

# **A Stone Left Unturned: Landscape, Race, and Memory at the Gila River War Relocation Center**

**Adrian N. Mulligan**

Bucknell University, Department of Geography  
amulliga@bucknell.edu

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## **Abstract**

In the United States during World War II, under the guise of national security but driven by racial discourse, about 120,000 people were incarcerated on account of their Japanese ancestry. Focusing on one of these incarceration camps, the ‘Gila River War Relocation Center’, located on the Gila River Indian Community reservation in the state of Arizona, in this article I consider how this incarceration might be better understood geographically, while also exploring connections to Indigenous American experiences. Consequently, I explore how one landscape can have different meanings to different communities, resulting in a complicated politics of memory and memorialization, while also uncovering shared landscape experiences that can potentially contribute to the forging of more inclusive historical geographies at this incarceration camp and others.

## **Keywords**

Landscape, race, Indigenous-American, Japanese-American, incarceration, memory

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**Figure 1.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. A panorama of the northwest section of Camp Two at this relocation center” (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, November 27, 1942) <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/538649>

## Introduction

Around fifty miles south of the city of Phoenix in the United States (U.S.) state of Arizona, on reservation land belonging to the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), lie the ruins of what was once the Gila River War Relocation Center in which approximately 13,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated between July 1942 and November 1945. Consisting of two separate ‘camps’, named ‘Canal’ and ‘Butte’ located approximately 3.5 miles apart, it was one of ten such sites in the U.S. operated by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to incarcerate approximately 120,000 such individuals during World War II. At the nearby Huhugam Heritage Center (a museum devoted to the history of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh peoples who constitute the GRIC), a small but permanent exhibition tells the story of this period when, against their wishes, Japanese Americans were incarcerated on their land. Despite at the time being denied any substantive interaction with those incarcerated, in the decades since, community members have facilitated visits to the incarceration camp by any member of the Japanese American community who wished to visit. They have worked with a local post of the American Legion to maintain a World War II memorial at Butte Camp and liaised with the Phoenix chapter of the Japanese

American Citizens League (JACL) to facilitate pilgrimages, organize site clean-ups, and the placement of three plaques marking the location of the two camps and the World War II memorial. GRIC law enforcement also continue to police access to the camp, with it requiring a permit for non-tribal members to visit. Beginning in the 1970s, the GRIC also conducted a series of archaeological surveys documenting building foundations, cement pools, gardens, inscriptions, pet graves, and trash dumps for example, before expanding their agricultural production into the area.

In this paper, I consider how such Japanese American incarceration might be better understood, geographically, while also exploring connections with Indigenous experiences in the American West. Furthermore, I utilize a critical spatial approach to better understand this particularly difficult site of memory, drawing from geographers such as Karen Till (2003, 2008, 2010), who encourages scholars to resist fixing the meaning of such troubled sites, but rather to consider multiple interwoven narratives through the recovery of forgotten and marginalized voices. I am also inspired by Doreen Massey (2006) who argues that such landscapes be considered a provocation, of sorts, to consider place as process and to contribute to forging more inclusive sites of memory. I also utilize the work of such geographers as Richard Schein (1997) to consider how one landscape could naturalize quite different racial discourses, but also how that same landscape was utilized to resist such discourses.

While such an approach lends itself to making sense of contested historical sites where there is a clear politics of memorialization, it also applies to those where no such contestation is evident, either perhaps because one narrative completely subsumes all others, or because communities are already working together to resist a dominant narrative of erasure. Here, the Gila River War Relocation Center provides a case study of the latter, given that since its closing in 1945, the two communities to whom it is most meaningful have continued to respect the other's understandings, memories, and meanings - despite significantly different perspectives. In its focus on the historical site therefore, and an openness to recovering multiple narratives, the critical spatial approach utilized here, although unconventional, is nonetheless potentially more constructive and reconciliatory in recovering or building upon common ground between groups, not just figuratively through shared experience and memory, but also quite literally in the landscape.

Finally, before proceeding, an important note on terminology. It should be noted that various branches of the Federal Government deliberately employed euphemistic language during World War II to conceal an injustice being perpetuated against American citizens and immigrants who had not committed any crimes. Consequently, there are arguably limits to which scholars might uncritically reproduce such language today, and I follow the Japanese American community in moving away from several problematic terms (Daniels, 2005; JACL, 2013). For example, while 'internment' was widely used to describe this historical event, it is inaccurate since those 'interned' were overwhelmingly American citizens rather than the enemy, so I therefore use the more accurate term 'incarceration'. Consequently, I refer to 'incarcerees' rather than 'internees' or 'evacuees' as they were officially characterized. Furthermore, rather than utilize the term 'evacuation', I refer to it as 'forced removal', and not to 'assembly centers' but rather to 'temporary detention centers'. Also, given the fact that two-thirds of those incarcerated were American citizens and the remainder immigrants who had overwhelmingly resided in the U.S. for decades (while being denied the opportunity to naturalize, on account of their race) I simply refer to this entire population solely as Japanese Americans. Finally, although 'relocation centers' such as the one built at the GRIC might be more accurately termed 'concentration camps' (given that a population here was being persecuted solely based on their identity, and the Federal Government also utilized this term on occasion), I refrain from doing so given that it is synonymous with the Holocaust. Instead, I follow the advice of the Japanese American community to alternatively refer to such sites in general as 'incarceration camps'. However, when referring to specific sites, I use their most

common official names at the time of their operation, for example, the ‘Gila River War Relocation Center’, while again acknowledging that this is still problematic.

