

Although Canada had at first contemplated only ad hoc restrictions on civil liberties and specific measures against those suspected of enemy activity, it soon joined the “continental policy” (King 1944) of total internment set by the prior US decision to uproot Japanese Americans from the Pacific Coast. Authorities placed internees in a temporary detention center before moving the majority (roughly 12,000) to internment sites away from the coast (Stanger-Ross 2020). Among the others, just under 4,000 accepted punitive labor contracts on farms in other provinces. Approximately 1,000 were pushed into the hard labor of constructing provincial highways, while some 2,500 managed their own accommodation by finding places in a communal settlement outside British Columbia’s so-called protected area or securing employment in other provinces (Adachi 1979; Sunahara 1981).

Although Ottawa promised that the seizure of property would be temporary, it soon effected the almost total and permanent dispossession of the community (Stanger-Ross 2020). Initially held under a putative protective trust, Japanese-Canadian owned property fell prey to looting and vandalism. In a chaotic process marked by bureaucratic failure, improvisation, and malice, officials dropped the trust idea, selling the property over the objections of the owners. Continuing into the early 1950s, these sales underpinned a de facto postwar policy of ethnic cleansing. Declaring it impossible for Japanese Canadians to return to the homes of which they had been dispossessed, officials forced them to relocate permanently in eastern Canada or accept expulsion to Japan. Ultimately, roughly 10,000 moved east, some 4,000 were expelled, and the rest remained interned until 1949, when they finally regained citizenship rights, including the right to return to coastal British Columbia.

#### *Brazil*

Brazil realigned its foreign policy in the 1930s, abandoning an earlier West European orientation in favor of “supporting the United States in its role as a world power in exchange for [Washington’s] support for Brazil’s supremacy in South America” (Alves 2005). The shift was a direct response to the US Good Neighbor Policy, a hemispheric doctrine established in 1933 (Grayson 1969), which, among other things, offered inducements to countries willing to support Washington’s geopolitical battles in the Americas—in this case, against persons of Japanese ancestry. Certainly, anti-Japanese racism in Brazil was long-standing. Racist immigration restrictions, which were never applied to German or Italian migrants, dated from 1890 (Leão Neto 1990). However, after the Good Neighbor realignment, Brazilian legal discrimination against Nikkei markedly increased. For example, it led Brazil to all but eliminate Japanese immigration and to replace members of company boards with non-Japanese appointments (Quintaneiro 2006). When Japan entered the war in 1941, Brasilia responded swiftly; in a phrase that soon became commonplace in media and civil society, authorities deemed persons with ancestral links to Axis countries to be “hostile citizens,” regardless of actual

<sup>7</sup> Until 1947, the equivalent legal term to “citizen” in Canada was “British subject of Canada.”

citizenship or place of birth (Quintaneiro 2006). However, Nikkei were often disproportionately affected, owing to the climate of anti-Asian racism nurtured before the war and the pre-existing reification of “Japanese” as a distinct group warranting discriminatory treatment (e.g., Paganine 2015).

Although Brazil did not undertake a centralized internment policy, a fact that complicates comparison with our other cases, it certainly committed injustices. It banned communicating in Japanese, expropriated Nikkei-owned farms and businesses, detained persons of Japanese ancestry, froze their assets, and evicted them from their properties (Handa 1987; Silva 2013). In São Paulo alone, federal authorities uprooted 400 Japanese families, freezing their assets until 5 years after war’s end. In 1942, inflamed by a German submarine attack near Belém, mobs assaulted Axis immigrants and burned their homes. Authorities then confined the mainly Nikkei victims, about 480 families, for 3 years in concentration camps in the nearby state of Pará. Accounts differ as to whether they were interned for their own protection or to prevent alleged sedition, but they never regained the property they were forced to leave behind (Toyama 2009). The pattern repeated the following year, when German submarine attacks, this time near the port of Santos, led to concerted and violent police-led evictions in July 1943, which removed from the local coastal area all persons with ancestral ties to Axis countries (Toyama 2009, 249). The victims, again predominantly Nikkei, were prevented permanently from returning to their homes, without aid or recourse.

