

# Teaching in the Desert

## *White Women Educators in Japanese-American Incarceration Camps*

By EMILY XIAO, YALE UNIVERSITY

Like any other fourth grade teacher in America, Martha Shoaf began the school day by leading her pupils in the pledge of allegiance to the American flag.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the flag in her classroom was an unusual one—it had been sketched on a twelve-inch piece of art paper by a boy in the class. Before the makeshift flag existed, Shoaf and her students had saluted to an empty corner. The school was unusual, too, for it had been built inside the barbed wire fences of Manzanar. Located in central California, Manzanar was one of ten concentration camps administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) during World War II. And Shoaf's class consisted entirely of Japanese American students who had been removed from their homes on the West Coast after Executive Order 9066.<sup>2</sup>

White women like Martha Shoaf traveled to the camps to take up teaching positions in schools set up by the WRA. There, they found educational facilities inadequate and supplies scarce; they also encountered young students whose lives had been profoundly disrupted by incarceration. Many of these teachers articulated their motives using the language of benevolent compassion, and they often assumed an oppositional stance toward racism. Moreover, the benevolent, yet unequal, relationships they forged with their students could not be easily described in terms of a straightforward, unidirectional exertion of disciplinary power.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, they could be genuinely affectionate at times. I will argue, however, that these relationships were ultimately constrained by the official role that white women teachers played as cultural facilitators in a program of assimilation. They operated within a broader, state-directed project founded upon racist assumptions of cultural pathology in Japanese American students and the desire to socialize them into the white American main-

stream.

A number of scholars, including Thomas James and Gary Okihiro, have sought to reconstruct the significance of education in the Japanese American incarceration experience.<sup>4</sup> James argues that the camps were pedagogical institutions concerned with the “transmission of culture through formal schooling,” delineating the function of WRA schools in organizing social meanings within camp communities.<sup>5</sup> I build upon this work by focusing specifically on white women teachers as important agents of cultural transmission. Meanwhile, Okihiro's work on Nisei student relocation to college campuses engages with the concept of anti-racism and the contributions of white advocates who devoted their labor to the relocation project. He links his study to earlier works about white individuals who performed benevolent care work for Asian American charges, often with the “added baggage of paternalism, or maternalism, termed ‘white racist love’ by Asian American writers.”<sup>6</sup> Okihiro challenges the binary of racism and anti-racism, exploring ways in which inclusion, through forced assimilation, may be fundamentally racist. In addition, John Howard's study of Jerome and Rohwer is useful for its analysis of the camps as gendered spaces that offered expanded opportunities for women.<sup>7</sup> This provides a helpful starting point for my examination of the dynamic between the white and Japanese American women who taught in camp schools, and the ways in which gender and race must be understood as relational concepts. In understanding the particular attitudes and deeds of white women who taught in camps—and the gendered dimension of their contributions—I also draw from the work of scholars like Peggy Pascoe and Margaret D. Jacobs, who have written about the ideological practices of white women

1 Martha Shoaf, interviewed by John Allen, November 7, 2002, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Visual History Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

2 On February 19, 1942—two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the mass removal of Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast. Over 110,000 Japanese Americans were subsequently incarcerated in concentration camps in the western interior of the United States. More than two-thirds of them were U.S. citizens.

3 Peggy Pascoe also challenges this framework in her study of Victorian women reformers working in the Chinese American community in the American West. See Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xix.

4 Thomas James, *Exile Within: The Schooling of Japanese Americans, 1942–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Gary Okihiro, *Storied Lives: Japanese American Students and World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

5 James, *Exile Within*, 4.

6 Okihiro, *Storied Lives*, x.

7 John Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.

reformers during the Victorian era. I seek to explore how similar contradictions of race, gender, and social authority may play out in a time period dominated by a different set of cultural assumptions.

I will begin this essay by exploring the diverse backgrounds and motivations of white women who taught in camp schools, extending their narratives beyond stories of pure altruism. I will then consider intercultural relations between white and Japanese American women, focusing on the ways in which both race and gender mediated their social position in the camps. The essay will then discuss the pedagogical underpinnings of the camp curriculum and its emphasis on democratic principles. Finally, it will seek to understand the various ways in which teachers engaged with these curricular aims in the classroom, with particular implications for the bonds they could form with Japanese American students. Ultimately, even the most well-intentioned educator was constrained by her ability to navigate unequal hierarchies of race and gender, and by the broader pedagogical project that had been laid out in the camps.

#### COMING TO CAMP, BY CHOICE

“She had very honorable intentions, and she had every intent that she would try to rectify some of the wrongs that were being done to us,” Henry Mitayake recalled of his high school freshman year teacher at Minidoka, a camp in Idaho. The wife of a Marine fighter pilot, Mitayake’s teacher had read about the incarceration of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor and felt that there was “some kind of injustice being done to these people.” Sensing an opportunity for both personal career advancement as well as benevolent work on behalf of people in the camps, she volunteered to teach at Minidoka.<sup>8</sup>

In this section, I explore the motives underlying the decisions of white women like Mitayake’s teacher to relocate to camp schools. How were their contributions understood, either by themselves or by the War Relocation Authority? To begin with, we should not take for granted that their presence within the camps was universally accepted among white Americans. Helen Amerman Manning, who also taught at Minidoka, recounted several occasions during the war when she walked down

the streets of nearby Twin Falls, Idaho with a former student, a Japanese male, and encountered verbal harassment from white servicemen.<sup>9</sup> Though their friendship—made possible by wartime displacement and unequal levels of mobility—was one between teacher and student, it could nevertheless be perceived with great suspicion. Indeed, at a time when Japanese citizens and resident aliens were deliberately constructed as threats to national security, what did it mean that white women were able to live, work, and socialize in the camps? What were the factors that motivated them to teach young Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated? Altruism offers a partial explanation, but such benevolence must also be understood in the context of teachers’ material circumstances, as well as the social mobility and legitimacy that these roles could provide.

White teachers who worked in the camp schools came from a range of geographical and ideological backgrounds. Henry Mitayake’s teacher hailed from Idaho, where her husband had last been on assignment as a mining engineer.<sup>10</sup> Others traveled considerably greater distances to the state to take up their teaching positions. At Minidoka, Helen Amerman Manning initially lived in a dorm with several other teachers, consisting of two missionaries from Japan (one Baptist, one Episcopal), a woman from Emmett, Ohio, one from Boise, two from Minnesota, and one from Kansas.<sup>11</sup> Another teacher came from Occidental College in California, and Manning herself had grown up in New Jersey and received her education at Michigan State College and Stanford University; her paternal grandfather had been a missionary in Japan.<sup>12</sup> A seventh-grade student at Poston, in southwestern Arizona, attested to this striking geographical diversity when she wrote: “Our teachers are from outside of camp. Some from eastern, northern, southern, and western states and another from Hawaii.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, some regional variations could be observed. For example, almost all of the white teachers at Jerome and Rohwer were from the South, typically from Arkansas.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of geographical origin, many of the teachers cited benevolent or altruistic motives for coming to camp. For example, Martha Shoaf, a graduate of UCLA, had Japanese friends who were incarcerated after the evacuation order, and she felt that she had to “do something”

8 Henry Miyatake, interviewed by Tom Ikeda, May 4, 1998, Densho Visual History Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

9 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito, August 2, 2003, Densho Visual History Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

10 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito.