### **Considering Japanese American Incarceration Geographically**

The Gila River War Relocation Center is a place whose very existence challenges a hegemonic nationalist narrative, bringing its racial dimensions into stark relief and exposing the fact that American citizenship never has been colorblind. In this regard, like other former sites of Japanese American incarceration during World War II, it holds tremendous power in providing tangible material proof of this chapter in American history, with the potential to contribute to combatting racism and discrimination today. Furthermore, this site is a significant place of meaning and memory to both the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh peoples, and an integral piece of their historic homeland that was seized and utilized against their wishes. While for the Japanese American community, it represents a place of confinement, but also resistance, resilience, and memories too of a temporary home. There are many layers of meaning here therefore, creating a complex politics of place, and yet this site remains relatively uncontested; a product of a long relationship of mutual respect between these two communities, but also perhaps because of its remoteness and inaccessibility to the public which has contributed to it being largely forgotten. Despite these qualities however, it is still a site that is worthy of further investigation, in fact arguably *because* of these qualities.

Despite there being a considerable amount of scholarship examining the incarceration of those of Japanese ancestry during World War II, particularly in the U.S., this historical chapter has surprisingly received relatively little attention from geographers, despite it being an inherently spatial process. Some notable exceptions, however, include Karl Lillquist (2007) who provides an overview of the U.S. incarceration camps, and Robert Wilson (2011) who considers the Tule Lake Incarceration Camp and its connections to the Bureau of Reclamation’s Klamath Project on the Oregon-California border. Wilson (2011: 427-8) wonders why, in the extensive literature, such camps are largely considered ‘self-contained bubbles’ with very little contextualization of their historical geographies. Instead, he argues that such camps were quite deliberately constructed racialized landscapes, in which the Federal Government utilized Japanese American incarcerated in an explicitly environmental manner. In considering this historical chapter geographically therefore, and attempting to better understand the Gila River War Relocation Center in a manner that is potentially useful, this paper also draws upon the work of those geographers who examine the role that cultural landscapes play in materializing and naturalizing racial discourses, for example Kay Anderson (1987) and Richard Schein (1997).

Amongst the other rare geographers who do focus on this historical chapter, the work of Audrey Kobayashi, Reuben Rose-Redwood, and Sonja Aagesen (2018) is noteworthy, through their involvement with the ‘Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective’ which illuminates the imprisonment, dispossession, and deportation of Japanese Canadians during World War II. This is also important scholarship because it illuminates the experience of Japanese Canadians, who have long been overlooked in the literature in favor of Japanese Americans. Ian G. Baird (2018, 2019) is another geographer who has studied this period, focusing on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and whose work argues that the acknowledgment of such past injustices is crucial to reconciliation efforts today. His work is particularly useful in advancing an anti-racist pedagogy that seeks to expose how racism continues to be manifested on the ground, largely through erasure and a dearth of memorial sites, museums, monuments, or any acknowledgment of the once strong Japanese Canadian presence on the island.

Such scholarship can be considered part of an emerging field of interdisciplinary inquiry known as ‘memory studies’, to which geographers are increasingly making important contributions in considering how historic landscapes are recruited and memorialized to constitute, articulate, and forge group identities. As Till (2003: 291) succinctly states for example, “while the memory literature is replete with spatial metaphors, most scholars neither acknowledge the politically contestable and contradictory

nature of space, place, and scale, nor examine the ways that social memory is spatially constituted.” The work of such scholars advancing critical spatial thinking about memory, landscape, race, and identity holds enormous potential therefore, in better understanding Japanese American incarceration during World War II at such sites as the Gila River War Relocation Center. This is especially so, given this site’s unique qualities that arguably necessitate an approach more attentive to its multiple meanings and narratives, one that seeks to uncover knowledge that could potentially strengthen connective strands between the respective communities to whom it is meaningful, while in so doing also potentially contributing to telling a different kind of shared spatial story to a broader audience. By being cognizant of how dominant groups erase the pasts of others, acknowledging how multiple pasts can take place in one landscape, and considering how different groups might interpret a historical site, a critical spatial perspective can therefore potentially contribute to the forging of more inclusive historical geographies at this incarceration camp and others.

Such an approach is ideally suited to understanding the uniqueness of the Gila River War Relocation Center because it is similar to those historical sites that Till (2008: 10) examines, insofar as being ‘wounded’ and “understood to be present to the pain of others and to embody difficult social pasts.” In considering such sites, Till encourages an historical geographical approach that unearths forgotten voices and resists any urge to ‘fix’ meanings; instead allowing sites to remain messy, contested, and convoluted, in a manner that also raises questions about our own role, positioning, and agency as researchers. Only through such an approach, she argues, can such difficult sites truly speak to us in a manner that is sensitive to unresolved past injustices, that elicits conversations between past and present, and that resonates with contemporary debates.

Although the Gila River War Relocation Center was built on land that the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh peoples consider their ancestral home, like many of the sites chosen by the WRA, this landscape was considered barren, remote, destitute, and somehow empty in official government discourse. This was arguably not a natural situation however, but rather a product of deliberate government policy that had long permitted white settlers upstream to divert precious irrigation water to their own uses (Sullivan et al., 1987). Consequently, by the outbreak of World War II, this landscape was very much entangled with the dominant racial imagining of its inhabitants as propagated by various branches of the Federal Government. Furthermore, these Indigenous peoples were overwhelmingly considered incapable of self-sufficiency despite the historical evidence that they had farmed incredibly successfully for centuries. In her analysis of ‘Chinatowns’ on the West Coast of North America during the nineteenth century, Kay Anderson (1987: 584) argues that each was a social construct in which “[r]acial ideology has been materially embedded in space... and it is through "place" that it has been given a local referent, become a social fact, and aided its own reproduction.” Similarly, American Indian reservations must be considered as places that were racially defined by the state, often with powerful and tragic consequences; or to put that another way, cultural landscapes that structured social processes. As Schein (1997: 662) states, with reference to the way in which the cultural landscape arguably functions as ‘discourse materialized’, it can be considered "a material presence and conceptual framing [that] serves to discipline interpreting subjects alongside their objectification of the landscape's form and meaning.”