Postwar events brought more suffering. A cult-like organization known as *Shindo-Renmei* (League of the Path of Subjects) refused to believe that Japan had been defeated (Kumasaka and Saito 1973; Morais 2000), in part because Brazil’s ban on Japanese-language communication impeded the flow of factual information to the community. These difficulties polarized Nikkei into two factions, the *kachigumi* (who believed Japan had won the war) and the *makegumi* (the defeatists, who accepted Japan’s unconditional surrender). *Shindo-Renmei* engaged in a campaign of misinformation and violence, murdering at least twenty-three Nikkei community leaders (Jacobowitz 2021). Authorities responded indiscriminately with police sweeps, arbitrary arrests, torture, and the 1946–1947 imprisonment of more than 1,200 Japanese Brazilians. Although most were soon released, Brazil sent 170 without trial for longer periods to the Anchieta Island prison on São Paulo’s north coast (Toyama 2009). The persecution of the *Shindo-Renmei* era, like the evictions and depredations that preceded it, was not a significant topic of public discussion until the 2010s.

#### Mexico

Although a number of farmers, business owners, and skilled workers came from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, most of Mexico’s early Japanese migrants were recruited in the early decades of the twentieth century as exploited contract labor for British- and American-owned mines, plantations, and railroads. They endured harsh conditions. Mexico imposed discriminatory measures well before the Second World War, initiating general restrictions on Asian immigration in 1903 and specifically anti-Japanese ones in 1924 (Ota Mishima 1982). From the early twentieth century, Mexico legally classified Japanese migrants and their descendants as “foreign aliens [of the] yellow race” (Fernández de Lara Harada 2022).

These developments reflected a mix of domestic and transnational factors. The Mexican postrevolutionary elite

tended to view Asians as an unassimilable group to be expelled from the body politic (Fernández de Lara Harada 2022), while the United States deployed “yellow peril” scare-mongering to further its neo-imperial economic and military ambitions in the region (Azuma 2014; Kozen 2016; Tamayo 2020). Having already racialized the community in law and subjecting it to harsh surveillance (Hernández Galindo 2011), Mexico moved almost immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack to place persons of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps, remove them from their homes, confiscate their property, and generally suspend their rights. In contrast, and much like the other countries in our analysis, Mexico targeted other, non-Nikkei, Axis-linked persons only on a selective and individual basis (Inclán Fuentes 2013).

The other significant external influence was the US Good Neighbor Policy, which continued Washington’s long-standing crusade against Japanese influence in the Americas. As was the case for all Latin American countries, for almost a full decade before the outbreak of war, Washington offered Mexico political leverage and favorable terms of trade for joining its battle against Japanese presence (Peddie 2006; Azuma 2014). Overt US direction increased in wartime, with intelligence figures often pressuring their Mexican counterparts to hasten their implementation of anti-Nikkei measures (Takashi et al. 2012; Azuma 2014; Tamayo 2020).

Mexico differed from the other countries in this analysis by enlisting a community organization of wealthy and well-connected Nikkei, the *Kyoei kai*, or Japanese Committee of Mutual Aid, to support Japanese migrants, aid destitute families, enforce camp hierarchies, and punish recalcitrant internees (Chew 2015). The *Kyoei kai* role is particularly notable for highlighting the extent of Japan’s involvement in the Mexican case. Japan, along with influential Japanese Mexicans, supported the committee in order to prevent the relocation of victims to US concentration camps (Sekiguchi 2002), and the Mexican and Japanese governments jointly selected the *Kyoei kai* leaders (Takashi et al. 2012). After the war, Japan arrogated to itself the former *Kyoei kai* role as the venue for complaints about unjust treatment and internee property (Fernández de Lara Harada 2022), an appropriation of rights that it also used vis-à-vis Japanese migrant combatants in the Soviet Union (Muminov 2022). Upon the 1952 signing of the Treaty of San Francisco, which formally organized the postwar peace between the Allied powers and Japan, Mexico “reimbursed” the latter country in the amount of ¥23 million (\$64,000 in 1952 USD) for confiscated Japanese government properties (Sekiguchi 2002).

While estimates vary, between 6,000 and 15,000 Japanese Mexicans, including some 4,500 Japanese citizens, experienced this wartime oppression (Takashi et al. 2012). As in Canada, many of the injustices continued long after the already specious wartime rationale had ceased to exist (Hernández Galindo 2011), even past the 1952 signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in some cases (Fernández de Lara Harada 2022). At the time of this article’s writing, the injustices had prompted scattered individual calls for redress, but not an organized campaign or, still less, any kind of state response.