11 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, September 29, 1942, ddr-densho-171-2, Helen Amerman Manning Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

12 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito.

13 Sheryl Ritchie, “School Life in Poston,” in *Through Innocent Eyes: Writings and Art from the Japanese American Internment by Poston I Schoolchildren*, ed. Vincent Tajiri (Los Angeles: Keiro Services Press and the Generations Fund, 1990), 46.

14 Thomas James has attributed this selective recruitment to a desire to give those camp schools a visible connection to the local school system. James, *Exile Within*, 50.

about the situation. She returned to school to obtain her teaching credentials, then immediately signed up to teach at Manzanar.<sup>15</sup> Another teacher, Edith Waterman, often drove by the Santa Anita Racetrack, one of the temporary “assembly centers,” and was deeply moved by the circumstances of the children she witnessed there.<sup>16</sup> Other forms of altruism were linked to religious institutions. Mary Blocher Smeltzer, who taught at Manzanar, was a member of the Church of the Brethren, a historic peace church founded upon principles of social activism. Her husband, Ralph, was also a teacher and had been ordained as a minister in the church. A conscientious objector to the war, he had refused to sell defense stamps in school. Motivated by a sense of social justice, the couple decided to travel to Manzanar together in September of 1942.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, there was more to the story than pure altruism. Teaching positions in the camps offered white women real opportunities for material advancement. Teachers working for the WRA received far higher salaries than those who worked in school districts in rural states, including the segregated white schools of the South.<sup>18</sup> Helen Amerman Manning expressed her astonishment at the level of pay: “I didn’t have any other opportunities lined up, and my goodness. Two thousand dollars a year?” Combined with the subsidized pricing for room and board in camp, the job offer amounted to a “pretty good bargain.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Elaine Clary Stanley chose to work at Manzanar rather than Huntington Beach High School, in California, because of the better pay.<sup>20</sup> One exception to this trend was Poston, a camp in southwestern Arizona that was under the jurisdiction of the Office of Indian Affairs until 1943. Because the OIA could not offer as high a salary as the WRA, the camp experienced a relatively higher rate of teacher turnover.<sup>21</sup>

Though I focus on white women who taught in the camps, there were also a fair number of male teachers,

particularly at the high school and administrative level.<sup>22</sup> At Tule Lake, for example, the white teachers consisted of 46 women and 10 men; all of the male teachers worked in grades ten through twelve.<sup>23</sup> I nevertheless seek to understand teaching as a distinctly gendered profession, whose historical mythologization entailed such feminized images as the genteel schoolmarm and the old spinster. At the elementary school level, in particular, teaching had come to be regarded as women’s work over the course of the nineteenth century; by the 1920s, over 90 percent of primary schoolteachers were women.<sup>24</sup> During the mid-nineteenth century, school reformers such as Henry Barnard and Catherine Beecher had promoted the notion that young, unmarried women who had completed their education were more nurturing than men and could best occupy themselves as teachers.<sup>25</sup> These ideas could be seen as continuous with those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—namely, that educated women were necessary for bringing up knowledgeable citizens of a republic.<sup>26</sup> For white women, such images therefore shaped the social meaning and appeal of teaching opportunities in camp schools.

However, these same social expectations also imposed important limitations on many women’s commitment to the teaching profession. Conventionally, new domestic responsibilities would demand these young teachers’ attention after marriage, and their husbands would provide for their financial and material support.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even when white teachers forged genuine intimacies with their Japanese American students in the camps, they nevertheless regarded their positions as jobs that they could leave to fulfill other obligations. Elaine Clary Stanley, for example, was eager to leave Manzanar to join her new husband in Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi.<sup>28</sup> And in a letter home to her family, Helen Amerman Manning remarked upon the imminent departure of one of her female

15 Martha Shoaf, interviewed by John Allen.

16 James, *Exile Within*, 31.

17 Mary Blocher Smeltzer, interviewed by Richard Potashin, July 17, 2008, Manzanar National Historic Site collection, Densho Digital Archive.

18 Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 95; James, *Exile Within*, 45.

19 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito.

20 Elaine Clary Stanley, interviewed by Richard Potashin, August 21, 2010, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

21 Lane Hirabayashi, “Afterword,” in *Through Innocent Eyes*, 95–96. Poston had been built on the Colorado River Indian Reservation and was therefore the only camp administered jointly by the War Relocation Authority and the Office of Indian Affairs, which oversaw the reservation system. See Jeffery F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard B. Lord, *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 215–219.

22 Male teachers were likely perceived to be better prepared academically to work at the highest levels of the curriculum and to meet the challenge of disciplining difficult older boys. See Joel Perlmann and Robert A. Margo, *Women’s Work? American Schoolteachers, 1650–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 94.

23 “Annual School Report,” Education Section, Community Management Division, Tule Lake, 1944, Box 90, Reel 104, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Microfilm, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

24 Perlmann and Margo, *Women’s Work*, 1.

25 Perlmann and Margo, *Women’s Work*, 29.

26 Perlmann and Margo, *Women’s Work*, 30.

27 Perlmann and Margo, *Women’s Work*, 29.

28 Elaine Clary Stanley, interviewed by Richard Potashin.

colleagues, who was getting married. Already dealing with an acute teacher shortage, Manning predicted that the school was “really going to be in a mess now.”<sup>29</sup>

For many white women, the teaching profession was linked to social interpretations of their marital status and moral respectability in the community. In her study of women teachers in the American West, for example, Polly Welts Kaufman described the mythological ideal of the schoolmistress from the East as an educated, self-sacrificing, unbendingly moral figure dedicated to the welfare of children.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, some camp teachers used such legitimizing social roles to their personal advantage. An unmarried 38-year-old woman with a master’s degree from the University of California, Virginia Tidball lost her job when the institution she taught at, El Dorado Junior College, closed its doors for lack of students during the war.<sup>31</sup> Having been unemployed for several months and eager to leave the family farm, Tidball contacted a number of WRA administrators about teaching positions in the camps in Arkansas. As John Howard has argued, she was able to benefit from playing the part of a “spinster teacher,” a role seen as suitable for mobile and single white women.<sup>32</sup>

Another important “pull” factor that enhanced camp teachers’ sense of mission was the patriotism attached to such teaching positions. Elementary school teachers at Minidoka received a handbook that urged: “May this challenge serve as an inspiration for your contribution to the war effort.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the teacher’s handbook for Amache Elementary School, at Granada, stated: “Probably at no time in your life have you launched on an experience which holds as many possibilities for service to your fellow man.”<sup>34</sup> In general, wartime and accelerated industrial production had brought new opportunities for American women, whose activities were not merely domestic issues but also matters of national and patriotic concern. Teachers were among those who left their occupations for higher-paying jobs in defense industries; at the beginning of the war, the National Education Association reported a nationwide shortage of 50,000 to 60,000 teachers.<sup>35</sup> The War Relocation Authority therefore struggled a

great deal to recruit and retain adequate teaching personnel for the camp schools. Indeed, many centers employed older teachers who had been out of the profession for a number of years, likely after getting married and leaving the workforce to raise families.<sup>36</sup> Such teachers were probably impelled to come out of retirement by the wartime “days of need,” as suggested by M.P. Gunderson, a school principal at Tule Lake.<sup>37</sup>

These factors—altruism, patriotism, and material advancement—were all essential elements in the War Relocation Authority’s recruitment of teaching personnel. By charging camp teachers with special civic duties, they imbued the position with a degree of patriotic significance that competed with the allure of other, more lucrative opportunities. Whether they were missionaries or conscientious objectors, former retirees or adventure seekers, the white women who came to teach in the camps professed a number of motivations for the work they took on. While we should continue to regard altruism as an important element of their story, we must also contextualize it within these women’s personal and social circumstances. Moreover, even as wartime changes facilitated new opportunities for women—even for Japanese American women inside the camps, as we shall see—they did not completely overturn the constraints of race or gender.