Drawing from this scholarship, and focusing on the Gila River War Relocation Center, it is important therefore to consider the role that such cultural landscapes play in the service of the state, in materializing and naturalizing racial discourses as a means of categorizing and governing subjects who consider such places their home. Here, this process involved various government agencies dispossessing Japanese Americans as a means of further dispossessing the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh peoples. What is particularly interesting about this particular site however, is that the *same landscape* was harnessed to naturalize two different racial discourses; with the Federal Government appropriating and transforming a portion of it (through the allocation of an enormous number of resources during World

War II) so as to ensure that their racial fantasy momentarily bloomed, before erasing almost all trace of it.

Finally, this paper also draws on Massey (2006) who encourages scholars to consider ‘landscape as provocation’. By this, she advocates for resistance to exclusive and insular ideas of place and urges instead a reconsideration of place as a product of interconnectivity between different identities and the world beyond, while also involving relationships with nature as similarly ‘culturally mediated’ (Massey, 2006: 36). Her approach would build on the work of environmental historians who consider how the natural environment of incarceration camps operated as both a medium by which a racial minority were subjugated, but also one through which they resisted, for example through ornamental gardens that “buffered the psychological and physical trauma of the incarceration experience” (Tamura, 2002: 2). Here the work of Connie Chiang (2010, 2018) is groundbreaking in teasing out the complicated relationship that Japanese Americans had with nature at many incarceration camps. As Chiang (2018: 4) succinctly states for example, “most scholars of the Japanese American incarceration have not adopted an explicit environmental focus” and “the environment remains mostly an unexamined backdrop rather than an integral element of this wartime program.”

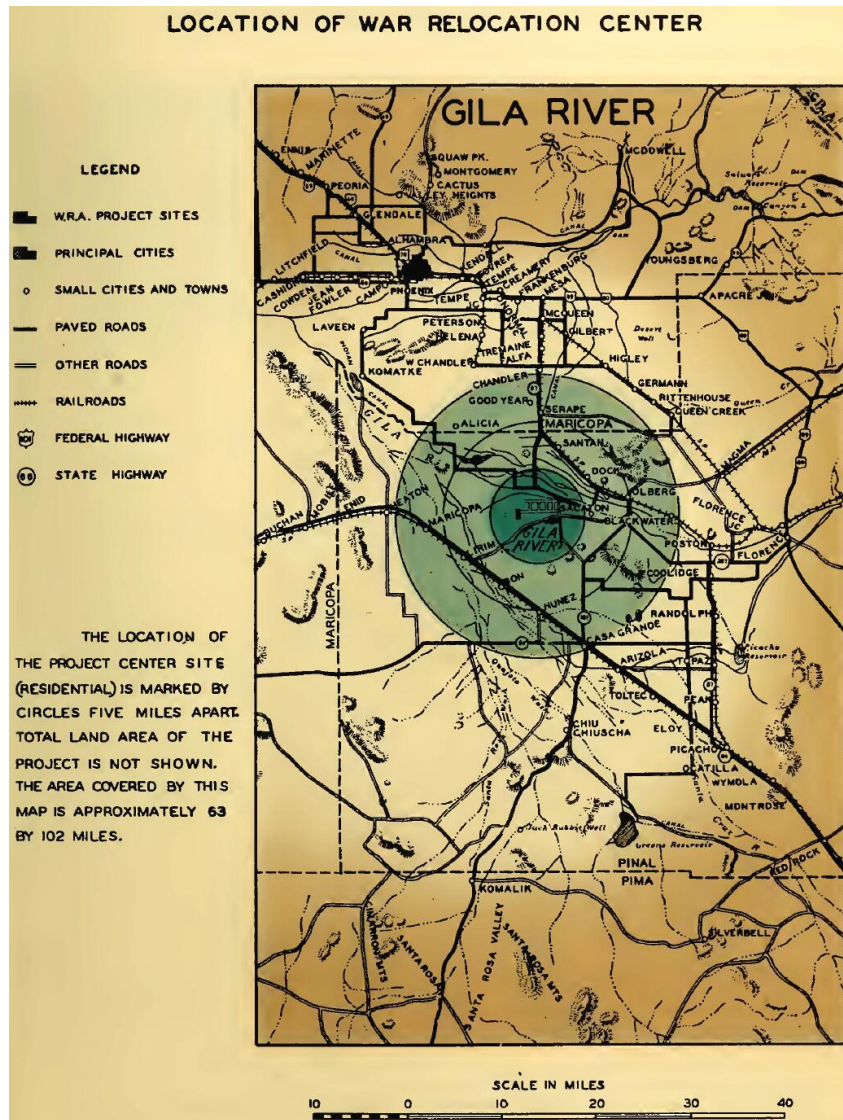
Furthermore, Massey’s conceptualization of place can not only advance understandings of Japanese American environmental connections to these sites but extend these to consider ‘sense of place’ more broadly, while also considering relationships with other groups to whom these landscapes are meaningful, focusing on whether any experiences or understandings are shared. Potentially, it echoes that of Wendi Yamashita (2016) whose examination of the Manzanar War Relocation Center considers how Indigenous peoples and Japanese Americans in the American West share a history and geography in which they have both been racialized, criminalized, dehumanized, and consequently dispossessed and contained by a white supremacist state. However, it is important to note as Baird (2008: 301) does, that while people of Asian descent “have been victimized by the same colonial powers that oppressed Indigenous peoples... the relationships in which they were embedded and their positionalities have not been the same.” While acknowledging the disciplining power of landscape, both built and natural, in the hands of various government agencies therefore, and the similarities but also the important differences between groups and their experiences of oppression, sites such as the Gila River Incarceration Camp nonetheless provide an important opportunity for such groups to take control of the narrative by focusing on shared experiences and meanings of sites.

