

Jeffrey Mark Leavitt

*Memories in Emulsion:  
Photography and the Remembrance of Japanese Incarceration*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay explores the Japanese American incarceration at Manzanar during World War II through photographs of the camp as it stands today under the stewardship of the National Park Service (NPS) and asks how the narrative of incarceration is endorsed, edited, or erased. In addition to the author's original photographs, it analyzes the NPS's cultural and historical preservation and interpretive plans, oral histories, and measures taken at the site to guide the reader through today's Manzanar. Through this exploration, Manzanar emerges as a missed opportunity which fails to relate the racial violence of the past to that of the present and insufficiently imparts visitors with the knowledge and impetus to combat racism in today's America. Manzanar thereby does an injustice to the agency and history of the Japanese Americans who suffered there due to America's fear, ignorance, and racism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; U.S.; World War II; Japanese Americans; internment; Manzanar; National Park Service (NPS); historical memory; agency; photography*

*Introduction: An American Concentration Camp*

It is nearly ten thirty at night, and a seasonal chill of 45 degrees Fahrenheit sets in as the nearly full gibbous moon rises behind me over the Inyo mountain range. Once my eyes adjust, the Owens Valley, nestled between California's Eastern Sierra and Inyo ranges, becomes a dream state of familiar forms and unfamiliar movements just outside of my periphery: rabbits, scorpions, and the swaying of sagebrush in the night breeze—my head never turns fast enough to see it in time before the scuttling stops. Standing alone in the desert wilderness at night under the comforting light of the moon can ostensibly bring peace and relaxation, as it has for me in the past, but the fact that I am standing in a consecrated space at a site of violence, trauma, loss, and mourning changes things. Just over two hundred miles from Los Angeles, I am standing in the cemetery of an American concentration camp: Manzanar.

What brought me to a site of such injustice was the need to understand how the preservation and interpretation of a public memory site, combined with its visual history as illustrated through photographs, can tell a meaningful story that is accessible to visitors, and true to the nature of the events that occurred there. Manzanar is not only a site of injustice: it is a site of public memory, and through the interpretation of that memory, Manzanar acts as a site of public history. Ideally, meaningful interpretation can—and should—encourage visitors to identify the crimes of the past within their present or even future. However, any site's interpretation can be compromised by whoever controls its narrative. I argue that Manzanar, as a site of public memory and history of Japanese incarceration, has been compromised by its stewards, the National Park Service (NPS), who do not utilize the camp to its full extent to teach the historical realities of the Japanese incarceration, nor do they connect the crimes of the past to the race-based imprisonment of minorities by recent U.S. administrations and the Immigration

and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), and this can best be understood through Manzanar's visual history and the interpretation of the camp's physical remains. In claiming that Manzanar, as it stands today, is not the site of public memory that it should be, I use my own photographs to illustrate what the NPS has deemed worthy of remembrance, thus adding to the literature on public memory spaces by demonstrating how to critically assess a space that has been set aside for preservation, along with how narratives surrounding said space have been created, altered, or erased. Manzanar is unique, because it is not just a place where injustice occurred on a massive scale: it is also a place where the government agency in charge of preserving its past is part of the same bureaucracy that committed the injustice to begin with. Many of the NPS's interpretive decisions could be acts of atonement, but—in reality—many of their choices are, as will be shown, acts of historical neglect with regard to the camp's legacy of suffering.



Figure 1: Mt. Williamson through sentry post window. Photo by the author.

Since 1992, Manzanar has been a National Historic Site, and the NPS, a U.S. government agency, is now its steward. My photographs illustrate what happens when the perpetrator of violence and injustice becomes the historical curator of its own crimes. While Manzanar is no longer as ruinous as it once was, its identities, histories, and memories are now interpreted through the lens of the NPS. In this

interpretation, the United States' use of the concentration-camp paradigm has been strictly relegated to the past, although the U.S. still uses concentration camps today, most notably in the form of ICE camps along the Mexico-U.S. border. The NPS's interpretation facilitates the replacing of narratives of incarcerated suffering with stories of overcoming adversity; it enables the downplaying of the incarcerated's unique Japanese culture while fetishizing American mainstream cultural assimilation through Western sports and entertainment; and it leads to the forgetting of the camp administration's guilt while leaving an abundance of uninterpreted prison apparatuses to define the incarcerated as prisoners rather than people. While the NPS does not deny that the incarceration was an injustice, there are many missed opportunities when it comes to illustrating the magnitude of the injustice and connecting it with injustice today. The NPS has the capacity to turn Manzanar into a "Contact Zone," which would use the site's history in an engaging way to bring its visitors into the struggle against injustice today. Instead, the NPS effectively portrays Manzanar as a history that can no longer be repeated, even as it repeats itself a few hundred miles to the south.



Figure 2: Manzanar Cemetery with Venus descending behind the Sierra Nevada. Photo by the author.

### I. Viewing Images of Violence

Images of Japanese incarceration are images of violence. Viewing these images means becoming witnesses to said violence, and both the photographer and the viewer share a responsibility – just like witnesses to any other crime. With regard to the viewing of violence, English and museology scholar Bettina Messias Carbonell states, “When museums and other exhibition venues arrange, contextualize, and gloss the extant evidence of inhuman brutality and human suffering, audience members are called upon to be both witness after the fact and parties responsible for the present and the future.”<sup>1</sup> While it is the viewers’ responsibility to remember the acts of injustice and violence they witness and, ostensibly, ensure they are not repeated, the responsibility of the photographer is a little different. Questions of presentation and exhibition arise but, even more so, there is the question whether violence should be photographed in the first place.

In the postmodern criticism of photography, prominent art historians and philosophers like Susan Sontag, John Berger, and Roland Barthes – who have been labeled as polemicists by journalism professor Susie Linfield – seem to regard photography with dismissive ambivalence or virulent hostility, or anywhere in between. Berger has characterized photographs of political violence as “at best useless and at worst narcissistic, leading the viewer to a sense of self-conscious helplessness rather than to enlightenment, outrage, or action.”<sup>2</sup> Barthes has followed suit, stating that “[s]uch images are too finished, too complete – ‘overconstructed.’ As such they deprive us of our freedom of response: ‘We are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing.’”<sup>3</sup> To deliver the *coup de grâce*, Sontag has elucidated the degradation of photography’s impact:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. [...] Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more – and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. [...] The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote (It’s only a photograph), and inevitable. [...] “Concerned” photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bettina Messias Carbonell, “The Afterlife of Lynching: Exhibitions and the Re-Composition of Human Suffering,” in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 347-356, here 347.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 20-21. According to Linfield, Sontag has back-peddled from this stance in her work, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), but these original statements retain more cultural clout.

If one were to accept this criticism, viewers of photographs of political violence would be rendered inert, passionless, and desensitized social simpletons, bereft of agency and action in the face of atrocity and suffering.

