

The Sacralization of the American Deserts in the War Relocation Authority Camps for Japanese Americans

Dominique Leblond

Université Paris XII-Val-de-Marne

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The geography of the relocation camps¹, in the American deserts of the West, where the Japanese American community was interned between 1942 and 1945¹⁶, contained enough physical as well as symbolical force to enable the internees to invest it with a whole set of functions and relations. My intention here is to analyze the nature and significance of the internees' relation to space, and their reappropriation of exterior surroundings as well as interior residential quarters, with a view to showing how these were symbolically reclaimed. The relation to the pace of incarceration assumed various modes and styles depending on generational groups;² each evolved separate modes of identification which can roughly suggest on the one hand (for the *Issei* and the *Kibei*³) the idealization of Japan, and on the other hand (for the *Nisei*) the idealization of America.

1. The removal and incarceration process to concentration camps (Roosevelt, 1942) was euphemistically called a 'residential control program' set up in 'relocation centers'.

2. The Japanese terms *Issei* (first generation) will be used for immigrants from Japan, and *Nisei* (second generation) for their children born in the United States. For linguistic convenience, I will use the Japanese term *nikkei* when referring to Japanese Americans as a whole community. It is noteworthy that the majority of the adult population under discussion here were 'aliens ineligible to citizenship' and remained Japanese nationals until 1952 (Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization act).

3. *Kibei* are *Nisei* whose developmental years were spent with relatives in Japan. The practice of sending a child to Japan was most popular between 1920 and 1941.

For the first generation *Issei*, which is my main reference here, internment to some degree made possible a return to the past. Through the construction of a symbolic system, the internees tried to make sense of wartime tyranny, and adapt to local circumstances. For all the signs and "objects" analyzed here, the commonality lies in the fact that they were cast in forms where the senses and the emotions could reflectively be addressed. The images of the past were a source of remedial wisdom (Geertz, 1983), but the working force behind them was not so much the past being recaptured than the strange being construed.

My purpose is not to present the relocation centers as miniature Japan or United States, but to point how the confrontation with a new hostile environment (geographical as well as mental) maintained cultural traits and reshaped the internees' identity.

The Geography of Incarceration

The ten W.R.A. relocation camps⁴ covered a circumscribed perimeter where space conformed to a straight sided and right angled matrix ; their limits were irrevocably closed and explicitly set by barbed-wire fences, guard towers with armed soldiers, and search lights. Although official documents tried to present these projects (as the camps were commonly called at the time) as "not totally different from ... an average American community" (Anon., Ap.5, 1943, 3), the "memory of civilization was unbecoming on the barrack infested hill, surrounded by barbed wires, and isolated in the midst of wild nothingness" (Abe, 13). Clearly, the "rhetorical totalitarianism" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, 2) and its taken-for-granted assumption that internment was an ordinary pattern can be reexamined through alternative modes of representation – emotional and symbolical.

Soon after the outbreak of World War II in the United States, the Japanese American community (namely 120,000 people) started being

4. Arizona: Gila River, Poston; Arkansas: Jerome, Rohwer; California: Manzanar, Tule Lake; Colorado: Granada; Idaho: Minidoka; Utah: Topaz; Wyoming: Heart Mountain.

evacuated (March 1942⁵), first to temporary detention centers set up throughout coastal states and Arizona⁶ and then to permanent relocation centers. Typically, the evacuees received only a few days notice prior to the departure date and were allowed to take only the belongings that they could carry with them. They were taken to the "most unusual cities" which "literally (had) sprung overnight on desolate" sites where only "sagebush, cactus and Russian thistles survived the winter snow and hot summer sun, jackrabbits, rattlesnakes and turtles were the only creatures to feel at home." (Anon., Apr.5, 1943, 3). Although it is commonly accepted that there were ten permanent camps, some projects covered several sites (Poston three, Gila River two); among the ten WRA projects, one isolation and detention center, Tule Lake, held 2 700 "high risk" persons: shinto priests, prefecture leaders, Japanese language teachers, labor leaders, veterans of the Japanese Imperial Navy or Army (Anon., Apr.5, 1943, 1).

All accounts of camps acknowledge the bleakness and desolation of geographical features, the extremes in weather, the irregular seasonal cycles with thunderstorms in summer months, snow and blizzards as late as May, the recurrent dust storms in the summer and the "sun scorching pitilessly on the bare earth" (Anon., Oct.18, 1944, 15).⁷ These peculiar features undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on the internees' health; they also emphasized the general feelings of estrangement generated by the detention process and accentuated by the matrix of the camp and the organization it induced.