### NISEI TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES

We turn now to the experiences of the incarcerated teachers who came from inside the camps. Our understanding of the social position of white women in the camps would not be complete without some consideration of the intercultural relations between white women teachers and their Japanese American colleagues. After all, white women teachers interacted on a daily basis not only with their students, but also with the rest of the camp community. A comparison between white and Japanese American teachers demonstrates that teaching was not only a gendered profession, but also a racialized one. Moreover, we must look to specific configurations of both gender and race in order to locate sites of authority that white women teachers themselves might not have fully acknowledged.

29 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, November 5, 1944, ddr-densho-171-63, Helen Amerman Manning Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

30 Polly Welts Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), xvii.

31 My discussion of Tidball is based on John Howard’s biographical description in *Concentration Camps*, 95–96.

32 Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 104.

33 *Elementary Teachers’ Handbook*, Minidoka Project Schools, Hunt, Idaho, Helen Amerman Manning Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

34 *Teacher’s Handbook*, Amache Elementary School, Amache, Colorado, Box 39, Reel 45, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation.

35 James, *Exile Within*, 47.

36 “Second Quarterly Report, July 1 to September 30, 1942,” circa October 1943, Box 1, Folder 4, Mary Buford Courage Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

37 M.P. Gunderson, “Personal Narrative of M.P. Gunderson, Elementary School Principal, High School Principal and Assistant Project Director,” Community Management, Tule Lake, Box 98, Reel 114, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation.

It is important to note that the administration of camp education was strictly hierarchical, and white women were by no means at the apex. Rather, the chain of authority extended from “teacher to principal to superintendent to other members of the WRA administration.”<sup>38</sup> Along these lines, Thomas James has argued that teachers occupied a secondary status between administrators and the managed community, with little say about camp policy.<sup>39</sup> Teaching did offer educated women a greater degree of autonomy in their professional lives, and some women took on higher roles as principals or even higher-level administrators in camp schools.<sup>40</sup> In general, however, women teachers were subject to the educational authority of male administrators. And the qualifications of women who did become administrators were nevertheless contested, including by other women. Helen Amerman Manning, for example, privately criticized the administration and pedagogical methods of Millie Bennett, the elementary school principal, as a “complete flop.”<sup>41</sup>

Still, white women teachers expressed their professional and cultural authority not only in relation to upper-level male administrators, but also in relation to their Japanese American colleagues and students. At the same time, the experiences of Nisei, or second-generation Japanese American, teachers deserve attention in their own right, for they shed light on the fractures between race and gender in shaping professional opportunities both before and during the war. On one hand, the organization of camp life and the presence of a concentrated Japanese American community produced novel opportunities for Japanese American women who were incarcerated. For instance, the collectivization of tasks like meal preparation, laundry, and childcare meant that domestic responsibilities—usually performed by women—tended to be lighter.<sup>42</sup> Japanese American women also entered the camp labor force on the same WRA wage scale as men.<sup>43</sup> Yet, persistent racial assumptions continued to shape Japanese American women’s access to positions of social authority, even as those same positions elevated their white counterparts.

In the camp schools, Japanese American women could take up teaching positions that had previously been closed to them. In her memoir of incarceration, Yoshiko Uchida observed that her sister was able to put her professional skills to use as a teacher at Tanforan, for the first time since graduating from Mills College.<sup>44</sup> In the pre-war years, teaching jobs in mainstream public schools had been inaccessible to Japanese Americans; few of them qualified for state certification, though many were college-educated. Hannah Lai, who had always wished to enter the profession, planned to attend teachers’ college in Japan before returning to the United States to teach in a Japanese school. She hoped that, by that time, racial discrimination would become less of a barrier and she could then obtain an American teaching credential.<sup>45</sup>

In the early days of the assembly centers, self-organized community schools relied on young Japanese American teachers for their personnel. In the temporary schools at Tanforan, none of the teachers had official state accreditation, though there was a “sizable proportion of college graduates and a good sprinkling of Phi Beta Kappas.”<sup>46</sup> Both Uchida and her sister relied on support from white contacts and former teachers outside the camps, who donated books, school supplies, educational materials, and toys for the younger children.<sup>47</sup> And a small four-room cottage, in a state of “terrible disrepair,” was converted into a suitable nursery school through the efforts and resourcefulness of Uchida’s sister and several friends.<sup>48</sup>

However, when the War Relocation Authority implemented its own school designs at the relocation centers, they systematically sought out accredited white teachers from outside the camps. Their reliance on the seemingly neutral marker of professional certification, however, both ignored and reified the structural barriers that the Nisei faced in obtaining accreditation. Initially, the work of white elementary and secondary teachers in WRA-organized schools was supplemented by that of Japanese American teacher assistants, while Japanese American instructors were placed in charge of nursery school and general or vocational adult classes.<sup>49</sup> For example, Helen Amerman

38 *Teacher’s Handbook*, Amache Elementary School.

39 James, *Exile Within*, 55.

40 One such example is Dr. Genevieve Carter, who served as the superintendent of education at Manzanar.

41 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, October 19, 1943, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

42 Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 99.

43 Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 101.

44 Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 87.

45 Hannah Lai, interviewed by Tom Ikeda, March 14, 2011, Densho Visual History Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

46 James, *Exile Within*, 27; Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 90.

47 Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 88, 90.

48 Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 87.

49 “Education Program in War Relocation Centers,” February 1945, Helen Amerman Manning Collection, 4.

Manning’s first assistant teachers at Minidoka were a “brilliant young” history major from Reed College and a “keen girl” who had majored in English.<sup>50</sup> Due to the exigencies of the teacher shortage, Japanese American teachers were eventually trained through in-service or summer school programs and placed in charge of their own classrooms.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, they were noticeably more educated than the white teachers who trained them.<sup>52</sup> The training of Japanese American teachers under white guidance can, in some sense, be linked to earlier Victorian-era programs of training “native helpers” among a racial minority community, who could then serve people of their own ancestry. Such initiatives were meant to assuage public fears about racial mixing between white women and their charges.<sup>53</sup> While the process of training Nisei teachers was largely a matter of practicality—and Victorian values had long been challenged by a more egalitarian outlook—such programs also privileged the professional expertise of white women teachers, made possible by unequal access to teaching certification.

