

Examining Japanese Internment in Children's Fiction

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Abstract

Children's books narrating the experience of Japanese internment in the United States appeared as early as 1945 and continue to be published to the present date. One question of importance regarding these books is historical: does the way that internment is presented change over time? As James E. Young states in *The Texture of Memory*, "to suggest that a society 'represses' memory because it is not in its interest to remember...is to lose sight of the many other social and political forces underpinning national memory." While examining a timeline of children's literature releases, gaps in publishing as well as the presentations themselves connect to events in United States history which may have affected this particular representation. In addition, a lack of changing representation can be analyzed along with various other factors which may affect these books.

How the narratives in these stories change, or don't change, tells us not only about our representation but also about the social climate during publication and how this can affect historical-related media.

Background on Internment

- Even before Pearl Harbor there existed deeply set racial prejudice aimed at Japanese Americans and immigrants, as well as other Asian immigrants.
- Within two months of Pearl Harbor President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, leading to resident West Coast Japanese Americans being forcibly evacuated.¹

- By mid-1942 approximately 120,000 residents were placed into "assembly" and "relocation" centers, and of those, 65% were American citizens who were now being stripped of their rights

Book Requirements

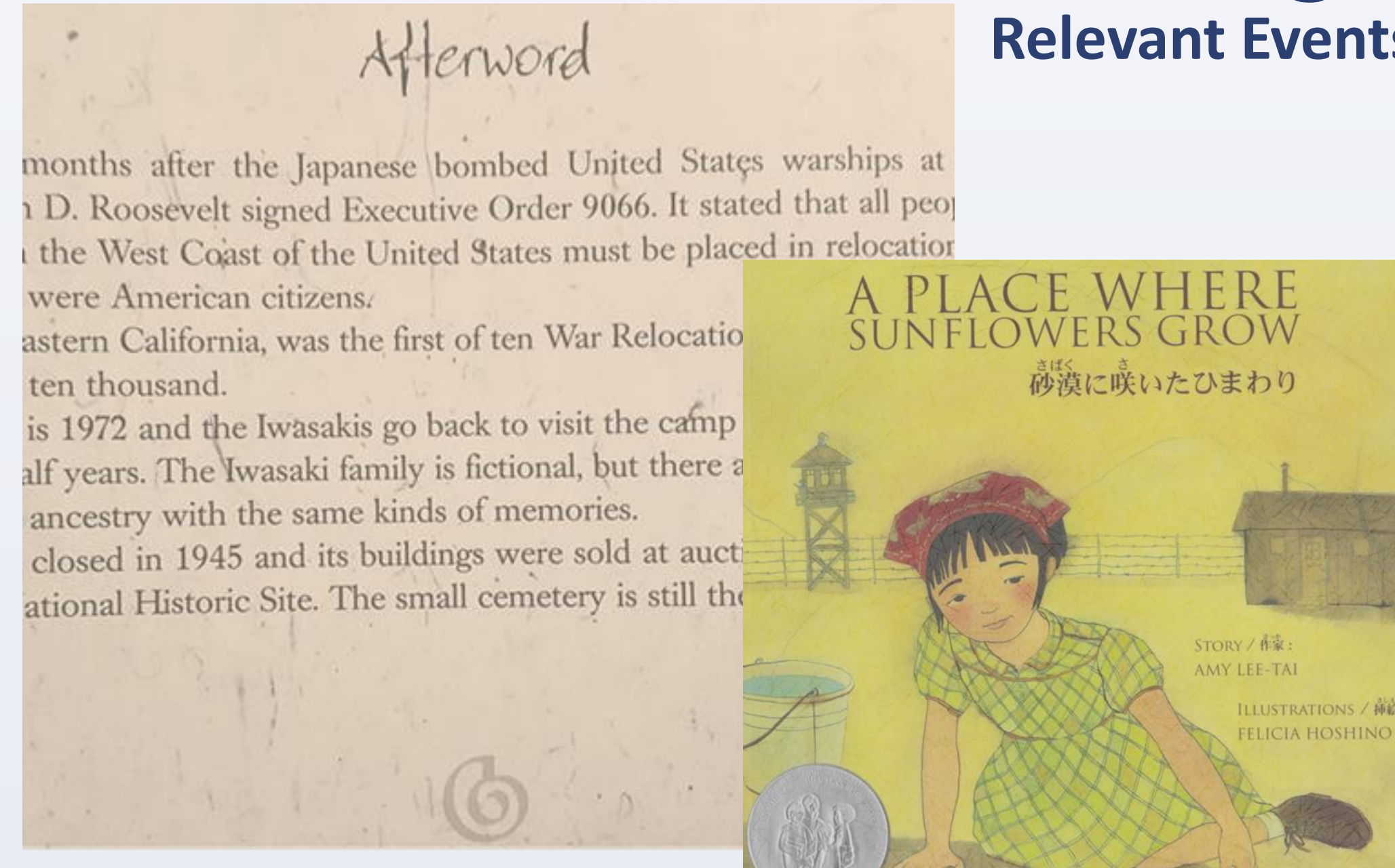
This study examined most, if not all, children's fiction on or relating to the internment of Japanese Americans. Autobiographies, memoirs and non-fiction have been left out, while biography-related fiction has been retained. The logic behind these choices is that its important to note, considering that historical fiction gives more freedom of narrative as compared to factual biographies, what is being presented as history to younger audiences. Overall, 57 books were used as primary sources in this study.

