

Haku Blaisdell

Professor Michelle Huang

Asian American Studies 303

“Healing Gila”: Race and Indigeneity in Analyses of Interracial Encounters

“wind, spirits, tumbleweeds, pain.” (Inada, 1997, line 30). Layers of history are embedded in the Gila River Indian Community in what is currently the state of Arizona. In the poem “Healing Gila,” Inada (1997) calls on these histories—the violent and ongoing displacement of the Akimel O’odham people and the forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II—that are connected in place. Expanding on Harris’ (1995) understanding of whiteness as property, Inada reminds us that analyses of interracial encounters must also work through and from the intersection of race and indigeneity. One cannot think about these histories in isolation, nor can they operate solely on one axes of analyses. Utilizing both Inada and Harris’ work, I argue that looking at both race *and* indigeneity—along with connected structures of displacement and incarceration—can help us to understand how racial hierarchies were/are constructed and utilized to advance U.S. empire and settler colonial projects.

Inada (1997) begins the poem with the line, “for The People” (line 1). Rather than specifying who “The People” are or explicitly mentioning race, Inada keeps the subjects and their racial identities vague. Beyond the title, it is not until the second stanza in which “the concentration camp” and the “reservation” are mentioned that readers might get a better idea of who the intended people could be. Inada’s use of deracination in this poem is purposeful, and it highlights the simultaneous unsustainability and pervasiveness of race. As Harris (1995) mentions, the requirements to possess whiteness shifted as needed to serve the settler state, often in ways that contradict or conflict with each other. For instance, legal constructions of race and

citizenship protected whiteness and the material and political advantages that came with it. Harris (1995) highlights the 1790 Naturalization Act, in which a condition of U.S. citizenship was both residency and “white” racial identity predicated on arbitrary combinations of phenotype, social acceptance, and blood-based illogics. Over a century later, legal rulings like *Ozawa v. U.S.* (Supreme Court of the U.S. 1922) and *Thind v. U.S.* (Supreme Court of the U.S. 1923) continued to protect whiteness as a property interest; the former defined whiteness as “Caucasian,” while the latter directly contradicted it by defining whiteness based on the “common” (see: white) man’s understanding of whiteness regardless of geographic origin—a metric that could also shift as needed to reproduce exclusion and othering.

Furthermore, Inada’s purposeful deracination also works to decenter readers from whiteness. As Harris (1995) writes, whiteness as both an “aspect of identity and a property interest” (282) forms the basis of property rights, citizenship, and humanness in the United States. Harris (1995) calls on Radin to emphasize that whiteness was naturalized, normalized, and made an “objective” stand-in for the Human, in direct opposition to constructed notions of non-white groups (particularly Black folks) as “Other.” Though they are often left unsaid and seen as neutral ground, whiteness and white supremacy continue to shape and form the center of every aspect of American society. Inada’s deracination turns the tables on whiteness, and by leaving “the People” unnamed and unracialized, he forces readers to reflect on both the embedded histories of Gila and the constant centering of whiteness in society.

Perhaps most prominently, Inada’s (1997) deracination of “the People” (line 1) highlights the interconnected and layered histories of the Gila River reservation. All of the beginning stanzas could apply to both the Akimel O’odham and the Japanese American communities. For both communities, this place holds painful memory of both displacement and containment, two

strategies deployed against them in connected and intersecting ways by the U.S. empire. The state exploited and othered both groups, characterizing them as threats to “national security,” to reproduce racial hierarchies and prop itself up. As Leong and Carpio (2016) write, the forced removal and containment of Native Americans from their traditional homelands to reservations was, and continues to be, a key part of the broader and ongoing settler colonial project. White settlers characterized the land as “terra nullius,” or “nobody’s land,” in ways that erased the presence of Native people and justified westward expansion and occupation. As Harris (1995) notes, white settlers also imposed metrics like blood quantum as a determinant of one’s indigeneity, and thus one’s claim to land. These blood illogics, along with narratives of terra nullius and the “vanishing Native,” erased familial relationships to land, transformed it into private property, and naturalized settler presence on the continent. Following the forced removal of the Akimel O’odham, heavy settler extraction and exploitation of the Gila River area created largely infertile conditions for farmland, and as Leong and Carpio (2016) note, the U.S. government in part chose the Gila River reservation as an internment site for the value that Japanese farmers could bring to the area. In essence, the state justified Japanese internment on the Gila River reservation through a constructed racial hierarchy predicated on the model minority myth: hardworking Japanese farmers were contrasted with Natives who weren’t “productively” using the land, a narrative that ignored the long-standing reciprocal relationships Native people have with the land and embedded a racial hierarchy in place (Leong and Carpio, 2016). Inada (1997) invokes this shared history of land stewardship with the lines “this was a lush land once, / graced by a gifted people” (lines 14-15). Again, who the people are is not specified; rather, it can be read as an ode to both the Akimel O’odham’s and the Japanese American’s cultivation of settler-exploited land. Through these lines, Inada also reclaims this

erased history and challenges settler-imposed definitions of who Native people were and are.

Contrary to narratives that support the settler colonial project, this stanza reminds readers that the Akimel O'odham have specific claims to and relationships with the Gila River area.

The lines to follow go on to challenge simple multicultural analyses and reminds readers of the differing reasons and circumstances under which both cultivated the land: "Then came the nation. / Then came the death. // Then came the desert. Then came the camp." (Inada, 1997, lines 23-26). Native stewardship of the land was interrupted by the U.S. settler colonial empire, which then exploited Japanese stewardship of the land to institute further violence on the land and its people. These lines remind readers that Indigenous peoples, though racialized by the state in many ways, are more than just another ethnic or racial group. It is here that the importance of both a lens of race and indigeneity is emphasized. A racial lens brings power and hierarchy into discussion, particularly in the context of land and private property. As Harris (1995) points out, race and property are deeply connected, and each is dependent on the formation and maintenance of the other. Through these processes of knowledge production and material realities, both the land and people were racialized. A lens of indigeneity speaks to the process of property making and revisits connectivity and responsibility to people and land. Race and indigeneity together, as Inada deploys through purposeful deracination and the refiguring of colonial narratives, recognizes the ways in which the formation of race and racial hierarchies are central to settler colonialism on this continent, and vice versa. The internment of Japanese Americans and the forced removal of the Akimel O'odham were not isolated events, nor can the responsibility of the settler state be fully realized through a lens of either solely race or solely indigeneity. To do so misses the multiple angles and axes from which violence is enacted on racialized bodies, allowing whiteness to remain protected at the center.

Towards the end of the poem, Inada (1997) writes, “But the desert is not deserted.” (line 27). This line resonates for several reasons—not only does it continue to counter settler colonial notions of land as empty or “terra nullius,” but it also recognizes that the relationships both groups have with this land and each other are complex, nuanced, and ultimately still here. This line emphasizes that these histories are intertwined, overlapping, and intersecting in ways that have maintained the settler state, but also in ways that can dismantle it. It is a reminder that the U.S. empire has not always been at Gila, nor will it be there forever. Moving forward requires recognizing the past and enmeshed pain of this place while reckoning with these hierarchies and material realities they’ve shaped.

Works Cited

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