The total population of a camp averaged between 8,000 and 10,000 people on 10,000-acre areas divided between three delimited zones:

- the farm where food was grown for the mess halls: vegetable (some Japanese), poultry, hog.
- the core area where camp administration and management were located.
- the internees area.

5 "It took a total of eight months, from March 24 to November 3, 1942" (Hatamiya, 1993, 16).

6 These 'assembly centers' were mainly converted fairgrounds, race tracks, and livestock exhibition halls.

7 "At least three days out of a week the residents are forced into their barracks by a sudden gust of wind carrying fine particles of sand" (Anon., 1943, 1).

These enclosed areas, where the internees were kept, were shaped like a square with the sides a mile in length. They were laid out by Army engineers and called for minimum amount of facilities insuring the health and comfort of the evacuees confined there for the duration. The camps were bordered by bleak landmarks: cemeteries or memorial monuments, dumps and sewer farms, warehouses, hospitals (McGovern, 1944-45, 6).

The basic unit of the projects were the blocks, made up of a number of living quarters built in barrack form which were divided into six units in three different sizes according to family needs.⁸ There were usually two rows of six or seven barracks or apartment units per block laid out on both sides of a utility core: since the rooms had no running water or plumbing, the internees were forced to use common latrine, shower, and laundry facilities. The barracks were divided by sandy thoroughfares; the main roads were originally paved with clayish material and small crushed rocks, which became very slippery when wet.

Assigned to specific barracks and block numbers, large families were squeezed into tiny, unpartitioned rooms in which flooring consisted of a layer of bricks laid directly upon the dirt. Insulation boards lined the interior walls and ceilings. The units were provided with folding canvas cots, mattresses which were in fact "bags to be filled with straw" (Armor & Wright, 1988, 27) and quilts, a coalstove (a recurrent image of internment, called the "pot-bellied stove" by the internees) and a semi-completed cabinet (McGovern, 1944-45, 23). The rest was to be made by the evacuees who were allowed and encouraged to make the barracks as homely as possible (McGovern, 1944-45, 6). Denied a sufficient outlet for the simple demands of their existence, the internees were impelled to make their own opportunities in what was explicitly an oversimplified program for living. They soon attempted to improve, however minimally, the quality of their lives by maintaining their health, educating their children, working at various jobs, and participating in recreational opportunities, with a view to giving some meaning to their lives. In spite of the control exercised by the administration, through Americanization classes, for example, or giving the lead to second generation, most

8. 20' by 16' for 2 or 3 persons ; 20' by 20' for 4 or 5 persons ; 20' by 24' for 6 or 7 persons (WRA, Aug.20, 1943, 2).

opportunities were tractable and mainly had to do with adjusting the behaviors of both prisoners and guards.

The Symbolic Landmarks of Outer Space

The excessive monotony of the geography of the camps and their dominant reiterative pattern was slowly going to be modified by various signs: for example, literal signs sculpted in roots or scrap wood – made by internees during leisure time – stood outside the barracks to identify the names of the residents or at crossroads where they indicated various scheduled activities. Others more explicitly contrasted the bleakness of the surrounding environment:

- every year, for Boy's Day (early May) most barracks where young boys lived exhibited colorful carps made of paper or cloth. These overtly referred to a celebration inherited from the Japanese tradition in which the carp, as a symbol of long life, endows the child with a long and fortunate existence.
- at Topaz, newcomers and visitors were greeted by a banner with Japanese calligraphy, which stood by the gate of the camp. However anomalous, this sign was meant to give some sense of community and a sense of belonging, probably more so to its makers than to the newcomers.
- in all camps, mailboxes ornated with sculpted landscape scenes and ingenious family name plates were displayed outside the barracks; similarly, small collection boxes were scattered here and there to gather money for camp recreational activities. Here again, the latter indicated that some sort of community life was going on; but, because these signs were written in Japanese, they were sometimes outlawed on the grounds that the language used might have contained uncontrollable messages. As for the internees' names carved in Japanese on mailboxes, these clearly indicate an attempt at escaping from the anonymity imposed by the matricule under which all internees were identified.

The choice of Japanese, and its direct connotation with internment, acts as a socio-political message: to explicitly display one's name in the language of the enemy nation indicates an urge to uncover an origin and preserve a heritage. It also demonstrates a will not to renounce a lineage that was dismissed and disregarded by the dominant society and wartime tyranny.

