Blinded by the fear and paranoia that followed Japan’s 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government suspended the constitutional rights of loyal, patriotic Japanese-Americans and imprisoned whole families in internment camps throughout the war. Few Anglo-Americans even considered questioning the illegal and immoral walls of barbed wire because they had built walls of ignorance and hatred years before. Unfortunately, these attitudinal walls remained standing long after the war ended and the camps disappeared. To combat prejudice in communities across the nation, former internees wrote about their experiences, including books for children and young adults. Minoru Kiyota suggests in his book *Beyond Loyalty* that tolerance and respect must begin at a young age: “Our class began each day with teacher and pupils all sitting together in a circle. In this atmosphere, I soon felt confident that both the Japanese and the Caucasian children in the class were my friends. Racism did not exist in this realm of small children” (11). This essay examines young adult internment literature as a means of teaching interracial understanding and fellowship, historical truth, and cultural self-awareness.

Kai-Yu Hsu writes that the undertone of nearly all postwar Japanese-American literature “involves the shock of Pearl Harbor, the relocation camps . . . and the lingering anti-Japanese feeling in America” (Hsu and Palubinskas 90). This literature includes picture books, young adult novels, poems, and memoirs that describe the pain of dehumanization and social alienation, as well as celebrate Japanese-American humanity and heritage. These texts problematize America’s segregated, hierarchical society and inspire a more multicultural national perspective. They have helped erode the walls of Anglo-American ignorance and prejudice, as well as the walls of silence, guilt, shame, and cultural self-denial within Japanese-American communities.

Internment literature performs important cultural work: “[Internees] wrote down what they saw, so that one day their words could carry their burdens for
them” (Wakida xiv). The Japanese-American burden was a political, social, cultural, and artistic marginalization that caused the “double consciousness” of being both an American citizen and a despised subaltern. Sheng-Mei Ma posits that the continuation of this self-division has brought “the deathly embrace of Orientalism and Asian American identity” (161) into the twenty-first century. In order to challenge the stereotypes and construct a more positive, bicultural self-identity, internment literature asks young and old readers to address past and present social barriers. Ma writes that “[r]acial healing must begin with a remembrance of the nightmarish trauma” of the camp experience. Remembering the past helps young Americans understand and explode racial and ethnic preconceptions so that Japanese-Americans can overcome “a representation of an ‘us’ that [is] homogenized, stereotyped or simply wrong” (Lauret 2).

Most children and young adult internment literature proposes a transcultural ideal for American society, hoping to meet the dominant society halfway. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the sincere integration efforts of Issei (immigrants), Nisei (second-generation Japanese-Americans), and Sansei (third-generation Japanese-Americans) often have been met with insults and violence. Therefore, in addition to sharing their culture with Anglo-American readers, these authors counter Japanese-Americans’ feelings of isolation, oppression, and self-hatred by providing an imagined community based on common traditions and experiences. Such a conceptual community parallels the “communitism” of Native American literature in its recognition that “language and narrative have tremendous power to create community” (Weaver 40). This pairing is not surprising since both groups experienced a similar “quest for belonging, a search for community” (Weaver 45) after Anglo-Americans demonized both groups and relocated them to the Southwest; in fact, several internment camps were located on reservation land. Some internee authors embraced this connection, advising young readers to develop a deeper sense of cultural pride that transcended “confinement” and began the healing process for themselves and America. At its core, young adult internment literature focuses on community building, reaffirming Japanese-Americans’ self-respect, and asserting their rights as equal members in the larger society.

“We are Americans, too”

This analysis of children’s internment literature focuses primarily on books by Yoshiko Uchida, who was interned as a teenager with her family at the Topaz concentration camp. Uchida wrote numerous works about the lives of young Japanese-Americans before the war, in the camps, and after the war. Her stories challenge prejudice and argue that American communities should accept everyone who embraces “American” values, regardless of their ethnicity. The texts also challenge Nisei and Sansei readers to not deny their heritage or feel ashamed of parents and friends that are “too Japanese.” Her complex Japanese-American characters struggle for self-identity and, despite their human flaws
and failings, model self-awareness, spiritual strength, industriousness, and loving-kindness. Through them readers learn not to suppress their cultural identity to gain partial acceptance into a society that pits “us” against “them.”

Uchida humanized members of her community, particularly children, and explored their development of maturity and self-awareness. Many of her stories begin with a Nisei girl who internalizes the racism directed at her, causing her to reject her own community and heritage. In *The Rooster Who Understood Japanese, The Birthday Visitor, A Jar of Dreams, The Happiest Ending,* and *Journey to Topaz,* the young protagonists initially resent their Japanese faces, names, language, and customs. Rinko in *The Happiest Ending,* for example, begs her mother not to force her to take Japanese-language lessons, saying, “It makes me feel like a foreigner . . . and I’m not!” (4). Through the course of the stories, however, these girls become young women and learn to appreciate their Japanese-ness (and their parents) while remaining loyal Americans. These stories ask white America to welcome these thoughtful, respectful, patriotic children into the national community and to appreciate the wisdom and creativity of their Japanese culture.