### **The Racial Exclusion of a Population**

Following the attack by the Japanese Imperial Navy on the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, the U.S. declared war on the Empire of Japan. Subsequently, President Roosevelt issued a series of executive orders by which he authorized General John DeWitt of the Western Defense Command to remove all 112,000 Japanese Americans from West Coast states, and to incarcerate them in temporary detention centers while more permanent incarceration camps were constructed further inland. While this was argued to be essential for national security purposes, it was driven by a long history of racial prejudice now fueling sensationalist reporting of the danger that Japanese Americans represented as a so-called ‘Fifth Column’. Forced at short notice to abandon their farms, crops, and livestock in rural areas, and to leave their businesses, homes, and family pets in urban areas, this not only destroyed Japanese American communities but robbed them of millions of dollars of investment, most of it acquired by white Americans for pennies on the dollar.

In an arguably similar manner to how the Federal Government had dealt with the so-called ‘Indian Problem’ during the early nineteenth century by imagining eastern Native Americans as farmers and forcibly relocating them to marginal land in the interior so their rich ancestral lands could be reallocated to white settlers, over one hundred years later the ‘Japanese Problem’ was solved. Western Japanese Americans were imagined as farmers and forcibly relocated to the interior, with both their urban and

rural wealth redistributed amongst white Americans. Furthermore, two of the ten incarceration camps were located on American Indian reservations, namely the Colorado River Indian Reservation and the GRIC. Here, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) argued that farmland could be improved if it were temporarily put in the hands of Japanese Americans, given their assumed agricultural ingenuity and industriousness (Leong and Carpio, 2016). Maps produced by the Western Defense Command further illustrate the important factors by which camp locations were chosen, such as being some distance from population centers and military installations, but with access to rivers, reservoirs, and canals so that a measure of self-sufficiency might be achieved, while also being interconnected by rail and road. This is evident in the following map showing the location of the Gila River War Relocation Center.



**Figure 2.** Detail from 'Final Report of Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast' (Western Defense Command, 1943: 253).

In contrast to how the Federal Government viewed the landscape of their reservation, to the Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh peoples it was still their physical and spiritual home, although given their recent history, they were a disinvested, marginalized, and struggling community (Woodson, 2010). Early reports from Spanish, Mexican, and American visitors passing through this region during the 1700s had described extensive agriculture fed by a network of ancient canals and spoke of the hospitality and kindness of the local Indigenous peoples. Under Spanish rule, however, they increasingly lost their autonomy and territory with the influx of new settlers and following the Gadsden Purchase of 1854 (when this region came under American administration), their already dire situation only deteriorated further. Confined together on reservations, they suffered from poverty and disease because of increasingly losing their water to white settlers upriver, and consequently their crops and livelihoods (DeJong, 1992, 2004). Despite Congress recognizing their self-government through the establishment of the GRIC in 1939, the Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh peoples remained very much a colonized people managed by the BIA and considered incapable of self-sufficiency despite their rich agricultural history (Leong and Carpio, 2016; Sawyer-Long 1989; Tamir, Russell, Jensen and Lerner, 1993).

In comparison however, Japanese Americans were then envisioned by various branches of the Federal Government as self-sufficient farmers who would transform barren land, and consequently, on April 2, 1942 - thanks to the intervention of BIA Commissioner John Collier -the Department of the Interior (DOI) approved the construction of an incarceration camp on the GRIC. Consequently, a site was chosen south of the historic village of Vah-Ki (also known as Casa Blanca) in an area inhabited by the Akimel O'otham people, close to the Gila River where irrigated fields had once produced corn, squash, beans, and melons, before falling into disuse owing to lack of water. Nonetheless, nearby modern canals associated with the San Carlos Irrigation Project could potentially provide irrigation water, and furthermore the site was considered remote despite being quite well-connected via roads and a nearby railroad terminal. Negotiating on behalf of the GRIC, BIA Superintendent Albert Robinson (of the Gila River Agency) agreed to terms with the WRA, the War Department and the DOI, whereby he leased approximately 77,000 acres of reservation land to the government for a period of five years. Of these acres, approximately 7,000 had recently been leased to a white farmer who had cleared and plowed what had previously been cattle pasture, before purchasing water and planting alfalfa to enrich the sandy loam soil, with the intention being to farm it (Tamir et al., 1993). The WRA also agreed to pay the San Carlos Irrigation Project to provide essential water to the incarceration camp (via the Gila River and canals) at a cost of \$3.60 per acre, something that the Akimel O'otham had previously been unable to afford (Lillquist, 2007). Not only did the BIA believe that the incarceration camp would improve reservation land, but there was also an understanding that it would benefit Indigenous peoples in providing employment opportunities and some much-needed infrastructure upon its eventual closing. Ignoring their status as a sovereign nation, Superintendent Robinson did not consult with the Tribal Council about the negotiations he undertook on their behalf, and when he finally did, in late April 1942, he appealed to their patriotism while explaining that it was a national emergency (Falcone and Bishop, 2015). Although the GRIC Tribal Council objected to the building of the incarceration camp and passed a resolution calling for a broader referendum on the matter, construction commenced regardless (Leong and Carpio, 2006). Furthermore, as an additional reminder to the Akimel O'otham in particular of their patriotism, the WRA subsequently designated the camp's post office by the name 'Rivers' in honor of the first member of the tribe, Jim Rivers, to have been killed in action during World War I (Burton et al., 2002).

