

engineering internment: anthropologists and the War Relocation Authority

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On 19 February 1942, Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which gave the army authority to establish zones from which citizens and aliens alike might be removed by military command. On 16 March, Western Defense Commander General John DeWitt declared the entire West Coast a restricted area for all Japanese Americans, and the next day Roosevelt established the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to supervise removal and relocation. By June, 110,000 Japanese Americans—two-thirds of them American citizens—had been resettled in ten camps administered by the WRA.

A photograph taken by Ansel Adams in the fall of 1943 shows a scene from the Manzanar Relocation Center (Figure 1). Appearing in a book on Manzanar published in 1944, the picture seems a generic image of semisuburban or rural America during wartime. Students carrying books walk to an undepicted school. The sky is bright; the students are smiling and neatly dressed; and the low buildings in the background look like tract houses, fronted by a baseball field and backstop. Trees and telephone poles rise just above the buildings, backed by low mountains. The caption reads: "Manzanar is only a detour on the road of American citizenship."

Manzanar photographed as a normal American community typifies the dominant way relocation was represented in America during World War II. Shaped in a context where support for the government was deemed imperative, these representations repeatedly stressed the success of the internment program. The common denominator was portrayal of the relocation camps as developing communities, with the 110,000 internees happily adjusting to their new lives. In professional journals, distinguished educators wrote of the high quality of camp schools (Kehoe 1944), and public health experts praised hygiene programs at the centers (Gerken 1943), and social workers attested to the social benefits of relocation (Pickett 1943). In more general circulation were pictures by famous photographers like Adams and Dorothea Lange showing smilingly industrious Japanese Americans and countless radio and newspaper human interest stories on life at the centers.

Many of the people taking the pictures, writing the reports, and authoring the journal articles were seriously concerned about the plight of the internees. Their views were by no means either monolithic or conspiratorial. The Adams photograph does not conceal Manzanar's dirt streets or the guard box behind the baseball backstop, and Adams himself had been deeply disturbed

This paper reexamines a neglected chapter in the history of anthropology, the involvement of ethnographers in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Anthropologists worked in the ten internment centers with the good intentions of improving camp conditions and defusing anti-Japanese public opinion. But the present study argues that their writings had a series of largely unintended effects, including restriction of discourse about removal, legitimation of relocation, and promotion of racial stereotypes about the Japanese. [Japanese Americans, World War II, internment, history of anthropology]

WRA

4006 Brookhollow Road
Norman, Oklahoma 73072
January 4, 1987

Ms. Rosamond B. Spicer-Sheward
5344 E. Fort Lowell Road
Tucson, Arizona 85712

Dear Roz:

I think Starn is a graduate student at Stanford. He is now carrying out field work in Peru. Some time ago he called me on the phone and asked me some purely factual questions. Now I see he has listed me in his acknowledgements, something that might be interpreted to mean that I gave him some aid of substance. I judge him to be a slippery customer. I wrote a rejoinder (copy enclosed) which is supposed to appear in the next issue of the American Ethnologist. It disgusts me that we have to defend ourselves from such ignorant trash.

I gather that our holiday card and letter had not reached you when you wrote. From it you'll gather that I had a rough year. The trouble still goes on. I just had cataract surgery on Dec. 30 (very successful), but will have to wait for two months for my permanent glasses. I hope I'll run out of ailments soon.

We hope you and your husband are very happy and that we can see you again before too long. Lu adds her best wishes to mine.

Cordially,

Morie and Lu

Enclosure

Comment on Orin Starn's "Engineering Internment: Anthropologists and the War Relocation Authority"

by

Morris E. Opler

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Comment on Orin Starn's "Engineering Internment: Anthropologists and the
War Relocation Authority"

My parents were immigrants from Europe to the East Coast, and so I knew something of the difficulties of this group in regard to acceptance and assimilation. For this reason I paid considerable attention to the subject of immigration when I became a social scientist. When I moved to the West Coast to teach, it was obvious that race and the activities of anti-oriental hate groups complicated the picture. The attack on Pearl harbor gave these groups their opportunity, and they launched their campaign for various restrictions against all those of Japanese ancestry. The immigrants of this group had never been allowed to naturalize and so were technically enemy aliens. Their American-born children were citizens but were scarcely thought of as such by the racists. It was evident that trouble was brewing, and so I visited with A. L. Wirin, the lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union for southern California who represented the Japanese American Citizens League, and offered my services. The first repressive act against those of Japanese ancestry was the imposition of a curfew. This was contested by the A. C. L. U., and I wrote the legal brief to challenge it, though, not being a lawyer, I could not sign it. The A. C. L. U. prevailed, and the curfew was lifted. Another move was an attempt to strip American-born persons of Japanese ancestry of their citizenship. This required another brief by me, and again the court's decision was favorable to the American-born of Japanese ancestry.

