Hard History: Teaching the Japanese American Experience in American Concentration Camps

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ABSTRACT

How should “hard history” be confronted to understand the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II? This article shares a way of teaching this topic that not only confronts directly the real experiences of Japanese Americans in concentration camps but also humanizes the story. Encouraging students to learn the history experientially, the author uses two different sets of historical primary sources, offering both an “outsider” and “insider” perspective. First, the author explains that he focuses on the biographies and objectives of different photographers who took photos at Manzanar, highlighting how this context helps illuminate students’ perceptions and understanding of these photographs, revealing a larger story about the experience of Japanese Americans. Second, he describes how he incorporates the diary of Stanley Hayami, a Japanese American teenager interned at Heart Mountain who used his diary to retain agency within an oppressive system. Through an analysis of the diary with students, the author demonstrates how this diary captures the complexity of the Japanese American experience in American concentration camps.
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Fresno Pacific University offers an entire online course titled Japanese Internment Camps: Pearl Harbor - Post Release. Consisting of six modules, in this “self-paced” online course, students have up to one year to complete the course requirements to receive three college credits. In a course such as this, we would expect that students will come away with a thorough understanding of what is a very difficult and complex subject matter. Most students, however, will not have the opportunity to learn about the internment of Japanese Americans in this fashion. In middle school and high school, although generally part of the curriculum in many states for required American history courses, teachers may spend at most a few days on the topic. Many may spend just one day. Some may not discuss it at all. At the collegiate level, the topic could be included in courses on twentieth-century America, American immigration history, the history of Asian Americans, and the history of World War II, to give just a few examples. Instructors may dedicate one class session, or a few class sessions, to the topic. But how can they address this important and complex topic in such a limited amount of time, especially when there is so much complexity, and so much rich material, that an entire course could focus on it?

This question becomes even more pertinent when considering scholar of religion Richard Hughes’s editorial published in the Los Angeles Times in 2021. When teaching a college course for first-year students in an honors program, Hughes asked the students what they knew about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Their response shocked him. They knew nothing. Hughes uses this personal example for his argument, that part of the problem with the racial divisions in our country is that Americans do not know their own history. While no doubt there are many historical topics students learn in high school but do not remember learning, Hughes’s article speaks to what it means if the history students learn does not have any long-term impact. Specifically, Hughes’s argument reveals that although public schools across the country technically include the internment of Japanese Americans in their curriculum, even high-caliber students are arriving in college with little or no memory of learning about the subject and certainly lack an understanding of it that can inform them about decisions they will make as adults.

The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II is a historical subject that we may describe as “hard history” because it does not fit into any popular grand narrative of the United States becoming more democratic over time. Nor does it fit into stories about America during World War II that is popularly known as the “Greatest Generation.” The term “hard history” was used in a 2018 report produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center about the teaching of American slavery in schools throughout the United States. Titled Teaching Hard History: American Slavery, the report highlighted how educators were avoiding the topic of slavery or minimizing it in classrooms because it is so difficult to talk about. Historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries, who chaired the Teaching Hard History Advisory Board, emphasized in the preface that while the “hard history” of slavery makes people “uncomfortable” because of the “implications it raises about the past as well as the present,” by not confronting this history, we as a society...
are minimizing the impact of slavery. Most profoundly, this has implications for public policy that ignores “racialized systems.” Central for Jeffries, and those behind the report, is that an understanding of slavery’s history helps us understand inequities that exist today.4

Hughes’s article suggests that slavery is not the only topic in US history not being taught in America’s schools: the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II is also “hard history” that American students are not learning by the time they graduate from high school. Acknowledging that this subject is complex and difficult to teach, and that teachers face time constrictions, what can high school teachers do to ensure that when students graduate from high school they understand the experience of Japanese Americans during World War II? What can college professors do when they teach about the internment of Japanese Americans, knowing the limitations in their students’ education that Hughes identifies?

With these questions in mind, I offer an approach to teaching the history of the Japanese internment during World War II that can be completed in one or two class sessions, addresses the complexity of the subject, and is designed to have a lasting impact on students. The pedagogy is in the form of an “active lecture,” one that is highly interactive with students.5 While what is presented here is intended for those with time constrictions, it can also provide the foundation for more in-depth lesson plans over multiple class sessions.

