Preserving Difficult Histories
Tule Lake: Learning from Places of Exception in a Climate of Fear

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On a stretch of highway near the California-Oregon border sits a tract of land that, at one time, held a small city of prisoners. On both sides of the asphalt, mint and potato crops grow in green, leafy grids. Small houses, painted in white and blue, sit adjacent to neat stacks of hay. In the distance, Mount Shasta rests in chalky white, upstaged only by a craggy peak where the Modoc Indians once rowed their boats and carved their messages into the rock. On a clear day, a tiny white cross is faintly visible at the top of this peak. Nearby, Captain Jack’s Stronghold, a restaurant that takes its name from an Indian warrior who resisted forced removal by the U.S. Army, is one of the few eateries in the area.

It would be easy for the casual traveler to miss the intermittent signs on the road, one of them indicating that the Tule Lake World War II Segregation Center lies ahead. The turn-off, a county road, leads to a fenced area covered by sagebrush and yellowing dry grass. A low concrete bunker with boarded-up windows stands in the center of a field, covered by a metal tent-like structure. The building is one of the few lasting material indicators that a concentration camp, with rows of brown, military-style barracks reaching into the bluffs in desolate similitude, once existed here. One of the 10 Japanese American concentration camps that dotted the west-

The Tule Lake Segregation Center grounds.
PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHLIN GOULDING
ern and southern United States during the World War II, Tule Lake had a special status as a maximum security “segregation center.”

In 1943 the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the bureaucratic body that managed the forced removal and mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans, issued a questionnaire to all 110,000 incarcerated people. Widely termed the “Loyalty Questionnaire,” two of the questions were “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty?” and “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?” Individuals and families deliberated at length, agonizing over the wording of the questions and potential implications of their answers. For first-generation Japanese Americans—the Issei—the question about forswearing allegiance to the Japanese emperor was especially fraught. Because they were denied naturalization under the exclusionary U.S. immigration policy, answering “no” might have left them stateless, without legal ties to either their native country or their adopted one.

A sizeable number of prisoners at Tule Lake answered “no” to one or both questions (or refrained from responding entirely) for myriad reasons that ran the gamut from political dissent to confusion and familial obligation. As a result, the prison was selected by the WRA to serve as a segregation center to detain so-called “disloyals” from across all 10 camps. In preparation for this influx of prisoners, the camp’s administration bolstered guard towers and police presence and added multiple security fences to the perimeter of the camp. The mood at Tule Lake was rife with tension and anxiety. Radicalized Japanese nationalist groups formed and demonstrated in the streets of the camp. Prisoners protested labor and living conditions. The administration instated martial law and routinely rounded up prisoners into smaller, makeshift prisons for arbitrary reasons. And, in perhaps the least-known aspect of Tule Lake’s history, approximately 5,500 prisoners renounced their American citizenship after a new federal bill offered them the
opportunity to voluntarily give up citizenship and return to Japan. The reasons for renunciation included pressures from pro-Japan factions in the camp, misleading rumors about the outcome of the war, fear of resettling in hostile communities, and acts of political dissension. In 1946, 1,116 of the prisoners who had renounced citizenship were deported to Japan. A large contingent of those who remained—realizing that their decision had been ill informed—applied for hearings to reinstate their citizenship, an effort led by American Civil Liberties Union lawyer Wayne Collins. Many of those who applied for reversals would remain stateless, designated as “Native American aliens,” until a court case restored their citizenship more than two decades after World War II.

Tule Lake was an experiment in systematic denaturalization and deportation. As historian Barbara Takei notes, it was “a chilling program” that has “received little critical scrutiny.” Imposing this framework of loyalty onto prisoners would have lasting consequences. Families were split up, prisoners suffered long-term emotional wounds from the stigma of being sent to the “troublemaker” camp, and political and personal rifts that developed between “loyal” and “disloyal” prisoners continued for decades.