While this may hold true for those who, indeed, become morally dejected and powerless by viewing such images of abject suffering – for example, the images of war by American photojournalist James Nachtwey or French photographer Gilles Peress, who have both poignantly and graphically illustrated senseless atrocities all over the globe – Linfield rails against this notion. If postmodernism dictates that photographs deaden emotion, or that sentiments must be guarded against photographs, Linfield insists that photographs facilitate – more than any other medium – a visceral, urgent, and palpable emotional connection between the viewer and the subject.<sup>5</sup> It is the viewer's responsibility to foster this emotional connection and let it be a catalyst for social change and remembrance – to stoke the flame of anger that wells up in the viewer in the face of injustice and let it become a torch for change rather than a dying ember of moral complacency. For Linfield – and for every viewer, “Every image of suffering says not only, ‘This is so,’ but also, by implication: ‘This must not be’; not only, ‘This goes on,’ but also, by implication: ‘This must stop.’ Documents of suffering are documents of protest: they show what happens when we unmake the world.”<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the question whether or not these images ought to be viewed, the answer should always be a resounding and responsible “yes.”

Now that we have established the responsibility to view these photographs, there is the issue of “how” – one that Carbonell further complicates: “The act of bearing witness can take many forms; no ‘ideal’ form exists; no form can promise to bring every potential visitor to the brink of ethical action.”<sup>7</sup> For the images of Japanese incarceration, there are two methods worth noting. To unleash the viewers' eyes, and in turn their worldviews, upon the photographs without context is a powerful decision, one endorsed by art historian Svetlana Alpers who believes that the sheer act of looking can best facilitate an emotional connection between viewers and images.<sup>8</sup> However, with this method, the “museum effect” – which strips meaning from objects and makes them worth looking at solely because they are on display – can render the photographs of Japanese incarceration merely interesting to look at, nothing more, effectively fetishizing suffering as it simply becomes visually stimulating.

Meanwhile, meaningful contextualization through captions can “temper” viewers and prepare their worldviews to take in atrocities and thus establish

---

<sup>5</sup> Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Carbonell, “Afterlife of Lynching,” 354.

<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25-32, here 26-29.

deeper connections between them and the photograph's subject. The use of contextualization, which art historian James Clifford favors, turns the viewer-photograph encounter into a "Contact Zone" where understanding can be produced.<sup>9</sup> Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of the "Wanto Co. Grocery" (Oakland, California, 1942),<sup>10</sup> a soon-to-be-shuttered Japanese American business, depicts an ordinary street scene. A car is parked out front, the store windows are stocked with goods, and the door is open, inviting potential clients inside to shelter themselves from the sun. The only abnormality is a large sign over the windows that reads in bold, capital letters, "I AM AN AMERICAN." Viewers who look at this image without context will have their worldviews generate the meaning for them. Perhaps they are patriotic and the banner resonates with them. Perhaps they do not even consider the store's owners to be non-White. Without context, these viewers miss the opportunity to read the photography correctly. However, with context, as achieved through captions and educational information, the image becomes a painful reminder of how racial injustice on the part of the government deprived American citizens of their livelihoods. While Alpers's approach may be interesting for certain museum objects, for photographs of Japanese incarceration Clifford's use of proper context is required to facilitate meaningful remembrance. The way we look at these photographs is important, but so is an understanding of how the photographers chose to take them. Each action taken by photographers is fueled by pretense and agenda, and motivated by previous ideas and worldviews. In the end, the photographs of Japanese incarceration allow viewers to peer into the event, but through the subjective lens of the past and the eyes of history.

## II. Manzanar Today

A recording broadcast to any traveler who heeds the sign just outside of Lone Pine, California, advises northbound motorists to tune to AM 1610 for information on the upcoming Manzanar National Historic Site. Turning left onto Manzanar Reward Road, as instructed, immediately presents a somber scene. A lone sign in governmental brown and emblazoned with the word MANZANAR greets visitors with an arrow to direct them south down a two-lane blacktop toward the camp. In the distance, the barren landscape of the Owens Valley stretches outward to seamlessly blend with the mountains of the eastern Sierra Nevada range, towering over the valley floor as silent witnesses to the injustice perpetrated under their gaze. This scene is what welcomed Japanese American citizens to their new "home." For the incarcerated, these jagged peaks and arid wastes would become very familiar sights.

---

<sup>9</sup> James Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," in James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188-219, here 191-193.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothea Lange, "I AM AN AMERICAN" (Oakland, California, 1942), photograph, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 3: Manzanar Reward Road. Photo by the author.

### III. Prison Apparatuses

Turning south, the first thing visitors—and the incarcerated—would see is the guard tower, a powerful sentinel that facilitated the prisoners’ confinement under its watch. This is the first confrontation visitors have with the camp’s reality. The single tower standing today is a replica, and showing visitors a part of the camp’s prison apparatus first sets the tone for the rest of their visit. The NPS wants people to understand that this was, above all, a prison complex, and by placing the tower so that it is seen before anything else the NPS does justice to what the camp truly was: a prison. This is acknowledged in the NPS’s *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, which states that the tower “is a prominent visual attraction along U.S. 395, further identifying the site as a former internment camp.”<sup>11</sup> For motorists traveling along Highway 395, it is one of the only clearly visible landmarks of the camp, and, in effect, the tower becomes an advertisement of sorts. From the highway, the tower is backed by the Sierra, providing a stark juxtaposition between serene beauty and antiquated, menacing fortification, and imparting a feeling of mysterious importance to any passersby who do not know the area’s history. The NPS’s *Long Range Interpretive Plan* recognizes, too, that “one of the more compelling views will be with the mountains in the background.”<sup>12</sup> The arrival at Manzanar communicates solemnity. The ominous MANZANAR sign and the guard tower against the backdrop of wilderness indicate that this is a place of remembrance.

<sup>11</sup> National Park Service, Manzanar National Historic Site, *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, August 2017, 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> National Park Service Manzanar National Historic Site, *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, 18.



*Figure 4: The moon rises above guard tower number 8 with U.S. 395's constant traffic passing by. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 5: Guard tower number 8, stars overhead. Photo by the author.*



Figure 6: U.S. 395's Blue Star Memorial Highway designation with guard tower number 8. Photo by the author.

But from this point forward, the message begins to muddy and fluctuate. Manzanar's frontage road is part of the Blue Star Memorial Highway system, and the sign that designates it as such states that it is "A tribute to the Armed Forces that have defended the United States of America." Tacked onto the same post, just below, is another, much smaller sign "In honor of Americans of Japanese Ancestry who served in the 100<sup>th</sup>/442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team and the Military Intelligence Service during World War II." Juxtaposed with the guard tower looming behind, this memorial creates a provocative dichotomy. The Blue Star Memorial Highway sign establishes a pro-military posture for the camp. It justifies the incarceration of the Japanese, reminding readers that American servicemen fought against the nation's enemies abroad, and this camp, with its guard tower as proof, defended America against her enemies at home by incarcerating them. The sign perpetuates the same fabricated "military necessity" that gave impetus to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1942 Executive Order 9066 authorizing Japanese "relocation. It generates an anti-Japanese sentiment that is only slightly offset by the second, smaller sign honoring the Japanese American 100<sup>th</sup> and 442<sup>nd</sup> units. Yet, this smaller sign neglects to inform visitors that the very camp they are touring was, in fact, the main recruitment ground for these units and thus fails to vindicate the alleged "enemies" kept behind its fences. Visitors continue to the

camp unaware that those interned here were loyal American citizens, and not the enemy, and the combination of the tower with the memorial sign underscores the notion that this camp was a necessity for American safety.



