

Into the Badlands: Japanese American Incarceration and the Environment

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States not only declared war on the Empire of Japan, but also began the forced relocation of thousands of Japanese American citizens from the Pacific Coast to concentration camps in the inland West. Over the course of the next four years, the experience of Japanese Americans in these camps was characterized not only by scant wages and arduous work weeks, but also by the harsh climate of Western United States. For Japanese Americans uprooted from the balmy Pacific Coast, the hostile alien landscape shaped everything from their mental and physical health to their overall perception of imprisonment, often compounding their feelings of homesickness and anger. Thus, the environment was not merely a site of Japanese American incarceration, but an instrument of social control manipulated by the War Relocation Authority (WRA): administrators situated the camps in strategic locations designed to both isolate Japanese Americans and secure their labor in the name of patriotism and the public good. Thus, Japanese American internment was more than just an atrocious civil rights violation, but an instance of environmental injustice where one group used the natural world as a tool to assert authority over another.

Even before the war began, deep-seated racial prejudice towards Japanese Americans abounded in the United States. Despite the fact that the US government apportioned Japanese immigrants land considered to be barren or economically unviable, many Japanese Americans were able to find success on these “marginal lands to which they were generally restricted.”¹ The fact that some Japanese Americans were able to prosper in these conditions only served to fuel anti-Asian sentiments and led to an influx of xenophobic legislation to deal with the economic and racial threat of the Japanese. For example, in response to Japanese Americans gaining

¹ Fujita-Rony, Thomas. “Arizona and Japanese American History: The World War II Colorado River Relocation Center.” *Journal of the Southwest* 47, no. 2 (2005): 209–32

control over more agricultural land, California passed an Alien Land Law in 1913 prohibiting those who were ineligible for US citizenship, chiefly first-generation Japanese immigrants, from owning or leasing land.² This, along with numerous other immigration restriction laws, was indicative of the overall climate of repression towards Japanese immigrants in the pre-war United States. However, just a few decades later, as Japanese Americans were torn from their farms on the West Coast and placed in concentration camps, this racial prejudice would become even more explicit in the WRA's exploitation of the environment as an instrument of subjugation.

In the early stages of Japanese internment, the WRA was deliberate in its site selections and took numerous environmental factors into consideration including water supply, climate, and crop suitability. In a 1942 report to members of Congress, the WRA noted that “despite the general scarcity of available water and despite other limitations imposed by climate and soil, [our] teams are finding a number of reasonably promising sites.”³ As it would happen, severe storms and extreme temperatures were some of the chief complaints made by interned Japanese Americans, including Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki who noted temperatures in excess of 154 degrees in one of his letters to a librarian back home.⁴ Another internee, Katherine Tasaki, recounted the fear she felt during a rainstorm that knocked out power and blew the roofs off the barracks before concluding her letter with a remark that if she had a diary, she would write that “the food is awful/The heats terrific/Whirlwind--dust/ Home sick/This is only half.”⁵ In this sense, the

² Lillquist, Karl. “Farming the Desert: Agriculture in the World War II-Era Japanese American Relocation Centers.” *Agricultural History* 84, no. 1 (2010): 74–104

³ War Relocation Authority. Informal Report (1942): <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/memorandum-milton-s-eisenhower-members-congress-april-20-1942-forwarding?documentid=NA&pagenumber=2>

⁴ Letter to Clara Breed from Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki. August 27, 1943: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31JH/>

⁵ Letter to Clara Breed from Katherine Tasaki. July 24, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31DN/>

environment became a tool of repression the WRA wielded to create a negative perception of the relocation camps and, as Katherine noted, fuel feelings of homesickness for the temperate California coast among internees. The WRA was well-aware of the abominable conditions internees would face in the camps and chose to build their initial facilities in these hostile Western environmental in spite of the climate, or perhaps even because of it.