### **Incarceration, 1942-1945**

On May 1, 1942, the bulldozers moved into the GRIC to break ground at Canal Camp, followed by over a thousand workers who began constructing a uniform grid pattern network of 36 housing blocks, each containing 12 barracks, a recreation building, mess hall, and latrine buildings, all of which were constructed out of cheap pine, fiberboard, and tar paper, sitting on concrete pilings. Future blocks were



reserved for the later construction of hospitals, schools, and churches, with none of these facilities being considered immediate priorities even though incarcerated were known to include pregnant women, the elderly, the sick, and school age children. Before construction of Canal Camp had finished however, on July 10, 1942, the first incarcerated began arriving at a rate of 500 per day from the Turlock Assembly Center in California. They had endured a three-day train journey to the nearby town of Casa Grande, and then a 20-minute Greyhound bus or truck ride to the camp, all under armed guard (Burton et al., 2002). Incarcerated from this, and other temporary detention centers, followed rapidly, and by mid-August, Canal Camp consequently had a population of 8000 living in reportedly abysmal conditions; a result of the intense heat, overcrowding, a lack of medical facilities and staff, intermittent electricity, inadequate drinking water and food preparation, and sewer pipes having not yet been laid, the latter of which resulted in toilets flushing into open cesspools. Incarcerated such as Izumi Taniguchi (2003), who was then a child, would also later recount navigating utility trenches full of rattlesnakes in these early days of the camp, and of there being no partitions in any of the buildings, even the latrines. In his diary, a young anthropologist named Robert Spencer, then conducting fieldwork on behalf of the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study (JERS), would report on August 15, 1942, of an understaffed WRA struggling to cope with epidemic dysentery, heat rash, and sunstroke.

The fact that the Federal Government considered it acceptable to imprison Japanese Americans in such conditions is arguably a product of how they were dehumanized during World War II, while also illustrating the role that specific built environments played in further reproducing racial discourses. These built spaces of incarceration betrayed their racist motivation therefore, by failing to consider all kinds of aspects of humanity that Japanese Americans shared, with this being a landscape clearly implicated in the deliberate goal of disciplining, categorizing, and further depersonalizing and dehumanizing incarcerated. Despite the many challenges however, faced by the Japanese American community at Canal Camp and at Butte Camp (the latter of which was constructed in early Fall, 1942) they nonetheless made fast progress in transforming the built environment into something more bearable, while also familiarizing themselves with the natural environment. To this end, for example, incarcerated raided the construction sites to secure wire, on which blankets and sheets could be hung to create rudimentary partitions in the barracks. They also built porches on the outside of barracks, in which people could change into their outside shoes or an inside kimono, as some considered custom (Spencer, Report 2, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1942). Although photography was banned, modifications to buildings are evident in official WRA photographs, for example the following that show porches affixed to both a Buddhist Church and a residential barracks at Butte Camp (see **Figures 3 and 4**).

Given the lack of any furniture, those families who could afford to, ordered items from mail order catalogs, while others were forced to improvise with stolen scrap lumber. Yasu Koyamatsu Momii (2011) for example, remembers her older brother cutting a hole in the side of their barracks, in which he inserted a rudimentary evaporative cooler constructed out of an electric fan, some wire, and shredded wood packing material. Kazumi Yoneyama (2012) meanwhile, who was incarcerated in Canal Camp as a child, remembers how his father excavated a basement to escape the intense heat and frequent dust storms:

My dad dug a basement beneath our unit. It was probably four by four by four. And he built a trapdoor in the floor of our barrack, and he had stairs, so we would go down there and sit beneath the ground level. And it was cooler down there, so we used that sort of like our own private basement, just to stay cool.



**Figure 3.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. The Buddhist Church at camp two at this relocation center” (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, November 27, 1942)  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/538609>



**Figure 4.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. Barracks vacated by evacuees who have relocated” (Hikaru Iwasaki, WRA Photographer, September 1945)  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/539835>

Reflecting on how the community in both camps had responded to overcome a range of significant challenges, on October 7, 1942, Japanese American writers in the WRA-endorsed newspaper, the *Gila News-Courier*, published the first of a series of articles under the heading ‘Impressions of Gila’, accompanied by a cartoon (**Figure 5**) drawn by an artist named Matsuura:

There are lights and plenty of water now, but Gilans need no prompting to remember when some of them like the man in the sketch, stood with uplifted candle, muttering imprecations at the unfinished wiring above. The distant buttes, the ramshackle bus, the lettered baggage pile, the M.P.s, that drove us from the station to the camp, the dust storms, the mother and the child, the big lumber piles, the looming figure of the guard, the laden looter, the rattle-snake and gila monster, the few waterless hours, when rumours increased the dryness of our throats, the languid poses of some of the well-paid construction workers, the first encouraging miniature rock garden, the fore runner of many that now pop up in Butte and Canal camps like Commandos in the Solomons, and strong in the center of the sketch, on the rope-bound box, the number, a number like all of us had become. The first chapter was a brief one, the book may be brief or long, but Matsuura will continue to write it.

(*Gila News-Courier*, October 7, 1942, p.2)

Matsuura's artwork reveals how this landscape, despite the many challenges it presented, was nonetheless becoming incredibly meaningful to thousands of Japanese Americans through their lived experiences. While undoubtedly the landscape of the reservation did appear desolate, hostile, and alien to incarcerated, it is important to also realize that many came to appreciate and understand this landscape, to forge relationships and to collaborate with it, to find solace and strength in it, and to essentially *make it their own*.



**Figure 5.** “Impressions of Gila”, Matsuura, Gila News-Courier, Vol.1, No.8, October 7, 1942, p.2. <http://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-141-8-master-40fe98cdf5/>

As a means not only of alleviating boredom but also to take some control of their lives amidst troubling circumstances, many of those incarcerated spent their time transforming the bulldozed desert ground into something more appealing, which they achieved through the planting of trees, bushes, and the construction of ornamental gardens, often featuring rocks and pools. Given the fact that the perimeters of Butte and Canal camps were only loosely marked with barbed wire, incarcerated were free to venture out further into the landscape of the GRIC to collect rocks and cacti, waterlilies, and cottonwood trees, and to catch carp from irrigation canals, all of which were duly incorporated into gardens. Together, such plantings and water features arguably served not only a cultural function, but also an environmental one, given the degree of shade, dust prevention and evaporative cooling they provided. Faced with an initially

unfamiliar landscape, Japanese American gardeners were forced to adapt to the local environment, but also to develop new conversations with it. In so doing, they were encouraged by WRA staff who appreciated the gardens' environmental function but also how they kept people busy, and who consequently awarded prizes to the residential block with the best ones. As Kay Matsuoka (1999), who was incarcerated while in her twenties at both Canal and Butte Camps would later recall, "Everybody was competing for their front part, garden. It was just a square part, but they had flowers and trees. And by the time we left camp, it was like a park. But at first it was just kind of bare, nothing. And some people even had ponds and fishes in there."