Figure 7: Recreated historic sign reading “Manzanar War Relocation Center,” night. Photo by the author.

Following in the footsteps of the incarcerated, we pass the modern entrance that brings visitors to the new interpretive center and enter the “historic entrance” further south. This entry is marked by a reconstruction of the original entrance sign. Hoisting it upright are two parallel beams projecting out of a rock pile. Heavy black chains link the large wooden sign to its supports. The sign itself is adorned with the euphemism “MANZANAR WAR RELOCATION CENTER” in old Gothic or Germanic lettering, ascribing to the site a medieval flair. There is no interpretive placard here, leaving any onlooker potentially confused as to what exactly might have occurred in the camp. However, showing a replica of the original sign is important, as the history of the “War Relocation Authority” (WRA) euphemism is vital for a critical understanding of what happened here. Yet, the sign should not be hidden: it should be displayed in the interpretive center, accompanied by plenty of context, as evidence of the WRA’s use of euphemism.

On the other side of the historic entrance, visitors pass two of the three original, remaining buildings: the sentry posts. Thus far, visitors have been bombarded with prison paraphernalia: guard towers, barbed wire, allusions to America’s enemies, a barbarous-looking euphemistic sign, and now a prison checkpoint. While it is vital to demonstrate that this was a prison, if only to counter revisionist histories stating anything to the contrary, Manzanar—to uninitiated or simply curious visitors—projects the incarcerated as prisoners and nothing more. The sentry posts are short stone structures, clad in flagstones, with wooden, shingled

roofs. These roofs are reminiscent of traditional Japanese *hogyu-yane* style roofs or even pagoda roofs, as the square pyramid roofs slope downwards sharply at their highest, leveling off slightly halfway toward the roofline. Perhaps this was an attempt – albeit an unsuccessful one – to calm the incarcerated upon their arrival, suggesting – falsely – that this would be a place where their culture would be preserved and their lives would go on relatively unscathed. The interpretive signage for these sentry posts is hidden behind the structures themselves and might be missed by those passing by. According to its *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, the NPS is aware that this entrance might confuse visitors:

Upon entering, visitors first encounter the two restored sentry post buildings; however, these structures look very similar to the entrance stations at many present-day national park areas, and some visitors stop, expecting to pay a fee. The historic significance of these buildings is not readily apparent to arriving visitors, nor is that of the adjacent administrative area. Visitors may follow directional signs to the visitor center, not realizing the importance of the resources they are passing by.<sup>13</sup>

Those intrepid guests who leave their cars to peer inside the structures are able to see the first sign of any semblance of Japanese agency, albeit bereft of any context or information. On the inside walls of the sentry post, there are Japanese names: Nakatama, Kamoshita, and Takahashi are a few of the names written on the walls, as if to reclaim the site or perhaps “get the last word in.” However, without additional information provided by the NPS, their meaning is lost on visitors.



Figure 8: Manzanar military police sentry post, one of three remaining original structures, night. Photo by the author.

<sup>13</sup> National Park Service Manzanar National Historic Site, *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, 6.



Figure 9: Moon rising over Inyo Mountains and military police sentry post. Photo by the author.



Figure 10: Military police checkpoint interior, names are scrawled on walls between door and window. Photo by the author.



Figure 11: Manzanar internal police sentry post, one of three remaining original structures. Photo by the author.



Figure 12: Night traffic along U.S. 359. How many drivers are aware of the history they are passing? Photo by the author.

#### IV. Administration Area

Once inside the historic entrance, the immediate area visitors enter is the administration area, a site where the White camp laborers and military police would have lived and worked. This place has one of the highest concentrations of stone ruins still standing in the camp—a testament to the higher quality of the structures Whites lived in. However, there is a noted lack of interpretation in the area, compared to the reconstructed “demonstration block” and other places in the camp. It marks a prevailing inconsistency throughout the camp, as the NPS felt it necessary to rebuild structures of Japanese imprisonment for interpretation, but not sites of Japanese agency. Meanwhile, sites of authority are left standing—sometimes with boundary markers not provided to Japanese ruins—but without detailed interpretation. This strange need to recreate and heavily interpret the Japanese living quarters, while the living quarters of the administration are still standing with no interpretation, alludes to a confusing dichotomy of possible meanings and intentions. Should one not evenly interpret every aspect of the camp? After all, the camp’s administration impacted every one of the *ten thousand stories* the NPS purports to accurately preserve. The NPS makes strides in establishing narratives for the Japanese, but does not attempt to confront the history of the still-standing evidence of their overseers. Perhaps this focus on the Japanese in the form of reconstructions and their stories—rather than to reconstruct or interpret the administration area—is a way to avoid unnecessary attention to the crimes perpetrated by the government, which would have been carried out by those living in this administration area. According to its 2007 *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, the NPS “explore[d] the potential of acquiring one of the administration area buildings and relocating it to its original site,” however, this was given a “low” priority and has yet to be implemented.<sup>14</sup>

Directly north of the sentry posts and administrative area are two plots of land that are indicative of the NPS’s preservation efforts—or lack thereof. One is the internal police station, maintained and cordoned off; the other is the Manzanar Free Press, unmarked and overgrown. The Free Press was a bastion of Japanese American agency during incarceration—albeit heavily censored by the camp administration—but its site is only marked by a sign, and the removal of the sign would effectively remove the Free Press from physical memory, only to dwell within the archives. The police station, however, acts as a sepulcher of authority over the Japanese, its tombstone is its preserved foundation, which is carefully sectioned off from encroaching plants by a border of painted stones—protected and remembered. Even if its sign were removed, these physical markers would still act as a threshold between the sacred and the profane. Yet, while these remains of authority are preserved and marked off, there is little to no interpretive signage for areas that potentially draw attention to authoritative control over the incarcerated.

---

<sup>14</sup> National Park Service Manzanar National Historic Site, *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, 31.



Figure 13: Cordoned-off internal police station site. Photo by the author.



Figure 14: Overgrown Manzanar Free Press. Photo by the author.

While there is a sign hidden behind a sentry post for the military police, there is no signage for the internal police which was made of incarcerated personnel under the command of White, non-military police officers. While some might consider incarcerated security a means of self-security and, in turn, Japanese agency, the use of incarcerated labor under the orders of White officers on the WRA's payroll was a perversion of Japanese authority. Essentially, the WRA used incarcerated as a tool for their own imprisonment. This is certainly a facet of life in Manzanar that visitors should learn about when seeing the remnants of the internal police station.

