DOROTHEA LANGE

Japanese Internment Detainees, Hayward, California, May 8, 1942
photographic print, 11 x 17 in

courtesy: Jane Diamond and the National Archive

Bearing Witness:

Dan White interviews Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston on war, ancestry, and the enduring power of memory

"It's a dead issue ... People are issued out."

A New York City-based literary agent made this glib pronouncement in the early '70s when he found out that Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and her husband, the novelist James D. Houston, wanted to collaborate on Farewell to Manzanar*, chronicling her family's relocation to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans.*

Dead issue? This was news to Jeanne, who was opening up to her husband about her family's time at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in a heat-blasted piece of Owens Valley near the Sierra Nevada range. She was one of 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry—most of them citizens—who ended up in relocation camps after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in 1942, declaring certain areas of the United States as military zones "from which any or all persons may be excluded."

As an adult, Jeanne told her writer husband what it was like to watch her father burn a Japanese flag in a fruitless effort to protect his family from relocation, the sounds of a dust storm as the bus made its way into the desert, the beating and shaming of internees branded as traitors or "inu" by their own people, the armed guards, the heat, and tumbleweeds piled on a barbed-wire fence.

Ignoring the agent's reaction, the Houstons began their now-legendary collaboration inside their Victorian house overlooking a sandy beach and bird-filled lagoon near the Santa Cruz city limits.

As a seven-year-old in camp, Jeanne was a camera, recording impressions and details for later use. But she'd stuffed many of her best stories in a mental attic with a Do Not Enter sign on the door. It's hard to access memories when you've forgotten you have them, or have no desire to dust them off. Her husband drew her out. With a journalist's patience, and a novelist's love of story, he pressed forward with questions and would not relent when Jeanne turned to him and asked him, "Why on earth do you want to know that?"

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the resulting book, Farewell to Manzanar*, which has sold over a million copies, and wound up on several "best memoirs of the 20th century" lists. Last year, the nonprofit Cal Humanities chose* Farewell *and four other books from more than 300 titles, encouraging young readers and librarians to rediscover the work. Since publication, the book has become much more than the best-read account of an American tragedy. It's also a foundational text for the author, who revisits Manzanar thematically while finding new ways to tell the story.*

This winter, I met with Jeanne to talk about her work's enduring power. She opened a beveled glass door and led me into the Victorian. She has high cheekbones, flowing dark hair and a smile as radiant as the one you see on the 1973 author's photo for Farewell To Manzanar*. Redwood planks creaked as she headed for the living room. Hand-carved railings set off an intimidating display of books, row after row of them, rising to the ceiling. The house felt like a hard-earned place of refuge. This might have something to do with Patty Reed Lewis, who survived the winter of 1846-7 with the Donner Party. Lewis spent her last ten years in the house.*

James Houston, her husband of fifty-two years, died in 2009 but you sense his creative presence in every corner. He still informs her work. Every year, Jeanne continues to build on the scaffolding they created with Farewell to Manzanar*. While the memoir hinges on the impact of relocation and incarceration on her proud father,* Beyond Manzanar *(1985), a collection of short pieces, shifts the focus to her mother,*

while her novel, The Legend of Fire Horse Woman *(2003) adds Native American traditions and Kabuki stylings to her Manzanar tale.*

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston spoke with Catamaran about Farewell To Manzanar's *enduring power, her return to the ruins of the old camp, and her dreams of shaping her bestselling memoir into a musical.*

Dan White: The book started with a conversation you had with your nephew, nearly twenty years after your internment camp experience.

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston: My nephew was born in camp. He was a student at Berkeley. He asked me, 'Auntie, I was born in Manzanar. I don't know anything about this place. What can you tell me about it?' I said, 'do you ask your parents?' He said, 'no, they won't talk about it.' I began to tell him, but all I talked about was, 'oh, we played baseball, we ate this food,' very trifling stuff, but he looked at me, and because he was of the '60s, he said, 'God, Auntie, you are talking about being in a prison camp like it was nothing. What do you feel about that?"'