To begin with, in my courses, I have given my unit on the subject of the internment of Japanese Americans an intentionally provocative title: “The American Concentration Camps.” For many students, the term “concentration camps” is a reference to the Holocaust and is not something they associate with the United States. In this way, the title opens up a space to have a discussion about language: specifically, why we are using the term “American concentration camps” instead of “Japanese internment.” I explain to students that the term was used in a 1998 joint statement by the Japanese American National Museum and the American Jewish Committee. Both organizations agreed the term was appropriate because of their definition of a “concentration camp,” which I share with students: “a place where people are imprisoned not because of any crimes they have committed, but simply because of who they are.”6 I stress to students how important it is to understand why we will use the term “American concentration camps” in the course, that the word “American” is used because it happened here in America, and it happened to Americans. If we call the topic “Japanese internment camps,” then the assumption is that this experience happened to someone else, to a group who was not American.

Using the term “American concentration camps” also enables me to provide a framework for challenging students’ conceptions of the Japanese American experience during World War II. The work of Ken Bain, president of the Best Teachers Institute, has particularly influenced me in this regard. New frameworks, he demonstrates, enable teachers to “transform” students’ “conceptual understanding” of the topic they are learning about. Students learn when their own ideas on a subject are challenged and are simultaneously provided with a new model for understanding it.7 In my approach, the concept “American concentration camp” frames the lesson and is wovened consistently throughout the lesson to reinforce the concept.

After making introductory remarks, my “active lecture” focuses on a series of primary sources
that include a cartoon, photographs of the camps and the people who lived in them, and the full
texts of diary entries from a high school student who lived in one of the camps. These primary
sources are meant to create a connection to the past for students, to help students imagine the
experience Japanese Americans had living in concentration camps. Research has shown that
engaging students with primary sources helps in the development of history cognition. These
primary sources are also intended to create historical empathy. Visual images, especially those
that illicit an emotional response, have also been shown to be effective in terms of learning and
remembering historical material.

After explaining my use of “American concentration camps,” I display Ansel Adams’s 1943
photograph "Baseball Game at Manzanar.” I purposely display the photograph with no title and
no attribution. My intention is to establish what may at first appear to be a visual contrast to the
term "concentration camp.” I ask students what they see as they examine the photograph. In the
context of our discussion of the term “American concentration camps,” most find the photograph
quite jarring. They see men playing baseball. They are not sure what to make of it. I suggest
to students that a photograph such as this could be seen as a snapshot into history—that it
could be seen as “something whole, something that speaks for itself”—and could be seen as
“presenting the truth” of a historical moment.” But does it? I ask. I prompt students to consider
whether this particular photograph supports or contradicts the term “concentration camp.”
Students generally reply quite quickly that it contradicts the term. I explain that without any
context, it is very easy to see how the photograph contradicts our use of the term “concentration
camp.” My goal is to show the importance of contextualizing primary sources; when we do so,
we begin to do the work of historians and get a deeper understanding of history. And when we
contextualize the photograph "Baseball Game at Manzanar,” we will see it as actually supporting
the concept “American concentration camp.” This last point is crucial. My objectives are for
students to understand the Japanese American experience in concentration camps and to learn
the importance of contextualizing primary sources.

Figure 1: Ansel Adams, "Baseball Game, Manzanar Relocation Center, Calif." Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division, Ansel Adams Manzanar War Relocation Center Photographs.

8. Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in
Knowing, Teaching & Learning History: National and International Perspectives, ed. Peter N. Stearns,
this specific lesson plan over several years. I was first inspired to use photographs after hearing
an NPR review of a photography exhibit at the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles: Adrian Florido,
"Photos: 3 Different Views of Japanese Internment," Code Switch, All Things Considered,


10. Chad Berry, Lori A. Schmied, and Joseph Chad Schrock, "The Role of Emotion in Teaching and
Learning History: A Scholarship of Teaching Exploration," History Teacher 41, no. 4 (August 2008):
437–52.

11. For more on problems with viewing historical photographs without any context, see Jennifer
McFarlane-Harris, review of Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body, by Cassandra
Ward Williams and Carrie Mae Weems," streamed on December 4, 2008, YouTube video, 9:10,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beHC3kx0Ks0.
Students do need to have some background for the Japanese American experience prior to World War II. Prior to the first class session on the topic, students are expected to explore on their own the online digital source Densho (www.densho.org), which provides an excellent overview of the Japanese American experience prior to and during World War II. To ensure students understand the historical context, I review the push and pull factors that brought Japanese immigrants to the United States, the segregation they faced in cities like Seattle, and the legal barriers they experienced, particularly with the 1913 California Alien Land Act and the 1924 Immigration Act. Despite their challenges, many Japanese Americans were able to thrive in the United States.

