Valley of the Heart takes place in California’s Santa Clara Valley, where the Yamaguchis and Montaños, proud immigrants with strong ties to their Japanese and Mexican roots, struggle to provide a future for their American-born children amidst growing racism and fear. Just as their oldest children, Thelma and Benjamin, secretly fall in love, the attack on Pearl Harbor throws the families into turmoil and the country into war. When the Yamaguchis are incarcerated in one of the U.S. concentration camps, the families’ allegiances are tested and the two young lovers must find a way to stay loyal to each other—and their country.

Luis Valdez describes Valley of the Heart as a memory play. Eighty eight-year-old Benjamin Montaño is “both storyteller and protagonist” as he revisits the events that changed his life, and America, forever. This story of resilience and solidarity in the face of injustice challenges us to revisit a painful chapter in our country’s history.

How do you keep your dignity amidst injustice?
THE YAMAGUCHIS

THELMA: Eldest daughter, she is Nisei, or second-generation U.S.-born. Works on her family’s ranch.

ICHIRO: Father, he is Issei, Japanese born individual who immigrated to the U.S. Unable to technically “own” his ranch due to the Alien Land Law, he purchased the farm under U.S.-born son Joe’s name.

HANA: Mother, she is Issei and arrived from Japan in 1915 to marry Ichiro as an Omiai, or Japanese picture bride. Works on the ranch while raising her family.

JOE: Youngest son and a student at UC Berkeley.

CALVIN SAKAMOTO: Joe’s close friend and college roommate.

THE MONTAÑOS

BENJAMIN: Eldest U.S.-born son. Works as a foreman at the ranch.

CAYETANO: Father, leaves Calexico, CA for San Jose with his wife and children after the Great Depression. Works as a sharecropper and lives on the ranch.

PAULA: Mother, Mexican-born, leaves her country during the Mexican Revolution. Works on the ranch while raising her family.

TITO: Youngest son, U.S.-born and has grown up on the ranch.

MARUCA: Youngest sibling and only daughter, U.S.-born and has grown up on the ranch.

“Your mother once told me Yamaguchi means ‘Mountain Pass.’ Do you know what Montaño means? ‘Highlander.’ The valleys are great, but it’s only by climbing mountains that we can see where we’re going... From up here I can see our future.”

–Benjamin Montaño

STANDING IN SOLIDARITY

When thousands of Japanese were sent to concentration camps, there are reports of Latinx, black, and Filipino families demonstrating solidarity by taking care of their ranches and homes to prevent the government from confiscating their properties. Though there are no exact numbers on how many people stepped in to support the Japanese community and many of the accounts have been shared through oral histories, people like the Montaños helped to ensure that families like the Yamaguchis could eventually return to their homes.
“Who would’ve thought my family would become victims of such hateful rhetoric in the land of the free? I was born here, raised here, went to school here. Don’t they realize we’re just as patriotic as anybody else?”

“We pledge allegiance to the flag every damned day behind barbed wire... What are we swearing allegiance to?... What kind of Americanism is that?”

“Why is it important to remember and examine our country’s history? What similarities can you see between the way immigrants were viewed in 1942 and today?”

“Do you ever wish to be free to serve your community, to fellow humans? How are you called to be of service to your community, to fellow humans?”

“Why is it important to remember and examine our country’s history? What similarities can you see between the way immigrants were viewed in 1942 and today?”

“I don’t want to die; I just want to do what’s right.”

“it’s become really obvious they need bilingual nurses. So I’m getting some medical training and finally going to war—which is a curse.”

“Thousands of Latinas also joined the war efforts working as “Rosita Women’ in defense industry factories. Many Latinas also served in hospitals, nurses, Red Cross aides, and as members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC).”

“Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, amidst wartime hysteria and an already growing xenophobia (anti-Japanese sentiments), President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Japanese Removal Act. This law ordered the imprisonment of approximately 120,000 Japanese individuals in concentration camps across the United States. The majority—90%—were born in the U.S. All people of Japanese lineage, including children, the elderly, and people who were even 1/16 Japanese, were rounded up and taken to army-run camps built by the War Relocation Authority. Conditions in the camps were inhumane, medical support was minimal, and many developed and died from illnesses and environmental conditions. The Nisei people were both resilient and creative, building shelved units from found wood scraps and creating classes honoring cultural rituals and schools for young people.”

“DIGNITY AMIDST INJUSTICE

The Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited Japanese and other Asians from owning farmland. The Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 placed limits on the number of people of Japanese lineage allowed into the United States, based on quotas. The Japanese were ineligible for citizenship and could not become naturalized citizens. This law ordered the imprisonment of approximately 120,000 Japanese individuals in concentration camps across the United States. The majority—90%—were born in the U.S. All people of Japanese lineage, including children, the elderly, and people who were even 1/16 Japanese, were rounded up and taken to army-run camps built by the War Relocation Authority. Conditions in the camps were inhumane, medical support was minimal, and many developed and died from illnesses and environmental conditions. The Nisei people were both resilient and creative, building shelved units from found wood scraps and creating classes honoring cultural rituals and schools for young people.”
“Today they’re complaining about all the illegals and building jagged steel fences on the border to keep all the Mexicans out, but it’s too late. California is now half Latino and Asian. And there’s not a damn thing they can do about it. Shikata ga nai.” —Benjamin Montaño

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