A summary of the education program by the War Relocation Authority stated that every teacher was employed as a wartime civil service employee and was required to have a valid teaching certificate.<sup>54</sup> However, the realities of teacher hiring were more complicated, and more haphazard, than what WRA administrators reported in their narratives of camp education. At Minidoka, for example, Hannah Lai began as an assistant in a fourth grade class, but she suddenly found herself in charge of 34 children when the teacher fell ill during the first week of school.<sup>55</sup> In a similar situation, Lily Kajiwara was an assistant teacher in a classroom at Manzanar, when the white teacher abruptly resigned in the middle of the term. Despite their lack of training, Kajiwara and another Nisei woman, Hannah Ikeda, were assigned to take over the class for the remainder of the year.<sup>56</sup> In such cases, the supposed necessity of formal training procedures by white faculty was deemed largely impractical.

White women teachers could claim a degree of respect from their students that was largely unavailable

to Nisei teachers. One of the major challenges faced by Japanese American teachers was that their pupils were unaccustomed to seeing somebody like them at the front of a public school classroom. Although they were familiar with older Issei instructors in the private language schools, Japanese American students had attended mainstream public schools since 1907, when President Theodore Roosevelt pressured the San Francisco school board to integrate Japanese children.<sup>57</sup> In these schools, they sat in classrooms headed exclusively by white teachers. As Henry Tani, the supervisor of Tanforan High School, remarked, “the Nisei as a teacher was an unknown thing,” an implausibility to many Japanese American students.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, describing the sense of disorientation that had accompanied the disruptions of incarceration, one high schooler at Topaz wrote: “I sometimes pinch myself, am I really in Utah, or is this California, do I live in a barrack with other people [...] and *do we have teachers of our own race*, do we go to school in barracks and then I pinch myself once, twice and then I am out of my daze” (emphasis mine).<sup>59</sup>

War Relocation Authority administrator John D. Cook asserted that students preferred white teachers to Japanese American teachers, having a “greater respect for the unknown quantity which is embodied in Caucasian teachers,” as well as a “feeling of inferiority which has been induced by evacuation and by long years of discrimination.”<sup>60</sup> While Cook’s assessment from an administrative perspective merits some skepticism, students likely did ascribe greater authority to white teachers. Ironically, the so-called “unknown quantity” that elevated white teachers probably derived from the fact that the white woman as a teacher was a known thing. In other words, students typically expected to see a white woman at the front of a classroom, and they had already learned to associate her with a social role that was familiarly imbued with pedagogical influence and the license to discipline.

Age was another important consideration, as it played a differentiating role in determining social authority even among white women teachers themselves. For example, Helen Amerman Manning wrote of her frustra-

50 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, October 12, 1942, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

51 “Family Welfare: Orientation Program,” April 1944, Box 1, Folder 7, Mary Buford Courage Papers.

52 James, *Exile Within*, 59.

53 Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards: The Life of a Wartime Celebrity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 10.

54 “Education Program in War Relocation Centers,” 3.

55 Hannah Lai, interviewed by Tom Ikeda.

56 Lily Kajiwara, interviewed by Richard Potashin, July 24, 2010, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

57 Okhiro, *Storied Lives*, 17.

58 Henry Tani, “The Tanforan High School,” quoted in James, *Exile Within*, 28.

59 As quoted in Michael Tunnell and George Chilcoat, *The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese Internment Camp Based on a Classroom Diary* (New York: Holiday House, 1996), 53.

60 John D. Cook (Reports Officer), “Little Black School House,” Education Reports, Tule Lake, Box 90, Reel 104, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation.

tion with the constant presence of Gladys Gilbertson, a colleague, who often sat at the desk at the front of her classroom. Manning was disconcerted, specifically, by the implications of having “an older teacher standing behind me in my class.”<sup>61</sup> The inadequate physical environment of the camp schools, and the limited classroom space available to teachers, only exacerbated such tensions. It is unsurprising, then, that age also played a role in differentiating white and Japanese American teachers. In general, white teachers tended to be older than their Nisei counterparts. Sumiko Ikeda, a high school junior in Poston, remarked that some of the Japanese American teachers were “so young that at times it is hard to distinguish between students and teachers.”<sup>62</sup>

The differences in status that white and Japanese American teachers experienced were not merely abstract. They also lived and worked in profoundly different material circumstances. For example, Japanese American teachers were paid \$16 to \$19 a month for a 40-hour work week, while white teachers received a regular teaching salary of \$150 to \$200 a month, along with subsidized room and board.<sup>63</sup> WRA orientation materials for teacher recruits apologized for the substandard conditions that they would encounter upon arriving in camp, noting that “the housing for the teachers is about as bad as it could be. This also applies to the Japanese residents and to the rest of the administration.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, the white residents of camp had access to considerably better resources and facilities. When Helen Amerman Manning first arrived at Minidoka, she noted that the teachers’ dorms were fitted with flush toilets and hot water. They also received furniture from the Empire Hotel in San Francisco, which was then occupied by military command. In contrast, the Japanese homes lacked private access to water.<sup>65</sup> Yoshiko Uchida recalled the first time she went into the special barracks of the white staff members at Topaz. A young couple had come to teach in the camp, bringing along their six-month-old baby. The small family lived in half a barrack—the same area of space allotted to three Japanese families—and they enjoyed the comforts of carpeting, furniture, and a fully equipped kitchen. “I was amazed at the transformation

and realized this was the first time in six months I had been inside a normally furnished home,” Uchida wrote. “I was filled with envy, longing, and resentment.”<sup>66</sup>

In some camps, these discrepancies extended to the classroom. The white teachers in Topaz taught at Mountain View School in Block 8, which was close to their living quarters and the administration buildings. Desert View School, meanwhile, was located at the opposite end of camp, in Block 41, and was staffed by resident Japanese American teachers.<sup>67</sup> None of the elementary school barracks were ready for use, but the conditions in Block 41 were “even more alarming” than those in Block 8. As Uchida recalled, there were “large holes in the roof where the stove pipes were to fit, inner sheetrock walls had not been installed, floors were covered with dust and dirt, and again there were no supplies for teaching.”<sup>68</sup>

White teachers were treated as intermediaries between the administration and the incarcerated population; administrators sometimes asked them to disseminate information about federal policy aims to the children, who would then relay it to their parents.<sup>69</sup> To an even greater extent, Japanese American women were positioned between their white colleagues and the community and expected to serve as cultural interpreters. For example, in the preschools, the primary teacher who coordinated parent engagement and activities was aided by a Japanese assistant, “who helped to interpret the program to the patrons, and the community to the supervisor.”<sup>70</sup> More informal arrangements could also be seen between white and Japanese American women. During Helen Amerman Manning’s first days at Minidoka, she found a valuable resource in Frances Maeda, a college graduate. “She has helped me a great deal to really see life from the Japanese angle,” Manning wrote to her family.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, some white teachers were nonplussed to find that their Japanese American colleagues were fluent in other, unexpected forms of cultural knowledge. Lucille Reed, an elementary school teacher at Poston, wrote in her diary about a meeting with a group of Japanese American primary teachers: “They are so helpful and wonderful to one. We learned songs and I felt quite strange having a Japanese girl teach me all of the

61 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, April 10, 1943, ddr-densho-171-20, Helen Amerman Manning Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

62 Sumiko Ikeda, “High School Life in Poston,” in *Through Innocent Eyes*, 47.

63 Tunnell and Chilcoat, *Children of Topaz*, 42.

64 War Relocation Authority Orientation Materials, Poston Relocation Center, Box 1, Folder 2, Mary Buford Courage Papers.