It is essential to explain to students the distinction between the Japanese term *Issei*, which refers to Japanese immigrants, and *Nissei*, which refers to people of Japanese ancestry born in the United States. Since Nissei were born in the United States, because of the Fourteenth Amendment, they were US citizens at birth. In contrast, Issei could never become American citizens because of a 1790 immigration law that declared, to qualify for citizenship, immigrants had to be white. It was only after World War II that this law was changed. I emphasize to students that both Issei and Nissei were forced into American concentration camps, and thus American citizens (Nissei), as well as legal immigrants (Issei), were in camps.\(^\text{13}\)

With this context in mind, to understand the dire consequences the attack on Pearl Harbor had on Japanese Americans, I display a cartoon titled "Waiting for the Signal from Home" that was published in the national magazine *PM*, February 13, 1942. The cartoon includes a house full of TNT with a sign "Honorable Fifth Column" and a figure out front handing out TNT to a long line of men with caricature faces of people of Asian descent. After asking students to describe what they see, I ask them to convey what they think the message of the cartoon might be. Students begin to understand that the cartoonist made no distinction between the Issei and the Nissei, that all Japanese living in the United States were being portrayed as enemies. Then I ask students if they can identify the cartoonist. It takes some effort when projected onto a screen, but eventually they discover at the bottom the signature of Dr. Seuss. This provides an opportunity to discuss with students what it means that this iconic children’s author created a piece of anti-Japanese propaganda. I also discuss with students how the anti-Japanese attitude among many living in the western United States was a central reason that President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided in February 1942 to issue Executive Order 9066 that dictated that Japanese Americans be placed in concentration camps.
To help students understand what it was like to arrive at one of these camps, I present Sally Deng’s drawing that appeared with George Takei’s 2017 *New York Times* opinion piece titled “Internment: America’s Great Mistake.” In the drawing, the viewer sees only the backs of a family carrying suitcases, who face two guards with guns, three barracks, and mountains. The scene is bleak. I ask students to consider what the family might be thinking in that moment. My goal is to spark their historical imagination and move beyond the numbers I share with them: more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were placed in camps. Through this drawing, and their own imagination, I want students to consider what it meant, what it felt like, for every family the moment they arrived.

I then pose two central questions to students: How did Japanese Americans experience concentration camps? How should we confront our “hard history” to understand the incarceration of Japanese Americans? These central questions, I explain, will serve as guiding questions for the remainder of our unit.

At this point, I display again Adams’s 1943 photograph “Baseball Game at Manzanar,” only this time I include the title and attribution. I give background information on Adams, explaining that he was a famous environmental photographer at the time who was personally distressed when he learned about Japanese Americans being placed in concentration camps. He requested permission to visit one of the camps, Manzanar, for the purpose of photographing the camp. His request was approved on the condition that he not take photographs of barbed wires or guard towers. The photos were exhibited in 1944 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and published that same year in a book titled *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans.* This context provides an opportunity to analyze the photograph from a different perspective. Students now examine the photograph again and are asked to explain how it fits into a narrative suggested by Adams’s book title. Adams’s purpose, as his book title indicates, was to
portray the Japanese at Manzanar as Americans and as strong people. What happens when we look at the photograph through the lens of Adams’s book title? The historical context, along with the photographer’s purpose, enables students to view the photograph differently. As we continue to discuss the photograph, students begin to see that Adams was trying to show that the people living in these concentration camps were “American.” These types of moments, I have found, light a fire for students, a fire that produces sustaining energy for the remainder of the class session.

I introduce students to another well-known photographer who took photographs at Manzanar, Dorothea Lange. She gained national attention during the Great Depression as a documentary photographer when she took photographs around California. Federal government agencies hired her to visually document struggling farmers and the unemployed with the goal of raising awareness to the plight of those hit hardest by the spiraling economy. During World War II, the War Relocation Authority assigned Lange to document life at Manzanar—even though she opposed the internment policy being operated by the US government. It is important to explain to students that Lange’s objectives were different from Adams; she wanted to capture the misery of the experience to create outrage. Unfortunately, the government refused to publish or exhibit her photos. It was not until 1972 that the California Historical Society exhibited Lange’s photographs of Manzanar. I display a photograph titled “A Japanese Woman in the Door of Her Living Quarters.” In the photograph, we see a Japanese woman, looking forlorn, standing in front a simple wooden structure with the door open, and broken wood panels under her feet. After asking students to describe what they see, I ask them to consider what this photograph reveals about life in concentration camps for Japanese Americans. We move from seeing the internees at Manzanar as “American” to examine the misery of the conditions they lived in. The goal here is to visually illustrate that while the photographs of Adams and Lange offer different perspectives of Manzanar, they complement each other to tell a larger story: Americans were forced by their government into miserable conditions.