#### Australia

Although there were roughly 3,500 Australian Nikkei at the start of the twentieth century, only some 1,000 remained by the Second World War, the vast majority of whom were male noncitizens (Nagata 1996). This transformed community composition was caused by the “White Australia”

immigration and naturalization policy of 1901 (Nagata 1996), that country's particular response to the transnational White supremacist movements and networks that spread anti-Asian ideas, discourses, and policies across the so-called White settler countries from the late-nineteenth century (Lake and Reynolds 2012).

As early as summer 1940, and thus over a year before Pearl Harbor, officials prepared a policy of total Japanese internment, implemented on December 8, 1941, rounding up and detaining virtually all Japanese in the country in a single day (Nagata 1996, 51). In practice, in contrast, authorities only interned persons of Italian or German ancestry whom they regarded specifically as security threats (Bevege 1993, 130; Nagata 1996, 61). Australia abrogated civil liberties throughout the war, even prohibiting Nikkei from carrying more than 10 shillings (equal to \$1AUD in 2020), which rendered them effectively destitute. Furthermore, alone among our cases, Australia treated its victims as prisoners of war, even though most were civilians. It forced them to live in purpose-built shacks surrounded by barbed wire; segregated men from their families; rationed food according to military standards; prohibited alcohol, profanities, and "indecent gestures"; imposed uniform meal and bedtimes; censored and restricted publications and communications; and seized funds (Nagata 1996, 125–40).

Australia was also distinct as a multinational hub for interned Nikkei civilians and Japanese POWs from across the Pacific. While the interned civilian Australian Japanese population numbered only about 1,000, an additional 3,000 came from elsewhere, particularly the Dutch East Indies (Bevege 1993, 145; Nagata 1996, xi, 78–84, 91); a further estimated 2,000 were Japanese POWs. When some POWs attempted escape on August 4–5, 1944, authorities killed 321 and injured another 108 persons. Staff at other camps then attempted to maintain docility by preparing conspicuously for copycat uprisings, bringing the specter of mass killing to the civilian Nikkei internment experience (Bevege 1993, 133–34; Nagata 1996, 179–80).

Last, only Australia expelled almost all of its internees after the war, some of whom had lived in the country for over four decades. The only exempt, numbering about one hundred persons, were Australian born, had Australian or British spouses, or were deemed medically unfit to travel (Nagata 1996, 193–96, 207–12). Having almost completely destroyed its Nikkei community, Australia has paid little attention to these injustices since.

### Apology Politics in the Cases

We now examine the transnational injustice knowledge potential of the "separate national apologies, interconnected injustices" phenomenon in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, and Australia. At the time of writing, the United States and Canada were the only countries among our cases to have officially apologized for persecuting Japanese-ancestry communities. Although three of the five countries had not at the time of writing apologized, we can still safely conclude that none of the relevant apology debates and processes appeared likely, at least in the short term, to build public knowledge about the transnational dimensions of the underlying injustices. Instead, and as Nobles's (2008) "membership theory" of domestic political apology would lead us to expect, apology advocates tended to focus on questions of inclusion and equal status in their individual national political communities. We explore this predominantly domestic focus, which also influenced

the corresponding state responses, in the individual country analyses below.

However, there were exceptions. First, some Mexican scholars hoped to use the Nikkei case to highlight ongoing US malfeasance in the Americas. Second, spokespeople representing the abducted Japanese Latin Americans drew parallels with the brutal present-day tactics of racialized internment employed by the United States on its Southern border. Third, we note a nascent transnationality, involving what some cultural critics call the politics of "white civility" (Coleman 2008; Wakeham 2012). However, this was not a transnationality focused on understanding the historical processes of White supremacy. Rather, persistent comparisons reached across national borders to cite the United States and Canada as trend-setting apologetic models. Although these comparisons were surely not purposeful invocations of White civility, they appeared to reinforce extant hierarchies that position the wealthy, White-dominated countries of the global North as the standard bearers of human rights (Bagdonas 2018).

#### *United States and Canada*

The US and Canadian apologies came after years of Nikkei consciousness raising, coalition building, and protest (Hatamiya 1993; Miki 2005). By 1987, US Nikkei had secured congressional support for the Civil Liberties Act, which proposed \$20,000 USD compensation for each eligible internee. After threatening presidential veto, Ronald Reagan (1988) relented on August 10, 1988, acknowledging before Congress that Japanese Americans had been "forcibly removed from their homes and placed in makeshift internment camps . . . without trial, without jury . . . solely on the basis of race." While Reagan did not accept direct US responsibility for the wrongs, say "sorry," or use any variants of the word "apology," Presidents George H.W. Bush (1991) and Bill Clinton would go further. In 1991 and 1993, respectively, each sent a letter of "sincere apology" to the internment survivors covered under the Civil Liberties Act. Clinton's (1993) was the more explicit, acknowledging that "the United States government unjustly interned, evacuated, or relocated you and many other Japanese Americans."