Finally, the hate groups pressed for the removal of those of Japanese ancestry, aliens and citizens alike, from the West Coast. This demand led to the establishment of Manzanar and the other inland camps. It was

obvious

^ that the only way to know what was happening in such a camp was to be there, and that is what I chose to do. Mr. Starn's curious thinking leads him to state that my presence somehow legitimized the existence of the camp. The high officials of Manzanar certainly didn't share his strained view of the meaning of my presence. I had constant reminders that they considered me a nuisance and a snoop.

It was not particularly pleasant or comfortable to live and try to work in a flimsy tar-paper-covered barracks in southeastern California at the edge of a desert. Starn faults me for not publishing exposés about evacuation and the camps. This is a slander, for I tried time and again to publish on the subject and failed to obtain the needed government clearance, a wartime requirement. Starry-eyed late-comers such as Starn have little appreciation of the rancor generated against the evacuees and of how solidly the notion that government action must not be criticized in time of war had taken hold. These events persuaded me that the legal route was the only one that held any promise of success. I counted heavily on my brief challenging evacuation. Wirin said we had no option but to present it, though he warned me that in the midst of war I must brace myself for an unfavorable nine-to-zero verdict. The case moved through the legal process to the U. S. Supreme Court. It is a life-long disappointment to me that the Court did not deal a death blow to evacuation at this point. Yet we did shake the foundations and obtained a six-to-three decision and eloquent dissents. It still saddens me that we were not able to win over a majority of the judges; yet I would be still more unhappy if the attempt had not been made. The brief was written in Manzanar, and I doubt I would have been able to write as effectively if, during the effort, I had not been able to see the bleak surroundings, the barbed wire fences, and the watch towers manned by armed guards. I must tell Starn that

at the time my fellow Social Science Analysts and I were not worrying about how our behavior would reflect on anthropology and anthropologists fifty years in the future. We were more concerned that anthropologists deport themselves as sentient human beings determined to preserve justice in these United States. I can also tell Starn that if my colleagues and I were faced with similar circumstances today, I am confident that we would act as we did so many years ago.

WRA

Comment on "Engineering Internment"

1

by Rachel Sady

I want to comment on Orin Starn's article "Engineering Internment: Anthropologists and the War Relocation Authority" (American Ethnologist 13 (4), 1986). To keep my record straight: I was not then--nor have I ever been--among the "most renowned ethnographers of the time" that Starn lists me with. At the time, I was twenty-five years old and had not written ethnographically. Nevertheless, I do have competence in the subject of the article. I was one of the WRA community analysts, am still alive, and have over the years often turned to my WRA experience and the community analysis materials. For me, the issues are fresh.¹

Starn's purpose is the laudable one of analyzing anthropological work connected with the WRA in the context of professional ethics, the nature of WRA, and the public setting in which the removal of Japanese Americans from the west coast, and subsequent WRA programs, took place. I think he is correct in believing that the forty-five year old story is worth examining because of its political implications for applied anthropology within a governmental framework or associated with any other non-governmental locus of power today.

Starn's findings are that the community analysts came to their WRA work anthropologically-imbued with structural-functionalism, national character notions of culture and personality, and views of acculturation as progress.² So pervasively imbued, in fact, that--although with the best of

motives--they accepted a model of applied anthropology on the side of the status quo, saw resistance to government programs as pathological, worked to justify relocation, advocated repressive social control, and advanced racial or national stereotypes.³

This is a stunning indictment. It is, however, one arrived at by an analysis seriously flawed by several factors: lack of clarity about key words used, a naive view of power, skewed reading of community analysis reports, and no empirical evidence of the impact attributed to "WRA ethnography."

Key words. Starn states that WRA was responsible for the "removal and relocation" of the evacuated population. He never uses the word "evacuation" in his exposition (whether because he considers the term governmentalese or scatological, I do not know), but I assume that this is what he means by "removal." The fact is that institutional WRA had nothing to do with the evacuation order or its execution--that is, the actual expulsion of the evacuees from their west coast homes into nearby temporary assembly centers. The Army's Western Defense Command expelled them, and its civilian affairs arm, the Wartime Civil Control Administration, helped with the removal and ran the assembly centers. The WRA was invented to deal with the ensuing mess.

