

The Incarceration of Japanese Americans in the 1940s

Literature for the High School Classroom

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Rachel Endo

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1 Why Japanese American Literature?

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City, some American journalists and political leaders commented that “another Pearl Harbor” had occurred. In the name of national security, the US government began increasing its surveillance efforts at all levels from local mosques to international airports. Then-President George W. Bush and other political leaders defended their action as a necessary means to prevent future acts of terrorism. In response to this grand plan, national organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), founded in 1929 and the oldest Asian American civil rights organization in the United States, began to release public statements that strongly condemned what they saw as racist counterterrorism political projects. The JACL joined an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit that challenged the premise of the USA Patriot Act (the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of Congress, signed into law October 2001) by stating that its scope of surveillance activities violated all Americans’ civil liberties and constitutional rights. The JACL also began to compare the events leading to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in the 1940s and the racialization of Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and South Asian Americans as extremists and terrorists in the post-2001 era. While receiving initial backlash for promoting what was seen



by some political leaders as unpatriotic views, the message soon gained traction as more Americans became disillusioned by the emotional toll and financial costs associated with President Bush's Global War on Terrorism.

In the early 2000s, I was among a handful of educators of color in Nebraska and also an active member of JACL. After giving a speech about the politics of wartime hysteria at the University of Nebraska Omaha, I started receiving invitations to visit K–12 classrooms and teacher preparation programs to discuss how the mass detainment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s had implications for current conversations about racial profiling in times of heightened concerns about America's safety and security. The timing was significant given what was making local and national headlines: a local mosque was receiving threatening messages from an anonymous caller, and the systemic abuse and torture of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison by American soldiers was cycling in the daily news. Many Americans also expressed outrage that so-called extra security measures such as enhanced airport screenings disproportionately targeted and criminalized persons with certain physical features, religious affiliations, and surnames.

One particular student-led dialogue continues to remind me of the value of encouraging young adults to see connections between current events and history through the lens of ethnic literature. In 2003, I visited a twelfth-grade English teacher's classroom to teach Miné Okubo's (1946/2003) *Citizen 13660*, a graphic novel of 189 drawings with accompanying text chronicling the author's life in detainment in the 1940s. I started our class by reading part of the preface: "In the history of the United States this was the first mass evacuation of its kind in which civilians were removed simply because of their race" (pp. viii–vix). Before facilitating a whole-group discussion, I had students discuss with one another their



because of their assumed or real social identities. Japanese American literature from the World War II era specifically surfaces a relatively invisible moment in our nation's history while offering students critical counterperspectives about what it means to be "American." For example, excerpts from Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (2003) speak to "right the wrong done during the war," and telling "the shocking story" (p. xii) of what happened to Japanese Americans in the 1940s to illuminate the histories and literatures of ethnic Americans is usually not part of the regular curriculum. The writings of Okubo and other Japanese American authors also connect to contemporary examples of social injustice that are eerily similar to past histories when we analyze the uneven legal protections that different Americans are afforded depending on factors such as disability, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Having written the bulk of this book before the 2016 US presidential election, I now see with even greater clarity that Japanese American literature is a particularly relevant vehicle for discussing current events and social issues with young adults. Controversial rhetoric, proposals, and policies have received considerable attention since President Donald J. Trump's inauguration, including his plans to build a wall along the Mexican–US border, emboldening Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to detain people whose immigration status is in question, and his push to implement Executive Order 13769, also infamously known as the travel ban that targets Muslim-majority nation-states. Teachers across the United States have been fielding questions from their students about how Trump's policies might impact their classmates and their own families. In the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, for example, several teachers in New York City Public Schools, such as English teacher Kevin Kearns, allowed their students, many from immigrant and refugee families,



works written about, by, and/or for Japanese Americans, although the most widely recognized titles are based on the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. Prominent Japanese American authors such as Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Lawson Fusao Inada, Lonny Kaneko, John Okada, Miné Okubo, Monica Itoi Sone, Yoshiko Uchida, Mitsuye Yamada, and Hisaye Yamamoto were all children and young adults when their families were incarcerated in the 1940s. They've written memoirs, novels, picture books, poems, and short stories based on their direct and indirect memories of the World War II era as young Americans who experienced intense racial intolerance during times of extreme anti-Asian sentiment.