Uchida also attempts to break through the cultural walls in her autobiographical *Invisible Thread* and *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family.* Before describing life in the Topaz internment camp, Uchida identified the barriers her community faced in prewar Berkeley. Her stories are so personal and the characters are so realistic that a reader cannot help but identify and empathize with the Nisei’s struggle to find her place within a society that rejects her. The lengthy prewar section of *Invisible Thread,* in particular, shows the social pressure of hating and denying anything Japanese. At first, young Yoshi dislikes her Asian features, her mother’s constant bowing, and the look on the postman’s face while delivering a smelly daikon from Japan. Uchida writes that she and her sister “absolutely refused when Mama wanted us to learn how to read and write Japanese. We wanted to be Americans, not Japanese!” (15). Yoshi proclaims, “I was born in California, recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag each morning at school, and loved my country as much as any other American—maybe even more” (13) because “[d]eep down inside, where I really dwelled, I was thoroughly American” (52). However, when an Anglo-American woman complements her for speaking English well, Yoshi realizes, “she had seen only my outer self—my Japanese face—and addressed me as a foreigner. I knew then that I would always be different, even though I wanted so badly to be like my white American friends” (15). Yoshi eventually learns to accept and appreciate the Japanese side of her identity, and she is glad that her parents instilled in her a strong sense of history, family, community, and selfhood.

Examining America’s prewar prejudice after the war is a common theme in internment literature. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese immigrants and their American-born children had difficulty finding a place for themselves. Almost all Japanese-born children lived on the West Coast at this time, where Anglo-American communities and local organizations
like California’s Japanese Exclusion League turned the American Dream into a nightmare by dehumanizing, segregating, exploiting, and attacking them (Bailey 13). Local politicians used pervasive anti-Japanese sentiments to win elections, and both state and federal governments institutionalized social and economic discrimination, denying the *Issei* and their children many of the rights and privileges of citizenship. Made to feel like second-class citizens (and often noncitizens), Japanese-Americans formed their own cooperative, supportive communities within larger cities. While these “Japantowns” helped their residents maintain both halves of their bicultural identity, prominent politicians accused the residents of refusing to assimilate and called them “sneaky” foreigners, “treacherous” criminals, and “lecherous” beasts who wanted to “steal” Anglo-American jobs and women (Mass 160).

Uchida implicitly argues in her young adult books that Anglo-Americans should be happy to have Japanese-Americans in their communities. She writes in *The Invisible Thread* that during the Depression her parents unselfishly helped others: “Papa never failed to dispense advice or money to anyone who asked for help, and Mama often baked cakes and dozens of cream puffs to provide comfort of a different kind” (23). They also promoted cultural pluralism—during the Japanese “Doll Festival Day,” her mother says, “Bring out your [American] dolls, too. . . . We don’t want them to feel left out” (18). Finally, Uchida suggests that given the chance, all Americans would respect her father’s strong work ethic and public service and appreciate “the tantalizing smell of chicken bubbling in soy sauce and sugar” (19) coming from her mother’s kitchen.

Similarly, Monica Itoi Sone and Julie Otsuka wrote about young *Nisei* girls who initially reject their Japanese heritage with the hope of entering American society, but later they reconnect with their community, recognizing its inherent worth and its important role in America’s cultural diversity. Sone’s protagonist in *Nisei Daughter* and Otsuka’s protagonist in *When the Emperor Was Divine* are typical American teens who, as the novels begin, are oblivious to the invisible wall of prejudice surrounding them. When neighbors, associates, and strangers begin to consider them enemies, they try to re-integrate into American society by destroying their Japanese possessions, speaking only in English, and bringing peanut butter sandwiches to school instead of rice balls. Then signs appear in shop windows that declare “Open Season for Japs!” and “We kill rats and Japs here,” causing the girls to draw closer to their families and communities. The strength and vitality of the family and culture help the characters survive the confusion of exclusion and the humiliation of internment.

Internee poets also exposed the invisible walls of prewar prejudice in defense of their humanity and their right to participate in American society. Yotenchi Agari wrote haikus to protest American society’s attempt to dehumanize him and exile his American-born child as a threat: “Rhododendron blooms / about to leave this house / where my child was born” (65). Toyo Kazato writes in “Going to the Relocation Center” that the attack on Pearl Harbor did not change his loyalty to his country, even after he felt the “fierce stares” (98) of his
neighbors and was “discarded” (99), seemingly without a second thought, to a camp in the Arizona desert. Charles Kikuchi asserts in his prewar diary, “We are Americans, too,” and he denies that he and his neighbors are or ever were “enemy aliens” or “Jap” spies (50). Mitsuye Yamada’s “On the Bus” satirizes the childhood memory of her innocent and patriotic father being arrested by the FBI: “Possible espionage or / impossible espionage / I forgot which” (Camp Notes, n.p.).