Starn's use of "relocation" is a more complicated misunderstanding. WRA first made an abortive attempt to resettle the evacuees outside of camps, then established the relocation

centers as war-duration entities, but quite soon adopted a policy of getting the residents out of the camps into a more normal life. In other words, "relocation" at one time meant relocation to the centers, where the residents were repeatedly buffeted by programs paving the way for the next stage, when the word meant relocation out of the centers. (WRA was a unique governmental agency in its determination to work itself out of a job).

During most of the time of the community analysts' tenures, "relocation" referred to the latter program. This is more than a matter of nuance. When the analysts wrote about "resistance to relocation" they were not then referring to evacuee anxieties, bitterness and anger about evacuation, or reinstatement of selective service, or registration, or segregation, or conditions of center life, as Starn implies--these were subjects of other reports. They were referring to the same emotions about being pressured to get out of the camps. All of these reactions were reported as being perfectly understandable if one knew all the facts. They were not reported as being "pathological," which is Starnian imagery.

So when Starn writes that the anthropologists "should have developed an ethnography that seriously challenged the relocation decision," it is legitimate to ask: now, exactly which decision was that?

A last point about terminology. Were the camps internment camps, concentration camps, or relocation centers? They were

all three, to one degree or another, and I do think, contrary to Starn, that the degree makes a difference. At the time, "relocation center" was more than a euphemism; it embodied the vision of reversing the policy of internment by group. (The Justice Department ran the official internment camps for individuals). Today, if the other terms help arouse a guilty nation's conscience, fine.

View about power. Starn describes the community analysts as "aligning themselves with power" instead of "confronting power with truth." They "used anthropology to supply information to power" and they "bent to the ends of power." How did the analysts do this? In two ways, Starn seems to think: by advising project directors and by not making public denunciations of removal and internment.

The analysts thought their jobs in the centers were to help communication between the project administration and the residents, to make the project directors more aware and understanding of evacuee anxieties and problems. Starn reads these activities as repressive social control, as if a blow-up based on frustrations was a good idea. Major blow-ups did meet with repression when the military were called in. This was an alternative no one wished. Neither did most want the intra-resident threats and beatings that occurred initially in some centers and later in supposedly-segregated Tule Lake. The goal of a "harmonious community" was not the joke Starn makes of it.

The picture of the community analysts toadying to the

project directors is something of a joke, however. Unfortunately, few of the analysts developed a rapport with their directors that would lead to their advice being sought. The Nisei researcher and writer, Michi Weglyn, has an interesting view of the relationship:

Headquarters did not always take the good advice of its social scientists, whose views were in direct conflict with those of camp administrators; but in this case (a change in the registration questions) they did...⁴

Good advice was often given and taken in some of the centers, and the community analysts' findings were channeled through the Washington office by its head, Spicer, to top WRA officials. Reports were also disseminated throughout the agency and the centers. Spicer's summary of what the community analysts did (Spicer 1979) is precise, perceptive, and the best that can be found.

→ What was happening to the west coast Japanese Americans was not as institutionally and historically entrenched in our government and national life as was colonialism and certain trends within the indigenismo movement with which Starn compares it. The wartime federal government was not a solid block of power determined to destroy Japanese American civil rights and "to break Japanese American identity." It was a diverse group of power-holders, first vying with one another over the evacuation decision,⁵ and then over the decisions

to give leave clearances for relocation and to rescind the west coast ban on the evacuees.

The WRA leadership was involved only in the last decisions. It worked with other governmental and Nisei allies to swing the whole government with them. This effort involved some of the kinds of public relations Starn objects to, and it involved good, persuasive relations with the Army and the Congress. (It also involved a great deal of blood shed by Nisei soldiers, a tragedy of epic proportions--not only the blood, but the perceived need of it).

Starn regrets that, in this volatile but potentially productive environment, the community analysts did not proclaim in public the horror of it all. The community analysts I knew thought evacuation was dead wrong, not just "unfortunate and perhaps unjustified."⁶ They had trouble with particular WRA programs and saw things wrong with particular center administrations. They also, obviously, saw room in the center situation and WRA as an institution to make things better, a reasonable goal. There is more than one way to bear witness. Shouting out our "truths" in all arenas, come what may, seems closer to prophetic religion than practical anthropology. Public moral stances are often necessary and productive, and sometimes the only good they do is make the protester feel better.

The community analysts did bear witness in their reports, in a way I would have thought difficult to mistake.