The study of Asian American literature, especially works by Japanese Americans, became more prominent at US colleges and universities on the West Coast in the 1970s during the rise of various ethnic studies movements. However, both in the 1970s and now in the twenty-first century, most Americans, particularly K–12 students living outside of the West Coast, haven't been regularly introduced to the works of Japanese Americans or other Asian American writers. *The Incarceration of Japanese Americans in the 1940s: Literature for the High School Classroom* offers teachers tools to diversify their Eurocentric secondary literature curriculum by focusing on incorporating literature about the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. The focus on this historical moment is intentional, as the illegal incarceration of Japanese Americans in the 1940s represents “one of the most troublesome instances of government-sanctioned mass incarceration, racial profiling, and segregation in U.S. history” (Endo, 2012, p. 17).

Each chapter provides essential contextual information to guide teachers in constructing culturally relevant and engaging



including various Asian American writers, were included as a part of, rather than apart from, the canon.

However, teaching American literature from multicultural perspectives is still more the exception than the rule. Despite their long history in America, in addition to a population increase in US K–12 schools of 46 percent since 1997 (Krogstad & Fry, 2014), Asian Americans continue to remain relatively invisible in the classroom. When I teach lessons and units on Japanese American literature in K–12 or university settings, it's often the first and only introduction that students will have to learning about Asian Americans' experiences in and contributions to the United States. Even today, I meet hundreds of students, including young Asian Americans, who haven't read one book by an Asian American author by the time they graduate from high school or their postsecondary institution. This is common even in progressive schools or universities that publicly promote missions of diversity, equity, and multicultural education.

My focus on Japanese American literature offers an admittedly incomplete picture of Asian America's vast literary contributions. For one, Japanese Americans represent only one of Asian America's more than two dozen government-designated ethnic groups. Hundreds of works authored by ethnically diverse Asian American writers such as Chinese American Gene Luen Yang, Filipino American Carlos Bulosan, Hmong American Kao Kalia Yang, Korean American Linda Sue Park, and Vietnamese American Thanhha Lai, among others, are also worthy of study in the classroom. Second, as not all Japanese Americans have familial connections to the World War II incarcerations, teaching about this historical moment can't and shouldn't be the only representation of Japanese American experiences. For example, while I'm Japanese American, my family's history doesn't include being incarcerated



Recognizing the growing expectation that today's high school students should graduate with a range of knowledge and skills, this book incorporates several of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS ELA) spanning grades 9–12. By 2015, several states had adopted all or parts of the CCSS ELA standards, which significantly overlap with the content standards set forth by most state departments of education. To capture key overarching competencies, the activities and assignments in this book infuse core aspects of the CCSS ELA standards for grades 9–12 with an integrated focus on the seven characteristics of college-ready students: that they (1) demonstrate independence as learners, (2) build strong interdisciplinary content knowledge, (3) respond to varying demands and tasks, (4) are able to comprehend as well as critique information, (5) value and incorporate evidence, (6) use technology and digital media effectively and responsibly, and (7) come to understand other perspectives and cultures (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 7). Rather than focusing on single standards, however, this book uses an interdisciplinary, integrated, and multistandards approach that can be adjusted to meet varied learning outcomes and pedagogical goals. All of the activities, assignments, and readings have been designed to assist teachers as they develop their own interdisciplinary approaches to teaching different genres of Japanese American literature.

The latest volume in the NCTE High School Literature Series offers new ways to talk and teach about the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II through the selected works of three critically acclaimed Japanese American authors: Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memoir *Farewell to Manzanar*, along with its film version; a sampling of Lawson Fusao Inada's poetry; and a selection of Hisaye Yamamoto's short stories. All three authors were children or young adults during World War II, and their texts powerfully speak to how being racially profiled, forcibly removed from their homes, and then detained in racially segregated concentration camps for nearly three years forever changed their lives.

This volume features author biographies, guiding questions, resources for teachers, and student-centered activities that incorporate digital literacy. Assignments and discussion questions that appeal to multiple learning styles are included. With several student work samples as models, each chapter includes practical ideas for the classroom, including connecting common themes in Japanese American literature about World War II to contemporary social issues such as civil rights, identity, immigration reform, and race relations.

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