

Judges' Commentary on "The Dehumanization of Japanese Americans"

by

Rachel Grubbs

"The Dehumanization of Japanese Americans" won second prize in the University of Pittsburgh's 2005/06 Composition Program Writing Contest

In "The Dehumanization of Japanese Americans," Rachel Grubbs responds to an essay assignment that asks her to investigate two historical writings as persuasive, subjective texts: Roger Daniels' *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* and Michelle Malkin's *In Defense of Internment: The Case for 'Racial Profiling' in World War II and the War on Terror*. Grubbs' comparative analysis pays particular attention to how these authors consider the same historical moment but represent it in much different ways, focusing specifically on how the authors' decisions regarding terminology affect and reinforce their interpretations of that history as a whole. By analyzing the nuances of each author's language choices, she concludes that Daniels best represents the injustices faced by interred Japanese Americans:

Both Malkin and Daniels agree that the term internment is not appropriate to describe the actions that were taken against the Japanese Americans during World War II. Internment legally refers to the detention of enemy aliens during wartime. This is where their agreement ends, however. Malkin prefers to describe the process as evacuation and relocation as a means to support her claim that "the national security measures taken during World War II were justifiable," as well as to avert her readers' attention from the violation of human rights that took place (Malkin xxxiii). Conversely, Daniels prefers the term incarceration, which means imprisonment, in order to support his claim that "the wartime abuse of Japanese Americans . . . was merely a link in a chain of racism . . ." (Daniels 3). He argues

that those interned had the right to a court hearing; therefore, since prosecutions were nearly eliminated from the equation, internment could not possibly be the correct term (Daniels 27). Daniels' choice of words also acts to focus his readers' attention on the inhumanity toward, and robbing of sacredness from, the Japanese Americans.

According to Malkin, her book "offers a defense of the most reviled wartime policies in American history: the evacuation, relocation, and internment of people of Japanese descent during World War II" (Malkin xiii). In order to argue her position, Malkin strategically makes claims and uses rhetorical language to downplay the violation of human rights and dignity that occurred. The title of Chapter 9 in her book is "The Myth of the American 'Concentration Camp'" (Malkin 95). The word myth literally means an "invented story," or "an imaginary or fictitious event" (Thorndike 738). Malkin's use of this word is an attempt to persuade her readers that this event did not happen at all, at least according to how her critics see it, diverting her readers' attention away from the wrongs that were committed. The term concentration camp denotes "a camp where political enemies, prisoners of war, or members of minority groups are held by government order" (Thorndike 230). In reality, this term is accurate to describe the places to which Japanese Americans were sent. However, as Malkin quickly asserts, that term also connotes Nazi death camps, the Holocaust, and inhumane treatment. Thus, throughout the chapter, the author chooses to use alternative phrases to describe the areas, such as assembly centers and relocation facilities. These expressions do not evoke negative images and powerful emotions as does that of concentration camp. The use of these terms acts as a barrier through which the

inhumane treatment is shielded. According to Malkin, the images used today to depict the relocation camps are equated with those that portray the Nazi concentration camps, most likely to evoke pity from the audience. She objects to this approach, however, claiming that the two cannot accurately be compared.

In this excerpt, Grubbs deftly pinpoints the purpose and argument of each historical text and explores how the two converge and diverge. She draws attention to how both authors deploy terms such as "internment," "myth," and "incarceration" to different effect as a means to offer new readings of the treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II. Grubbs does not simply highlight the differences between the two histories or the shifts in word choice, however. Rather she considers how these decisions about language reinforce the overarching argument of each text and lead readers to entirely different understandings of the internment events. Her work reveals how the strategies of comparison and rhetorical analysis can yield insightful and thought-provoking results when applied to historical writing.

To read the full text of Rachel Grubbs' essay, [click here](#)