To the south lies the administrative area proper and, beyond that, the staff housing area. Simple signs indicate the locations of the post office and the town hall and a few other locations, but the majority of these remains nameless—and thus meaningless—to visitors without access to archives. Some sites, like the town hall, receive the same treatment as the internal police station and are outlined in whitewashed rocks. The town hall was another apparatus of incarcerated self-incarceration, as block managers would meet at this site regularly to maintain order among the populace.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 15: Town Hall. Photo by the author.

When one explores the administration area and staff housing, remnants of foundations and stonewalls still perforate the desert landscape. A crumbling asphalt roundabout surrounds a large rock-walled garden with a Joshua tree in its center. This was the hub of the staff housing and administrative area—what the lone interpretive sign calls “a community apart.” This sign offers visitors a glimpse into the life of WRA employees living at the camp.

<sup>15</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 2006, 53.



*Figure 16: The sun beats down upon the crumbling roundabout in the administrative area. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 17: A replanted Joshua Tree in an incarceratedee-designed garden, administrative area. Photo by the author.*

In very poor taste, the NPS's sign uses first-hand accounts to depict the White employees as somehow enduring a similar ordeal as the incarcerated. One entry reads: "Industrial arts teacher Brieuc Bouché recalled that his Manzanar apartment had a living room, bathroom, and 'a bedroom you could not turn your bed all around in'." A quote from fourth-grade teacher Martha Shaof states: "The children would talk to me, and they would ask questions like, 'Could I leave the camp?' and I said, 'Yes.' ... 'Won't the soldier shoot at you?' And I said, 'No,' and that rather surprised them because I think they thought ... since I lived in the camp, that I would be treated the same. And I think they had a hard time accepting that." Shirley DaValle, the young daughter of another teacher, said: "My father had left ... and my mother was faced with becoming the breadwinner ... teaching jobs were not plentiful, but she was offered a job teaching at Manzanar." These quotes allude to the cramped spaces, the feeling of imprisonment, and the economic difficulties of the time, but to elucidate the comparatively minor inconveniences of Whites at a site where people were imprisoned based on the color of their skin, whose living spaces were shared by their entire family without privacy, who had the guns from the towers trained on them and no one else, and who had lost every bit of their economic agency to Whites, is highly historically insensitive. To make any attempt to compare the suffering of the incarcerated with the specious exasperation of the people who actively participated in their imprisonment by working for the WRA is a sick joke on the part of the NPS.

Along with references to White hardships, other quotes on the sign reflect a sense of surprise by Whites when their interaction with incarcerated proved to be amicable. Shirley DeValle's sister Joan, a White teenager, said: "In all of our contacts, the Japanese were gracious, warm, and friendly ... we joined the Japanese Girl Reserve Groups, an organization for socializing ... [and] we attended several plays and music programs put on by the Japanese, and even went to a Japanese wedding." Camp policewoman Nan Zischank stated: "There wasn't one of them that was mean to me or said anything nasty, they were all really lovely people." The surprise that is communicated by people who expected the incarcerated to be cruel toward their own captors portrays the Japanese—to the sign's readers—as a potentially hostile group by illustrating an underlying fear held by Whites that those incarcerated would not be friendly to them. The sign perpetuates White fear of possible Japanese enemies because there is no additional information to interpret the quotes: they are presented "as is." The sign could point out the racism in these quotes and place them into their proper historical context but, instead, it celebrates Whites who overcame their own racism when they were treated fairly by the incarcerated. This lone administration area interpretive sign portrays Whites as victims on par with the Japanese and as racial ambassadors when those they oppressed and held captive were treating them with kindness.

The reality, however, was not as optimistic and sympathetic as this sign makes it out to be. There were cases when Whites living at the camp were met with hostility, and some Whites found the place so depressing they had to flee on their

off hours to preserve their mental health—a luxury ignored by the NPS who wants visitors to be under the impression of racial harmony throughout the camp. In an interview, Manzanar incarcerated Karl Yoneda (1906-1999) described the animosity his White wife faced from other incarcerated for her forceful complaints about the camp's conditions—behavior that made Japanese women feel uncomfortable because of their upbringing which taught them to endure hardship silently. Yoneda stated that “Well, camp people resented, too, that I brought a Caucasian wife into camp. Some of them said, ‘Well, you know, she had the right to stay outside of the camp; why does she have to come into camp and become sort of a sore thumb?’ It was easy to point out the ways that she didn’t fit into the Japanese community.”<sup>16</sup> Whites were often not met with the cheerful openness the NPS describes, and sometimes they themselves did not even want to be there. When interviewed, Lucy Adams (1898-1996), assistant project director in charge of community management, who sought to escape the oppressive atmosphere of Manzanar, stated:

My first impression was I was profoundly depressed at the enclosure within Manzanar. That was so depressing to me that I went out, and I had a house outside Independence up in the mountains where I could go on weekends and get away from that enclosed atmosphere. And also, the kind of—the feeling of the people in Independence and Lone Pine, whenever you were in there, they were so curious and so hostile. So, by having this house way up in the mountains that I could get to over weekends, I could get away from it.<sup>17</sup>

The need to escape the very community she was helping manage due to its claustrophobic nature is a narrative certainly not on display in the administrative area, and the omission of such narratives by the NPS is an example of its attempts to change the tone of the camp for its visitors.

Throughout the rest of the administrative and staff housing area, markers of significantly better facilities dot the grounds. Cement stoops and decorative rock walls that once adorned the superior White housing are still standing today. According to the NPS,

Staff housing was constructed to a higher standard than the internees’ barracks. Kitchens, bathrooms, hot and cold running water, and sound-insulated partitions between the apartments offered a level of comfort and privacy to the WRA staff that was unavailable to the internees. Formal landscaping, including rock planters, lawn areas and foundation planting beds helped create a sense of comfort and convey a sense of permanence to the staff housing area.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Karl Yoneda, interview by Ronald C. Larson and Arthur A. Hansen, March 3, 1974, Oral History 1353.2 (csufccop\_jaoh\_0944), transcript, Japanese American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Lucy Adams, interview by Arthur A. Hansen and Sue Embrey, October 16, 1993, Oral History 2327 (csufccop\_jaoh\_0122), transcript, Japanese American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton, 26.

<sup>18</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 53.

These fixtures still existed long after the incarceratedees' barracks had been destroyed or sold off. One of the most remarkable markers is a granite boulder and cement mortar wall and doorway that surrounds the patio of the camp director's office. This wall was commissioned by the director and built by hired incarceratedees.<sup>19</sup> The use of camp labor is not addressed by any interpretive sign in the area, nor is there any indication that this lavish appointment was for the camp director. Today, it simply sits as a portal between desert waste and more desert waste, denied any particular significance by the NPS. Thus, the administrative area is another missed opportunity for the NPS, who could use it to illustrate the workings of a concentration camp. How do these buildings and the people in them keep an institution of confinement going? What apparatuses are required to subdue a population? What kind of mindset is shared by those who justify imprisoning a group of people based on race? How can wartime hysteria and racism be masked by military necessity? The administrative area and staff housing could become the perfect "Contact Zone" for visitors to draw a connection between the past and present, but these vital questions continue to go unanswered, and, instead, the NPS portrays Whites as in the same barbed-wire enclosed boat as the incarceratedees.