The gardens often featured traditional Japanese rock lanterns and trellis, alongside figures ingeniously molded from leftover building cement, including fishermen, cranes and turtles, sometimes alongside much more elaborate features like a model of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, constructed from wood and string (Spencer, Aug 23, 1942). They also instilled a sense of stoic perseverance amongst incarcerated, such as the carp which traditionally represented perseverance in the face of adversity. Furthermore, they also often had religious significance, for example those belonging to Shintoists that featured Torii (a traditional Japanese gate) and Ofuda (paper charms) now attached to cacti, while Buddhist gardens featured pagodas and shrines.

Unfortunately, there were very few photographs taken of the gardens at the Gila River War Relocation Center because the WRA banned the ownership of cameras amongst incarcerated. One of the best photographs, therefore, was taken by Toyo Miyatake, who, having been released from Manzanar War Relocation Center, drove to other camps to document what had taken place. In this photograph (see **Figure 6**), taken in September 1945, a shrine is visible in the garden, and the photograph is accompanied by a caption that states "[t]he dispossessed residents made use of local materials to make their new habitations more attractive; this garden of native cactus plants at Gila was one result of this adaptation" (Eaton, 1952: 57).

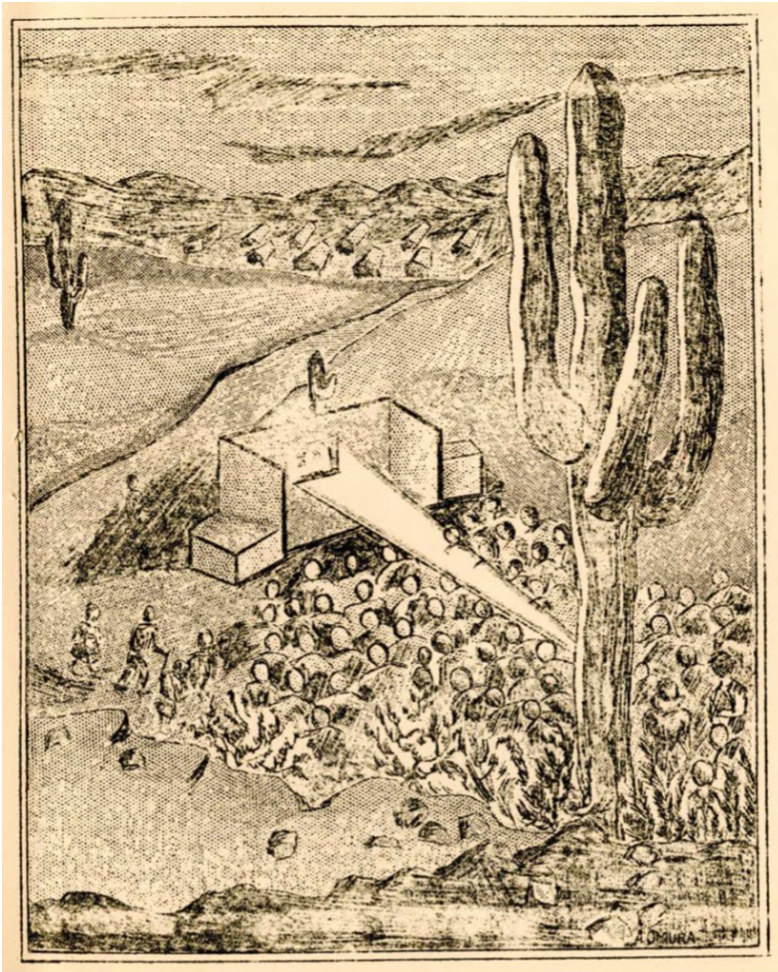
Other features of the reservation landscape also became meaningful to incarcerated, for example two small hills at Butte Camp. One of these featured a water tower, and the other a memorial honoring former incarcerated serving in World War II, including those killed in action. Also nestled in the saddle between the two hills was a stage where movies were shown, plays and performances staged, and religious services held. Many incarcerated for example, remember the tensions in the camp following the distribution of a loyalty questionnaire in 1943, and how this manifested itself in young 'Kibei' men (who had been born in the U.S. but had grown up in Japan) congregating at the water tank. They also recall Boy Scouts raising the American flag over the memorial, and fondly remember watching movies on the outdoor stage. Speaking of the latter, Kazumi Yoneyama (2012) would later recount:

There was like a drive-in screen, except the people who lived in the camp would take their own folding chairs, and they would have speakers throughout this open space, so that you took your chair with you, sat wherever you wanted, and you can hear the sound of the movie. And when the movie was over, all the kids used to run back to their block and go take a shower before the adults got there, and while there was still hot water.