Skewed reading. Starn writes: "...Spicer acknowledges the

violation of civil rights in relocation (sic). ...Concern about (evacuation) Spicer continues, is understandable, but should not draw too much attention from the immediate human 'problems of the 110,000 (people) suddenly made homeless...'" (reference omitted and emphases mine). In the first two paragraphs of the article referred to (Spicer 1979), Spicer describes with no reluctance the civil rights situation and goes on to say, "Nevertheless in March 1942, the evacuation was ordered and there was no rescinding it. The consequences directly and immediately affected 110,000 people and had to be dealt with promptly." How they were dealt with, of course, was the subject of the article and the source of Spicer's expertise.

This is only one of many examples in Starn's article of shading statements by community analysts, particularly those of Spicer, in a way that does not reflect the actual content or context of what they wrote. But it must suffice, because the practice is trivial compared to the overall misrepresentation and misinterpretation of what the analysts reported on. It is hard to reconcile Starn's reading of the community analysis reports with the reports themselves. (He does not actually claim that he has read them, but his writing gives that impression). My examples here, chosen from others equally distorted, concern the quality of center life and Japanese characteristics.

Starn credits the hearings of the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation in 1981 with finally revealing what the community analysts had not about life in the centers. Whereas,

he says, the analysts thought unrest and protest were deviant and pathological, the Commission understood unrest as a clear response to WRA policy. The community analysts considered the relocation camps real communities; the Commission witnesses described them in all their misery.

I in no way denigrate the work of the Commission when I refute the above characterizations. I thought the appointment of the Commission and its published report, Personal Justice Denied, were wonderful. (When Congress passes the redress legislation the Commission recommends, it will be even more wonderful). The hearings engendered heavy publicity, and what the Nikkei⁷ witnesses described came as a surprise to many people. It should not have been a surprise to anyone familiar with publications on the subject, however, which proliferated starting fifteen years ago, and some of which include community analysis material among their sources (e.g. Weglyn 1976).

I call a hostile witness on this matter, the Chinese American dramatist Frank Chin. After attending the Los Angeles Commission hearing, he cruelly castigated the emotional testimony of Nikkei, who had at long last opened up about their experiences, saying at one point:

At the Commission hearing we are not hearing anything that has not been said before by the eager beaver social scientists of the Community Analysis Section of the War Relocation Authority.⁸

Starn asserts that as a result of the hearing and the work of later scholars, "we now know the grave problem with the picture of the camps anthropologists presented." He cites as newly uncovered evidence feelings about barbed wire fences, watch towers, lines to the lavatories and mess halls, the initial pro-Nisei WRA policy, generational differences among the residents and so on. I am never against the rediscovery of the awful, but these matters and thousands of quotes similar to those he provides (p. 707) are not only in community analysis reports but in the publications mentioned above.

A part of Starn's "grave problem" is that he does not want the camps to be called "communities," thinking of the *communitas*: *civitas* dichotomy. Well, I do not believe that a community must have a "folk" cachet to be recognized as one. In each camp there were thousands of people interacting, and these normal people in this abnormal situation were a community. Residents initiated many center activities and organizations unguided by WRA. Moreover, it is virtually impossible to be only angry and bitter for three years with never lighter moments. To my knowledge, Impounded People (Spicer et al 1969) still gives the best-rounded and detailed picture of center life in all its processual stages.

Starn claims that the community analysts directly applied national character analysis to the camps. This is not the case. As the "most notable" example of this, he cites an article⁹ written by a psychological anthropologist who had served six

weeks at one center and two years later published in a scholarly journal. Although purportedly partly based on some observations made at the center, it seems mainly to have resulted from some earlier culture-at-a-distance research. At any rate, it was not part of the community analysis effort. Starn offers no other work by analysts to foster his view that they indulged in Freudian culture and personality studies or national stereotyping, except that some of them described Japanese cultural forms practiced in the camps and others used such terms as "Little Tokyos," "cultural encystments," and "highly organized communities," with their sinister connotations, about neighborhoods outside the centers.

Impact. Starn believes that WRA ethnography legitimized domination, removal, internment and racial stereotyping. For whom? Perhaps he thinks others should have considered it legitimizing these activities, but it remains his own interpretation that they did, for which he presents no evidence at all. What has actually happened in this country since the last camp closed in 1945? Is it popular either among the powerful or the public in general to contemplate evicting whole groups from their homes and locking them up because of their ancestry? To the contrary, there has been a swell of revulsion to evacuation on the part of those informed about it. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1952 removing bars to naturalization, repealed the Emergency Detention Act that laid the ground for future internments in 1976, and appointed

the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation in 1980. Since the late 1960's there has been a flood of condemnatory published material about the evacuation and internment, and the Nikkei have been exceedingly vocal on their own behalf.