Chronological Examination

Relevant Events and Noted Patterns

The 1940s is when the first children's literature books on Japanese internment were published. These books were released just as internment ended, or in the case of one book, as it was still going on. *Pigtail Twins*, in 1943, is the likely first book which mentions internment in regards to some of its characters; however *The Moved Outers* in 1945 is the first known book to focus on Japanese internment. In the following decades, the amount and kinds of fiction produced on internment varied widely.

A sample of the decades and their notable events which could have influence on publication: **60s:** Civil Rights Social movement. **70s:** Redress movement for internment, inspired by the 60s Civil Rights movement. **80s:** Civil Liberties Act of 1988: Provided a presidential apology and 20,000 payments to surviving former detainees. Wartime defendants' cases reopened, and their convictions overturned. **2000's:** 9/11 – September 11th, 2001. The beginning of the War on Terror. **2010's:** 2017-2019 – Separated children kept in the same former Japanese internment camp.



Above – An example of an afterword to provide historical framework within a children's literature title. (Lee-Tai, Amy, Felicia Hoshino, and Marc Akio Lee. *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*. New York: Children's Book Press, 2006.)

Further Examination

Historical Context and Framing

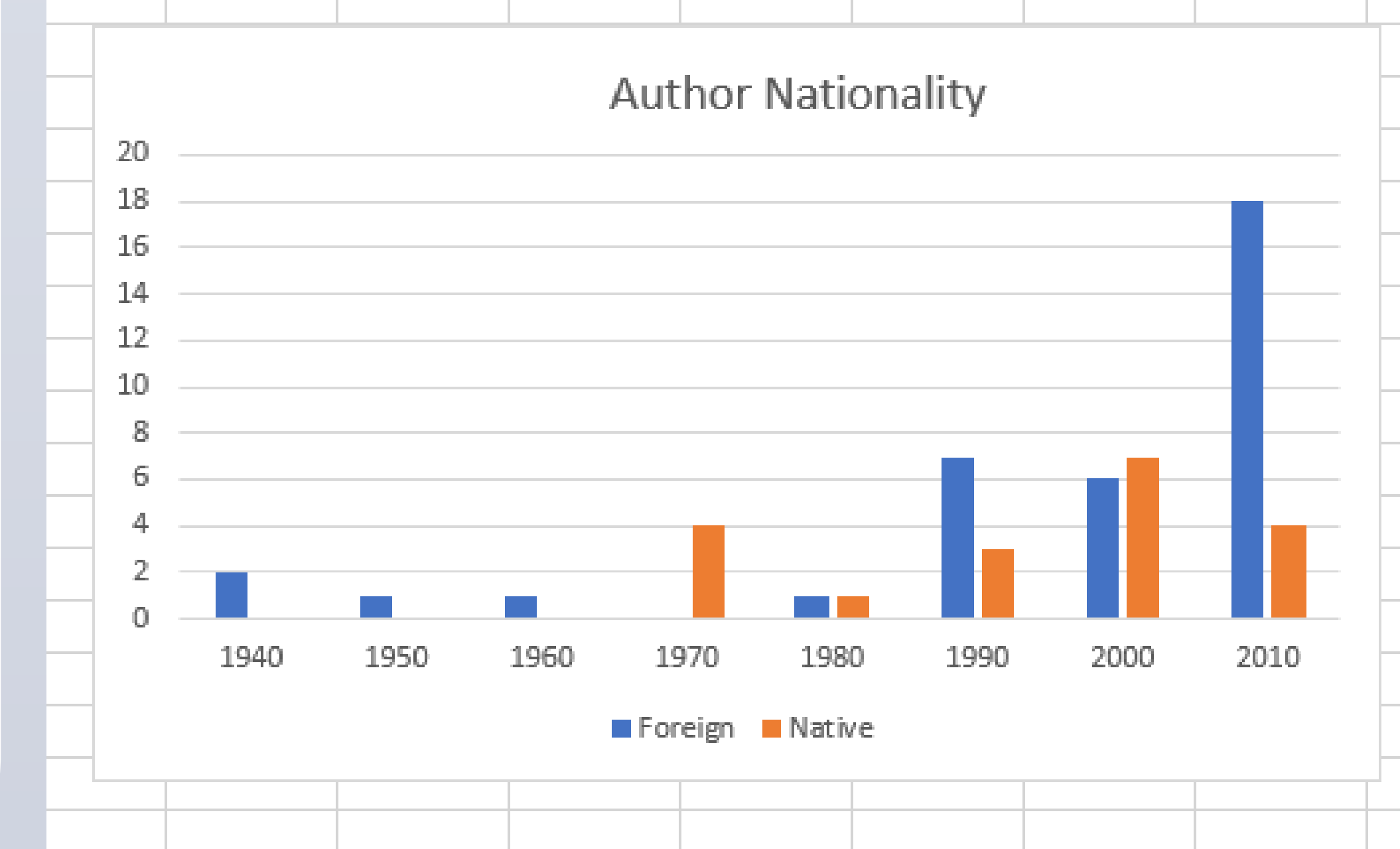
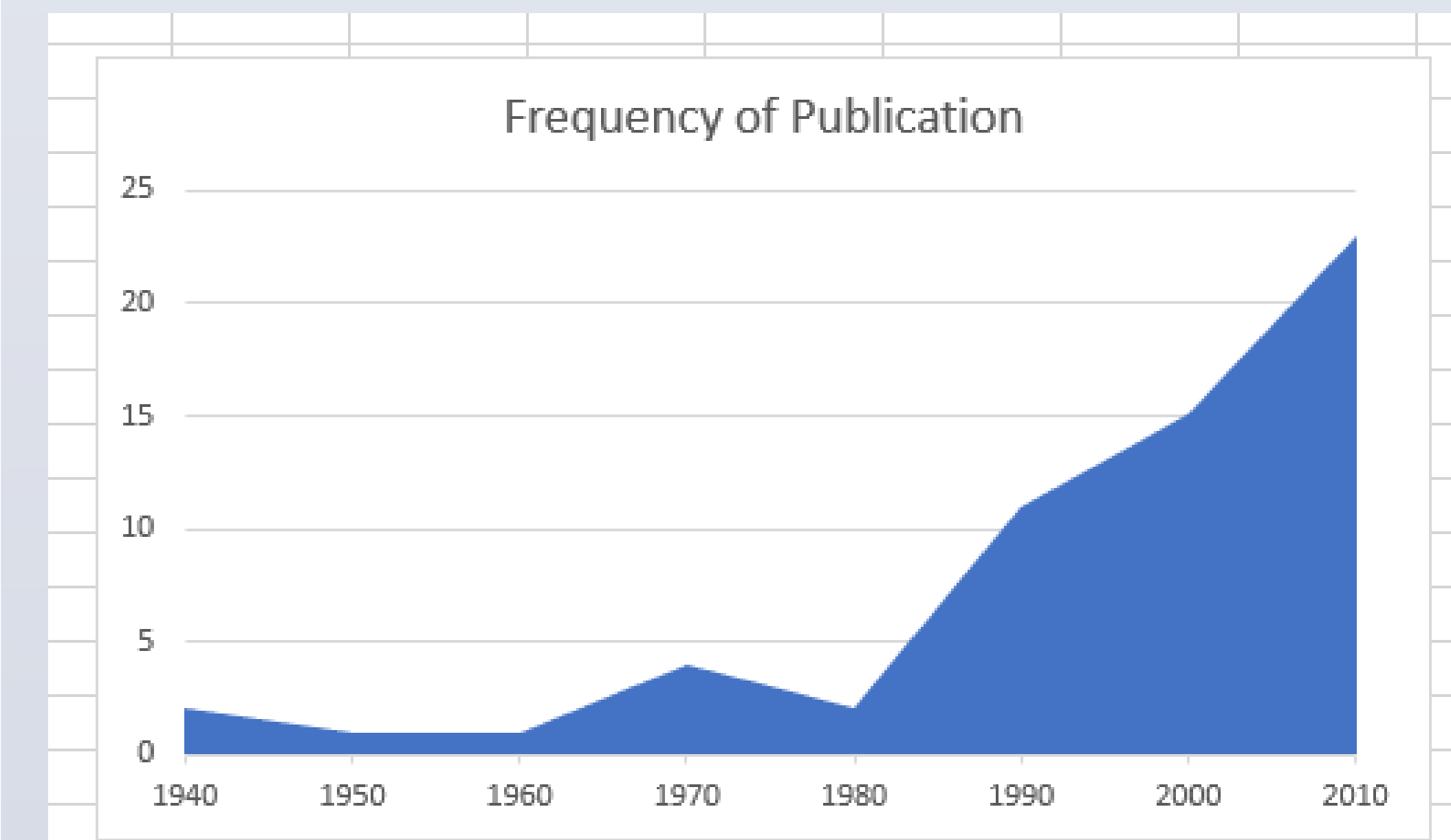
What these stories are commonly missing from context is the deeply ingrained racism present in America, but especially the Western Coast, long before Pearl Harbor ever occurred. The Immigration Act of 1924, which prevented not just Japanese immigrants but all Asian immigrants from immigrating and also from becoming American citizens, is hardly featured. They also fail to give examples of this, often hostile, racism - the best example of which can be seen in newspapers of the time period, often with inflammatory articles. At the same time, children's literature set in the Japanese internment camps seek to employ a scaffolding of historical events in order to give greater authority to works of historical fiction.