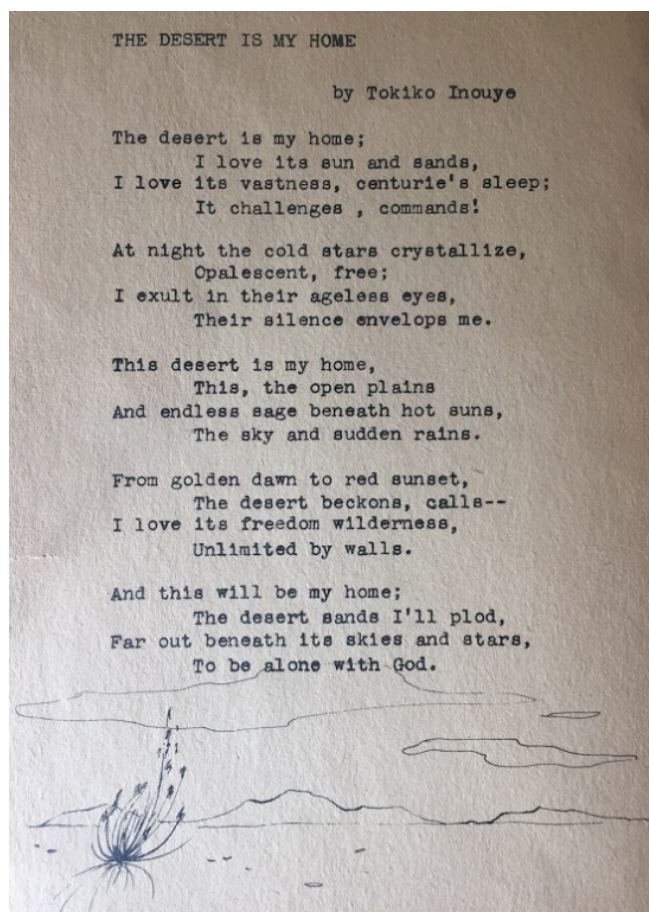
**Figure 6.** “Garden of Native Cactus, Gila River, Central Arizona”, Toyo Miyatake, in Eaton, 1952, p.57.

On July 20, 1943, to mark the one-year anniversary of the Gila River Incarceration Camp, the WRA produced a booklet that contains a sketch of this outdoor movie theatre (see **Figure 7**).



**Figure 7.** Detail from ‘A Year at Gila: Anniversary Booklet’, produced by the United States War Relocation Authority.

But perhaps the clearest example that illustrates how much the desert landscape of the reservation meant to incarcerated, and the fact that it came to be deeply appreciated and representative of their sense of identity, resolve, stoicism, and hope, is a book of poetry written by Butte Camp High School students. It contains several poems in this vein, for example the following written by Tokiko Inouye, and illustrated by Shizuko Nakamura (see **Figure 8**).



**Figure 8.** “The desert is my home, by Tokiko Inouye” (Ferne Downing, ed. 1945)

While some of the San Carlos Irrigation Project water purchased by the WRA fed ornamental gardens, most of it was used to irrigate the approximately 17,000 acres of farmland that they had ostensibly leased from the GRIC. Additionally, Japanese Americans were provided an estimated 200 pieces of farm machinery that included tractors, cultivators, manure spreaders, plows, disk harrows, mowers, hay balers, grain drills, and threshers (Tamir et al., 1983). Given the long growing season and resources provided, productivity per acre was reportedly excellent, with farming soon producing 48 different varieties of produce, including daikon (a type of white radish that was already being served in mess halls in September 1942) in addition to such crops as cabbage, carrots, watermelons, beets, onions, lettuce, celery, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and sweet potatoes (Effland and Green, 1983). In 1943, the WRA added an 8000-acre dairy farm with milking sheds, a beef cattle ranch, a hog farm, and poultry operation, all of which were soon annually providing 79,000 gallons of milk, 1,800 cattle, 2,200 hogs, 5,700 chickens and 112,500 eggs (Lillquist, 2007). When the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, visited in April 1943 she commented on the tremendous success of Japanese American farmers, and her hope that they would take such skills elsewhere, failing to mention the resources provided that had been denied to the local Indigenous peoples, although she did compare the two populations: “Efforts are being made to make it possible for them to be brought to a place where they will not be institutionalized, where they will be able to take care of themselves, the whole object being not to let them become a second Indian problem...” (quoted in Tamir et al., 1993, p.50).

In 1944, approximately 15,000,000 pounds of produce was reportedly grown on just 1,436 acres of reservation land; food that was eaten on site, but also canned, dried and shipped to mess hall kitchens at several other incarceration camps (Lillquist, 2007). The fact that agriculture was so successful, even though the farms constantly struggled with labor shortages (a product of the work being voluntary, poorly



paid, and involving hard physical labor with which the majority of incarcerated had no experience) is a product of the wealth of resources invested. Nonetheless, in the dominant racial imagining of Japanese American incarcerated, they were understood to be utilizing an almost *natural* skillset to prove their loyalty to the United States, a narrative that is evident in official WRA photographs of farming at the Gila River War Relocation Center which incidentally also reveal the abundance of irrigation water and agricultural machinery provided to guarantee that the racial fantasy became reality (see **Figures 9-12**).



**Figure 9.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. Irrigating winter pasture at this relocation center” (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, November 25, 1942)  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/538619>

While there is very little evidence of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh peoples benefitting from this agricultural abundance, there are reports of their being employed, for example, in the initial construction of the camp, in a camouflage net factory that operated briefly, and as automobile mechanics in an affiliated motor pool (Lillquist, 2007). They also reportedly assisted the professional baseball player, Kenichiro Zenimura, in building an impressive baseball diamond at Butte Camp, and perhaps even played baseball and attended games there (Lillquist, 2007). While the WRA extensively documented Japanese American activities in the camp, and since its closing various organizations have captured the experiences and memories of former incarcerated, there is unfortunately very little recorded perspective of Indigenous peoples. Some incarcerated would later admit they were ignorant of even being on a reservation, while others such as Alice Kanagaki would recount for example that “[w]e saw the young Indians riding horses, and they all made friends in time, the Indian boys and the high school Japanese boys had intramural sports tournaments” (quoted in Tsuchida, 2017). While their interactions might have been limited, the anthropologist Robert Spencer, in his November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1942, report on recreational activities, does however mention the mutual respect he witnessed between Japanese Americans and the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh people, insofar as they considered themselves ‘persecuted minority

groups' and 'brothers' with 'Mongolian antecedents', with the latter even learning rudimentary Japanese words and phrases for trading purposes. Such respect is also evident in official photographs of a



**Figure 10.** Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. A view of cauliflower, which is being grown for its seed (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, April 24, 1943)<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/537071>

Thanksgiving Day parade held in Canal Camp in 1942. Here, alongside women wearing traditional Japanese dress, members of the JAACL, and a Harvest Queen riding an elaborate float, are school children dressed as pilgrims and American Indians, the latter of whom hold signs stating, "This is our Native Land" (see **Figure 13**). While it is arguably problematic that racialized Americans here performed such a stereotypical white narrative, the fact that they nonetheless also expressed solidarity with other racialized Americans, on whose very land they were parading, is significant.