In that same 1942 report, the WRA provided a synopsis of a conference in Salt Lake City between the states that would potentially house internment camps, and nearly all of them expressed concerns about the presence of internees within their borders; thus, the WRA mandated that all camps be located far from places of “strategic importance.”⁶ This was a euphemism for land most considered to be uninhabitable, largely because of the harsh climate and scarce water noted earlier in the report. The WRA was not only aware of the environment they were placing internees in, but used it to advance their purpose of locating Japanese Americans as far away from civilization as possible, deep in the interior of the United States.

As a note, aside from the impact the arid climate had on internees themselves, the presence of the camps served to amplify water resource depletion in the region: though irrigation made the agricultural intensification of the land possible, it drew from and rapidly depleted already sparse water sources since internees were essentially farming in the desert.⁷ In fact, the climate’s effect on the agricultural success of the camps seemed to be more important to the WRA than its impact on the internees. In a quarterly report from 1942, the WRA noted that “agricultural work at the [Colorado River] center was retarded by the ... wilting summer heat.”⁸

⁶ War Relocation Authority. Informal Report (1942)

⁷ Lillquist, Karl

⁸ War Relocation Authority. Second Quarterly Report (1942): <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/report-second-quarterly-report-july-1-september-30-1942-war-relocation?documentid=NA&pagenumber=53>

Though the report implied that internees were suffering in the extreme temperatures, it only did so in the context that it was slowing their progress in cultivating the land.

Furthermore, after the Salt Lake City conference, the WRA also announced the requirement that “all relocation centers must be located on public land where improvement at public expense will become public, not private, assets.”⁹ In other words, US agriculture and war efforts were to benefit greatly from the labor of an imprisoned racial minority, and not for the first time. Aside from producing food for the war, the WRA believed that Japanese Americans could labor on public works projects like irrigation, soil conservation, and flood control; in fact, Japanese Americans played a pivotal role in making the areas surrounding the relocation camps more hospitable, both through their cultivation of the land and installation of irrigation systems.¹⁰

These programs were not unlike those of the New Deal, save a few key differences. First, the working wages and conditions for Japanese Americans were abysmal. With internees working 14 hour days for earnings less than a third of the 1942 minimum wage, the WRA severely degraded more than just the living conditions in the camps.¹¹ Furthermore, the US government exploited Japanese American labor in the name of patriotism, claiming that internees should have been jumping at the opportunity to contribute to the war effort.¹² Apparently, it was a sign of dignity and a noble sacrifice for them to be kicked off of their farms and relocated to concentration camps. Above all, what set internees’ work on soil erosion and land cultivation apart from the New Deal programs was the involuntary nature of their labor: the US government forced Japanese Americans into simultaneous imprisonment and military service.

⁹ War Relocation Authority. Informal Report (1942)

¹⁰ Fujita-Rony, Thomas

¹¹ Postcard to Clara Breed from Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki. November 11, 1943: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31K/>; Letter to Clara Breed from Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki. December 1, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31AP/>

¹² War Relocation Authority. Relocation of Japanese Americans (1943): <http://drc.ohiolink.edu/handle/2374.GODORT/18>

Nevertheless, the WRA attempted to deny the reality of life in the camps, explicitly avoiding language of imprisonment or incarceration in a 1943 pamphlet on Japanese relocation. Near the end of that pamphlet they emphasized that “the relocation centers, however, are NOT and never were intended to be internment camps or places of confinement.”¹³ Yet, in a news release just two months earlier, WRA director Dillon S. Meyer noted that his agency found it necessary to have the camps guarded by military police, internees were forbidden from leaving the relocation area without special permission, and the camps were normally fenced in with barbed wire.¹⁴ The WRA could hardly have been clearer in laying out that their “relocation centers” were the textbook definition of prisons, and more than this, the camps were intentionally designed to be penitentiaries per the demands of the state officials in the areas surrounding the camps.¹⁵ In a clear example of environmental injustice, the US government compelled Japanese Americans from their prosperous farms and burgeoning communities into environmental wastelands bordered by looming barbed-wire fences, due, in part, to racial prejudice over the growing economic power of Japanese Americans on the West coast.