Figure 18: 48-star flag flown by the NPS, administrative area. Another flies by the auditorium. Photo by the author.

<sup>19</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 203.

One of the more interesting facets of the camp today is the use of the flag in the administration area. From the road, a historic, rock-lined cement walkway leads to a plaza containing a diamond-shaped stone flowerbed with a flagpole in its center. This is an original structure, and the NPS continues to fly a flag on this pole. However, the flag is flown unlit at night, and this is atypical for NPS locations which usually adhere to strict flag protocols and call for flags to be removed or lit at night. Upon closer inspection, this flag is a forty-eight-star flag. Thus, not only is this flag unburdened by today's flag codes; it is a subtle method of relegating the crimes of incarceration to the past. Rather than flying a fifty-star flag at this site of suffering, the NPS flies a flag of the past, linking the unconstitutional existence of Manzanar to the actions of the United States of the past. Many view the American flag as a symbol of freedom, and to see it fly over a concentration camp causes a cognitive dissonance of sorts, but the NPS sidesteps this by simply not flying today's American flag, and in turn, not connecting crimes of the past with similar crimes of today.



Figure 19: Sectioned-off staff housing ruins. Photo by the author.



*Figure 20: Staff housing stoops against the Inyo Mountains. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 21: Staff housing stoops against the Alabama Hills. Photo by the author.*



Figure 22: Incarceree-built wall to director's residence against Sierra Nevada. Photo by the author.

### V. Auditorium

The primary location of interpretation for Manzanar is also the most prominent original structure at the site: the auditorium. The auditorium's existence is what determined the NPS's selection of Manzanar for preservation over the other nine internment camps, and its adaptive reuse is an excellent demonstration of effective historical preservation, which helps foster meaningful connections between the past and present. In the 1950s, the auditorium was sold to Inyo County which demolished the stage to build a truck ramp, tore out the wooden dance floor to exchange it for concrete, and used the structure for decades as a highway maintenance depot. The county also sold the southern one-story wing to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who moved it to nearby Lone Pine to be used as a meeting house.<sup>20</sup> Between 2002 and 2004, the NPS strove to restore the structure to its prior state by rebuilding the stage inside, laying down new wood floors, and even reconstructing the south wing.<sup>21</sup> However, there is a drawback to using a venue known for holding joyous occasions—such as school dances, concerts, plays, and other festive ceremonies—to correctly impart the historical significance of suffering, as the visitor's experience inside is largely determined by the structure's prior, more jovial, use. Unfortunately, this is where much of the NPS's misdirection comes into play.

<sup>20</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 205.



Figure 23: Sun glaring upon Manzanar's auditorium, one of three remaining original structures. Photo by the author.



Figure 24: Another 48-star flag, Manzanar auditorium. Photo by the author.

The NPS's emphasis on recreation and entertainment at Manzanar is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, preserving these aspects of the camp demonstrates that those incarcerated within its walls were able to carve out a modicum of happiness and joy under duress and imprisonment, proving that they did indeed exercise personal agency at Manzanar. On the other hand, placing emphasis on sources of fun instills a sense that life within the camp was not as bad as it seemed. The NPS muddies the water by heavily injecting notions of gaiety into prison life,

thus distracting visitors from the crimes perpetrated by the U.S. against American citizens. The adaptive re-usage of the camp's auditorium—a place where dances, concerts, and theatrical performances took place—as the nexus of learning about the camp establishes a festive gloss over any information gleaned within. The auditory experience inside the interpretive center reinforces this by barraging visitors with looped applause from U.S. President Ronald Reagan's 1988 restitution signing; a recording of U.S. President Harry Truman's address to the Japanese American 442<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, "You've fought not only the enemy, but you've fought prejudice, and you've won"; reenacted radio news, complete with hammed-up "newsreel diction," informing radio listeners of the war; and a crooner smoothly delivering a rendition of Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In"—ironically one of the most popular tunes performed inside the very auditorium visitors are standing in, played by an all-incarceree big band, The Jive Bombers. This aural display, along with all of it taking place on the dance floor, subverts any intention of addressing the gravity of the situation faced here by the Japanese.

The music, the applause, and the endless repeats of "you've won" all double down on one notion very prevalent at Manzanar: overcoming adversity. While this was a vital aspect of life in the camp, it should not crowd out the principal purpose for preserving the camp, namely, to show how the United States stripped American citizens of their constitutional rights and imprisoned them. Historian Emily Colborn-Roxworthy argues "that making the former internees' theatre the focal point has allowed the NPS's proliferation of multiple meanings of 'overcoming adversity' (to quote an NPS pamphlet) at Manzanar, most centering on Japanese Americans' embrace of mainstream youth culture and all-American recreational activities as performed at the auditorium and elsewhere on the former camp's grounds."<sup>22</sup> Manzanar's preservation should remind visitors that unwavering vigilance is necessary when it comes to safeguarding the rights of others, lest the crimes committed at Manzanar continue to repeat themselves. The camp should not become a light-hearted playground that distracts from the suffering of those incarcerated within.

The theme of overcoming diversity extends beyond the auditorium to the baseball field and the rebuilt basketball court. These "all-American activities" and the emphasis on them is, once again, a double-edged sword. They do demonstrate a historical reality of the camp, which should not be forgotten, but because they take up a disproportionately large portion of visitors' time—compared to the portion of camp life they actually filled for the prisoners, visitors might leave Manzanar assuming that everyone there was constantly at play. Additionally, the emphasis on overcoming hardships—via embracing American sports, theater, and culture—replaces the Japanese culture of the incarcerated with an American one,

---

<sup>22</sup> Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, "'Manzanar, the Eyes of the World Are upon You': Performance and Archival Ambivalence at a Japanese American Internment Camp," *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 2 (May 2007): 189-214, here 191.

which communicates (falsely) that the Japanese Americans were only able to overcome their plight through an abandonment of their own culture.



Figure 25: Manzanar's reconstructed basketball court. Photo by the author.



Figure 26: Manzanar's reconstructed baseball diamond. Photo by the author.

“By focusing on such performances of triumph,” Colborn-Roxworthy continues, “the NPS not only facilitates visitors’ emotional connection by providing a shortcut around the unjust suffering and often insurmountable adversity imposed by the internment, but also frames Japanese American internees as inherently theatrical, natural-born actors – one-dimensionally available for public scrutiny that suggests their display serves as an assimilative mask – in a way that denies their complex subjectivity.”<sup>23</sup> The “Americanization” of the Japanese was exactly what many photographers, such as Ansel Adams, tried to depict. During the war, their priority was to establish that the Japanese were loyal because of how American they were, but today such cultural erasure is anachronistic, inappropriate, and distracts from the message that these people were imprisoned on the basis of race.