65 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, September 29, 1942, ddr-densho-171-2, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

66 Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 117.

67 Tunnell and Chilcoat, *Children of Topaz*, 43; Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 117.

68 Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 118.

69 James, *Exile Within*, 55.

70 “Education Program in War Relocation Centers,” 7.

71 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, September 29, 1942, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

nursery rhymes that I should know better than she but did not.”<sup>72</sup> While Nisei women were ascribed a limited degree of cultural authority and expected to provide interpretive services to their superiors, individuals like Lucille Reed also erroneously assumed that they lacked access to other strands of culture—such as common nursery rhymes—on the basis of their racial identity.

White women who came to the camps to teach did not exist in a social vacuum. Rather, their relative agency emerged from the position they held with respect to both their students and their colleagues. For Japanese American women, professional experiences in the project schools were constrained by their racial identity, illustrating the extent to which race and gender must be understood as relational categories in producing social possibilities. Compared to their white counterparts, these women navigated harsher material circumstances as well as limited social and physical mobility. Nevertheless, many Japanese American women proved themselves to be highly capable in the classroom. In the end, they were praised even by WRA administrators, who reported that “they proved eager to learn, hard workers, and at the end of a very short period of time ranked as our best teachers.”<sup>73</sup>

### A CURRICULUM FOR THE COMMUNITY

“The training of children must center around the life of the community,” wrote John D. Cook on the education program at Tule Lake. “They must study the civic organization of the colony; they must come to understand the need for law and justice; to accept their responsibilities as voters and citizens of the community.”<sup>74</sup> Of course, the deep irony of such thinking lies in the fact that the students’ communities were organized around incarceration: geographically constrained, heavily administrated, and short on democratic possibilities. The incarceration centers offered few opportunities for self-government, and a significant portion of the population was disenfranchised.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, the War Relocation Authority sought to inculcate Japanese American children with a “true picture of

America and her institutions, that students might better understand their rights and privileges and perform their civic obligations.”<sup>76</sup> How and why did administrators insist on teaching principles of democracy to a population of young people living behind barbed wire?

In this section, I outline the WRA’s overarching pedagogical aims and the larger mission with which white women teachers were inextricably connected. The project schools did not exist only to teach children their ABCs; rather, administrators viewed formal schooling as a valuable opportunity for civic acculturation. After all, the camps were always understood to be only temporary institutions, from which young Japanese Americans would eventually be dispersed into mainstream communities across the United States.<sup>77</sup> However, this aim of resettlement also entailed enormous pressure to erase conspicuous markers of racial and cultural difference in Nisei youth.

It is important to note that the “Americanization” of second-generation Japanese Americans was not unique to camp schools or even to the wartime period. As Gary Okihiro has pointed out, it was a process that had taken place since 1907, when Japanese children were allowed to attend mainstream public schools.<sup>78</sup> We must also contextualize camp education within the dominant pedagogical trends of a nation at war. President Roosevelt and Congress had attached heightened significance to education, an institution already historically regarded in the United States as important for nurturing civic competence.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, in the pre-war years, political conservatives and liberals alike had agreed that educators should emphasize the merits of democracy in their classrooms.<sup>80</sup> Conservative educators, who gained greater support during this time, urged teachers to foster patriotism and national unity, and public schools were subject to expanded wartime responsibilities.<sup>81</sup> The war bond drives and Red Cross events that took place in project schools were therefore representative of activities in schools across the nation.<sup>82</sup>

However, education within the camp schools differed in a few important respects. For one, camp pedago-

72 Lucille Reed, “Teacher’s Diary,” in *Through Innocent Eyes*, 91–93.

73 Gunderson, “Personal Narrative of M.P. Gunderson.”

74 Cook, “Little Black School House.”

75 Howard, *Concentration Camps*, 87; James, *Exile Within*, 57.

76 “Summary of the Educational Program of the Amache Elementary School,” Granada, Box 39, Reel 45, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation, 26.

77 As Greg Robinson observes, the War Relocation Authority adopted a “quasi-official state policy” of dispersing Japanese Americans throughout the United States. In doing so, they operated under the theory that the geographic concentration of Japanese Americans in densely populated areas catalyzed prejudice. Greg Robinson, *After Camp: Portraits in Midcentury Japanese American Life and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 73.

78 Okihiro, *Storied Lives*, 17.

79 Charles Dorn, *American Education, Democracy, and the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

80 Gerard Giordano, *Wartime Schools: How World War II Changed American Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 120.

81 Giordano, *Wartime Schools*, xxi & 22.

82 “Summary of the Educational Program of the Amache Elementary School,” 34.



gy and curricular proposals reflected a more progressive outlook than conventional school curricula. “The set-up for education here is really fine—the administration see eye to eye on the finest progressive slant,” wrote Helen Amerman Manning about the schools at Minidoka.<sup>83</sup> The camp curriculum had been developed by Dr. Paul Hanna and his graduate seminar at Stanford University in cooperation with the War Relocation Authority, and their proposed methods were distributed as a handbook to all project schools. A liberal educator, Hanna promoted the concept of a “community school” based on ideals of social justice and reform. By engaging with group life, children would be exposed to civic principles through direct experience and participation in the community.<sup>84</sup> This differed from traditional curricula, in which subjects were not integrated and democratic behaviors were taught directly to students, rather than explored through individual experience.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, in mainstream public schools, skills-based curricula were popular due to their ease of implementation and closer alignment with wartime objectives. Wartime opportunities for implementing the progressive curricula espoused by liberal educators were limited, as they required highly trained personnel in the midst of a nationwide teacher shortage.<sup>86</sup>

The Stanford curriculum had important implications for teacher engagement. Implementing the curriculum required a greater degree of teacher participation and decision-making, as it had to be adapted to the individual community and students.<sup>87</sup> Rather than receiving pedagogical instructions straight from administrators, teachers would have greater autonomy in directing their classes. Such possibilities must have been highly attractive to white women like Helen Amerman Manning, who, decades later, recalled the excitement of going to a new school system built from scratch, “with all the best practices, no traditions to hamper us.”<sup>88</sup> Teachers were also expected to participate actively in the daily activities of the center and to integrate themselves into camp life.<sup>89</sup> At

Minidoka, for example, white teachers were encouraged to join community-wide activities such as churches or the mass choir, and orientation materials urged teachers at Poston to engage with various community programs and offer their “friendly cooperation.”<sup>90</sup> The visibility of white women teachers in the camp community thus extended beyond the walls of the schoolhouse as they took on multiple roles.