Canada followed Washington's August 1988 measures just 1 month later with the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement, which offered \$21,000 CAD in individual payments to eligible internees. In the House of Commons on September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1988) expressed "the formal and sincere apology of this Parliament," admitting that "the Government of Canada wrongfully incarcerated, seized the property, and disenfranchised thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry." A written Text of Acknowledgment (Canada 1988) added more narrative detail: "deportation . . . expulsion . . . restriction of movement . . . property liquidated . . . [proceeds] used to pay for their own internment."

Redress in each country was a project of community rebuilding and national inclusion driven by survivors and descendants seeking domestic healing, reparation, and acknowledgment (Miki 2005; Tateishi 2020). Indeed, a key factor behind the successful US redress push was the prior citizenship contribution of Japanese Americans through their military service (Izumi 2019). More generally, advocates prioritized citizenship concerns over more abstract projects of transnational injustice illumination and awareness. The point here is emphatically not to gainsay these orientations and choices. It is rather to observe that redress movements driven by survivors and descendants struggling against

state-imposed trauma and second-class citizenship are likely to be overwhelmingly domestic in their immediate preoccupations and priorities. The levers of political influence available to them will tend to heighten the domestic focus as well.

The resultant apologies reflected these dynamics. Neither the United States nor Canada mentioned the solidarity and affective links that White-settler polities forged by constructing supposed Asian degeneracy as a threat to the “sovereignty of autonomous self-governing men” (Lake and Reynolds 2012, 8). Neither acknowledged the anti-Asian immigration restrictions, disfranchisements, and discriminatory economic policies that settler-colonial polities employed to remain “white men’s countries” (Roy 1989)—measures that created “Japanese” as a socially and legally cognizable category ripe for subsequent persecution. Neither recalled the shared organizing models and leadership that, at the dawn of the twentieth century, fomented anti-Nikkei riots and created chapters of the Asiatic Exclusion League on both sides of the border (Lee 2007, 550). In fact, by attributing the wrongs to “wartime hysteria” and “perceived military necessities,” respectively, the apologies of President Clinton (1993) and Prime Minister Mulroney (1988) deliberately obscured these transnational White supremacist histories.

Thus, despite being proffered at roughly the same time, in the same language, and in immediate geographic proximity, the world’s first two Nikkei apologies proceeded as if the injustices were separate national events linked only by the shared accidental circumstance of war. However, if knowledge about the injustices remained in national silos, knowledge about apologizers did not. Seemingly alarmed at the prospect of ceding conspicuous moral leadership to its Southern neighbor, Canada moved rapidly to apologize following the August 1988 US precedent (Miki 2005, 304; Omatsu 1992, 160).

### Brazil

Starting at the turn of this century, writers and filmmakers began to focus Brazil on its Second World War wrongs. In *Corações Sujos* (2000), translated in 2021 as *Dirty Hearts*, the journalist and former politician Fernando Morais exposed the mass incarcerations, killings, and torture that characterized the country’s postwar response to the extremist *Shindo-Renmei* or pro-Japan, *kachigumi* faction. In 2012, a Japanese coproduced documentary, *Yami no ichinichi*, or *Day of Darkness*, directed by lawyer and filmmaker Mario Jun Okuhara (2012), brought to light the 1943 looting, dispossession, and evictions of Nikkei families from the São Paulo port city of Santos.

Moved by Okuhara’s film, Commissioner Rosa Cardoso of the São Paulo State Commission of Truth (a regional component of the country’s larger 2012–2015 National Truth Commission) convened a special session in 2013 on the Santos evictions (Shiraishi 2015, 47). Survivors spoke of long-ignored experiences of trauma, loss, wrongful imprisonment, and torture. Cardoso responded: “I apologize and ask forgiveness on behalf of all Brazilian citizens. . . [M]any [Japanese Brazilians] were imprisoned. It’s time for us to ask forgiveness in relation to the Japanese” (The Guardian 2013). At the time of this article’s writing, Cardoso’s apology stood alone, although some low-profile regional initiatives could be seen as regretful acknowledgments. These included the 2018 return to the local Nikkei community of a Santos school seized during the war (Fukasawa 2018) and the 2015 renaming of a water source at the Anchieta

Island prison museum to acknowledge the mass incarcerations there of accused *Shindo-Renmei* (Fukasawa 2015).