This distraction continues as visitors exit the rear of the auditorium for the replica barracks, an area featuring the recreated dirt basketball court. Further to the north is a preserved baseball field, complete with a built-up pitcher’s mound, bases, and the home plate. An egregious guest accommodation the NPS thoughtlessly believed was a good idea was to supply basketballs to visitors of the remade basketball court immediately northeast of the auditorium. Half a dozen basketballs are courtside in a large, weathered-looking, wooden-and-wire bin to match the aesthetic of the court itself – an easy distraction from the real lesson that should be taught here for any busload of children on a field trip. Visiting Manzanar should be a solemn, introspective experience. Visitors should peacefully take in the spaces and think about what transpired at the site, what actions took place to strip Americans of their freedom, and relate such actions to the present and future. Manzanar should be a place of respect, reflection, and awe. According to historical and architectural preservationist Norman Tyler, Manzanar is a destination for historical “thanatourism,” or grief tourism, and the site holds the anger, pain, angst, and shame of those incarcerated at the camp.<sup>24</sup> The NPS, in an act of utter irreverence, ignores this, evidently thinking that allowing visitors to complete their tour of a concentration camp with a friendly game of “horse” would be ideal to communicate the constitutional injustice committed here.

The NPS has clearly decided that Western sports, such as baseball and basketball, are worthy of remembrance over traditional Japanese activities, such as *Judo* and *Kendo*, thereby furthering the cultural erasure of the incarcerated. Under the auspices of the NPS, Manzanar retains the capacity to hold basketball and baseball games in recreated areas, but the *Kendo Dojo* is nothing but brush and trees, and the *Judo* platform is long gone. These activities cannot be performed in their previous locations unlike their American counterparts. While the tour road does not bring visitors anywhere close to the site of the previous *Judo* platform,

---

<sup>23</sup> Colborn-Roxworthy, “Manzanar, the Eyes of the World Are upon You,” 192.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Tyler, Ilene R. Tyler, and Ted J. Ligibel, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2018), 324.

guests do see the *Kendo Dojo*, however, just like the Manzanar Free Press's location, it would become non-existent if it were not for a simple sign reading "KENDO DOJO." No boundary or clearing preserves the location of this unique part of Japanese culture and identity. Meanwhile, at the baseball field, an interpretive sign drives home the homogenizing effect the sport had on the incarcerated with a quote by internee Takeo Suo that "[p]utting on a baseball uniform was like wearing the American flag." Again, the NPS illustrates a desire to overcome adversity through becoming "American" at the expense of Japanese culture. The sign explains that "baseball was a powerful symbol of an American way of life that boosted morale and brought some sense of normalcy to a confined community." Through this statement, the NPS links normalcy and morale to "an American way of life," and just as the auditorium links overcoming adversity to American entertainment, the sporting arenas preserved at Manzanar operate in the same way.



Figure 27: Manzanar's *Kendo Dojo*, now an empty field. Photo by the author.

The music, dancing, games, sports, and speeches all direct visitors to the idea that the Japanese prisoners were making the best of a bad situation and overcame adversity with the help of these recreational activities. However, the disproportional emphasis on these activities not only replaces Japanese culture with an American one but also distracts visitors from the fact that they are visiting

a place of suffering. This is exactly what happens when the perpetrator of a crime becomes the curator of its history: the reality of injustice is subverted by offering an emotional substitute for confronting the pain and suffering that took place. Visitors leave Manzanar with the notion that, while those imprisoned here had been ripped from their homes, they also embraced American culture at the cost of their own, regularly enjoyed sports and dances, and overcame adversity and prejudice as confirmed by Truman's looped speech, and that no such atrocity could ever happen again—all with a quick pick-up game of hoops to top it off. Based on the NPS's current conceptualization and preservation, visitors leave Manzanar unaware of similar unconstitutional actions occurring around them and emotionally unequipped to confront such injustices when found.



Figure 28: Mt. Williamson, one of the incarcerated's constant companions. Photo by the author.



Figure 29: Barbed wire under the starry sky. Photo by the author.

## VI. Plaque

The inability to realize the unconstitutionality of Japanese incarceration—or the ability to perform the mental gymnastics required to justify it—was prevalent during the incarceration and, to a degree, still exists today, especially when it comes to referring to these camps as concentration camps. When interviewed, Lynn Iwasa, an incarcerated person born in Manzanar in 1942, frequently used the term “concentration camp” when referring to her birthplace: “I remember being aware I was born in Manzanar. At that time when somebody would say, ‘What is that?’ I’d say, ‘A concentration camp.’”<sup>25</sup> Iwasa went on to describe an encounter she had with a coworker who could not conceive of the United States operating concentration camps: “I remember when I started working, I was talking to our secretary and she was from Denver. And I mentioned I was born in Manzanar. And we discussed this thing and she didn’t have a clue. She didn’t even *believe it*, that that went on.”<sup>26</sup> Disbelief is not a rare response when confronted with America’s concentration camps, and hostility can often result from such denial.

After Manzanar was named a National Historic Site in 1992 and the NPS began developing it, some of Owens Valley’s White residents began to sound the alarm concerning what they perceived as a distortion of the truth. The NPS did not shy away from openly labeling Manzanar a prison, but local residents considered this “anti-American” because they felt that the Japanese had never been stripped of their rights and had been free to come and go from the camp. “There is a cadre of individuals that term themselves a ‘circle of patriots’ that feel that we have some hidden agenda, which sort of baffles us,” Manzanar’s first NPS Superintendent Ross Hopkins said: “It’s obvious that many of them feel that if we tell the story of Manzanar as it relates to the war relocation camp with negative connotations, that represents ‘America-bashing.’”<sup>27</sup> However, the anger surrounding the camp’s status as a National Historic Site was not new. The greatest controversy had occurred in 1973 when a plaque was placed at the site, decreeing Manzanar not only a California Registered Historical Landmark but also a concentration camp. Anna T. Kelley, a longtime resident of Independence, just north of Manzanar, worked in the first-aid station at the camp during its original construction. When asked in an interview about this plaque—which refers to Manzanar as a “concentration camp” and decries the “injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism, and economic exploitation”—Kelley argued that the camp should not be called a concentration camp, as it was not one:

---

<sup>25</sup> Lynn E. Iwasa, interview by Steve Sewell, May 9, 1994, Oral History 5865 (csufccop\_jaoh\_0204), transcript, Japanese American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Lynn E. Iwasa, Oral History 5865 (csufccop\_jaoh\_0204), transcript, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Martin Forstenzer, “Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at Camp,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1996.

Well, it was a ... In a concentration camp the people are in horrible straits. I mean, in Europe you know, just terrible and all jammed together and no privileges, no means of keeping themselves clean or anything else. And this is not true of Manzanar. Manzanar was a war relocation center. The living conditions were pretty adverse at first, but after the camp was built and the people had a chance to, like I say, make themselves comfortable, it was pretty good. It wasn't bad at all.<sup>28</sup>

The association of concentration camps with Nazi death camps is a perpetuation of a euphemistic paradigm designed to soften the crimes of those who use concentration camps. While Nazi death camps were concentration camps, not all concentration camps have been (or are) death camps, and Manzanar is a perfect example of this. To say that Manzanar “wasn't bad at all” is the logical result of an inability to critically confront the constitutional crime of Japanese incarceration, and the plaque continues to confront those who deny that it was, in fact, a crime.