Authors

The majority of Japanese authors writing on internment more often than not base their stories on their experiences or their family's experiences. Non-Japanese authors tend to write these stories out of sympathy, or a need to educate the public at large. While some base their stories on real people, few authors are truly historians or work with history in any capacity.

Major Tropes

There are several recurring tropes throughout these fiction titles, the most notable being the "white best friend" trope and the separately interned father. Many of these titles feature a white friend to the protagonist to assuage fears of racism, i.e. "not everyone is racist, _____ is nice to me!" The father is often interned separately from his family for several months or over a year, this is often due to their occupation or renown in the community.



Above – Graphs depicting the frequency of publication and the nationalities of authors. (graph made by Dr. Chika Y. Rosenbaum)

Conclusion

The biggest takeaway from this research is that there is a huge lack of historical context within these titles. There is extremely loose historical framing with the absence of fact within this fiction to properly give the narrative any authority over the described experiences. Aside from this, there is a very clear issue regarding a lack of unique perspectives. When the narrative for over 50 fiction titles in a period of nearly 80 years seemly nearly unchanging, there exists a problem on the part of the author. The biggest problem within this is the emphasis on "American" experiences, referring specifically to the United States. Internment of Japanese Americans also occurred in Canada and South America, with South American internees being sent to the U.S. for internment and barred from returning home. Where are their stories?

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