Meanwhile, the filmmaker Okuhara continued to press the Brazilian Ministry of Justice for an official apology for the dispossessions and postwar campaign against *Shindo-Renmei* (Fukasawa 2018; Jornal Nippak 2020). For his part, the author Morais agreed that Brasilia should compensate Nikkei for their wartime losses, but demurred that *Shindo-Renmei*’s violence made the postwar era a different matter (Travae 2013). The Japanese–Brazilian community seemed divided, too. Brazil’s largest Nikkei organization, the Brazilian Society of Japanese Culture and Social Assistance, rejected Okuhara’s call for an apology, in part because it did not wish to focus on the *Shindo-Renmei* years (Fukasawa 2018). Conversely, the Okinawa Kenjin Association of Brazil voted unanimously in 2015 to support Okuhara’s campaign, perhaps in part because most victims of the particularly harsh Santos evictions came originally from Okinawa (Jornal Nippak 2020).

Political apology advocates seemed entirely domestic in their focus. Like their US and Canadian counterparts, they sought to build internal community solidarity and to promote equality in domestic belonging and membership. In the words of Santos survivor and apology advocate Ana Maria Higa, “We must pass this story on to our descendants so they know it” (Jornal Nippak 2020). According to Santos Survivor Yusei Higa, “I was born here, I’m Brazilian. I am a citizen of this country. This kind of thing cannot be repeated” (Jornal Nippak 2020). For her part, Commissioner Cardoso presented the São Paulo truth commission’s apology as a response to specifically domestic problems: “the background of this episode is racism. The Brazilian elite have always been racist” (The Guardian 2013).

However, when commentators, and at least one political actor, discussed questions pertaining to the image or standing of apologizers, the frame of reference appeared to change. For example, upon returning the Santos Japanese School to the Nikkei community, Mayor Paulo Alexandre Barbosa placed his act in global context: “This is the first chapter of a new history built on justice, equality, and respect. Fundamentalism and antiforeignism are prevailing in the world” (Fukasawa 2018). For its part, the UK-based *Guardian* presented Cardoso’s 2013 truth commission apology as a belated catch-up—“Twenty-five years after similar steps by the US and Canada”—to Brazil’s Northern predecessors (The Guardian 2013). The publication, *Black Brazil Today*, did the same. Invoking the apology as a precedent for Black communities harmed by slavery and discrimination, it pressured Brazilian authorities, stressing that Cardoso’s words “came 25 years after the United States and Canada” and that “both [countries] compensated following their apologies in 1988” (Travae 2013).

### Mexico

Calls for Mexican apologies have come primarily from academics. Historian Selfa Chew (2015) concluded *Uprooting Community: Japanese Mexicans, World War II, and the U.S. Mexico Borderlands* with a chapter arguing for apology and redress; Chew then used American media interest in the book to amplify her case (Rentaría 2015; Kao 2016). Sergio Hernández Galindo, a researcher in Japanese Studies at Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History, also called on several occasions for an apology (e.g., Hernández Galindo 2017; “The Mazatlan Post” 2020).

The very limited apology advocacy from outside the academy appeared to focus exclusively on Mexican

culpability for the wrongs and domestic Nikkei community revitalization and healing (e.g., [The Mazatlan Post 2020](#)). The relatively low-key nature of this advocacy may have reflected Japan's postwar positioning of itself as the legitimate representative of Japanese–Mexican victims, to say nothing of the difficult climate for minority-group advocacy in a country with significant levels of political repression and violence ([Human Rights Watch 2021](#)). In contrast, Chew and Hernández, academics with international media access, sought explicitly to highlight the central role of the United States and to build public knowledge about the transnational dimensions of the injustices. They appeared to hope that the publicity garnered by a possible Mexican apology might focus attention on Washington's present-day wrongdoing, particularly its aggressive pressure on Mexico to persecute Latin American migrants ([Rentaría 2015](#); [Hernández Galindo 2017](#)).