**TULE LAKE NATIONAL MONUMENT: RAISING ISSUES OF CONTINUING RELEVANCE**

The campaign to memorialize Japanese internment camps was decades in the making, beginning with the Civil Rights-era activism of Japanese American college students, who sought to preserve the stories of the camps through multiple outlets—higher education
curricula, pilgrimages to former incarceration sites, and formal juridical processes. In 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, allotting $20,000 in reparations to each former prisoner. In the aftermath of this national recognition of wrongdoing, interest in camp pilgrimages proliferated and, simultaneously, so did political coalitions and grassroots advocacy for Tule Lake’s preservation.

In nominating it for landmark status, the National Park Service (NPS) argued that Tule Lake demonstrates a “political and cultural idea that that safety and security can be found only in segregation and confinement of those perceived to be dangerous mainly because they are ‘different.’” Moreover, the NPS stated, these kinds of extensions of power resurface “in spite of [their] inconsistency with important and basic American ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.” Justification for Tule Lake’s landmark status, then, was grounded in how the site exposes the contradictions between stated democratic principles and acts of racialized exclusion and banishment. Despite the persuasive arguments for Tule Lake’s designation as a national historic monument, the designation and long-term preservation plans were met with some concerns. Some residents of the Tule Lake Basin not only feared governmental overreach but also believed longstanding myths and misunderstandings about the camp that had passed through generations—including the idea the camp had incarcerated “dangerous” prisoners of war. Ultimately, in order to realize landmark status, Tule Lake was grouped with a series of historic places affiliated with “World War II Valor in the Pacific,” mostly battlefield and military sites located in Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor, California, and Alaska’s Aleutian Islands. In 2008 President George W. Bush decreed Tule Lake a National Historic Monument.

The NPS has stewardship over a small portion of the historic camp—37 out of the original 6,110 acres. The rest of the land is now a mix of private and public property, including areas owned by the California Department of Transportation and the Federal Bureau of Recreation. Unique among all of the Japanese American camps, Tule Lake had an internal jail, as well as auxiliary
confinement structures, used to criminalize and detain Japanese American prisoners. These “jails within jails” are among the few buildings that remain open to the public via ranger-led tours. The site is not otherwise accessible to the public and does not yet have a permanent visitor center. Tule Lake is a park-in-the-making, currently running a series of public meetings in response to a recently released general management plan.

As part of its interpretative themes, the NPS asserts that Tule Lake “offers a compelling venue for engaging in a dialogue concerning racism and discrimination, war hysteria, failure of political leadership, and the fragility of democracy in times of crisis.” In our current political era, the Japanese incarceration has served as a historic touchstone—often a misguided one. In a December 2015 interview with Time magazine, President Donald Trump indicated that he was unsure whether he would have supported the camps. “I would have had to be there at the time to tell you, to give you a proper answer,” he said. “But you know war is tough,” he added. “And winning is tough. We don’t win anymore.” And in an interview on Megyn Kelly’s Fox News show, Trump supporter Carl Higbie suggested that the Japanese American prison camps might serve as a “precedent” for a registration of American Muslims. That the Japanese American incarceration frequently enters into the political discourse of late underlines this history’s unfortunate and continued relevance.

THE STATE OF EXCEPTION
What ties concentration camps, detention centers, temporary “holding” centers, and refugee camps together is a certain political logic. As we have often observed in times of terrorism, war, and crisis, populations deemed security threats to the state are targeted, stripped of certain rights and obligations, forcibly removed, and sequestered into isolated spaces. Within political and legal theory, this kind of climate is called a “state of exception,” a concept originally developed by Carl Schmitt, a German theorist who was grappling with the upheavals in Weimar Germany. Suspending the normal legal order that, in liberal democracies, ensures certain civil
rights and curbs executive authority creates a state of exception. An executive body folds new policies and practices into the legal order, often in the name of national security or emergency. Building on Schmitt’s thesis, contemporary political philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that what were once “provisional” measures used to deal with immediate security threats “constitute today a permanent technology of government.” In other words, heightened security is no longer an unusual, temporary state of affairs—it has become thoroughly integrated into day-to-day life.

Tule Lake—a prison riddled by bureaucratic complications during World War II, the sequestering of “defiant” prisoners into spaces of confinement within the larger camp, and policies designed to further strip prisoners of their legal status—highlights a larger political phenomenon: the power of the state to determine who will be included in the polity and who must be excluded and removed. These non-citizens, whom Agamben identifies as the figures of homo sacer, are excluded from the life and protections of governance while, at the same time, remaining vulnerable to the rules and regulations of the state. The prisoners at Tule Lake and similar spaces of detention all occupy this ambiguous legal status.