Although most Anglo-American authors of young adult literature ignored internment at the time, Florence Means’s novel The Moved-Outers argues for the wrong-headedness of the government’s policy through the experience of a Japanese-American family. The protagonist, a typical American girl, changes her name from Sumiko to Sue to gain social acceptance. She loves American food and customs, her brother joins the army, and she is dedicated to the idea that “all men are created equal,” but even before the war she notices an invisible barrier separating her from her Anglo-American classmates. Sue laments that her family and friends’ citizenship was unfairly denied: “They were American from their hearts out to their skins. But their skins were not American” (15). Means illustrates that the idea of the United States fails if one’s inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are confiscated.

“A barbed-wire democracy, a community under guard”

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Anglo-American racist groups and the U.S. government considered anyone with Japanese facial features an enemy of the state. War hysteria intensified a pre-existing fear of the “yellow peril,” which led to increased anti-Japanese propaganda, harassment, and violence. The FBI immediately arrested and detained many community leaders, newspaper editors, and Japanese-language teachers without public hearings. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066, which caused the internment of more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans, of which 70,000 were officially American citizens. General John L. DeWitt coordinated the evacuation and explained the policy to the media this way: “A Jap’s a Jap, and it makes no difference if he’s an American citizen” (Stanley 23). Forced to quit their jobs, leave their homes, and sell their businesses and possessions to Anglo-American opportunists, Japanese-Americans lost their dignity, honor, and self-sufficiency. They were called traitors and publicly humiliated by being rounded up like criminals or cattle. Uchida expresses the trauma of being a people without a community in Invisible Thread, including the struggle against the dehumanizing government label of “nonalien” (63).

The army transported Uchida and the other internees from their lives and communities along the West Coast to temporary assembly centers. Being close to home, the geography and climate was familiar, and friends visited with food and kind wishes. However, just as they began to reestablish a sense of home and community, they were moved again to permanent internment camps in remote, desert locations: Poston and Gila River in Arizona, Tule Lake and Manzanar
in eastern California, Topaz in Utah, Heart Mountain in Wyoming, Granada in Colorado, Minidoka in Idaho, and Rohwer and Jerome in Arkansas. Yajin Nakao laments being relocated from his California home to Arkansas in this haiku: “Autumn foliage / California has now become / a far country” (120). Community leaders, considered more of a threat to national security, spent the war separated from their families at Justice Department Camps in New Mexico, Texas, Montana, and North Dakota.

Uchida’s characters feel their humanity slipping away once they enter the camps. They experience the pain of being separated from both sides of their bicultural identity; however, they ultimately break through the walls of prejudice and self-denial to propagate a message of fellowship and hope. For example, the children’s picture book The Bracelet shows a loving relationship between Emi, a young Nisei, and her blond-haired, blue-eyed friend, Laurie. The impending evacuation of Emi’s family upsets both girls, and Laurie gives Emi a bracelet and a hug as a reminder of their friendship. Uchida humanizes the evacuees by showing Emi’s complex and realistic emotions. She feels disillusioned, lonely, and abandoned when she is excluded culturally and physically from America and her friend. She feels frightened when armed soldiers arrest her father, and she sees useless “We are loyal Americans” signs in the windows of abandoned, Japanese-American-owned stores. She feels despondent and upset when her family arrives at the barbed-wire camp, moves in to the filthy, smelly barracks, and discovers Laurie’s bracelet has disappeared. Finally, she gains a sense of hope when her mother reminds her that they carry their sense of community in their hearts wherever they go.

Uchida’s novel Picture Bride also humanizes Japanese-Americans and personalizes their struggle. The novel follows the life of Hana, an Issei woman, as she and her family struggle to gain acceptance in American society. Hana’s husband states that they have a responsibility to do everything they can to be model Americans: “We are on trial. . . . The way we live and comport ourselves may someday affect the way the [Nisei] are treated in this country” (69). Despite their efforts to acculturate and the absence of evidence against them, the all-white “jury” that is political authority and community opinion finds them guilty. Hana, who had built strong relationships with her Japanese-American neighbors, survives her internment experience by remaining close to them. Her husband, however, does not enter the camp with the same sense of community, and late one night the guards thoughtlessly murder him, mistaking his leisurely stroll for an escape attempt.

Internment literature often includes praise for the strong sense of community in the camps, which helps internees survive the loneliness, indignity, and hopelessness of an unjust imprisonment. The firsthand accounts of actual experiences in the camps put a human face on an abstract social problem and contradicted the propaganda being published at the time that portrayed the internees as evil and the camps as humane and comfortable. These stories are filled with accounts of inadequate food and substandard housing leading to
demoralization, depression, disease, and death. A lack of privacy, armed guards, barbed wire, broken sewer pipes, and physical and psychological abuse caused everyone to feel “bewildered and humiliated” (Okubo 62), and community building was not easy. Michiko Mizumoto writes that many internees were inactive because they felt “Tired. / Bewildered. / Embittered” (223). Uchida describes the horror of moving from a comfortable, middle-class home to the barracks at the Tanforan Assembly Center, a converted racetrack:

Four months have passed,
And at last I learn
To call this horse stall
My family’s home. (qtd. in Tunnell and Chilcoat 12)

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston writes that the camp experience forever divided her family, all of whom avoided being “home” while living in the camp and even after leaving it.