Although Chew and Hernández emphasized US misconduct, they also cited the same country as an apologetic exemplar. In an interview with Texas's *El Paso Times*, Chew reproved Mexican authorities for their failure to follow the US precedent: "For the Mexican government not to even offer any kind of apology or reparation is mind-boggling" ([Rentaría 2015](#)). Hernández stressed similarly that, "in the United States, the Japanese movement not only obtained an apology, but also compensation" ([The Mazatlan Post 2020](#)). Coming from critics of US foreign policy, these invocations seemed freighted with a measure of deliberate irony, according to which it was Washington's notoriety for hemispheric wrongdoing that made Mexico's failure to match it in apology so "mind-boggling" ([Rentaría 2015](#)). Nevertheless, the invocations underscored the role of domestic political apology as a basis of international moral comparison. Even as Washington's conduct in other matters was condemned, the US apologies were presented as creditable measures to be emulated, not as neo-imperialist ruses.

#### *Japanese Latin Americans in the United States*

The abducted Latin American Nikkei, most of whom came originally from Peru, pursued a blend of domestic and, to a lesser extent, transnational concerns. Led by and on behalf of people who had become US permanent residents and eventually citizens only after decades of struggle, the redress campaign was perhaps above all a drive for citizenship equality on a par with those included already in the 1988 Civil Liberties Act ([Do 2022](#)).

Some Japanese Latin American claimants accepted the 1998 *Mochizuki* class-action settlement, which President Bill Clinton implemented in 1999 with weak, "pro forma" ([Rodríguez 2021](#)) letters of apology and an offer of \$5,000 in individual redress for survivors ([Tsuchida 2017](#)). Most refused Clinton's offer, taking their battle to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2020 that Japanese Latin American victims resident in the United States should receive redress on the same terms as those covered under the 1988 Civil Liberties Act ([Nakagawa 2020](#)). Decades later, a statement from US President Joe Biden on February 19, 2022, the sixtieth anniversary of the internment order, hinted that redress might be forthcoming. Biden acknowledged "the painful reality that Japanese Latin Americans, who were taken from their Central and South American homes and incarcerated by the United States Government during World War II, were excluded from the Civil Liberties Act of 1988" ([Biden 2022](#)).

At the time of writing, abductees and their descendants continued to press for redress. They also continued to

protest Washington's present-day injustices in the Americas, particularly its internment and criminalization of Latin American refugees ([Simon 2012](#); [Lee 2019](#)). To be sure, other Japanese–American movements have done the same. For example, the Nikkei-led [Densho Project \(2022\)](#) responded to the civil liberty abuses of the "War on Terror" by drawing parallels between Washington's wartime policies of anti-Japanese incarceration and its post-9/11 treatment of Muslims. Still, the abductee movement stood out for advancing this relatively expansive and, to some extent, transnational focus at the same time as it campaigned for domestic redress.

Even if they failed to satisfy the mobilized abductees and descendants, Clinton's weak 1999 apology letters generated at least one attempt at cross-national moral comparison. The Mexican redress advocate, [Sergio Hernández Galindo \(2017\)](#), invoked the letters in a bid to pressure political leaders south of the Rio Grande: "No Latin American government has ever recognized the many violations committed against Japanese immigrants, much less apologized for them."

#### *Australia*

Australia has entertained virtually no significant public discussion of its wartime Nikkei internment. One indicator of the climate of awareness was a 2012 debate in the Western Australia state legislature on what the *Hansard* proceedings ([Western Australia 2012](#)) called "World War II Internment Camps." In over nineteen pages of printed remarks involving twelve different parliamentarians, only one speaker dwelled in any detail on the Japanese case, although two noted in passing that Nikkei had been interned. Instead, legislators focused overwhelmingly on the Italian–Australian experience, even when discussing Nikkei internment apologies in other countries. For example, when legislator Tony Buti observed that "Canada and the USA [had] fully apologized to Japanese . . . civilians with reparations," he did so not to advocate for Australia's Japanese victims but rather to ask rhetorically, "How long will interned Italian Australians need to wait?" ([Western Australia 2012](#))?

This indifference to the Japanese–Australian experience would appear to reflect the relative absence of Nikkei voices in that country. After all, Australia's prewar immigration regime and categorical postwar removals left "few Japanese Australian families [remaining to] share their internment stories" ([Steains and Whaley 2021](#)).

Significant obstacles to apology would appear to remain in other cases as well. In Brazil, the conflicts and stigma of the *Shindo-Renmei* years left a divided community. In Mexico, the arrogation to Japan of compensation rights after the war, coupled with a domestic context of political violence and repression, complicated the task of building a redress movement.

## Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that domestic apology politics has been a relatively weak vehicle for building public knowledge about the transnational aspects and character of the injustices. The US and Canadian apologies offered almost nothing in this regard, despite the striking temporal coincidence of redress in the two countries. Brazilian apology supporters seemed concerned primarily to build domestic injustice knowledge among younger Nikkei and to promote antiracism in Brazilian citizenship. The only Mexican advocates evidencing a transnational focus appeared to be

scholars pursuing themes linked to their research. The Japanese Latin American abductees connected their suffering to a history of hemispheric US imperialism, but they may have been the exception that proves the rule. Their experiences as victims of US-orchestrated kidnapping made transnational connection making almost inescapable. In the other cases, apology advocates treated the injustices as domestic wrongs; their advocacy stressed domestic equality concerns.

If Latin American Nikkei were to use domestic apology campaigns as vehicles for confronting US hemispheric wrongdoing, they would confront a significant difficulty. Consider the finding of political scientist [Carlos A. Parodi \(2008\)](#), who notes that, although Latin American truth commissions in the 1980s and 1990s had abundant reason to probe the US role in all manner of Cold War atrocities, the imperative to maintain good relations with Washington forced each country's commission into an almost exclusively national frame of reference. Anti-imperialist political apology campaigns might raise similar alarms and conclusions about US relations in Latin American capitals today. In the case of the truth commissions, [Parodi's \(2008, 175\)](#) conclusion is blunt: "The international system was not questioned and the legitimacy of US hegemony was preserved."

Conversely, a progressive Latin American government that wished to use a domestic apology as an opportunity to highlight transnationality in historical injustice might encounter a different yet similarly imposing problem. This problem stems from the fact that the key normative requirement in apologizing is to take regretful responsibility for one's own wrongdoing or, in the specific case of historical political apologies, to take regretful responsibility for the institutional wrongdoing of the entity that the speaker officially represents ([Tavuchis 1991](#); [James 2008](#)). Seen in this light, a domestic political apology that foregrounded the wrongdoing of a foreign government or even the forces of transnational White supremacy might seem less like valuable illumination and more like an opportunistic attempt to minimize the state's own wrongful choices, a sully of the moral core of the apologetic act.

The strategic interests of apology seekers would also seem to militate against foregrounding transnationality. Groups hoping to use domestic apologies as leverage for more thoroughgoing processes of material reparation (e.g., [Beckles 2013](#)) have an important reason to insist on unambiguous wrongdoer responsibility. This reason is that successful redress claims tend to require claimant leverage over a clear and actionable target ([Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo 2008](#); [Tateishi 2020](#)). Despite its very real force, and notwithstanding the vital importance of confronting it, transnational White supremacy is not a redress-capable actor.

Critical scholars (e.g., [Henderson and Wakeham 2009](#); [Muldoon and Schaap 2012](#); [Coulthard 2014](#)) link political apology to a liberal political imaginary that sees injustice only in temporally segregated ([Bentley 2021](#)) past events rather than in ongoing structures. Our complementary observation is that a certain indifference to structure is embedded in two basic features of apology politics: first, in the requirement that apologizers take personal or institutional responsibility for particular specific wrongful actions or events and, second, in the need of apology seekers to focus on specific institutional targets capable of reparative responses. Beyond these structure-effacing properties of apology politics, we suggest that the domestic political apology genre may obscure the transnational agency of specific individual wrongdoers as well. Consider, for example, the border-crossing propagandists and organizers in

[Lee's \(2007\)](#) analysis of early "yellow peril" activism in the Americas, or the opinion makers and statesmen in [Lake and Reynolds's \(2012\)](#) account of international White solidarities in the young Anglo-settler Pacific. Such actors are unlikely targets of domestic apology activism, which, quite understandably, is primarily concerned with problems of domestic membership and the state's responsibility for wrongful actions within its borders.

Why is the production of public knowledge about transnational connections and linkages in historical injustice important? We stressed that attention to these connections and linkages could help to challenge traditional apologetic framings of Second World War anti-Nikkei wrongs as the happenstance byproducts of "perceived military necessities" ([Mulroney 1988](#)) and "wartime hysteria" ([Clinton 1993](#)). These framings reflect unidimensional, outdated, and self-serving understandings that reduce racism to fear and prejudice. Certainly, activists and educators can contest the inadequacies of these limited, "wartime hysteria" apologies as a way of building deeper public knowledge about the specifically national histories of official racism involved. However, the opportunity presented by the "separate national apologies, interconnected injustices" phenomenon goes further.