Figure 30: The damaged plaque still stands as memorial to America's racial violence and denial. Photo by the author.

Still standing today, this plaque has been a recording – and in turn evidence – of how Americans have viewed the illegal incarceration of their fellow citizens. Bullet holes, hack marks, gouges, chisel cuts, and even corrosive spills left on the plaque are not only remnants of violence against the truth that the site was a concentration camp, but each action taken against it is also a violence against the memory of the Japanese Americans who suffered here. According to a 1996 *Los Angeles Times* article, “[t]he plaque, which still greets visitors at the camp entrance, has been hacked and stained, and the first C of ‘concentration camp’ has been ground off. [Manzanar’s NPS Superintendent Ross] Hopkins said that a man who

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Jessie A. Garrett and Ronald C. Larson, eds., *Camp and Community: Manzanar and the Owens Valley* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, California State University, 1977), 73-74.

described himself as a World War II veteran called him to say that he had driven 200 miles to urinate on the historical marker."<sup>29</sup> These acts of violence are manifestations of an ignorance-fueled denial of racial injustice—in the same vein as saying “all/blue lives matter,” and it is this kind of denial that Manzanar’s education and interpretation should combat first and foremost.

Yet, there is no information on the plaque’s defacement. Superintendent Hopkins even stated in 1996 “that the Park Service agrees that the term [concentration camp] is a misnomer and that the agency will not use it in describing Manzanar.”<sup>30</sup> This is a serious missed opportunity for the NPS to directly associate the racial issues that continue in our society today with the very same hysteria, racism, and economic exploitation that predicated the Japanese incarceration in the first place. To properly atone for its past violence, the U.S. government, through sites like Manzanar, should fully confront today’s racial violence and injustice, instead of framing them as something that only the Japanese had to endure due to wartime hysteria. Or, perhaps, this lack of confrontation is evidence that the NPS does not wish to draw attention to today’s racial violence and injustice since the latter have been discernible as pronounced proclivities of recent U.S. administrations.



Figure 31: Mess hall garden; cement barrack supports dot the field to the left. Photo by the author.

## VII. Gardens

Gardening represented a method of escape for the incarcerated, as well as a chance to exercise personal agency. The small gardens that adorned the front of many blocks and the parks and rock gardens scattered throughout the camp’s public

<sup>29</sup> Forstenzer, “Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at Camp,” *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Forstenzer, “Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at Camp,” *Los Angeles Times*.

spaces differed from the agricultural spaces. They were not a means of subsistence, like the orchards, but a means of beautification. They did not just occupy the time of those who suddenly had plenty of it on hand: gardens made an environment which had been forced upon the incarcerated uniquely theirs.

Referencing Dorothea Lange's opinion that the gardens represented an act of ingenuity on the incarcerated's part, historian James C. Curtis has argued that gardening was an act of naturalization and Japanese cultural erasure brought about by the WRA because "ingenuity had long been considered an essential trait of the American character, one born of the need to survive in a frontier environment."<sup>31</sup> Curtis notes that Eleanor Roosevelt, when visiting the Gila River camp, "praised the pioneering spirit of 'our Japanese Americans' as displayed 'in the gardens—which I can testify were truly beautiful even in camps where the desert surrounds them' [...] [and] showed 'how well the War Relocation Authority did its work.'"<sup>32</sup> A caption under one of Lange's images cited by Curtis reads, "growing flowers in the garden of their barrack homes at this war relocation center is a popular pastime occupation for the older evacuees."<sup>33</sup> Curtis argues that the WRA hoped that gardening would help siphon off any desire to protest, especially from the Issei population, and that Lange's photographs of their gardens were proof that the WRA was doing its job in naturalizing the Japanese.<sup>34</sup> While the incarcerated found themselves in a frontier-like environment, to assume that their planting of gardens was an effort to become more American or an act of cultural assimilation is highly White-centric. Gardening has had a rich Japanese tradition for thousands of years, and while scraping a part of the desert away to make room for a decorative garden does exhibit ingenuity, it is not a uniquely American trait.

The NPS places importance on these decorative spaces and preserves them under the category of "historic vegetation." Signs along the driving tour indicate where gardens remain for people to park and visit them. The gardens are not recreated or restored but, rather, stabilized for interpretive purposes because "current site staffing and funding [and] treatment guidelines for preservation of the gardens at Manzanar emphasizes stabilization of existing historic material (e.g., plants and garden features) rather than conjectural restoration or reconstruction."<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy, though, that the NPS has revitalized Manzanar's pre-camp historic apple orchard, which is a representation of White settler triumph over the desert, rather than the Japanese incarcerated's acts of culture and agency. While the orchards have become lush, producing trees, guarded by fences, the gardens are ruins and marked only by signs and empty concrete canals.

---

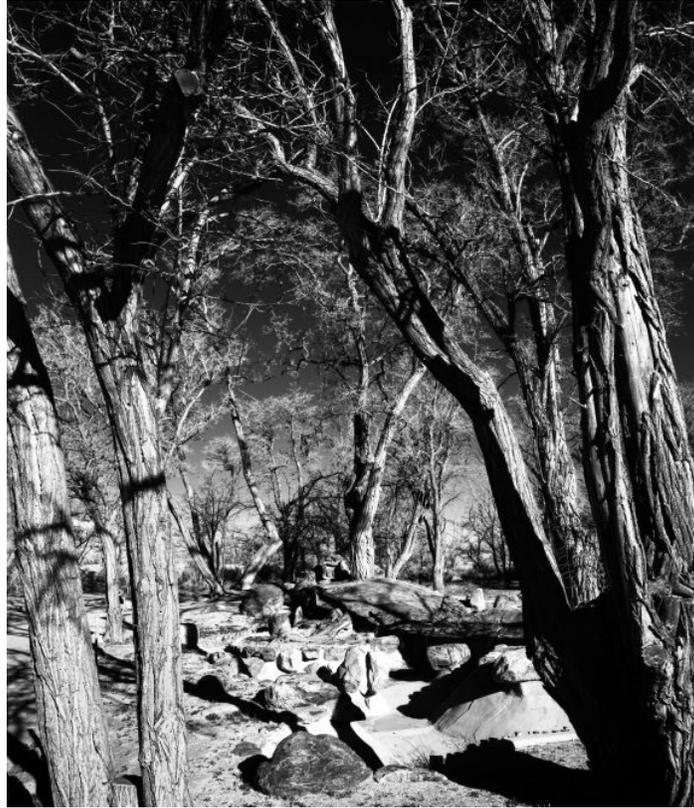
<sup>31</sup> James C. Curtis, *Discriminating Views: Documentary Photography and Japanese American Internment* (Kent: Curich Press, 2015), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Curtis, *Discriminating Views*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Curtis, *Discriminating Views*, 99.

<sup>34</sup> Curtis, *Discriminating Views*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 249.