**PLACES OF EXCEPTION**

Within a state of exception, concentration camps and other buildings play a central role in the exclusion and containment of a targeted population. These “places of exception” share specific types of architecture and spatial arrangements. Grids of barracks and cells facilitate surveillance; guard towers and centralized policing ensure that prisoners live in fear of being watched. Such places have often been situated in remote locations, away from view and scrutiny, and remained isolated and secreted from nearby communities. In the years after the material structures are disassembled, removed, and repurposed, the traces of the camps may remain in the form of foundations and ruins.

However, these places of exception can sometimes be transformed into places for teaching and learning about the history that transpired there. To enter and walk through these places—to
observe the contours of the landscape, to immerse oneself in the visceral feel of a prison camp, to learn the stories and memories of those who were incarcerated while traversing the actual site—is an act of learning about the state of exception. Elizabeth Ellsworth, a media studies professor at the New School, explains that such sites facilitate an “experience of the learning self” that puts “inner thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, desires, and ideas in relation to outside others, events, history, culture, and socially constructed ideas.”

When such a confrontation happens, according to Ellsworth, places become pedagogy, a “force with its own logics, materials, forms, and processes aimed at reforming what we think we know.” How might an immersive experience, then, in a place of exception teach about the limits and precariousness of our democratic systems and the uncertain nature of citizenship?

EXPERIENCING THE SPACES AND SENSATIONS OF CONFINEMENT

When a place of exception becomes a place of learning, part of its power to teach is derived from its unique ability to convey the sensory experience of confinement. At Tule Lake, very few of the original structures of the camp are available for public viewing. Part of the challenge for the NPS is evoking the sensations of confinement in a landscape that has, for the most part, transformed.

On Saturday mornings, visitors congregate at the temporary NPS headquarters—the Tulelake-Butte Valley Fairgrounds about 11 miles away from the original prison. After a brief greeting and introductions, the participants drive their individual vehicles down the highway, turn onto a small county road, then head to the first stop down a narrow road adjacent to the runway of a small airport. Having parked their cars, each person climbs over a broken portion of a barbed wire fence, gathering around a concrete foundation. There is a series of equidistant holes in the concrete and wooden planks are scattered over it. Kenneth Duott, one of a handful of rangers who regularly lead these tours, explains that we are standing at what was the women’s latrine at Tule Lake.
The latrine is a curious artifact of Tule Lake’s history, serving as both a literal and conceptual entry point to the camp, a common denominator between visitors and the Japanese American prisoners. The holes in the concrete foundation mark the places where the toilets stood. They are close to one another and, as the ranger notes, there were no doors or stalls. As former prisoners have reported, women would place paper bags over their heads to give each other some semblance of privacy. Duott says that visitors identify with the latrine for reasons that might be expected—the protocols, the processes, and the awkwardness of sharing bathrooms with strangers. “That’s something that I really try to impress upon people: the desolate conditions, the difficult conditions, the lack of things that people would normally have had outside of these barbed wire fences,” explains Duott in an interview. The ruins provoke an empathic response from visitors, who can relate to the quotidian intimacies and vulnerabilities that play out in the public bathroom. But they also highlight the differences between the visitors’ own creature comforts and the public debasements that prisoners experienced daily. Seeing the latrine causes visitors to identify with the emotions and experiences of those who once inhabited this place.
The Tule Lake Jail is the second stop of the tour. The jail was constructed after Tule Lake became a segregation center to confine those whose answers on the loyalty questionnaire were unsatisfactory. While much remains unknown about their other uses, the jail and the adjacent stockade held “trouble-maker” prisoners—members of pro-Japan organizations, prisoners who protested labor conditions at the camp, and prisoners who were in various states of non-citizenship. The “jail-within-a-jail”—as the NPS staff call it—was a heightened incarceration space in which prisoners were held in a purgatory-like state, no longer belonging even to the larger prison population, to speak nothing of the world of citizens outside the camp. Since the end of World War II, the building passed between various municipal authorities, eventually ending up in the hands of the California Transit Authority and then, in 2008, under the stewardship of the NPS.