However, many families and communities did work together to survive the severe physical and emotional trauma of the camps. Charles Kikuchi writes, “The whole family pitched in to build our new home at Tanforan” (53), and Uchida writes in Invisible Thread that many adults did what they could to boost morale, such as initiating “constructive activities to fill the long empty hours of each day” (83). Organizing democratic camp communities helped some Japanese-Americans maintain their dignity and demonstrate their loyalty to “American” values and institutions. The internees’ ability to reconstruct “American” communities in the camps caused the authorities to allow limited self-government, self-policing, and consumer cooperatives (Taylor 70). Many authors detail their cooperation and industriousness with pride, and Uchida and Sone both write that their supportive, cooperative community at Topaz showed the world they were civilized, honorable human beings who believed in representative democracy and capitalism. Richard Nishimoto’s autobiography details his work as a block leader and foreman of a work crew while in the Poston camp. He obeyed the government’s edicts because being able to work was essential in “maintaining morale” (41) and ensuring self-respect.

Uchida explains that she organized camp schools to give normalcy and structure to the frightened and confused children. She writes: “the children wanted to be in school. They were longing for a normal routine and needed school to give them a sense of security and order that had been snatched from them so abruptly” (Invisible Thread 83–84). In addition, Houston writes about inmates beautifying their communities by making furniture and tending gardens. Morale increased when people could go to jobs, church services, libraries, post offices, adult classes, dances, and holiday celebrations, which were often organized and run by the internees themselves. Ken Mochizuki shows in Baseball Saved Us that sports also helped children maintain a sense of joy and hope.

These stories describe what the internees actually experienced and felt, contradicting the propaganda that helped a nation rationalize the internment
policy. Kikuchi describes a letter he received while in a camp from a close friend who assured him life at a concentration camp was better than facing rationing, being afraid of foreign invasion, and having friends dying overseas. Kikuchi refutes this claim, detailing the restrictions and hardships he faced, particularly his loss of liberty and selfhood. Uchida writes in *Invisible Thread:* “I saw that a Nisei classmate had won the University Medal for highest scholastic achievement in our graduating class. The president explained that the winner of the medal was unable to attend the ceremonies because ‘his country had called him elsewhere’” (85). Bitter at the hypocrisy of such euphemisms, Uchida was one of many that satirized the wartime propaganda.

Nevertheless, Uchida and other authors maintained the hope that white America would eventually overcome its prejudice and accept Japanese-Americans into the larger community. Writing during the war, Lillian Ota urged Nisei internees to remain loyal so they would be released, go to college, and make positive contributions to American society. Ota argues that obeying the rules of Anglo-American society would help destroy the stereotypes that caused internment. The camps’ schools taught democratic principles and cultural pluralism, showing that the inmates could be trusted to re-integrate successfully into American society. Kay Masuda’s “Evacuee” pledges support to her “father,” meaning President Roosevelt, and urges other internees to remain loyal (qtd. in Hosokawa 118). Years after the war, Mabel Ota remembers, “I didn’t become bitter. I guess we learn to roll with the punches. . . . I guess we thought we should still be loyal and show that we are loyal by obeying” (174). These authors write that by maintaining “a barbed-wire democracy, a community under guard” (Taylor 112), they could prove their loyalty and end both physical and attitudinal barriers.

**“That Damned Fence”**

Although most authors of young adult literature tried to soften the barbed-wire attitudes by showing how loyal and American the internees were, a few joined the militant adult writers who attacked the attitudinal walls directly through protest literature. Arguing that the conservative, model “communities” within the camps legitimized the internment policy and perpetuated the stereotypes of Japanese-American complaisance and deference, the activist-authors refused to obey either an unconstitutional, unnecessary policy or its administrators. Minoru Kiyota, for example, rejected the false sense of community at the Topaz camp. He writes of being incensed when his high school teacher called him a “fascist” for questioning internment and insisting that “The imprisonment of Japanese Americans is a part of American history” (78). He and other activists soon held meetings and organized protests, which caused those within the community who proudly pledged their loyalty to criticize him. However, he accepted social isolation and continued to protest, writing, “I began to see the loyalty question as my only opportunity to take a stand against oppressive
government authority. I decided that I would no longer allow myself to be led around by the nose doing as I was told by the U.S. government” (101). Refusing to remain silent, Kiyota and many others spoke out and publicly demonstrated against the humiliating and inhuman treatment they received.

