Examining the Interplay of Environment and Anti-Asian Sentiment Through Japanese American Incarceration

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For decades, the prevailing narrative surrounding Japanese incarceration in the United States during World War II has been a somber tale of injustice and the erosion of civil liberties. Although this is all true, there seems to be a lack of knowledge of what life was really like for Japanese incarcerees as well as the connections between racial mistreatment and the environment in which these injustices were conducted upon. Within this melancholy chapter lies a critical cornerstone of Asian American history: a testament to resilience, the endurance of the human spirit, and the complexities of identity and belonging in an environment and nation at odds with itself. Examining the narratives of those who endured this harrowing experience unveils profound insights into the intersection of race, culture, and government actions. It is imperative to not only acknowledge the stories of the incarcerated, but also explore the roles and motivations of other participating parties—government officials, the legal system, and the broader societal context—in comprehending the lasting impact of this dark period on the Asian American community and the nation as a whole. By examining the conditions, such as harsh climate and inadequate housing, that the Japanese experienced during incarceration, these focuses allow people to unveil a narrative of resilience, adaptation, and loss amidst the unjust confinement, offering a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the predominant portrayal of hardship and injustice. This essay will examine the connections found between the racially motivated mistreatments and stereotypes targeted toward the Japanese incarcerated and the environments and conditions these injustices were acted upon, further assessing the lived experiences and responses of the incarcerated.

The selection of sites for Japanese incarceration camps during World War II was a complex process influenced by several requirements and considerations. The responsibility for this decision primarily fell on the War Relocation Authority (WRA) in the United States. They

faced the challenge of identifying locations that met specific criteria while adhering to political, logistical, and societal considerations paired with geographical isolation, a crucial factor in site selection. The chosen locations needed to be distant from the West Coast, which was perceived as vulnerable to potential attacks or sabotage, and situated away from strategic military zones. This led to the establishment of camps in remote areas, often in desolate regions with harsh climates and inadequate infrastructure. The mindset of WRA officials was that the camps were equated with "pioneer communities," and they "suggested that Japanese Americans were following in the footsteps of their white predecessors."[1] This immediately reveals the presence of racial discourse as early as selecting locations for the incarceration camps, where "western lands were undeniably the site of their oppression."[2] Additionally, the process involved negotiations with local authorities, landowners, and communities. These negotiations were sometimes contentious, as many locals were resistant to hosting the camps due to fears of economic impact, racial prejudices, and security concerns. The government's decision-making process often disregarded the rights and sentiments of these communities, contributing to strained relations and further isolating the incarcerated population. The sites selected reflected a compromise between military considerations, political pressures, and available resources. However, the chosen locations often lacked basic amenities and suitable living conditions, exacerbating the challenges faced by the interned Japanese Americans. Candidly[3] If Japanese Americans were to make the most of undesirable environments while being detained, then that would result in a win-win situation for the WRA as well as the government made up of New Deal liberals. Thus, the selection process involved a complex interplay of military strategy, political decisions, and

[1] Connie Y. Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.
[2] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 4.
[3] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 41.

societal attitudes, ultimately shaping the harsh realities experienced by those confined within these camps. This knowledge sets a foundation to help us understand how the hardships and challenges for the incarcerated Japanese people were brought about by the environment in which these camps were constructed.

As previously discussed, the internment camps where Japanese Americans were confined varied widely in their geographical locations, yet all shared a sense of remoteness and isolation. Some camps were set in desolate desert terrains like Manzanar in California, while others were situated in swampy areas like the Tule Lake camp in northern California. Often far from urban centers, these locations presented immense challenges for the internees. The harsh environments with extreme temperatures, inadequate shelter, and primitive living conditions posed significant hardships. The construction of Japanese incarceration camps during World War II reflected a rushed and haphazard process, resulting in structures that offered minimal protection from the harsh environments that they were situated in. In the minds of the WRA and the government, these camps "would be planned communities that would assimilate Japanese Americans through self-government, education, and work."[4] However, there was no preparation for the profound disconnect between these camps and the surrounding landscapes. These facilities were often hastily erected, failing to account for environmental challenges such as extreme weather conditions and inadequate sanitation. Upon arrival, Japanese Americans were subject to living in camps with "a combination of shoddy construction, wartime shortages, and harsh environmental features [that] created unpleasant, substandard living conditions."[5] This illuminates how the incarcerees grappled with adapting to these subpar living conditions, struggling to navigate a landscape that offered little refuge or sustenance. Even the WRA admitted to the crammed

[4] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 41.
[5] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 40.