It was the first time somebody asked me how I felt, the first time I was ready to go there, and I did, and that's when I just got hysterical. I started to cry, and my poor nephew thought, 'oh my god, what have I done to my Auntie?' I said, 'well, I can't talk to you about this, but I will write something for the family—*just* for our family.' At the time I had twenty-something nieces and nephews, and seven nephews born in camp, and none of them knew anything about their place of birth, so I decided I would write about it.

DW: How much did your husband (James D. Houston) know about your internment camp experience before you started working on the book together?

JWH: We were married fifteen years at this point, we had been together five years before that, and he never knew about this camp I'd grown up in. He knew some vague thing about an internment camp but he just never put it together.

DW: You wrote *Farewell To Manzanar* together. How did the collaboration work?

JWH: We had the perfect partnership. We met at San Jose State University (James was studying drama at the time, and Jeanne was studying sociology and journalism). We were the only inter-racial couple there in 1950, out of 10,000 students. When you get to my age and look back on your life, you ask yourself, 'what is the significance, aside from having beautiful children and so forth?' It's not that everybody has to have this big reason or purpose for being born into this life. But my thought was that meeting Jim was not an accident. It was destiny.

At first, when I started writing about Manzanar, I was a basket case. I would go to the beach and be in tears all the time. I finally said to Jim, 'if you could help me with this project …' He said, 'what project?' I told him, and he was shattered. He said, 'I have known you all these years and I had no idea you carried this around with you. Let me help you. Let me work with you on this.'

There is no way I could have written the book without Jim. It was so raw and so suppressed. He would ask me questions. One of his great gifts was knowing how to put himself in that place. He knew this was going to be a book about my father—a deep emotional thing for me. Often, as writers, you will go back to that place and find someone in your life who directs you for some reason. Obviously that was my father, or the loss of my father, when they took him away to prison and he came back a very changed man.

DW: In your book, you write that your father did not die at Manzanar but that life was, essentially, over for him there. You mention his enormous pride, and the multiple shaming—being accused of helping Japanese submarines while he was a fisherman in Santa Monica, getting shipped out to a federal penitentiary in North Dakota, being unable to stop his family from going into a relocation camp, and being branded an 'inu' or informer at Manzanar.

JWH: Yes. It was the end for him. That was the last hope. He was always such a hopeful guy. He believed in the American dream. He always wanted to start over; he tried everything from being a dental technician to doing legal work for Japanese people. My father just had the chance here he never would have had in Japan. He just had such a tremendous spirit. He never kowtowed. He never would go into an American restaurant if he thought they were not going to serve him. My father would not dare to be humiliated. He was a young college student when he came here, but in camp, by then, he was too old to start over. He was an educated man. He believed in American democracy. I think that was a huge, huge blow for him, to be imprisoned, and for his family to be put in camp.

DW: Last year, the California Council for the Humanities chose *Farewell to Manzanar* as a California Reads selection. What was it like to revisit this book four decades after it was first released?

JWH: Last year I went throughout the whole state visiting various libraries and a few schools. What was so interesting was the change in the audience, and their response. When *Farewell to Manzanar* first came out, I was just terrified because this was the first book on that subject matter. When we went all the way up to Seattle and we would go on these radio shows, I could hardly talk because we would get racist people who would call in and say, 'what are you talking about? What about what *you people* did to our boys in the Philippines?' They could just not make the distinction then between Americans of Japanese ancestry and the enemy. This was forty years ago and there was still a lot of anti-Asian sentiment on the West Coast. So to go back again, forty years later and to be speaking mostly at libraries, to book readers, that was fascinating because the people were totally different in their response. 'Oh my goodness. How could we have done that? This is so against the Constitution.'

DW: When the book was first published, you delved into a topic that many other Americans of Japanese ancestry avoided talking about.

JWH: You worry about people saying,'oh, that wasn't my experience or, 'shut up.' It was such a deeply rooted emotional experience.

DW: You are a California native, but when you were growing up, you felt a pressure to live up to an American ideal, during and even after your internment experience. You've spoken about 'super-Americanism'—this notion that Japanese Americans after World War II felt pressured to act or dress a certain way because they felt hated or invisible.