The ranger opens the metal gate at the entrance to the jail and takes a small group inside. The space is empty and dark, a welcome respite from the summer heat. The windows and doors are covered in boards—a local farmer removed the original metal bars, though he has since donated them back to the park service for re-installation. To the right of the entrance is a group of three cells, one of which is covered with a hanging screen featuring an enlarged, historic black-and-white photo of a man in a white undershirt. The man appears disoriented, and a blur of ghostly figures is visible in the cell behind him. The ranger leads visitors to the center cell, directing his flashlight to its wall, creating a circle of light around a faint, penciled scribbling: “SHOW ME THE WAY TO GO HOME.” The phrase is taken from a 1920s Irving King song that was still popular during the war:

*Show me the way to go home.*

*Everywhere that I roam*
Over land or sea or foam  
You can always hear me singing this song  
Show me the way to go home.

The ranger asks visitors to consider the meaning of “home” and to contemplate the questions raised by this faint inscription. Walking through the jail is an exercise in contrasts, prompting visitors to draw comparisons between the places where they feel most rooted and secure and the excision of these prisoners into spaces of little solace, in which their citizenship offered no protections. The sensations of confinement—the secluded nature of the cells, the hushed echoes, the ghostly presence of those who penciled song lyrics on the walls—are as essential to the learning experience as any historical record, interpretive panel, or photo. Thus, the place itself is essential to learning.

“UNSTICKING” THE PRESENT
On a July morning, a group of children gathered at the Tulelake Fairgrounds, in an area outside of the park service offices, where historic farm equipment is displayed next to the old barracks from Tule Lake. They are the children of farm workers, enrolled in a summer day program that takes care of them while their parents work nearby. An NPS staff member led them in an exercise, asking them to imagine that one day their parents announce that they are being told to pack up their things and leave their homes—and that they cannot come back. One boy, who had been bouncing up and down boisterously, was perplexed.

“But why?” he asked.

“You don’t know why. You are just told to leave,” she responded.

“But why?” the boy insists again, his face pinched in frustration.

The idea behind this activity is, of course, to put the children in the shoes of Japanese Americans in the aftermath of Executive Order 9066. Sometimes in the course of a week or two, with little idea of where they would end up, Japanese Americans sorted through their things and stuffed what they could into suitcases and canvas sacks. Some educators have concentrated on what people chose to bring when they left for the camps, thus running the risk
overemphasizing logistical questions about choosing between items. Structured educational experiences must attend to the boy’s unhappy echo of a deeply existential political question: “But why?”

This question gets at one of the most central issues that places like Tule Lake evoke for visitors: Why do we choose to remove and exclude those who we fear? And why do we do it over and over again? Tule Lake’s bearing on our present has a broad resonance. In the news cycle, we see images of Syrian refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos, settling into grids of tents for interminable periods. Off the coast of Australia, refugees or persons who have breached visa conditions are held in “processing centers” of green canvas tents and barbed wire fencing. In Texas the privately run Karnes County Residential Center detains those who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border seeking asylum. Though the euphemisms for these places range, they all have in common a political climate of fear, suspicion, and hysteria and a system of governance wherein power is ultimately rooted in the ability to decide who can and does belong.

University of Toronto education scholar Roger Simon explained that learning a troubling, difficult past unleashes “a potential force that might yet unstick the present from its seemingly necessary future, impelling us to see the work that still needs to be done today.”

Places like Tule Lake “unstick” our present, fostering thinking, feeling responses to the very structures and legal climates that make invasive national security measures permissible and possible. If we can, as a public, condition ourselves to small but necessary

Some of the original barbed wire fencing at the Tule Lake concentration camp. PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHLIN GOULDING
daily work—intellectual debate, curiosity and concern about others, a willingness to engage with troubling knowledge—then we can begin to fashion communities of political consciousness and ethical responsibility that do not accept the state of exception as a foregone conclusion. FJ

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**TAKEAWAY**

Read resources suggested by the National Park Service.

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