Similarly, in the inscriptions in memory of the ones buried in the desert (particularly the obelisk which stands in Manzanar and which reads, in Japanese, 'Memorial to the Dead'⁹), the use of Japanese can be analyzed as a means to overcome a sense of dislocation; here, Japanese language ensured continuity and unequivocal connection with a Japanese heritage. But, although using Japanese could indicate that strong ties with the land of origin were retained, these did not necessarily suggest political ties with the Japanese (enemy) nation. A closer investigation would obviously highlight differences and complexities in *Issei* attitudes towards their native language and the symbolic space it embraced.

Outside the camps, some picnic grounds were "dressed up with truly Japanese touch in the use of wood and stones to suggest a bridge or a stone lantern" (Deforest, 5). Public space, or at least space located outside the living units' outer space, overtly exhibited specific elements of the Japanese culture, such as bridges and stone lanterns traditionally found in Japanese gardens.

Similarly, if we transpose two elements of Japanese culture, the communal bath and the formal gardens, their presence in the context of incarceration here again fulfilled several functions; these explicitly modified the original plan of the enclosed areas; their location in the middle of a block for the bath area, or right outside the barrack porches for the gardens, disrupted and recomposed space as it had originally been designed. Besides the beautifying function of the gardens (Eaton, 1952; Gesensway & Roseman, 1987), what is interesting is the tensions that they produced; the management was rather compliant regarding working the soil¹⁰ and "...around nearly every doorstep was a garden of flowers, grass and desert shrubs" (Anon, Oct 18, 1944, 15) all presenting evidence of Japanese aesthetics: the bridges made of mesquite logs and leading

⁹ See Leblond (1992).

¹⁰ Families often had one or two plots a little over 20 by 40 feet (Nielsen, 1945).

over man-made brooks to quaint little grassy islands, or the stone gardens modelled after traditional zen gardens, all obviously referred to a significant cultural heritage. Not only did they set landmarks, they also suggested an origin and signified the ambiguous expression of an identity rooted in ancient tradition.

It is significant, though, that what could be seen as a metaphor for notions such as continuity or exile was challenged by other spatial landmarks deeply rooted in American culture. The camps also hosted recreation halls used for typical American activities, as well as baseball or football grounds – all visible enough spaces and popular among Nisei youth – to be significant. The ambivalence of the use of space could then be seen as the expression of a collective dynamics in which tensions, inclusion/ exclusion, conformity or resistance were brought out. However, this ambivalence enlightens an interactive process in which the boundaries of ethnic identity were not submitted to a clear-cut divide; through its "fringes," its "edges," the transience of its "center" and its "periphery," the space of the camps contained and revealed contradictions, and these were also disclosed in the reappropriation of inner space.

The Variations of Inner Space

Although the living units had common striking features, such as those mentioned earlier, a few examples will illustrate the complexity of the cultural references the internees used to reappropriate the inner space of incarceration. Pictures taken by official photographers¹¹ (McGovern Papers, 1942-45) often show interiors which explicitly suggested Japan: – in some barracks, small niches carved out in wood panels displayed floral compositions – an obvious remainder of the *toko no ma* in traditional Japanese interiors. – walls and ceilings were covered with white paper which softened the

11. Only officials were allowed to document the incarceration – as contraband objects, cameras were prohibited in the camps. However, some internees managed to make some cameras and take pictures behind the authorities' back. This paper is based on visual documents both official and non-official.

angularity of the rooms; sometimes white translucent paper also "covered the windows and toned down the light coming from the desert. Such elements are suggestive of the *shoji*, the mobile partition covered with thick opaque white paper which filters the light in traditional Japanese homes (Tanizaki, 1977). In the barracks, the subdued light filtering through the *shoji*-like curtains induced an atmosphere in which, as Miyaltawa (1979) suggested, the internees might have escaped reality:

"I was immune to their words. All I could see were the squares of a *shoji* door cast by an angle of afternoon sun into flattened shapes half on the wall and half on the *tatami*. The filtered light through rice paper was translucent and soft and white" (Miyakawa, 1979, 3).

There, inside the drab barracks, the opacity produced by the improvised *shoji* and the *toko no ma*, as apparently simple artefacts, guaranteed a sense of security in a cultural tradition that the conditions of the internment did not foster. But, in these constructed havens, such ancestral markers revealed the ambiguity and the difficulty of the meeting of the interior and the exterior, of the private and the public.

"We completely encase the interior in sheetrock, and Mother hangs watercolors and sumi paintings of flowers and birds and the hills surrounding us. From a package she has carried from Sacramento, she papers the windows with translucent rice paper, its fiber woven over small leaves of bamboo. (...) I suddenly realize how little time we now spend together as a family" (Miyaltawa, 1979, 111).