Authors of young adult fiction used the internment experience to raise awareness of America’s larger problem: social racism and institutional discrimination. For example, Sone’s protagonist loses faith in America’s ideals while behind barbed wire, causing her to ask, “Why, why did our government imprison us?” (199). Even Uchida’s optimism wanes during her confinement, causing her to demand an answer to the question, “How could America—our own country—have done this to us?” (Invisible Thread 79). Awareness of the larger social issues caused a number of authors to draw connections between their situation and that of Native Americans, who also were considered a threat to Anglo-American communities, branded as culturally inferior, forced to leave their homes, and relocated onto reservations in the Southwest and Northwest. Elaine Yoneda, who was interned with her husband and son at Manzanar, explains the connection to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians: “Though [my husband and I] were aware the impending ‘evacuation’ was a violation of constitutional and human rights, we also knew that if it suited the ruling U.S. leaders, they would use the Armed Services and their guns without hesitation to round up all those of Japanese descent, as was done to the Native Americans after passage of the 1830 Indian Removal Act” (156). Through this comparison to another dark chapter of America’s past, Yoneda publicly criticized the government for its arbitrary and racist use of power to deny Japanese-American citizens, including her husband and son, their civil rights.

Several other Japanese-American authors have used the Native Americans’ history of enduring hardship to inspire their readers. The implication is that both groups are made up of strong people who have built good family and community relationships and have vibrant cultures to which they can cling. Kiyoaki Murata writes that because the Poston camp shared land with a Native American reservation, the internees learned that dedicated people and a strong community could survive relocation (110). Patrick Nagatani, whose parents spent the war in several camps, expresses his appreciation for Native American wisdom in his “Artist’s Statement” to Virtual Pilgrimage, which includes a long quote from Native American author N. Scott Momaday that explains the value of cooperation and honoring one’s heritage (5). In The Moved-Outers Sue laments having to leave her home for a camp. She states, “This’ll be our Trail of Tears” (Means 30), noticing the irony that the Arizona internment camp to which the army and the government are marching her is located on a reservation. However, throughout their difficult ordeal, Sue’s family retains their human dignity and cultural identity.

Marlene Shigekawa’s picture book Blue Jay in the Desert also indicates that Native Americans and Japanese-Americans have survived similar humiliating
and dehumanizing experiences with their dignity and self-identity intact. The protagonist, a young boy interned at Poston, misses his home in California and complains about the Arizona dust storms, the barbed wire, the armed soldiers, and the mess hall’s long lines. The boy learns about his culture from his grandfather and others in the community, which brings all of them closer. A Mojave “neighbor” visits the camp and shares some corn seed with the internees. His presence clarifies the significance of a blue jay the boy’s grandfather carves for him. The grandfather associates the visitor’s situation with their own, stating that like the blue jay both peoples are loyal and brave survivors who do not forget their identity or heritage. Similar to the dreams or visions of a Native American shaman, the boy dreams that the blue jay carries him home to California.

Another issue raised by authors was the government’s 1943 loyalty questionnaire. Among other questions, the questionnaire asked male internees to volunteer for military service and asked all internees to forswear their Japanese citizenship and swear unqualified allegiance to the United States. Some saw the questionnaire as a chance to prove their loyalty and answered “yes, yes” to these questions without a second thought. Others, however, choose to answer “no, no” in protest. Houston writes that the issue angered and depressed her father, who felt the government should not force him to deny his heritage and homeland without giving him citizenship, civil rights, or even freedom (78). John Okada’s 1957 novel *No-No Boy* explores how the loyalty question split families within the camps, and how after the war Japanese-Americans attempting to re-integrate into mainstream communities criticized and alienated the “no-no” boy for implicating them in his “disloyalty” (60).

Militants in every camp disrupted the “communities” by engaging in demonstrations, strikes, and riots, and several authors defended the protestors. One anonymous *Nisei* poet defended activism, writing in “That Damned Fence” that no one should accept being “trapped like rats in a wired cage” (Bailey 114). In an effort to avoid further disruption within the camps, the U.S. government redistributed the prisoners in 1943. The “loyal” internees remained in their camps, while the “disloyal” element, members of pro-Japan movements and those who answered “no, no” on their loyalty questionnaires, were moved to Tule Lake or one of the Justice Department camps. However, authors writing in the camps and after the war were not deterred by American society’s attempts to separate militants from the rest of the community. Even after Violet de Cristofo (Kazue Yamane) was moved to the Tule Lake camp for writing protest poetry, she continued to write for all ages. Her prose poem “Dandelions” compares crushed dandelions in the camp to “the downtrodden internees [who] had been trampled under foot by circumstances” (326). She wanted her readers to know that for her and other internees, “each day [at the camp] was a reminder of the humiliating and oppressive existence we were forced to endure.” The one perfect dandelion she finds gives her the determination to endure and survive. The strong images and raw feelings in
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these protest poems express both the pain of the “inmates” and their refusal to accept imprisonment silently.