Though Hanna’s curriculum was distributed to all relocation centers, it was not universally adopted. The “community school” model was successfully implemented at Minidoka, for example, where the high school principal had helped to develop the curriculum in Hanna’s graduate seminar.<sup>91</sup> Administrators at other projects, however, felt that the curriculum deviated too greatly from state requirements.<sup>92</sup> A number of teachers—particularly those who had come from rural areas—were also skeptical of progressive pedagogy or lacked adequate training to teach in such a fashion.<sup>93</sup> However camp schools differed in their methods—whether they were traditional, progressive, or somewhere in between—they nonetheless shared a common and intensified emphasis on civic principles and American ideals, institutions, and practices. According to “Suggestions for Curriculum,” a document circulated in July of 1942, the unifying idea behind all instruction was democratic citizenship and the democratic way of life.<sup>94</sup> And while project schools sought to obey local state accreditation requirements, they were also influenced by curricular objectives distributed by the federal government itself.

The ability to speak, read, and write English became the key measure of Americanization in the camps. In the summary report for education at Granada, evaluations for each grade level assessed the students according to their proficiency in English, in line with the aim to “increase the vocabulary of English words by providing special opportunities [...] to off-set the extensive use of Japanese in the community.”<sup>95</sup> Camp life was construed as deviant and

83 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, September 29, 1942.

84 Paul R. Hanna, *Proposed Curriculum Procedures for Japanese Relocation Centers*, Palo Alto: Stanford University, 1942, Helen Amerman Manning Collection; Catherine L. Cullen, “The Education of Japanese-Americans, 1942-1946: The Fate of Democratic Curriculum Reform,” *American Educational History Journal* 38, no. 1 (2011): 201.

85 Cullen, “Education of Japanese-Americans,” 209.

86 Giordano, *Wartime Schools*, xxii.

87 Cullen, “Education of Japanese-Americans,” 213.

88 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito.

89 Cullen, “Education of Japanese-Americans,” 201.

90 Helen Amerman Manning, interviewed by Alice Ito; “We Introduce the Japanese,” Poston Relocation Center, War Relocation Authority, Box 1, Folder 2, Mary Buford Courage Papers.

91 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, September 29, 1942.

92 Cullen, “Education of Japanese-Americans,” 206.

93 James, *Exile Within*, 56.

94 Hirabayashi, “Afterword,” in *Through Innocent Eyes*, 95–96.

95 “Summary of the Educational Program of the Amache Elementary School.”

atypical by education administrators, who believed that Japanese American students would benefit from relocation to a “typical American community” in which they might have a “normal home life again.” Moreover, the blend of English and Japanese spoken in the camps was interpreted as a problem of “conflicting cultural patterns,” which could be addressed through formal schooling.<sup>96</sup> Such assumptions of cultural pathology failed to acknowledge the critical role of the federal government in the removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans in highly concentrated, administered communities. From pedagogical reports, we can discern how language was used as a proxy for culture, which in turn was conflated with racial identity. In the project schools, classes were conducted entirely in English by both white and Japanese American teachers, a requirement that the War Relocation Authority deliberately contrasted with the students’ previous educational background. As one administrator reported:

Many of the children come from homes where English is imperfectly spoken or spoken not at all. While a majority speak some English, it is obvious that the others labor under difficulties to which most Caucasian children are immune. Because many attended Japanese schools as well as American schools, Japanese-American children have an advantage over Caucasian children, accredited as they are with more school classes which gives intellectual development a broader sweep. By the same token, a handicap is induced in having to speak two languages, neither of which are thoroughly mastered, and by a certain frustration in trying to assimilate two entirely dissimilar cultural ideologies.<sup>97</sup>

Not only does the passage above reinforce the image of the tragic young Nisei caught between two ostensibly inassimilable cultures, it also constructs an ideological view of whiteness that erases the distinctions of ethnic identity. As Zoë Burkholder has described, the understanding of race in American educational discourse underwent a paradigmatic shift during World War II, during which teachers revised their language to incorporate a number of previously racialized ethnic minorities into the overarching category of “Caucasian.”<sup>98</sup> At the same time, other minority

groups were constructed as culturally inferior or inassimilable. Unlike Japanese American children, Caucasian children are depicted as inherently “immune” to the challenges of acculturation, having a natural facility for the English language despite whatever immigrant backgrounds they might come from. The one so-called “advantage” of the Japanese community—namely, its emphasis on education and intellectual development—is nevertheless transformed into an ironic “handicap” because its energies are misdirected from a pure embrace of Americanization. The passage thus undercuts the cultural value of Japanese language schools, which sought to preserve Japanese identity in the second generation and to counter the social influences of Christian churches and the public school system. Such rhetoric adopted a benevolent stance toward the Japanese American students, yet it also engaged in acts of cultural erasure and identified Japanese Americans as the source of their own problems.

Many administrators expressed concern about the effects of isolation on Japanese American students and sought to prepare them for life on the “outside,” in a postwar American society. Miles E. Cary, the director of education at Poston, wrote in a camp publication that the teaching staff’s primary goal was to prepare students for “return to the normal ways of living.”<sup>99</sup> These attitudes encompassed both students and their parents, especially toward the end of the war. The WRA expected camp schools to provide incentives to relocation by introducing parents to various types of community participation through parent-teacher organizations.<sup>100</sup> These organizations also sponsored English classes for parents and sought to offer parents an opportunity to “understand the American school system, the needs of the child, and the importance of having the child properly oriented into the school.”<sup>101</sup> Again, such attitudes expressed an essential benevolence toward Japanese families and, rather than advocating for racial exclusion, sought to integrate them into the “normal” American way of life. Yet, they also tended to ignore the history of racial exclusion that had contributed to incarceration in the first place. The state, through the WRA and camp educational institutions, also attempted to intervene in the private relations of the Japanese American family and to reorient parents’ attitudes toward correct understandings of child upbringing and

<sup>96</sup> “Summary of the Educational Program of the Amache Elementary School.”

<sup>97</sup> Cook, “Little Black School House.”

<sup>98</sup> Zoe Burkholder, “From ‘Wops and Dagoes and Hunkies’ to ‘Caucasian’: Changing Racial Discourse in American Classrooms during World War II,” *History of Education Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2010): 327.

<sup>99</sup> *Poston Notes and Activities*, April 1943, Box 1, Folder 1, Mary Buford Courage Papers.

<sup>100</sup> “Education Program in War Relocation Centers,” 2.

<sup>101</sup> “Education Program in War Relocation Centers,” 9.

development. In place of parental authority, the teacher herself was expected to transmit democratic principles through her language and behavior in the classroom. As the Minidoka teacher's handbook put it, "The story you read, your pleasant 'Good-morning,' your smile or your frown, your attitude toward the fisticuffs of little boys—these are evidences of democracy in action."<sup>102</sup>

### TEACHING ACROSS A DIVIDE

However, white women teachers themselves had complex motives that were sometimes at odds with those of the War Relocation Authority, and their actions did not always reinforce the state's policy of assimilating the Japanese community into a democratic society. Many teachers developed an ambivalent attitude toward the prescriptions of their jobs, made more complex by the intimate yet unequal relationships they forged with their Japanese American students. Official administrative policies, sent down from Washington, did not translate in a uniform or straightforward manner to the local experiences of individual teachers. In this section, I explore key ways in which the wartime climate and pedagogic principles of the WRA constrained interactions between teachers and students in the classroom.