"It can't happen here" can conceivably happen again, but not because a bunch of anthropologists worked for WRA, trying to make a dirty deal better--and perhaps succeeding more than the penal workers that Starn suggests might rather have been hired would have.

In conclusion, I borrow some of Starn's favorite phraseology: by not considering the political alternatives available at that time and in those places, Starn has ^othoroughly "decontextualized and dehistoricized" the work of the "WRA ethnographers." Dwelling on Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and quoting Linton and Chapple (pp. 705-6) do not a social-engineering analyst make. Starn has not given us a well-researched ethnohistory of WRA applied anthropologists. In its place, he has constructed a cartoon community analyst, good hearted but weak minded, to stand for all he fears about anthropology today.

NOTES

NOTES

¹In 1946-47 I was a research analyst for President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, whose final report, To Secure These Rights, criticized the evacuation. I worked briefly in 1947 for the Japanese American Citizens League's project aimed at liberalizing the naturalization laws. In 1970 I was co-author of a multi-media teaching program for secondary schools entitled Japanese American Relocation 1942: A Study of Prejudice and Discrimination. In the 1980's I offered a course at Pace University entitled "Japanese American Wartime Experience." And in 1981 I testified before the Congressional Commission's hearing in Chicago on the WRA Community Analysis ^{Section} and in favor of redress and reparations for the evacuees.

²The anthropologists and sociologists who served as community analysts came from coast-to-coast academic backgrounds and with varied professional interests and experiences. They do not fit the theoretical pigeon-holes Starn has reconstructed for them.

³This summary is extracted from numerous phrases about the analysts that pepper Starn's article (grammatical context not provided): "anthropology was set up as a science of social control," "view of resistance as a pathology," "inadvertently incorporated notions of social control with repressive implications," "worked implicitly to justify relocation," "validation of internment," "legitimized relocation," "sanctioning internment," "reflected and propagated public stereotypes of Japanese Americans," "formulated popular perceptions about the

intrinsic difference, inscrutability, and cruel conformance of Japanese Americans in scientific jargon," ad nauseum.

⁴In Michi Weglyn's Years of Infamy (1976), p. 143. It is a reference to advice Morris Opler gave to the Manzanar administration.

⁵Peter Irons (1983) tells a fascinating and detailed story of how the evacuation decision came to be made, how the varied cast of characters feel about it now, how the Supreme Court arrived at its verdicts in the test cases, and about the legal effort and human consequences ^{trying to} in reversing the cases today.

⁶Criticism of evacuation and vindication of the Japanese Americans was implicit in many of analysts' reports and explicit in the final report of the Community Analysis Section, Impounded People (Spicer et al 1969).

⁷"Nikkei" is a term coined much later by Japanese Americans to include all the various generations of residence in the United States.

⁸In "Unfocussed L.A. Hearings: A Circus of Freaks," The Rafu Shimpo, August 21, 1981. In this article Chin also refers to the analysts as "the former mad scientists of the camps" who laid the "rotten foundation" of all Japanese American social science.

⁹LaBarre (1945)

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Roz - in case you've seen the last AE .

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Further comment on "engineering internment"

I stand by my comments on "engineering internment." However, documentation of two points that Starn disputes are in order.

Starn repeats his original statement that the War Relocation Authority was responsible for removal (evacuation) of the West Coast Japanese Americans (p. 562). Presidential Executive Order 9102 of March 18, 1942, does establish WRA with broad powers. Inventing the actual institution, however, took more than a day. A month later it had been decided that the evacuation process would continue to be carried out by the Western Defense Command, with the Assembly Centers run by its civilian arm, and that relocation (referred to as the "rehabilitation aspects") was to be WRA's responsibility. This separation of jurisdictions is authoritatively documented in The Final Report: Japanese-American Evacuation from the West Coast 1942 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington 1943: pp50-51 and 237-247).

Starn thinks that my description of community analysis reports cannot be validated (p.563). During the closing weeks of WRA all community analysis mimeographed reports and every scrap of paper in the Washington and ten centers' files were collected and deposited in the University of California library at Berkeley and the National Archives in Washington D.C. An extensive annotated bibliography of these documents is a reliable guide to this rich lode of archival material.

Rachel Lady 9-8-87