Many others wrote about the confusion and anger within the camp communities. In Toshio Mori’s short story “One Happy Family,” the protagonist, a young boy, is told by his mother not to be bitter when the FBI arrests his father because “America is for us plain people. Believe in America” (254). However, the reader is meant to see the hollowness of this slogan, since the family is anything but happy and the story ends with the boy and his mother sobbing, unable to comfort each other. Mitsuye Yamada’s poetry illustrates the horrors of life at the Minidoka camp and urges readers to oppose racism, injustice, and hypocrisy. In “On the Bus” and “Harmony at the Fair Grounds,” she notes the irony of the inharmonious experience of life at Camp Harmony. “Recruiting Team” exposes the irony of internees being asked to volunteer for military service, and “Curfew” uses the metaphor of a blackout to show how racism and war hysteria caused unenlightened decision making. “Block 4 Barrack 4 ‘Apt. C’” includes man-eating sagebrush, which satirizes the government’s claim that the Japanese-Americans were in camps for their own protection. And “In the Outhouse” shows internees drowning in excrement and blood because of improperly dug latrines and the government’s inhuman internment policy.

“The blinders were off”

When the war ended, the camps disappeared from the landscape, but many of the old prejudices against Japanese-Americans remained. Returnees were “terrorized” (Harvey 190) and driven out of the West Coast communities they formerly called home by hate groups. Others had to move into slum housing because state-sanctioned discrimination kept them from obtaining jobs. A few even refused to leave the camps. The “stand-patters”—the ill, the elderly, and the demoralized—preferred the stability of the camp communities to American society (Smith 372). Okubo writes about her concerns about the Issei stand-patters at Topaz: “My god! How do they expect those poor people to leave the one place they can call home” (209). Nishimoto writes that he helped organize the All Center Conference to discuss this situation and send letters to Director Myer asking that Issei get additional assistance for integrating back into American society.

After leaving the camps, many Issei and Nisei desperately wanted to forget their imprisonment and re-acculturate into Anglo-American society, so they did not protest the resumption of their second-class status. Otsuka explains that many of those who returned “home” were still confined due to feeling guilty and ashamed at being “the face of the enemy” (120). Otsuka compared their release from the camps to the release of a convicted criminal—both receive twenty-five dollars, a train ticket, and the lifelong role of unwanted outsider. Society’s invisible wall of prejudice remained, and it even intensified during the wars in Korea and Vietnam; however the 1960s also brought protest literature, in particular the demand for a truly democratic and multicultural sense of
community in America. Otsuka writes that after years of swallowing insults and seeing her educated parents work as manual laborers, she wrote to protest social injustice, exposing the hypocrisy in postwar America. In the last pages of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, she satirically “accepts” blame for her people’s supposed treason: “I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. . . . I’m sorry. Now can I go?” (140–44). Otsuka’s bitterness shows that the pain of the internment experience did not end when the walls came down; it was buried deep in the hearts of many Japanese-Americans, and a public expression of this bitterness continues to be necessary for families to heal and for societal attitudes to change.

Other former internees who have been denied space in the American community recently have criticized the Anglo-Americans who did nothing to remove racial barriers. Uchida’s *Journey Home* presents both negative and positive role models for her postwar Anglo-American readers. Her protagonist, Yuki, returns to California from Topaz intending to be a good, loyal American citizen, but one man burns down her family’s store and home, and a blond woman spits at Yuki: “Go back where you belong, you damn Jap” (43). Uchida shows that prejudice continues to exist after the war and that Anglo-Americans have a choice. The Olssens, Yuki’s neighbors, lost their son in the war, but they befriend and help Yuki’s family. The story humanizes Yuki’s family, which includes a white-hating uncle, and the Olssens. It encourages both races to change their feelings of hate and mistrust to build an integrated community.

The most important audience of this literature is the young *Sansei*, who grew up after the war and knew little about the camps because of government propaganda and family/community silence. The authors take the responsibility of community building by reconnecting the *Sansei* to their *Issei* and *Nisei* relatives. They teach the *Sansei* why former internees felt it necessary to separate themselves from America’s wartime enemy by Anglicizing their names, Americanizing their activities, and denying their internment experience. They also inform the former internees that this strategy to integrate into the dominant society is self-destructive and has been ultimately ineffective against the walls of racial ignorance and prejudice.

Uchida, for example, wanted to connect the generations to each other and their Japanese-ness in order to break down barriers of silence and shame within her own community. Not only does she continually return to the camp in her writing, but she also describes visiting Japan. In the epilogue to *The Invisible Thread*, Uchida writes that after the war her search for a sense of Japanese-ness was difficult but worthwhile. She explains that when she and her family visited Japan before the war, she only wanted to return “home” to America. However, after the war, she visited Japan again and had a much different reaction:

> It was a long time before I understood who I really was. But a trip to Japan on a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1952 began to turn things around for me. . . . This time the blinders were off. I saw Japan in a new light and found the extraordinary beauty and richness of its life and art totally breathtaking. . . .
Slowly, I realized that everything I admired and loved about Japan was a part of me. It always had been. My parents had been giving it to me, like a gift, every day of my life.