Figure 3: Dorthea Lange, “A Japanese woman in the door of her living quarters in San Bruno, Calif.” Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
Finally, I offer students another perspective using photography when I introduce students to Toyo Miyatake, a Japanese American photographer who was interned at Manzanar. Miyatake was a professional photographer who had a studio in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. Part of the pictorialist movement that focused on tonality and composition, he was an award-winning photographer before being forcibly relocated to Manzanar. Dedicated to his craft and determined to document the camp experience, Miyatake smuggled in a lens, film plate, and film. Once inside Manzanar, he asked a carpenter to build a box for him to hold the lens. Initially, he secretly took photographs, but over time he gained permission. Significantly, the permission was conditional; so as not to go against camp rules, a white person had to actually snap the photograph. Meanwhile, he befriended Adams when he visited Manzanar, and the two men later, in 1978, published a book of photographs titled *Two Views of Manzanar*. Miyatake’s photographs are extremely important because they offer an insider’s view of Manzanar, from an actual internee.17

As a class, we focus closely on Miyatake’s photograph titled “Boys behind Barbed Wire.” The photograph is of Miyatake’s son and two of his son’s friends looking longingly from behind the barbed wire of the Manzanar camp. Students immediately notice that despite the rules that were given to Adams, the barbed wire sits directly in front of the boys, and a guard station looms ominously to the right of the boys, with beautiful snow-capped mountains behind them, conveying an interesting juxtaposition. The barbed wire and guard towers are indicators of a rebelliousness in Miyatake’s photographs. He is portraying children looking out, wanting to be somewhere else. The boys look sad, like the woman in Lange’s photograph, but they have hope for another world. But the barbed wire and the guard tower are symbolic and physical reminders that the three children are trapped in this concentration camp.

![Figure 4: Toto Miyatake, “Boys Behind Barbed Wire,” 1944. Courtesy of Miyatake Family Studios.](image-url)
By emphasizing the context of these three photographs, the background of the photographers and their objectives in taking these photos, my goal is for students to see these photographs not as pure snapshots of moments in time but instead as artistic presentations of Manzanar meant to provoke thoughts in the viewers about the experience of Japanese Americans in concentration camps. Viewed through these contexts, I ask students to write for a few minutes about how they would characterize the Japanese American experience during World War II based on these photographs. "Do the photographs support or contradict the term 'American concentration camp?'"

The discussion about what the three photographs evoke provides a space to transition to the second phase of the unit, where we focus on handouts of specific diary entries from Stanley Hayami, who was interned at Heart Mountain in Wyoming. Hayami was a high school student when his family was forcibly interned at Heart Mountain. Prior to internment, the family owned a nursery in Los Angeles and had integrated fairly well into American culture. Hayami was an aspiring artist, and his diary is laced with drawings of his life at Heart Mountain. To contextualize Hayami's diary, I explain that in the first half of the twentieth century many middle-class American boys and young men kept diaries, primarily for two reasons, as a form of self-discipline and as a method for reconciling societal demands with their individual needs.18

For this part of the class session, I divide students into small groups and hand out two of Hayami's diary entries, one from December 8, 1942 (the day after the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), and the other a few days later on December 13, 1942, when Hayami recounts listening to the USC versus UCLA football game. In the December 8 entry, Hayami describes his experience feeling enormously uncomfortable at school on that fateful day. In contrast, in his December 13 entry, Hayami recounts listening with excitement on the radio as UCLA defeated USC. Included in this diary entry are drawings that depict his responses at different points to listening to the game on the radio. Students are prompted to consider what these two diary entries reveal about how Japanese Americans experienced concentration camps.

Figure 5: Hiyami’s diary entry from December 8, 1942. Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum (Gift from the Estate of Frank Naoichi and Asano Hayami, parents of Stanley Kunio Hayami, 95.226.1)

Figure 6: Hiyami’s diary entry from December 12, 1942. Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum (Gift from the Estate of Frank Naoichi and Asano Hayami, parents of Stanley Kunio Hayami, 95.226.1)
The challenge, as students quickly discover, is that neither diary entry describes Hayami’s life in the camp. With some prodding, students realize that he used his diary to describe things outside the camp, his own memories, and a football game he was prevented from attending because of his internment. Some students interpret Hayami’s excitement about the football game as a demonstration that he was generally happy and just living a normal teenage life. Here it is important to affirm that, yes, his documented excitement demonstrates that he does want to live a regular life of a teenage boy. At the same time, it is important to challenge students to think hard about what Hayami is experiencing as he writes in his diary, “Where is he? Can he go to the game?”