structures the Japanese Americans were to be living in, saying that "the quarters occupied by individual family groups are small and the space in which personal property may be stored is limited."[6] The camps, characterized by flimsy barracks and meager facilities, forced the incarcerees to confront the unforgiving elements while endeavoring to make do with the poorly built and maintained structures. Author of *Farewell to Manzanar,* Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, recounts arriving at Manzanar to "a cluster of fifteen barracks that had just been finished a day or so earlier—although finished was hardly the word for it."[7] These buildings left the detainees with "minimal protection from the natural elements [such as] dust, wind, heat and cold."[8] The dust and climate were probably the most disheartening issues that entered the insufficient housing. There was no sympathy for the detainees who had to suffer from these environmental circumstances due to the living conditions they were forced into. The Japanese Americans often "woke early, shivering and coated with dust that had blown up through the knotholes and in through the slits around the doorway."[9] There was no escaping these conditions and the WRA was not blind to them. Although the WRA officials would embark "on a variety of projects to protect detainees from the dust," the incarcerated lived in a community of reappearing problems as there were never any permanent solutions for their living conditions.[10] A Japanese man named Gerald Nakata who lived in Manzanar revealed that they "had to go find whatever wood that [they could]...to patch up the holes in the barracks."[11] The profound impact of this lack of

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[6] War Relocation Authority to All Project Directors, 18 August 1943, Yuriko Domoto Tsukada Collection, Densho Digital Repository, Washington D.C. https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-356-982/

[7] Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar : A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 18.

[8] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 40.

[9] Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar : A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment*, 20.

[10] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 63.

[11] George Izumi, interview by John Allen, Manzanar National Site Collection, Densho, November 6, 2002.

preparation and consideration for the natural environment of the camps ultimately highlighted the resilience and adaptability of those interned amidst such inhospitable surroundings.

These horrible climatic and living conditions also affected the limited food and resource supply that the Japanese Americans had. It was a constant battle of being able to maintain supplies and ration them appropriately, however, the wartime shortages and harsh conditions did not make this easy. Although there was an evident power imbalance between the incarcerated and the government, "the environmental process of incarceration was simultaneously a social process, shaped by confrontations and compromises between and among Japanese Americans and WRA officials."[12] The government was constantly trying to reduce the costs of keeping up with the camps, and this, in turn, put the Japanese Americans in worse positions. WRA officials often just hoped for "favorable environmental conditions as well as the cooperation of detainees."[13] Wartime scarcity left the detainees with less than sufficient resources, while the WRA and government thought the reproduction of these resources was to be the job of the Japanese Americans. So, while struggling to sustain their own limited resources in these camps, the Japanese Americans were also tasked with the job of providing for the wartime efforts and needs. The food in the each camp was far from appetizing, yet was made to be tolerable. Meals often consisted of foods such as "canned Vienna sausage, canned string beans, steamed rice that had been cooked too long, and on top of the rice a serving of canned apricots."[14] The worst part was not the quality of the food served, but rather that the living conditions were incapable of maintaining the food. Jeanne Houston, recalls that the "food would spoil from being left out too

[12] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 5.
[13] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 5.
[14] Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar : A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment*, 17.

long," and in the summers "when the heat got fierce, the refrigeration [would] break down."[15] In addition, many of the cooks who prepared the food for the incarcerated had often not cooked before. Houston expressed, "The Manzanar Runs became a condition of life, and you only hoped that when you rushed to the latrine, one would be in working order."[16] It is tough to discuss the various problems that occurred within the camps, and many of the contributions are owed to the environment and war circumstances that were present at the time.

Despite being unjustly confined, Japanese Americans were also pressured to work within the camps. They were assigned various tasks vital for the camp's operation, including cooking, cleaning, construction, and agricultural labor. Many of these tasks were demanding and essential for sustaining the camps, yet internees faced low wages, or in many cases, no compensation at all.. George Izumi, one of the incarcerated Japanese Americans at Manzanar, spoke about the labor circumstances and said: "Oh yes, there was always, there was all kinds of work, but they're only getting paid $16 a month for just... I remember the first job I had was I was working in the... the first job was to clean up the, clean up that old highway that goes through Manzanar. Clean up all the sagebrush and all the brush that grew up along the highway."[17] The pay was not exactly fair in terms of compensation for Japanese Americans' labor, and this exploitation compounded the injustice they already endured through their forced confinement. Farming was no easy task either; Gerald Nakata said that they would go "to Idaho and help harvest the sugar beets and potatoes, and that was real hard work."[18] Connie Chiang's perspective from *Nature Behind*

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[15] Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar : A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment*, 26.
[16] Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar : A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment*, 26.
[17] George Izumi, interview by John Allen, Manzanar National Site Collection, Densho, November 6, 2002.
[18] Gerald Nakata, interview by Frank Kitamoto, Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community Collection, Densho, February 26, 2006.