**Figure 11.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. George Nagamatsu, a farmer with 15 years’ experience and a former resident of Santa Ana, California, is shown with two months of old tomato plants” (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, April 24, 1943) <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/537077>



**Figure 12.** “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. Property officer checking farm machinery prior to disposal to the Treasury Department” (Hikaru Iwasaki, WRA Photographer, September 1945) <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/539825>

On December 17, 1944, the Western Defense Command issued Public Proclamation No. 21, which ended the Exclusion Order in the West Coast states, thus permitting Japanese Americans incarcerated at sites throughout the continental interior to return to their homes, if they still had them. That same month, with the war’s end in sight, the WRA administration announced that the Gila River War Relocation Center would close in November 1945. Even though the BIA had led the GRIC to believe that they would eventually benefit from the massive financial investment in infrastructure and agriculture once the war ended, the Federal Government instead implemented something more akin to a ‘scorched earth’ policy, as if retreating from enemy territory. By the close of 1945 therefore, all the animals had been removed and the farms demolished, the irrigation water contracts terminated, and all the agricultural equipment auctioned off. By the close of 1947, every single building in both incarceration camps had either been

demolished, dismantled, or relocated. For example, the Butte High School Auditorium was purchased by and moved to the nearby city of Mesa, Arizona. The Federal Government even went so far as to break apart building foundations to salvage cast iron pipe, leaving behind an estimated 5,500 tons of cement, rubble, and other debris scattered across both sites. Rather than pay the \$25,000 it was then estimated to cost to remove this debris, the Federal Government took advantage of the fact that their own BIA had failed to include a “standard restoration clause” in the contract that they had drafted on behalf of the GRIC, and against their wishes (Tamir et al., 1993).



**Figure 13.** Detail from “Gila River Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona. Evacuee children riding in one of the floats in the Harvest Festival Parade held at this center on Thanksgiving day” (Francis Stewart, WRA Photographer, November 26, 1942) <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/538594>

During the 1970s, the GRIC brought a series of lawsuits against the Federal Government seeking assistance in clearing debris, and compensation for the fact that their agricultural land had not been improved, as per the WRA leasing agreement. The Indian Claims Commission consequently found in their favor and awarded them over \$1.5 million in damages (Lillquist, 2007). At this time, the community had initiated a project named ‘Gila River Farms’ to develop agriculture close to Butte Camp with newly secured water from the San Carlos Irrigation Project, utilizing some fields once farmed by Japanese Americans but being careful to not disturb the former residential areas. While continuing to act as guardians of the Gila River War Relocation Center, the Tribal Council nonetheless refused, in the late 1970s, to support a nomination by the Arizona State Parks Board to place the site on the National Register of Historic Places, because they considered such a designation to be yet another violation of their sovereignty. Meanwhile, after an almost 40-year struggle, in 1982 the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (1997: 459) concluded that the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II had no military justification but was instead the result of “race prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” This resulted in the government sending a formal

letter of apology and a \$20,000 check to surviving incarcerated, although members of the immigrant 'Issei' generation were initially considered ineligible for reparations on the basis that they had not been American citizens.

## Conclusion

The Gila River War Relocation Center provides an intriguing case study of what a critical spatial perspective can offer to further understandings of problematic sites of memory in a multitude of different ways. By focusing on the site, and considering its importance to other communities, it is possible to productively reveal coalescence, and to engage in cross-comparative analysis of differently marginalized and racialized groups. However, it also provides an example of how difficult it is to do this, given how extensively documented the Japanese American experience of incarceration is here, as compared to that of Indigenous peoples, and not just during World War II. In considering the role that landscape plays in naturalizing racial discourses, a critical spatial approach can also reveal the way this process was resisted through conversation and interaction with both the built and natural environment, for example through the modification of buildings but also the construction of ornamental gardens from local environmental resources. Furthermore, in revealing how *the same landscape* - once transformed through the purchase of irrigation water and agricultural equipment - was used to naturalize two very different racial discourses, this very popular practice is revealed as artifice.

It is through its focus on multiple narratives, layers of meaning, and recovery of forgotten voices however, that such a critical spatial approach is perhaps most useful, insofar as revealing potentially fruitful intersections between communities and a common experience of place. For example, in this landscape we see glimpses of the significance of a water tank to Kibei men who felt conflicted about their dual American and Japanese national identity, of a World War II memorial on a hill that reaffirmed American citizenship and loyalty, and of an outdoor movie theatre that provided an escape and some semblance of normality. We also see a Thanksgiving Parade in which school children expressed their solidarity with Indigenous peoples, and a desert landscape in which Japanese American high school students found solace and stoicism through poetry. Doreen Massey (2006: 46) asks if "both space and landscape could be imagined as provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories." That is very much the case here, and inspired by her approach, we potentially also contribute to the forging of common ground between communities, through shared memories of place.

Contrary to the dominant narrative, Japanese Americans did not just survive the experience of incarceration in such landscapes. A critical spatial approach reveals instead how they actively resisted, but furthermore how they made these spaces *their own*, interacting with both built and natural environments to overcome material and socio-political oppression. Finally, in considering the way these two marginalized communities have respectfully accommodated each other over the decades, while acknowledging that this site will likely forever remain off-limits to the larger public, this case study also raises important questions regarding *for whom* memorialization functions, what its purpose is, and our role as scholars and researchers in recovering what took place.

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