The attention of the internees might have been refocused upon one another, intimacy reclaimed, and ultimately history retrieved, but the sheltering space of the interior was not immune to the encroaching surrounding conditions. Communal feeding in mess halls had increased the distance between parents and children, disagreements over 'collaborationist' attitudes had split the community, these and other characteristics of wartime detention had markedly dislocated community and family ties.

In one camp, an internee decorated his living unit with objects displayed on shelves. Among them, a fan-shaped piece of wood had a sculpted ideogram which read "patience." In this substitute *toko no ma*, the exhibited message could question the very meaning of patience under

the circumstances of the internment. During relocation, a lot of internees resorted to the Japanese philosophy of *shikataganai* – literally you can't help it, things happen the way they happen. One can assume that, in this example, underlying the obvious surface message "be patient," a complex range of attitudes and a diversification of experience was also disclosed: a patient attitude was not consensual among the internees.

Although the practice of Japanese cults was not tolerated in all camps, little Buddhist altars were commonly set up in the rooms and the cult of ancestors secretly held. In enhancing "clanic solidarity" (Balandier, 1985) religious reverence here again sacralized a lineage and the family members gathered in veneration, for a time identified with an ordered genealogy.

At Tule Lake, a detention center where the most 'irreducible' internees were kept, a recreation hall was decorated with *tatamis* where tea ceremonies were regularly performed. If this can be understood as a justified quest for beauty, this practice also associated beauty with a cultural heritage.

In all camps, Japanese devices not only expressed the attachment to the old country, they were also used as metalanguage for resistance against the dislocation of the family, against the loss of cultural landmarks. The common artefacts of a culture evoked many levels of meanings expressed in a combination of forms: and what is interesting is the ambiguity of these expressions based on the multiplicity of meaning, as reflected in the calligraphy reading Patience or the apparent comfort of the inner space. Here again, what can be seen as instances of creativity (misplaced or not) or the transformation of the camps into miniature Japan, raises questions about the particular imaginations underlying the appropriation of outer and inner space.

The Polysemy of Space Reappropriation

All the devices discussed here marked the space of the camps and disclosed rituals (and there are many examples of this type, particularly the so-called recreational activities) which were all expressions of

retrieved gestures. These expressions enabled the internees to reaffirm links with the land of origin -and the symbolic space it encompasses- that had been so severely attacked at the time of war. But, in imprinting their presence in the American deserts, the internees also legitimized their presence in the United States; they marked the American space with a *nikkei* heritage, and complemented it with new sediments.

In a positive interpretation of the internment, the authorities and some internees emphasized the art, the dexterity and the expertise with which beauty was created behind barbed wire.¹² The authorities even called upon American foundation myths to praise and justify these 'works'. As the deserts were being remodelled, ambiguous connotations emerged: the internees were associated, or associated themselves, with the pioneers and related to the challenges of the Frontier (Ishi, 1942). This exemplifies ambiguity of meaning over clarity of meaning; although these representations were not blindly accepted, since the internees supported or reproved them according to generational grouping, the inscription in cultural tradition and history is ambiguous: this pioneer reference allows a history of conquest to legitimate the history of exile and subjugation of a minority group.

As the space of the camps was transformed it became a sacred space where Japanese cosmogony was reactualized, and this is particularly true for the composition of gardens, the tea ceremony, and to a different extent for religious activity, which all demanded the reenacting of immemorial gestures and, in doing so, symbolically abolished historical time.

The reappropriation of space was emblematic but also ambiguous because it suggested an imaginary Japan. It might be appropriate to mention that in Japan the cultural signs discussed here were reserved for the aristocracy. The vast majority of the *Issei* were peasant farmers who never had the opportunity to devote themselves to such artistic activities -either in Japan or in the United States. Ironically enough, the internment qualified and empowered the internees to reclaim what their remoteness facilitated: a newly modelled 'japaneseness.'

The recomposition of the space of incarceration did not eliminate or neutralize divisions, but to some internees, it ironically gave the possibility of escaping oppressive reality, of finding a place of 'freedom'

12. "Who but Nihonjins would leave a place like that in beauty?" (Tsukamoto in Tateishi, 1984, 14)

within the space of incarceration. In interpreting a tradition, the internees created new strategies. In a sense their symbolic investment of space not only challenged the suffering endured but it also rooted the exiled in the American land through the transformation of that landscape. A different sense of discovery was produced in the camps: one more of an acquisition than of inheritance (Geertz, 1983, 49). A passage was operated from the immediacies of one form of life to the metaphors of another.

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