Barbed Wire also emphasizes the irony of this situation; while confined behind barbed wire, the incarcerees were forced into agricultural and gardening labor, fostering a connection with nature despite the imposed constraints. This connection with nature was not just something that was fostered, but it was mainly something that was assumed and expected of Japanese Americans. There were many assumptions of "Japanese Americans enduring environmental ties to and knowledge of the Far West", which prompted their relocation and expectations of labor and tending to these areas.[19] From Japanese Americans being able to cultivate peat soil, to their "willingness" to perform stoop labor, these were just some of the ways the government and WRA validated their reasonings for allocating the detainees to these works. This forced labor not only underscored the dehumanizing aspects of their confinement but also revealed the resilience and determination of the interned individuals to find a semblance of normalcy and sustenance within the confines of their restricted environment.

However, something put into question is why the government was so adamant about having the incarcerated Japanese Americans endure considerably inhumane, from the beginning, the motto of the WRA preached that "[Japanese Americans'] labor would make the camps self-sufficient and "fill gaps in the wartime economy of the Nation," including food production, the development of "raw lands," and "other essential public works."[20] During World War II, Japanese Americans were utilized as a source of labor due to a combination of wartime prejudices and strategic considerations. The decision to employ them in such capacities stemmed from deep-seated fears and suspicions surrounding their loyalty to the United States following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Because of these suspicions, Japanese-Americans were used as a

[19] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 13.
[20] US War Relocation Authority, *Relocation Communities for Wartime Evacuees* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1942): 3, quoted in Connie Y. Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13.

dominant source of labor and were expected to produce during wartime shortages. In a letter exchange between a detainee and his friend, he said: “The thing I really object to is the idea of segregating a group of people on what looks to me as purely racial grounds and military purposes.”[21] This sentiment described by the detainee was entrenched in racial prejudices and unfounded beliefs about their allegiance to Japan. General Eisenhower's approach, reflected in his belief that employing Japanese Americans in harsh conditions could demonstrate their loyalty to the U.S., was a strategic attempt to use their labor as a means of proving their patriotism. By assigning them to work on lands deemed undesirable by others, such as arid or marginal lands, the government aimed to test their commitment to the country while also utilizing their labor in areas where other workers might have been unwilling to toil. Eisenhower's rationale, though flawed in its assumption that loyalty could be proven through arduous labor, reflected the broader societal attitudes and suspicions prevalent during that era. Not only was it putting Japanese Americans through this experience for the sake of loyalty and patriotism, but it was a prevalent thought that Japanese Americans were more suited to work and live in these harsh climates and that they were also “the foundation of [the United States] farming.”[22] Many argue that these reasonings were similar to how slavery was validified, displaying racialized ideals in these justifications. It seems as if detaining these Japanese Americans was a strategy to keep them from doing “harm” that so many Americans believed they could do following Pearl Harbor, while also using them for their benefit through production and expansion.

Ultimately, acknowledging the narratives of incarcerated Japanese Americans is crucial as it provides a vital lens through which to comprehend the multifaceted impact of racial

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[21] Bill to Tama, 1942, Tokuda Family Collection, Densho Digital Repository, Puyallup Washington. https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-383-543/

[22] Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, 23.

injustices and the profound consequences of wartime policies. The stories of these individuals encapsulate not just the historical wrongs but also the resilience, grit, and adaptability displayed in the face of adversity. By understanding their camp lives and living conditions concerning the environment, one gains insight into the intersectionality of systemic racism and environmental injustice. There is no way to fully understand Japanese American incarceration without recognizing their interactions and experiences with the camps they lived in. Amplifying these narratives sheds light on the injustices inflicted upon marginalized communities, emphasizing the importance of learning from history to foster a more just and equitable society. Additionally, connecting their experiences to the environment underscores the broader impact of policies that violated human rights and disrupted the relationship between individuals and the natural world. These facets collectively illustrate the systematic injustice, discrimination, and profound hardships that Japanese Americans endured during their internment: an experience marked by the violation of their rights, dignity, and freedom, and one that had lasting repercussions on individuals, families, and communities. This acknowledgment is pivotal in honoring their stories, rectifying historical wrongs, and ensuring that such injustices are never repeated.

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