*Figure 32: Housing block garden; wasp nests reside within its nooks and crannies. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 33: Isamu Noguchi is channeled by this garden water feature. Photo by the author.*

The gardens are eerie in their current state—certainly a far cry from their original beauty. A road sign indicates the general direction and distance to walk, then visitors unceremoniously stumble upon a dry cement tributary or rock stack amidst the trees. These gardens are now home to wasp hives under the fallen foliage at the bottom of the empty pools or to other creatures that have taken up residence in the unmaintained waterways. Some of these dry, asymmetrical pools and articulated rock formations are reminiscent of Isamu Noguchi's gardens at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, which he designed in 1959. Noguchi, a resident of New York, self-incarcerated at the Poston, Arizona, camp in 1942 to promote arts and crafts, and he designed many parks, pools, and the cemetery for the camp, none of which the WRA implemented. Considering Noguchi's work—like the "California Scenario" in Costa Mesa, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center Plaza in Los Angeles, or his sculptures, such as "My Arizona," the parallels between Noguchi's structures and Manzanar's gardens are evident.

Manzanar's gardens do not just represent Japanese agency, they are also the only site-specific artistic examples of that agency that still exist today. They were not agricultural endeavors but, rather, projects to behold, much like photographs. Their design, styles, and components were artistic choices, indicative of the incarcerated thought processes. They are visual evidence that still speaks to visitors today about Japanese culture, agency, and art. In an essay for her History class about the role the Japanese should play in recreating their life in the camp, incarcerated Mary Honda stated in 1943: "Truly we should all cooperate and labor together in making this relocation center something to be quite proud of and if each and every one did his share, no matter how little, we can worthily say, 'We made this such a place, so that we can be proud and happy ... in making it worth living in!'"<sup>36</sup> The desire to labor together to make Manzanar a place worth living in is embodied by the Japanese beautification efforts—still visible to this day.

These gardens are among the most important parts of the camp, and they should be more than just "stabilized." Their neglect shows what a perpetrator does to the memory of the victim, allowing it to languish and fall into ruin. They should be revitalized to, once again, become examples of the incarcerated protest against the desert and imprisonment, and to allow the incarcerated memory to live on in their original works. The NPS, however, is not the group to speak for those who made the gardens. The descendants of those who made them, or other Japanese American activist groups, should be given financial support and encouragement to return and rebuild the gardens into monuments of Japanese incarcerated agency and impetus. Art is the most powerful form of identity and culture, and the artworks that still linger at Manzanar should not be curated by the U.S. government but, rather, by those who created them in the first place.

---

<sup>36</sup> Mary Honda, "Manzanar and Its Purpose," History essay, January 30, 1943, Eastern California Museum, Independence, California, Henry Bently Wells and Shirley Elizabeth Wells Collection (ecm\_wells\_9027), California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.



Figure 34: Gated entrance to historic orchards originally planted between 1910 and 1920 by White farmers living in the agricultural town of Manzanar. Photo by the author.



Figure 35: Rows of newly planted, fruit-bearing trees, historic orchard. Photo by the author.



Figure 36: Stars and clouds pass over Manzanar's cemetery. Photo by the author.

### *Conclusion: Cemetery*

Perhaps the most poignant locale in the entire camp, Manzanar's cemetery remains the beating heart of Japanese agency. One hundred fifty incarcerated died at Manzanar: the first burial at the site was on May 16, 1942, the last on December 19, 1944. Most of the deceased were sent back to their hometowns for burial or cremated, with many housed in the camp's Buddhist Church. Fifteen were interred at the cemetery. After the camp closed, their families were contacted, and nine wished for the remains to be moved elsewhere, leaving six still at the site today. At a block managers' meeting in 1943, representatives of the Buddhist Church proposed that a marker be made on the cemetery to memorialize those who perished behind Manzanar's barbed wire. \$1000 were soon collected among the incarcerated. Designed by incarcerated stonemason Ryozo Kado, a stark white obelisk on a stepped platform was built that year and still stands to this day.<sup>37</sup>

Carved on the obverse and painted in black are three Japanese characters—"I Rei To"—which translate to "soul-consoling tower," while characters on the reverse translate to "erected by the Manzanar Japanese, August 1943." The obelisk is a pure representation of Japanese agency and self-memorialization. From its initial conceptualization and funding to its completion and use, the memorial's impetus and utility was the incarcerated's need to memorialize their dead. The writing on the reverse demonstrates how the incarcerated themselves wished to be remembered: not as Japanese Americans—an identity which the NPS strives to propagate—but as Manzanar Japanese, emphasizing their uniqueness among Americans as both Japanese and endurers of an unconstitutional injustice.

<sup>37</sup> National Park Service, *Cultural Landscape Report: Manzanar National Historic Site*, 82.



Figure 37: "Soul-Consoling Tower." Photo by the author.



Figure 38: "Erected by the Manzanar Japanese, August 1943." Photo by the author.

This is hallowed ground, on which those who struggled at Manzanar chose how future generations should remember them and their suffering in an act of personal and cultural agency.

Today, this site acts as a point of convergence for the annual pilgrimage to Manzanar. Every April, anywhere between 500 and 1,000 families and friends, representing all World War II U.S. internment camps, come to the cemetery to partake in a reification of the collective memory of those who experienced incarceration here. Like all old places—according to Thompson Mayes—the cemetery acknowledges the history of the site for those who visit it.<sup>38</sup> It is a marker of suffering and death, but also of collective healing and endurance. It is proof of overcoming adversity—not through an abandoning of Japanese culture for an American one, but through an embracing of uniquely Japanese action and identity. The history of incarceration as reaffirmed by the cemetery is the antithesis of the history propagated by the NPS. From one extreme end of the site to the other, the guard tower and the soul-consoling tower stand on two sides of the same history. One is a narrative that the NPS transmits to visitors, that these peoples' existence was predicated on their status as prisoners who overcame adversity through a process of American homogenization; the other is the history as told by the Japanese themselves: Manzanar was a place of suffering, a place where an injustice reserved for the Japanese was carried out, and—by holding on to what made them unique—they persevered their identity, culture, and memory. Note which one of these monuments had to be recreated to tell its history and which one continues to stand the test of time.

Manzanar's physical remains and these photographs of them show no absolute objective truths, but what is left out of the frame tells as much about how we remember the Japanese incarceration as what is included. The power structures which dictated how the Japanese were represented still dictate what visitors discover about them three quarters of a century later, and these photographs, while railing against the typical narrative witnessed in the interpretive center, are still not a complete truth, but they serve as a narrative that remains a necessary piece of the puzzle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Jeffrey Mark Leavitt of Los Angeles, California, earned his B.A. in History at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and his M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2020). He is a photographer, and he is a member of both UCLA's Theta-Upsilon Chapter and CSUF's Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honors Society). His essay printed above originated in a seminar on Visual History and a graduate writing seminar offered by CSUF's History Department and eventually became part of the author's M.A. thesis.*

---

<sup>38</sup> See Thompson M. Mayes, "Why Do Old Places Matter?" *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, January 9, 2017.