While some white women who taught in the camps had previously interacted with the Japanese community either in Japan or the United States, others had never encountered a person of Japanese descent. The teachers' orientation handout at Poston anticipated their bewilderment, predicting: "You will find yourself whispering, 'What a strange world! All these people look so distressingly alike [...] I wonder how much of what the newspaper said is true. Can it be that their thinking is as much alike as their appearance?'" The pamphlet assured the new teacher recruits that, in time, the Japanese residents' facial features and "uniformly black hair and eyes" would no longer be a "stumbling block to recognition."<sup>103</sup> These orientation materials, in seeking to familiarize the exotic, nevertheless reinforced a sense of physical difference and its spurious connection with psychology. Yet its attitude was probably not far off from those of many white women who arrived in the camps. In her diary, Lucille Reed wrote of the disorientation she felt on her first

day of school at Poston, in a bare room with "only crude benches and tables too large and 65 little brown children looking up into my face saying, 'good morning, teacher.'"<sup>104</sup> For teachers like Reed, being able to productively engage with their pupils would require them to overcome the significant cultural work done by mainstream media and wartime propaganda in racializing Japanese Americans.

Some teachers found it difficult to set aside their own racial presumptions. Betty Morita Shibayama shared a memory of one teacher at Minidoka, who would nearly utter the term "Japs" before remembering that she was standing in a room full of Japanese American students. "You knew she was going to say 'Japs,' but she would add '-anese,'" Shibayama recalled. On her first day of school, Lucille Reed met a young Japanese American boy who enjoyed playing airplane. "You spread out your wings," the child explained, "and you fly over the ditch and drop bombs on the *bad* Japanese." Reed later learned that the boy's name was Jimmy, not Hiroshi, as she had mistakenly believed. "You see, he wasn't Japanese in his own mind. He was an American," Reed commented in her diary.<sup>105</sup> That she found significance in Jimmy's self-proclamation of American-ness highlights the extent to which she found it unnatural—indeed, she seems to have had more difficulty accepting it than Jimmy himself.

Despite these barriers to racial understanding, recollections of camp indicate that a host of white teachers and their Japanese American students felt real affection for each other. For example, Bo T. Sakaguchi recalled a number of teachers whom he described as "kind and caring and generous," including Janet Olinsi Goldberg, who encouraged him to continue to study hard in the camp.<sup>106</sup> Another teacher, Miss Peterson, invited students to her apartment after school to learn crafts; after she left, it was rumored that she had gotten in trouble with the administration for being too personal with the students.<sup>107</sup> The homes of Martha Hays and Edith Waterman provided similar refuges for their students after hours.<sup>108</sup> Elaine Clary Stanley, who taught at Manzanar, kept in touch with her student, Kazi, for decades after the war. They were still in contact as of August 2010.<sup>109</sup> These teachers, among others, were remembered fondly by their students.

102 *Elementary Teachers' Handbook*, Minidoka Project Schools.

103 "We Introduce the Japanese."

104 Reed, "Teacher's Diary."

105 Reed, "Teacher's Diary."

106 Bo T. Sakaguchi, interviewed by John Allen, November 6, 2002, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

107 Gloria Toshiko Imagire, interviewed by Richard Potashin, October 17, 2008, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

108 James, *Exile Within*, 53.

109 Elaine Clary Stanley, interviewed by Richard Potashin.

Moreover, empathetic white teachers who were cognizant of their student’s unusual circumstances felt considerable unease about nationalistic displays in the classroom. Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, a high school teacher at Topaz, recalled: “As I faced my first day I wondered how I could teach American government and democratic principles while we sat in classrooms behind barbed wire!”<sup>110</sup> The ambivalence of teachers like Sekerak did not go unnoticed by their older students. In his cartoons about life at Poston, Jack Matsuoka remarked that the Pledge of Allegiance “somehow sounded hollow,” and “even the teacher’s voice trailed off to a murmur at the part about liberty and justice for all.” In the accompanying illustration, the white woman teacher raises her eyes uncertainly to the ceiling, while her young pupils enthusiastically recite the pledge.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, such ruminations on democracy sometimes met with important limitations. In September of 1942, Lucille Reed recorded the following exchange in her diary:

Millicent Ogawa is a very beautiful Japanese child [...] Today she came up to me and said, “Where do you live, teacher?”  
 “Up by the post office,” I replied.  
 “Oh, you live in a white house. In those white houses.”  
 “No, in a black house just like you.”  
 “Who lives in the white houses, teacher?”  
 “Some of the Caucasians.” I answered thoughtless—  
 “What are Caucasians? Am I a Caucasian? What am I, teacher?”  
 “You are a Japanese. Japanese are brown people.”  
 “Why do Caucasians live in white houses? Just because they are white? Half dirt, half grass. Half white houses, half black houses. That’s cheating teacher.”  
 What could I say! We flatter ourselves that we have democracy.<sup>112</sup>

In this conversation, we witness the child, Millicent Ogawa, grappling with the stark difference in material circumstances between the white and Japanese residents of

the camp. Despite Reed’s clear affection for Millicent and the fact that she herself does not live in one of the “white houses,” she is not quite able to transcend or even adequately address that social division. On the contrary, Reed reinforces Millicent’s awareness of difference by performing as an agent of racialization when she informs the child that she is Japanese, rather than Caucasian. During the exchange, Reed not only re-inscribes racial definitions on the basis of skin tone, but also associates them with powerful rules of racial behavior, which include physical segregation. Though Reed knows she has been somehow “thoughtless” in ascribing the white houses to the Caucasian residents, she does not acknowledge her own mobility in deciding where to live in camp. In an important moment of self-awareness, Reed regards this encounter as a challenge to her understanding of American democracy. What it also demonstrates, however, is the school’s power as a racializing institution. For Millicent, the broader project of acculturation is accompanied by an awareness and reminder of her ascribed racial identity.

In addition, white women who felt genuine fondness for Japanese Americans did not always relinquish their belief in the value of civic acculturation; indeed, Americanization provided the terms by which they expressed their affection. Describing an education group party, Helen Amerman Manning wrote: “I never expected that I would be dancing with Japanese people as naturally and unconcernedly! There are such fine young people here that we are still marveling at the way they have overcome all handicaps in Americanizing themselves.”<sup>113</sup> Later, she said of a young Nisei man who was leaving camp for New York: “He is a prince—very Americanized.”<sup>114</sup> Though Manning urged her family to welcome him as a visitor into their home, that warm acceptance was conditioned upon the young man’s embrace of mainstream American values.

Even when white teachers were sympathetic to their students’ situations, they also expected them to rise above the consequences of racial discrimination—to perform, perhaps, as early representatives of the model minority. At Amache Elementary School, teachers felt that “much had been accomplished through democratic procedures and practices to combat bitterness” among the student body.<sup>115</sup> Helen Amerman Manning was particularly

110 Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, quoted in Tunnell and Chilcoat, *Children of Topaz*, 19.