JWH: If you are Asian, unless you develop amnesia, your background, your history, and your ancestry are built into you. Then you come to America and you become hyphenated. As with almost everybody else, especially in an immigrant country like the U.S., we wanted to be 'American,' although we didn't know what American was except what we saw in movies and on television. So that's when you say, 'I want to be a super-American.' You think, 'if don't act like that, they will put me in a concentration camp.' You start identifying with something that you are not until you get to the point where you say, 'oh my God.' Usually in your late teens, you start figuring out why you are who you are, and why you need to be proud of it. I speak about it all the time. It was actually Martin Luther King, Jr. and the whole Black Power movement that awakened all these people—yellow, brown, Jews, and also white people who were not part of the dominant group. That is when people started looking at themselves and saying, 'I have value, too,' and started researching their identity and being proud of it. Up to that time, although we could not bleach out our skin it was all about the Anglo-American ideal: the Doris Day, the Betty Grable and so forth. We owe so much to the Black Power movement. It had to be really ferocious to begin to wake people up, to say 'hey look at us. Really, really see us.'

DW: Did your book cause a movement in its own right?

JWH: I don't think it caused a movement per se, but I do think it caused an awakening for other Japanese Americans, that they will read this and think, 'well, maybe this is not my story but it got published so it's not just me.' Getting it into the limelight was hope for other people.

DW: The loss of innocence was such a gripping part of the book; you were just a kid at Manzanar.

JWH: Yes. When you are seven years old—and my mother's not going to explain war to me, she wouldn't have been able to explain what this was all about—all you know is the image in your mind, this bleak desert. We were coming from Santa Monica, where our family lived, and the wind was blowing sand against the bus, and people were just milling around out there in the camp. It was just astonishing. And I remember asking my mother after we'd been in camp for a while, 'Why are we in this camp? Why are we in this place?' And she said, "Because we're Japanese.' Now, she didn't say, 'it is because we are at war,' or 'America is at war with Japan' because at that age I would not have understood the concept of war and so forth, so she just said, 'it is because we're Japanese.' I realized later as an adult that from that moment on, I perceived that it was not only bad to be Japanese. It was criminal because we were locked up behind barbed wire.

DW: *Farewell to Manzanar* is powerful because it speaks so clearly about camp experience, all these on-the-ground details about day-to-day life in Manzanar and its effect on families, but fantastical elements break through. I sensed that fairy tales were a way of interpreting life in camp when you were a child.

JWH: You know, I never even thought of it until you just brought it up, but of course, imagine yourself as a child in this absolutely strange situation, living in these barracks, like living in an army base. You can't go beyond the barbed wire because there are these rattlesnakes out there and dragons, and you have these Indians, Indian ghosts, in the camp. My God, my imagination must have gone crazy! That is how I survived. I grew up in a household where there weren't books. My father was a fisherman with ten kids. In camp, I was first exposed to books, especially fairy tales. The Quakers donated truckloads of books. In camp we had twelve or thirteen barracks and a big firebreak, so if a fire broke out, the whole camp wouldn't go up. The trucks dumped these books in the firebreak so we had these huge mounds of books. It would rain on them, the sun would burn down on them. I would pass them by, we would play war with those books, go in and throw the books at each other. No one thought to read them. One day I was walking by, the sun was shining, and I saw these gold leaves flitting. It was a book about Rapunzel letting her hair down. The pages were gilted with gold. It was sparkly. I picked up the book, and read it, and got all the fairy tale books I could find. That's how I began to read.

DW: As in old fairy tales, the spirits can be benevolent and also very frightening. In your novel, *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*, (2003) you have a scene with a little girl who is respecting the boundaries of camp because she's scared of the spirits out there.

JWH: They told us it was filled with rattlesnakes. They told us, 'there is a fountain of youth out there, filled with fish and everything, but to get to that you have to walk past all these rattlesnakes and scorpions.' Nothing was just free out there. You had to go through all these steps to get to it like in *The Hobbit*. It must have been the books I read that told me that.

DW: Those fairy tale and fantastical elements are brought to the forefront in *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*, but you've also added the traditions and legends of the Paiutes, who once lived on the land that Manzanar later occupied.