In my eagerness to be accepted as an American during my youth, I had been pushing my Japaneseness aside. Now at last, I appreciated it and was proud of it. I have finally come full circle. (130–31)

Uchida explains that because of her internment and self-awakening, she gained a “sense of pride and self-esteem” (131) that she wants to pass on to her Nisei and Sansei readers. Many of her books introduce her readers to Japanese customs and folk stories. In The Wise Old Woman, Rokubei and the Thousand Rice Bowls, The Magic Listening Cap: More Folk Tales from Japan, The Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales, and Samurai of Gold Hill, Uchida hopes to demolish stereotypes and teach “the young Sansei a sense of community and knowledge of their own remarkable history” (Invisible Thread 131). Other young adult books that encourage Sansei readers to overcome racism and discover their heritage include Maureen Wartski’s Candle in the Wind, Jean Okimoto’s Talent Night, Irwin Hadley’s Kim/Kimi, and Lauren Kessler’s Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family. Photographic storyteller Patrick Nagatani, a Sansei himself, writes that shame and guilt stopped his parents from talking about their experience; therefore, he documents his visit to the site of his parents’ internment camp in order to experience personal healing and inspire cultural awareness that builds stronger relationships between Sansei and their parents and grandparents.

Patricia Wakida writes that the reason internment literature must be written “is not just to explore history, but to use that exploration to understand more deeply the consequences of racial prejudice, to confront more fully the harm that it does and the strengths that it calls forth, and by increasing intellectual and emotional awareness, to help ensure that such events cannot occur again” (xiv). Many Nisei authors write about their childhood internment experiences to expose and explode their own community’s silent self-hate and cultural self-denial. Yamada suggests in “Thirty Years Under” that she may have been helpless to avoid being spat on like a dog just after the war, but thirty years later she publicly expresses her humiliation and anger as a means of fighting for her dignity and selfhood. Houston writes in Farewell to Manzanar about being unable to talk about her feelings of shame and worthlessness for decades as she tried to disconnect from her Japanese-ness and assimilate into mainstream society. She writes that eventually she had to face her pain and shame, which caused her to learn to celebrate her Japanese selfhood. Janice Mirikitani’s poem “Desert Flowers” suggests that beautiful Nisei “flowers” grew tall and strong even though the only water they received came from their mothers’ tears and the spit of statements like “america for americans” and “no japs wanted here” (128).

Even after relocating and raising families across the United States, Japanese-American internment authors argue that they must transport their readers to the Southwest (particularly to New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada,
and eastern California) where the camps were located. They force readers of all races to face the pain of the past and to accept the Japanese-Americans and their culture in order to address the long-hidden issues of discrimination and self-hatred. Wendy Ng argues that the “Japanese-American community has survived because it has been able to retain the memory of the camp experience” (112). Bill Hosokawa suggests that reliving and documenting his experience has helped him rediscover his “Japaneseness” (147). Lawson Fusao Inada identifies the memory of the internees being evacuated and imprisoned as an example of their character, unity, and determination: “Only what we could carry was the rule; so we carried Strength, Dignity, and Soul” (xvii). Uchida revisits the pain and frustration of her internment experience in her writing so she can express a sense of hope for the future of American society and her own community. Her protagonist in Picture Bride embodies the Japanese-Americans’ community spirit and survivor mentality. Hana is bitter but not destroyed; she has the “dignity and strength” (214) of a survivor and a true American citizen.

Poet Ann Muto visited Tule Lake, where her parents were interned, hoping to heal the scars that remain within the psyche of her family and community, but she had to face the reality that her parents “died silent / their stories untold” (106). Similarly, poet Koiho Soga wondered:

When the war is over
And after we are gone
Who will visit
This lonely grave in the wild
Where my friend lies buried? (Poets Behind 64)

The answer to Soga’s question is that each new generation who reads internment literature visits her friend’s grave and learns to honor her sacrifice, which was not made in vain. Uchida and many other authors broke the silence and told the untold stories. They presented and analyzed the internment experience to teach all Americans to destroy social barriers, stand up to ignorance and intolerance, and build inclusive, multicultural communities.

Notes

1. King-Kok Cheung writes that internment (1942–1945) resulted from nationwide wartime hysteria and racial prejudice, and "FBI director J. Edgar Hoover himself noted, at the time, that the claim of military necessity for mass evacuation was based ‘primarily upon public and political pressure rather than on factual data’" (117). W. E. B. Du Bois criticized internment in “As the Crow Flies,” calling the Native Sons of the Golden West a dangerously influential racist organization that included prominent politicians and businessmen as members: “[They] are the real force behind the [evacuation] movement in California. They have a membership of 25,000 and are not merely anti-Japanese, but anti-Oriental, anti-Mexican and anti-Negro” (284).
2. Many historians have made this point, including Allan Bosworth in his dedication to *America's Concentration Camps*: “To the past and present members of the Japanese American Citizens League. Through precept and example and their wholehearted devotion to an ideal, they could teach other Americans a great deal about Americanism.”

