

9. LIMITS

EXPLORE YOUR IDEAS

1. Why do you think the poet called her poem “Can’t Tell”?

2. Who are the parents speaking to when they say, “We are Chinese”?
Why do they repeat the phrase?

3. Compare the stereotyping of Asians after the attack on Pearl Harbor to the experiences of Zaki Barzinji, a Muslim, after 9/11 (Student Book, p. 10).
What are the similarities and differences between the two examples?

What to Do

Read the introduction and the poem, then answer the questions on the facing page.

In December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, causing the United States to declare war on Japan. Acting on fears against Japanese Americans, the U.S. government approved the removal of all Japanese Americans—young and old, aliens and citizens alike—from the West Coast. The evacuees were taken inland to isolated internment camps. To the horror of many Chinese Americans, popular newspapers and magazines in 1942 offered “tips” on how to tell the difference between a person of Chinese and Japanese descent. In her poem, “Can’t Tell,” Nellie Wong explores how those stories affected her parents and other Chinese Americans.

Can’t Tell

When World War II was declared
on the morning radio,
we glued our ears, widened our eyes.
Our bodies shivered.

A voice said
Japan was the enemy,
Pearl Harbor a shambles
and in our grocery store
in Berkeley, we were suspended
next to the meat market
where voices hummed,
valises, pots and pans packed,
no more hot dogs, baloney,
pork kidneys.

We children huddled on wooden planks
and my parents whispered:
We are Chinese, we are Chinese.
Safety pins anchored,
our loins ached.

Shortly our Japanese neighbors vanished
and my parents continued to whisper:
We are Chinese, we are Chinese.

We wore black arm bands,
put up a sign
in bold letters.

—by Nellie Wong