

[Oda on Chiang, 'Nature behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration'](#)

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Connie Y. Chiang. *Nature behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 328 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-084207-9.

Reviewed by Meredith Oda (University of Nevada, Reno) **Published on** H-California (March, 2020)
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Oda on Chiang, *Nature behind Barbed Wire*

Work on the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans is perhaps the most prevalent among all topics of Asian American studies. Such research was foundational to the interdisciplinary field and finds the most popular attention, with an audience of detainees' descendants, journalists, social-justice activists, and the broader public as the incarceration rises and falls in present-day resonance. Nonetheless, scholars continue to find innovative and productive avenues of interrogation. Connie Y. Chiang's *Nature Behind Barbed Wire* is one of these highly welcome additions to the field. Chiang's book is a pioneering environmental history of the incarceration, offering readers a rich new lens to understand how Japanese Americans and state officials confronted and transformed the pressures of detainment and Japanese American racialization.

Chiang's focus on the environment is a novel approach. As she notes, few scholars of Japanese American incarceration or Asian American history more broadly have taken an explicitly environmental focus. Chiang puts the environment at the fore of her analysis, arguing that "the confinement of Japanese Americans was an environmental process, deeply embedded in the lands and waters along the coast and the camps further inland" (p. 5). The entire process of incarceration—from site selection to detainees' views of their incarceration to officials' attempts to control them—was shaped by the environment in fundamental ways. At the same time, she notes that the interaction between people and environment was social. Socioeconomic status, background, the power people wielded, all shaped how individuals were able to negotiate with the environment: whether it was an opportunity or constraint, or more frequently, somewhere in between. As a result, the incarcerated found that their interactions with desert conditions and spaces were limited by their place behind barbed wire (Chiang's guiding metaphor, representative of human's compromised attempts to shape and control the natural world) while officials found that environmental conditions as much as wartime demands or popular perceptions shaped their ability to manage the camps.

Nature Behind Barbed Wire begins with a brief look at Japanese American prewar history and continues through incarceration and resettlement, ending with an epilogue on camp memories, memorialization, and redress. The heart of her book is the chapters on the incarceration, of course,

and she focuses on four camps carefully chosen for their breadth of land-use practices and ownership: Gila River in Arizona (reservation home to the Akimel O'otham and Maricopa Indians), Mindoka in Idaho (US Bureau of Reclamation project), Topaz in Utah (private, county, and federal property), and Manzanar in California (owned by Los Angeles for its water supply). This narrow canvas allows Chiang to closely delve into the relationships between internee population, inner-camp politics, governance, local relations, and the specific natural world.

The environment yields surprisingly fresh perspectives on the incarceration story. The landscapes of internment have not been unnoticed by observers or scholars, of course; first published in 1944, the Manzanar photographs of Ansel Adams are the work of a keen witness of the natural world and use the surrounding stark mountains and desert to distill the conditions of detainee life, as Chiang notes. However, by putting the environment at the center of her story, Chiang can analyze familiar stories in unfamiliar ways and offer fascinating new narratives. The first chapter, for instance, delves into the well-known lead-up to Japanese American incarceration but considers it as “environmental displacement” (p. 12). Her framing highlights anew the pressures from agricultural and fishing interests or the role of the Farm Security Administration, and introduces Japanese American proposals to create inland farm cooperatives as alternatives to mass eviction.

Additional, previously unexamined subjects support her claims for the utility of the environmental framework. Chiang's second chapter brings original perspectives to the federal process of site selection and camp construction, not a particularly fecund topic for past historians. The selection process highlighted the New Deal roots of the incarceration program, which aimed not only to assimilate Japanese Americans but also to contribute to the local landscape through resources or improvement projects. Incarceration camps were thus local as well as national projects, tying them into local communities in the US West and intertwined with hopes for postwar (presumably white) veterans. At the same time, of course, the natural world—and public opinion—did not always accede to administrators' goals, a problem at the heart of camp construction and initial life in the camps.

The tension between human goals and the conditions of the natural world is a constant theme in her book, one that is particularly apparent in the two chapters that focus on Japanese American labor in maintaining the camps and feeding its populations. Among the strongest in the book, chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how incarcerated workers struggled with constraints imposed as much by the natural world as by War Relocation Authority (WRA) policy. Thus, we get remarkable examples such as a labor dispute in Minidoka, in which cold and wet weather as much as job cutbacks inspired janitors and boilermen to challenge the control of WRA administrators; the politics of pipeline maintenance in Topaz, labor desperately needed in the desert camp but considered degraded by some of the urbanite detainees; or Japanese American agricultural adaptation, as farmers and nurserymen struggled to transplant skills developed in tolerant environments to harsh desert conditions. By highlighting the camps as “worksapes” (p. 7), a concept conceived by historian Thomas G. Andrews to describe lands transformed by human labor and natural processes, Chiang highlights how official-detainee relationships were “thoroughly enmeshed in the natural world” (p. 91).

While agricultural labor was a way Japanese Americans could “assert their loyalty to the nation” (p. 94), by feeding themselves as well as producing food and environmental knowledge, chapter 5 explores other ways the environment offered internees ways to demonstrate, or sometimes challenge, patriotism. Activities such as victory gardening, sugar-beet harvesting, or rubber-growing

experimentation demonstrated that “one’s devotion to the nation could be expressed through engagement with the natural world” (p. 123), but also that internees did not always find patriotic exhortations compelling. The fascinating chapter 6 explores the site of far more consistent Japanese American enthusiasm: outdoor recreation. Here, we follow the activities detainees undertook to “push at the boundaries ... that marked their confinement” (p. 148). The landscape of incarceration could be severe, but it also denoted freedoms for those who broke or expanded rules to hike, fish, swim, or camp. Even gardening, just outside barrack doors, could give disempowered people something to control and a way to demarcate Japanese heritage. The final chapter explores Japanese American choices, focusing on farmers as they left camps and tried their luck inland or “gambled” on a return to the West Coast, the place of their eviction. Wherever they went, Chiang asserts, they found another instance of environmental displacement in the face of “discriminatory attitudes and environmental constraints” (p. 201). She ends the book with a rumination on the parallels between the silent memories of detainees and the physical erasure of the camps from the landscape.

Chiang’s rich study builds on the lineage of incarceration studies that places eviction and removal not as an aberration of US democracy, but as a coherent part of a longer process of US race-making. Her focus on the environment provides another category to add to our understanding of Asian American racialization and displacement. As Chiang demonstrates, relationships with the environment was a social axis that, like citizenship, gender, sexuality, or space, helps us better understand the Asian American past, in which Asians in the United States were both constrained and seized possibilities of freedom and opportunity. This puts her story into the longer narrative of not only incarceration but the racialization of all Asian Americans, many of whom labored on or in the natural world, but in ways that have been left largely unexamined until Chiang’s intervention.

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