111 Jack Matsuoka, *Camp II, Block 211: Daily Life in an Internment Camp* (San Francisco: Japan Publications, 1974).

112 Reed, “Teacher’s Diary.”

113 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, November 16, 1942, ddr-densho-171-8, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

114 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, December 16, 1942, ddr-densho-171-13, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

115 “Summary of the Educational Program of the Amache Elementary School,” 30.

proud of one “thrilling case” she worked with, a teenager whose father had been arrested after Pearl Harbor. The boy had few friends in camp and “could see no future outside in a world of enemies.” What Manning emphasized, however, was the “thrill of having ‘salvaged’ him from quitting and being lost to bitterness.”<sup>116</sup> Though she planned to take concrete steps on the boy’s behalf, such as arranging for him to visit the guidance counselor’s office, the crux of the interaction was about changing the boy’s emotional state rather than his material circumstances. Indeed, the language in which Manning described the exchange—a “case” and a “spiritual experience”—illustrates her understanding of the boy’s situation as a specific pathology that he could nevertheless transcend with her enlightened guidance. In her letters, moreover, she tended to highlight the students she found to be exceptional representatives of their community. One such favorite was a young boy whose vocal talent had the potential to make him the “Marian Anderson or Paul Robeson of his race.” These were the students who, she believed, deserved additional attention and could potentially earn a college scholarship.<sup>117</sup>

It is also important to consider the continuity between camp schools and earlier programs of progressive education for indigenous children. As Thomas James has noted, Lucy W. Adams, the first acting head of the Education Section of the WRA, had directed the Navajo reservation school system in the late 1930s. Indeed, the Indian Service staff in the WRA’s San Francisco Office regarded Japanese American incarcerated as another group of people subject to and dependent on federal authority, like the Native American population.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, assimilation and removal policies had historically been justified by the argument that isolating indigenous children from their families would have a civilizing effect, and, in particular, they had relied on the so-called maternal influences of white women.<sup>119</sup> The legacy of such policies is suggested, for example, in Helen Amerman Manning’s use of the phrase “four wild Indians” to describe a group of Japanese American trouble-makers in her class, whom she had managed to discipline.<sup>120</sup>

Tellingly, moments of resistance could, and did,

occur in the classroom. Jack Matsuoka recalled that, in high school, United States History was a favorite class of his: “We students were always ready to pounce on the teacher’s most casual remarks about liberty, freedom, and equality.”<sup>121</sup> In another instance, Thomas Shigekuni got into a confrontation with his homeroom teacher, Margaret Hopcraft. The teacher had heard him reciting his own pledge of allegiance—“With liberty and justice for all but us in camp”—and sent him to the principal’s office. According to Shigekuni, Hopcraft had insisted, “Thomas, you don’t understand. We’re trying to help you.”<sup>122</sup> Although white women teachers claimed the role of benevolent cultural guides in these situations, their students challenged those representations. Such teachers sometimes interpreted student resistance as a serious rebuff of their sincere efforts in the classroom. For example, Henry Mitayake recalled a thirteen-page civics paper he once wrote about his frustrations with incarceration and American democracy. The teacher—who was popular among the students—called him in after class and expressed her disappointment, saying she had expected him to empathize with the principles taught in the class; instead, it seemed that he was “trying to completely upturn this whole thing that we’re trying to educate you on.” Mitayake refused to rewrite the paper, despite pleading from the principal, and he subsequently received an F and was kicked out of school.<sup>123</sup>

Indeed, for white women who taught in camp schools, their students’ acts of resistance could take on heightened significance. An education report from Tule Lake insisted that a teacher must be able to treat people of Japanese ancestry with kindness and tolerance, even if she had a husband or brother fighting in the South Pacific. Nonetheless, she must also “be expectant of antagonism and open revolt” from students sympathetic with the enemy nation.<sup>124</sup> While it is unclear whether a significant number of white teachers actually harbored such suspicions, they nonetheless navigated a political climate hostile to people of Japanese descent. Wartime circumstances had brought together two groups of people—white women teachers and their Japanese American pupils—who found numerous ways to engage with each other in warm and productive ways. Yet, that relationship remained always an

116 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, December 16, 1942.

117 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, March 11, 1943, ddr-densho-171-17, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

118 James, *Exile Within*, 37.

119 Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), xxxi.

120 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, December 16, 1942.

121 Matsuoka, *Daily Life*.

122 Thomas Shigekuni, interviewed by Martha Nakagawa, August 31, 2010, Densho Visual History Collection, Densho Digital Archive.

123 Henry Mitayake, interviewed by Tom Ikeda.

124 Cook, “Little Black School House.”

unequal one, constrained by deeply ingrained understandings of race and gender and the demands of democratic participation.

### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, many of the white women who took on positions as teachers for the War Relocation Authority—including those who did so out of altruistic yearnings—suffered disappointment. They worked under adverse conditions in the schools, faced with inadequate facilities, a lack of supplies, and overcrowded classrooms. Indeed, teachers could have as many as 60 students to a class, though 30 was the limit in most accredited high schools.<sup>125</sup> According to an education report at Tule Lake, the teachers who volunteered out of sympathy for displaced Japanese American children were the most likely to grow disillusioned; in fact, they experienced the greatest loss of personnel. Other women, who saw teaching as an opportunity for adventure or greater freedom, also grew weary of the adverse conditions and eventually left for other jobs.<sup>126</sup> The Japanese American families that they left behind in the camps lacked the same physical mobility and opportunities to escape their surroundings.

White women like Martha Shoaf, Elaine Clary Stanley, and Helen Amerman Manning were eager to serve as teachers in the camp schools, and many developed genuinely caring relationships with Japanese American students. Some teachers were ambivalent toward, or even critical of, the official aims of the War Relocation Authority—especially toward the end of the wartime incarceration, when frustrations about the teacher shortage and “high-handed” WRA policy continued to mount.<sup>127</sup> However, these teachers were also closely tied with, and even dependent upon, the WRA for their livelihood. Ultimately, they continued to operate within a broader, racially driven project of assimilation, and their classrooms served as sites of both acculturation and racialization.

Rather than being straightforwardly racist or anti-racist, the attitudes, behaviors, and recollections of white women who taught in camp were complex and sometimes contradictory, shaped by the nuances of both race and gender. And in the decades after the war, their Japanese American students and colleagues would remember them in a variety of ways—some good, some bad. Perhaps one of the more poignant assessments comes from Margie Y.

Wong, who attended school at Manzanar as a child. Looking back, Wong suggested that her white teachers “had to have that special feeling to go into camp to teach the so-called ‘enemies,’” like herself and her fellow classmates. “So they—I thought they were special.”<sup>128</sup> Whatever their motivations, and however successfully they were able to overcome the racial barriers between themselves and their students, these teachers had, indeed, chosen a fraught and distinctive path.

125 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, April 10, 1943, ddr-densho-171-20, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

126 “Education Program in the Tule Lake Center of the War Relocation Authority,” Community Management and Education, Tule Lake, Box 98, Reel 114, Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1946: Field Basic Documentation.

127 Letter from Helen Amerman Manning to her family, August 5, 1945, ddr-densho-171-76, Helen Amerman Manning Collection.

128 Margie Y. Wong, interviewed by Richard Potashin, January 21, 2011, Manzanar National Historic Site Collection, Densho Digital Archive.