JWH: Their spirits were there. They still are. They were there for centuries before we went there. In one square mile of Manzanar, archaeologists have gone down through three layers of artifacts. The first one, way down, are the Indians who lived on that piece of land, then the white settlers who planted the apple and the pear orchards—they left because Los Angeles stole the Owens Valley water in the 1920s. These people were going bust. They left their artifacts, and on top of that they put up Manzanar.

DW: I was going to ask you about the strong role nature plays in your work. In your writing, the dust storms of Manzanar seem like living beings.

JWH: I think it is a cultural thing, because Japanese culture is very nature-bound. Nature is so precious. Not only that, but in Shintoism, everything is a god. All these gods up there—rocks, rivers, streams. It is a kind of animistic

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Japanese Girl with Internment Tag, Hayward, California, May 8, 1942
photographic print, 11 x 17 in

courtesy: Jane Diamond (pictured) and the National Archive

thing. I grew up with that. If you see nature like that, everything is alive, and you have to be much more respectful. I do believe everything has spirit.

DW: And you have some female characters that are literally larger than life in your novel, including a grandmother who is a kind of giant.

JWH: Yes. When I started on the novel, I wanted to write about the immigrant women and their different personas and lives. That was taken from life; I didn't make that stuff up. But there is also a larger-than life-aspect in *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*. I wrote the novel in five books because there are five acts in a Kabuki drama and the characters are bigger than life because that is how characters are in Kabuki drama. The heroine is *really* a heroine. The hero is *really* a hero. It's over the top. Not everyone is going to pick up on that. With Kabuki drama you could make anything happen. It is not totally realistic.

DW: You've lived in Santa Cruz since the early '60s. It has been a home base for you and your creative projects for most of your creative life.

JWH: We'd been coming here even before then, in the 1950s. Jim was a surfer. We came to Santa Cruz because it's by the ocean. We were driving around and we saw this house which was all boarded up. They were going to tear it down. Jim said, 'let's find out who owns the house. Maybe they will let us live there and I will help whoever lives there fix it up.'

DW: That must have been intimidating.

JWH: I wasn't afraid to fix up this house because hey, I used to live in a barracks! All we had was this empty room with planks and holes in it that we had to make livable.

DW: You mentioned wanting to go back to Manzanar to develop a new novel.

JWH: I can't talk about it because it's not in progress yet. It is in here (she points to her head). But I will tell you what I am doing. I am working on a musical film of *Farewell to Manzanar*. Wouldn't that be wild? I've got such a really good idea. It would be a musical movie but it would be two stories. The narrative line would be going to camp, but there would be a story within a story. In a musical you also have to have the lighter side. That would be perfect for *Farewell To Manzanar* because we did have a musical director, Louis Frizzell, who came and worked with high school students to put on really good musicals. In film you can do a lot of fantastical things that are difficult to do on stage. It will be very interesting artistically.

DW: Clearly, Manzanar still has a hold on your imagination. Something keeps bringing you back.

JWH: In my mind the energy never leaves the place. I have only been back three times and it's such a weird experience. There is something unearthly about the place for me. I took my daughter Cori back there with me once, and she was videotaping. We went back to the block where I lived. I figured out where it was. They left all the ruins there. I found where the hospital was. I went to the exact spot where my barracks were. When my father came to Manzanar, he started taking care of the pear trees and brought them back to life. They were struggling. When I returned, they had a water spigot up there. I could see the trees.

Jeanne Houston's book *Farewell to Manzanar* (with James D. Houston), has become an American classic. Her other publications include *Don't Cry, It's Only Thunder* (with Paul G. Hensler), *Beyond Manzanar and Other Views of Asian-American Womanhood*, and *The Legend of Fire Horse Woman*. She married James D. Houston in 1957, and they were literary collaborators until his death in 2009.

Dan White's first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, published by HarperCollins in 2008, was a Los Angeles Times "Discovery" selection. Dan has his MFA from Columbia University.

BELLE YANG

Kite, 1997
Gouache, 16 x 22 in

courtesy: the artist