Some students will still want to see Hayami as living a happy life as a teenage boy. And to some extent the entry about the football game supports that. But contextualizing the diary entry, in relation to both his December 8 entry and the location where he is writing the diary, can provoke an array of thoughts. At this point, I ask students to take a minute and try to reconcile the two entries in writing. “How is Stanley [Hayami] experiencing life at Heart Mountain, as he both remembers what he experienced when Pearl Harbor occurred, and a few days later listens with joy to the USC-UCLA football game?”

Students generally still struggle a bit to understand how Hayami is experiencing Heart Mountain, since the two diary entries do not speak to his actual experiences there. I remind students that in addition to making numerous diary entries, Hayami also used his diary to create drawings, drawings that provide further insight into how he experienced Heart Mountain. These drawings help situate students in Hayami’s place.

Over the period of the next several minutes, I display three of Hayami’s drawings, creating space for conversations about each one of them. The first drawing is divided into three sections. At the top is a ranch house and written above it is “My house, 1931–1942.” In the middle of the page is barrack housing with a small section divided off from the rest, with writing on the roof “P-2-B” and an arrow pointing to it with the statement “My house, 1942–43.” At the bottom of the page is a huge question mark and written above it is “My house 1943–.” After letting students examine the drawing for a minute or so, I ask them the same question I just asked: “How is Stanley [Hayami] experiencing life at Heart Mountain?” We talk about what he is conveying by drawing his family’s house and the barracks at Heart Mountain on the same sheet of paper; the juxtaposition is interesting. But I also ask students what they make of the question mark. The uncertainty Hayami is expressing becomes clear.
Figure 7: Hiyami’s drawings of his past, present, and uncertain future homes. Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum (Gift from the Estate of Frank Naoichi and Asano Hayami, parents of Stanley Kunio Hayami, 95.226.1)

Figure 8: A sketch from Hiyami’s diary, titled “Reminiscing.” Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum (Gift from the Estate of Frank Naoichi and Asano Hayami, parents of Stanley Kunio Hayami, 95.226.1)
The next drawing I show students is titled “Reminiscing,” and on the top half of the page is a ranch house surrounded by trees. In contrast, the bottom half of the page displays barracks in a barren landscape, with barbed wire in the foreground. The similarity with the previous drawing is immediately evident. I ask students to think why in his diary Hayami is repeating this theme of contrasting barracks with his family home. Then we discuss the title. I encourage students to think about what it means if his experience at Heart Mountain is about “reminiscing.”

Finally, the last drawing, labeled March 5, 1943, is titled “NIGHT – HEART MOUNTAIN-Wyo.” A row of barracks is drawn in the center, with a chimney sticking up from one of the barracks. A mountain and darkness loom in the background. The drawing is extremely evocative in how it casts a menacing atmosphere around the barracks. But the title also inevitably causes some students to make connections to Elie Wiesel’s famous memoir *Night*, originally published in 1956, about his experiences during the Holocaust. Here we come back to the terminology of calling “Heart Mountain” a “concentration camp.” “When we look at this drawing,” I ask students, “how is Stanley [Hayami] experiencing Heart Mountain?”

Alongside “NIGHT – HEART MOUNTAIN-Wyo,” I then display again Adams’s photograph “Baseball Game at Manzanar.” My intention here is to bring things full circle, to connect Hayami’s drawing to the photograph we started with. I want students to look at the photograph through the perspective of Hayami’s drawings. How do they see it differently? The key point here is for students to begin to come to understand how both Hayami’s drawing and Adams’s photograph depict historical truths: Hayami’s drawing depicts the real experience of living in an American concentration camp and Adams’s photograph presents an outsider’s depiction of Americans living inside concentration camps.

While most of our class discussion centers on understanding how the primary sources shared in class help us understand Japanese American experiences in concentration camps, I conclude by returning to the other central question: how should we confront our “hard history” to understand the incarceration of Japanese Americans? I use my question as a prompt for students to write a
longer reflection about what they learned from all the primary sources we examined, within the framework of the term “American concentration camps.” This reflection assignment provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of how racism shapes policy and the effects those policies have on the lives of Americans. Students can identify easily with Hayami, as a high school student, an aspiring artist, and a sports fan. In so many ways, he was a “typical” teenager. What they are asked to do in their final reflection is confront the “hard history” that Hayami was forced to experience. And while American concentration camps were built eighty years ago, students also have the opportunity to consider how the experiences Japanese Americans had during World War II reverberate today in terms of the continued racism Asian Americans at large are experiencing.
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