Focusing collectively on our apology cases has helped us to highlight the shared historical trajectories that led many countries to converge on the Second World War injustices engaged by Nikkei redress movements. These trajectories were rooted in the nation-building and indeed world-making business of securing "White men's countries" on territories acquired through Indigenous genocide. Thus, advocates can use the fact of simultaneous Nikkei apology debates in multiple countries to focus public attention on the shared transnational processes underlying the relevant injustices. These processes—settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and White supremacy, furthered in many instances by US hegemony—are the ongoing conditions of possibility for the White settler states and national identities of today ([Hesse 2011](#); [Stoler 2016](#); [Blue 2021](#)). They have also been obscured by a long-run politics of forgetting ([Lowe 2015](#)). Confronting that forgetting is an important means of building change-oriented antiracist awareness and solidarities.

Many of the scholars cited in this article teach about these transnational processes and their forgetting. Social movements such as Black Lives Matter and No One Is Illegal (e.g., [Maynard 2019](#)) do the same. Despite the very serious silences and obstacles uncovered in our analysis, we believe that domestic apology politics can present complementary opportunities for building broader public knowledge about the nation-building processes of White supremacy in the so-called New World. Engaging the historically specific wrongdoing of determinate national actors in particular national citizenships, social movements can use the familiar civic reference points and vernaculars ([Kymlicka 2001](#)) of domestic apology politics as bridges of translation to the more abstract terrain of global relations and systems.

Yet, a deeper problem in apology politics must be confronted. International relations scholar [Azuolas Bagdonas \(2018, 780\)](#) observes that "the ability to 'face the past' may now be seen as the new 'standard of civilization'." Bagdonas's point is that the so-called age of apology may perpetuate "human rights imperialism" ([Heuer and Schirmer 1998](#)), with a nascent apology norm developed by wealthy Northern states becoming, even if inadvertently, a prism for generating moral comparisons that elevate them above poorer Southern ones. Domestic political apology debates certainly appear to serve as moral theaters of cross-national comparison. Canadians, known to "style themselves as

peacekeepers and honest, impartial brokers on the world stage” (Wiseman 2007, 271), may have been threatened in their international status concerns, and thus motivated to act, by the 1988 passage of the US Civil Liberties Act. Decades later, it was the failure of other countries, “25 years after the United States and Canada” (Travae 2013), to “offer any kind of apology or reparation” that appeared “mind-boggling” (Rentaríá 2015).

Although Canada has certainly boasted of its apologetic credentials on the global stage (e.g., Trudeau 2017), this moral comparison dynamic does not require a branding strategy or even intentionality on the part of apologizers. The dynamic arises instead from two basic realities of apology politics. First, apology campaigners and supporters use foreign precedents as instruments of domestic pressure (Dodds 2003). Second, overdeveloped Northern countries are the world’s most prolific apologizers (Zoodsma and Schaafsma 2022). As long as these basic realities remain, it appears that moral comparison in political apology will carry transnational “white civility” (Coleman 2008; Wakeham 2012) dangers. However, harnessing the cross-case linkage opportunities of the “separate national apologies, interconnected injustices” phenomenon could help activists to puncture apologetic smugness, too. In the cases at hand, for instance, they could seize the opportunity to explain that US foreign policy is in fact deeply implicated in the very wrongdoing for which other countries are now urged to emulate Washington in apology.

In any event, fulminating against the idea of political apology seems unhelpful. Concerns of memory, dignity, belonging, and equality will continue to motivate historically oppressed groups to seek apologies. Nation states should be forced to acknowledge and confront their injustices. The yardstick of accountability that even a minimally accurate and detailed political apology can provide is not easily dismissed. Thus, we argue for a clear-eyed but sympathetic confrontation with the transnational injustice knowledge pitfalls of domestic political apology.

As two of this research team have argued elsewhere (James and Stanger-Ross 2018), political apologies often age poorly because subsequent knowledge generation and inquiry tend to highlight their factual and interpretive inadequacies. However, we see this after-the-fact highlighting as central to apology’s promise. An apology can provide an occasion, target, and political momentum that actors can use to foreground the facts and knowledges that the apology itself denies or obscures. This, then, is the promise of the “separate national apologies, interconnected injustices” phenomenon. Advocates might leverage it to bring to wider political consciousness the transnational linkages and interconnections that have been absent in many historical justice debates to date.

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