

# Power in the Darkness

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On Saturday, March 25, 2023, I participated in artist Angie Eng's performance of *Right On!*, a "social justice art walk" conceived in response to the history of systemic racism and the rise of hate crimes against Asian American/Pacific Islanders in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

There were about 170 performers, all AAPIs, split into five groups, each with traditional Asian drummers/percussionists at the tail end. All were dressed in black, and the group traversed sixteen blocks through downtown Sacramento in a slow, deliberate, single file procession from the Robert T. Matsui Courthouse to Capitol Mall and back. Everyone wore a black T-shirt with one of seventeen dates printed on the front. The shirt design references Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara's *Today* series of paintings,<sup>2</sup> and each date corresponds to an Act passed by Congress, a Supreme Court decision, or an Executive Order which targeted AAPIs in the US. The back of each shirt has a QR code which contains a short summary of what happened on the date.



I consider myself part of an Asian community, as I do attend cultural events related to my heritage. However, outside of my family, I really don't have much contact with many Asians in my everyday life. As far as I know, I am acquainted with just one other person who participated as a *Right On!* walker. At the onset of the performance, I felt I was only sharing the experience with her. However, a sense of unity and purpose quickly became palpable to me, and that feeling escalated through the 1 1/2 hours of the walk.

By recognizing inequities that AAPIs have endured over the course of our nation's history, the *Right On!* walk bridged the past with the present – the oldest date cited was April 16, 1850,<sup>3</sup> the most recent, October 17, 2022.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps obviously, the date with the greatest emotional impact for me was February 19, 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced over 127,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans – including

both sets of my grandparents, my parents, my aunts, uncles, and other relatives – from their homes and from their lives and into relocation camps<sup>5</sup> in inhospitable wastelands away from the West Coast.



I have spoken with two people who viewed the walk from more of a spectator perspective, and both said it was a powerful display of solidarity. In addition to the emotional resonance the performance had for me, *Right On!* was an educational experience, as well – I had been familiar with only a few of the seventeen decisions referred to on the shirts.

*Right On!* was first performed in Boulder, CO on October 8, 2022. Sacramento hosted the second performance of the piece, and the first which incorporated the traditional musicians, who I believe added to the gravitas of the work. It was satisfying for me to have been able, in a small way, to assist in bringing Angie Eng’s empowering artistic vision to fruition.

<sup>1</sup> Anti-Asian American/Pacific Islander hate crimes nationwide increased, compared to the previous year, in 2020 by 124% and in 2021 by 339%.

<sup>2</sup> Kawara started his *Today* series in 1966 and continued it for over forty-five years. He completed nearly 3000 pieces, each of which consists of a monochromatic canvas of red, blue, or gray with the date on which it was made painted in a simple, sans-serif, white face. He did not make a painting every day, but sometimes did more than one in a single day. If a painting was not finished by midnight, it was destroyed.

<sup>3</sup> The 14th section of the Act of April 16th, 1850, regulating Criminal Proceedings, provides that “No black or mulatto person, or Indian, shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a white man.” While the text seems to be inapplicable to Asians, in *People v. Hall* in 1854, the California Supreme Court held that the term “black person” “must be taken as contradistinguished from white,” and included all races other than Caucasian.

<sup>3</sup> The US Supreme Court declined to hear *Fitisemanu v. United States*, which sought to challenge the lack of citizenship for those born in American Samoa, a US territory.

<sup>5</sup>“Relocation camps.” As if horseback riding and singing songs around the campfire were on the agenda.