3. Japanese-American activist work climaxed with the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which forced the U.S. government to stop calling internment a “wartime necessity,” apologize, and provide financial redress to the survivors and their families. See William Hohri’s afterword to *Only What We Could Carry*, Robert Shimabukuro’s *Born in Seattle*, and Maki, Kitano, and Berthold’s *Achieving the Impossible Dream*.

4. W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American author and activist, introduced the concept of *double consciousness* in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

5. Ishmael Reed explains the important role minority voices play in creating a multicultural American society: “When African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans write, they’re not just engaged in a parlor exercise—they are writing for their lives. . . . And once these voices have been heard, there is no turning back” (xi).

6. In Leslie Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, her Native American protagonist Tayo refuses to execute Japanese soldiers during World War II because he sees the face of his beloved uncle Josiah in the face of one of the soldiers. In California after the war, he sees the face of his beloved cousin Rocky, who was killed in the war, in the face of a Japanese-American child returning from an internment camp. The depressing connection between the two cultures and their experiences sickens him physically and spiritually. Healing for Tayo and the world is impossible until he builds a true sense of community, self-awareness, and multiculturalism.

7. San Francisco’s mayor James D. Phelan declared in 1900: “[The Japanese] are not the stuff of which American citizens are made” (Kikuchi 4). *Issei* could not become naturalized citizens, and California’s 1913 Alien Land Law denied them land ownership. The government limited immigration from Japan and relegated Japanese-Americans to second-class status with legislation like the 1907 “Gentlemen’s Agreement” and the 1924 National Origins Act.

8. Kiyota describes living in a “Japan Town” in San Francisco, which included dilapidated tenements and a racist landlord who threatens his mother and shouts at her: “You dirty Jap!” (8).


10. While Uchida describes the destruction of interracial friendships between young girls from the Japanese-American perspective, Marcia Savin describes it from the Anglo-American perspective in her 1992 young adult novel *Moon Bridge*.

11. This incident was based on the murder of Hatsuaki Wakasa at Topaz in 1943. Similar incidents occurred at other camps, such as the shooting of two prisoners at Lordsburg, New Mexico, in 1942, which caused demonstrations and riots (Culley 225). Tetsuden Kashima writes that few internees reported the regular incidents of physical and psychological abuse. In fact, every one of the seven cases of guards killing internees ended in acquittal.
12. Politicians called internees “scheming enemies,” and newspapers reported that they enjoyed “luxury food” in the camps while “Americans starve[.]” (Means 88). Lawson Fusao Inada writes that several political cartoons and Superman comic strips portray the camps as filled with benevolent guards and treacherous, traitorous inmates.

13. Many internees expressed their loyalty to the United States. Uchida defended her own Americanism and noted the irony of the many Japanese-Americans who volunteered for military service (often placed in segregated units while their families remained in the camps). Some Issei and Nisei moved to Japan after the war, but most remained.

14. Not only did President Roosevelt sign the evacuation and internment order, but he actually closed the camps a year later than necessary as a political move, fearing he might lose votes from West Coast Anglo-Americans in the 1944 election (Hosokawa 128).

15. This association is underscored further by administrative connections between the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the War Relocation Authority (WRA). Paul Bailey writes that several officials transferred from the BIA to the WRA to help organize the evacuation and govern the camps. The BIA itself operated the Poston camp, located on reservation land. The Granada camp in Colorado was called “Amache” after the daughter of a Cheyenne chief whose tribe had lived in the region (Matsumoto 125). Furthermore, when WRA director Dillon Myer, who would become the head of the BIA in 1947, visited the Topaz camp in 1943, a group of Issei and Nisei inmates held a sign that read: “Welcome Dillon S. Myer, the Great White Father” (Taylor 207). Regardless of whether the sign was purposefully satirical or was evidence of the internees’ dependence on governmental paternalism and their self-hatred, the connection between their situation and that of the Native Americans is clear.

16. Ronald Takaki writes that of the 21,000 Nisei men eligible to serve during the war, about 4,600 answered “no, no” to these questions (397). They were put in Justice Department camps, and some were charged with “draft evasion.”

17. Stirring protest haikus were also written by Neiji Ozawa: “Desert rain falling / spitting blood / then fall asleep”; and Shiho Okamoto: “In the shade of summer sun / guard tapping rock / with club” (Wakida 178).

18. The Native Sons, the Japanese Exclusion League, and other racist groups made returning difficult, as did a new California law prohibiting Japanese-language schools and local authorities turning a blind eye to housing and employment discrimination.

Works Cited