Moreover, this kind of extreme and intentional isolation had a devastating impact on the internees’ psyches. Upon her arrival at the Poston War Relocation Center in Arizona, Louise Ogawa noted that “this camp is so far away from civilization that it makes me feel as if I was an convict who is not allowed to see anyone.”¹⁶ By combining the camps’ remote locations with high profile guards and barbed wire fences, the WRA successfully constructed landscapes designed to break the spirits of their prisoners. Louise likening her status to an inmate after being

¹³ War Relocation Authority. *Relocation of Japanese Americans* (1943)

¹⁴ Myer, Dillon S. News Release: *Work of the War Relocation Authority* (1943): <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/news-release-work-war-relocation-authority-anniversary-statement-dillon-s?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1>

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Letter to Clara Breed from Louise Ogawa. August 27, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.3110/>

thrust into an alien environment evidences how the WRA's site selection reinforced the explicit and slanted power relations between internees and the US authority in the camps. Moreover, Louise also highlighted that in spite of the fact that internees were told the fence served to prevent cattle from coming near their homes, no one had seen any livestock yet, and the fence tended to "weaken the morale of the people."¹⁷ Though the WRA did indicate that the fences and police were for the safety of the internees in their official news release, they also slipped in that the guards were for the "protection of the public outside" as well.¹⁸ Thus, it becomes apparent who the WRA saw as the true threat in need of containment.

Beyond the conspicuous physical isolation of the fences and guards, the arid climate also served to minimize interaction between internees. In another one of his letters, Ted noted that, after a couple of months in the camps, people stopped leaving their blocks and hardly anyone was up for socializing because "the afternoons were still too hot to do so."¹⁹ Often times the weather, be it extreme dust storms or heat, kept internees cooped up indoors with plenty of time to reflect on the growing monotony of their life and depressing outlook for the future.

Even after the dissolution of the relocation camps, internment left Japanese Americans grappling with a profound sense of displacement and uncertainty about where to go next, a key facet of many environmental justice conflicts. Both Louise and Ted touched on this in their letters: Louise noted that her waning independence made her weary about the future since she wanted to leave, but hadn't the slightest idea of where she'd like to go, and Ted emphasized that relocation prospects were grim since most families had lost or sold all their belongings and couldn't afford new homes or furnishings due to the meager wages they'd received for the past

¹⁷ Letter to Clara Breed from Louis Ogawa. January 6, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31AC/>

¹⁸ Myer, Dillon S. News Release: Work of the War Relocation Authority (1943)

¹⁹ Letter to Clara Breed from Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki. October 3, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31AO/>

few years.²⁰ In essence, though the US government gave Japanese Americans the option to leave, they were still trapped in the camps by financial and cultural barriers. Even those Japanese Americans who were able to return home still had to cope with profound property losses as well as a hostile racial climate. Aside from the physical dislocation Japanese Americans felt upon leaving the camps, they had to deal with its lasting mental and emotional aftereffects as well since “their searing memories of incarceration would not only last through their lifetimes, but would also be passed down to other generations.”²¹

Overall, during World War II, the US government stripped Japanese Americans from their thriving farms and incarcerated them in an environmental purgatory bounded by barbed-wire fences due, in part, to deep-seated racial prejudice and a desire to see farmland reallocated to whites. Furthermore the barren climate, degraded living and working conditions, and long-term psychological trauma of the camps constitute critical environmental justice issues: the WRA manipulated the natural world as a tool for social control, compounding internees’ feelings of isolation and exploiting their labor for the public good. As California farmers and businessmen were transported to the blistering Arizona desert and bare, intermountain valleys of Utah, they not only had to confront US racism, but a desolate wasteland void of the green trees, city sparrows, streetcars, and freedom they had come to associate with home.

²⁰ Letter to Clara Breed from Louise Ogawa. September 14, 1943: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31JC/>; Letter to Clara Breed from Tetsuzo (Ted) Hirasaki. May 26, 1942: <http://www.janm.org/collections/item/93.75.31GM/>

²¹ Fujita-Rony, Thomas