

# Ruminations on the Camp Space in the United States during the 20th Century<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper is a brief stream of thought on the function of encampments in the United States during the 20th century. This work derives directly from my still-in-progress dissertation, “The Age of Encampment: Race, Surveillance, and the Power of Spatial Scripts, 1933-1950.” The dissertation charts a history of the creation of federally-funded camps and their lasting legacies beginning with the creation of New Deal-era liberal policies through the incarceration of enemies of the state during WWII. By revealing the history of federally-funded encampments in the US, I argue that camp spaces were racialized and classist projects dependent on a pathologized “other.” Further, the materialization of camp spaces became a tool used by the US government to surveil bodies deemed threatening to the local community and/or nation-state – a theory I call “spatial scripts.”

## 1 Introduction

Between 1933 and 1964, over 6 million individuals lived in U.S. government-funded camps. [1, 2, 3, 4] The Civilian Conservation Corps (1933-1942) built nearly three thousand labor camps. The Farm Security Administration (1935-1946) built over ninety labor camps. The Immigration and Naturalization Services opened ten Wartime Relocation Authority concentration camps, sixteen Wartime Civil Control Administration temporary detention facilities, three WRA Isolation Centers, and seventeen U.S. Army detention facilities (1942-1946). The number of Bracero Program (1942-1964) labor camps is more difficult to pinpoint because of its massive importation of nearly five million laborers from Mexico spread across agriculture, mining, and railroad industries<sup>2</sup>. [5, 6, 7] This number increases if other labor importation programs by the United States and refugee resettlement camps are added. [8, 9, 10] The camp as a space of surveillance and liminality in the United States exploded during the middle of the 20th century and existed both as a mechanism to remove certain bodies deemed threatening from public view and also as a way to emphasize the burgeoning military industrial complex.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written before Dr. Cortez finished their dissertation and has since published and refined their analysis on encampments in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> These were not the only government agencies maintaining camps. For example, the Federal Transient Program (1933) of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was simultaneously opening migratory labor camps at the same time as the CCC, numbering nearly one hundred and ninety camps by 1934.

## 2 Great Depression and New Deal

It was specifically the 1930s when the role of federally-funded encampments became a phenomenon. The drastic changes brought on by the increasingly unstable U.S. economy since the turn of the twentieth century resulted in the market crash of 1929 and ensuing decade which came to be known as the Great Depression. [11, 12, 13] During this time the federal government vastly expanded its role into the private lives of its citizens under the guise of federal relief. [11, 14] Specifically, the sphere of housing offered hotly contested debates about federal relief efforts for migratory laborers experiencing homelessness. The large influx of white migrants into California's urban and rural hubs built informal housing situations identified during this time as "Hooverilles" or squatter camps<sup>3</sup>. With suggestions from noted intellectuals such as economist Paul Shuster Taylor and photographer Dorothea Lange, both state- and federal-level agencies began to speedily build emergency migratory labor camps<sup>4</sup>.

The crisis of housing migratory labor in California was not an issue until an alarming amount of white populations inhabited squatters' camps. The white figure was the one worthy of redeeming. Mexican and Filipino migratory labor, on the other hand, were understood as perpetual proverbial birds of passage, having always migrated for labor and therefore less in a state of emergency as their white counterparts. [1, 15, 16, 17] In relation to the perception of nonwhite agricultural labor in California, historian Devra Weber argues that growers claimed, "they [minoritized agricultural laborers] were foreigners who neither wanted nor deserved an 'American' standard of living." [16] These views consequently resulted in the study of and the creation of relief policies aimed at poor white individuals and families. Federally-funded migratory labor camps were thus engineered and developed with the figure of the poor, white, citizen laborer – a figure worthy of redemption – in mind<sup>5</sup>. [18, 19] Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first two years in office resulted in large efforts in the building of camps. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Federal Transient Program (FTP), for example, provided housing for men who agreed to work and live in labor camps across the United States and its offshore empire<sup>6</sup>. Recruited to combat the destruction and erosion of the nation's natural resources, at its peak between 1935-1936, over 50,000 men were enrolled in the CCC at one time spread over about 2,650 camps across every state in the country. [20, 21, 22, 23] The FTP, however, was targeted specifically towards young men

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest known usage of the term 'Hooverville' in a widely-circulated media source was written in a 1930 New York Times article condemning a group of jobless men who set up a shanty town along the bank of Lake Michigan in Chicago. At a moment when the depression halted urban growth and infrastructure building in cities and towns, Hooverilles across the country were rapidly growing. See: "CHICAGO JOBLESS COLONIZE: Shanty Town Called 'Hooverville' Has a 'Mayor' on Its 'Easy Street.'" *New York Times* (Nov 12, 1930)

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Encampment Studies encompasses more than government-funded camps. Private companies funded labor camps to easily access their labor supply and to be able to maintain a sustainable/everpresent labor supply. Especially during the early 20th century when large agricultural corporation such as orange companies in California or the sugar plantations in Florida built their agricultural empires, they did so with on-site labor camps necessary to hold their racialized immigrant population forced or coerced into these physically demanding jobs. Camps also formed out of necessity for community. Post-emancipation Black communities, for example, formed encampments on the nation's mall as a form of protest. Especially for communities experiencing homelessness, building shelters out of scraps and disregarded material in close proximity to others in their same situation was a point of solidarity.

<sup>5</sup> I view whiteness as part of racialization. Earlier in the paragraph when Paul S. Taylor claimed most of the migrant laborers moving to California being white "of the native American stock," he is referencing U.S.-born white populations as opposed to white (predominantly European immigrants).

<sup>6</sup> Research shows that both the CCC and the FTS had labor camps in Puerto Rico.

and boys who had no family and who were understood as wanderers. Between December 1933 and November 1934, the Los Angeles County Intake Bureau for the transient service noted that ten thousand boys under twenty-one years of age entered their ranks, with boys from Texas accounting for more than ten percent of the total. [24] By the mid 1930s, the FTP had one hundred and eighty-nine camps created to put men and boys to work in “wholesome and controlled environments.” [3] Similarly, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) Migratory Labor Camps numbered over forty by the late 1930s mainly in Western United States and rapidly expanded to the Eastern seaboard by the early 1940s. [25, 26] All three agencies were started in the early 1930s as part of FDR’s tough, federal expansionist approach to the Great Depression.

FDR’s advertised emphasis of the camps was twofold: to provide housing for the needy and to put people to work. With more people migrating for work than ever before and moving with the crops, farmers had trouble maintaining a stable labor force. New Deal intellectuals recommended the building of migrant labor camps as a way to solve both the problem of a lack of health and sanitation amongst migrant laborers and the problem of an unstable labor force. They accentuated the need to promote education, health, and social skills in order to progress laborers’ cultural and economic standards. “Only upon a subsistence standard of living, which is decent in both its material and cultural provisions, can hope and morale be restored,” wrote Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange in their reports recommending the building of migrant labor camps. [27] Their logic, which was shared by many, was that if laborers were provided better housing and sanitation quarters, laborers would be more willing to work for lower wages and stay in areas for the full duration of the crops’ season rather than immigrating at the peak of harvest.

However, the camps served other purposes. Labor camps became a way not only to provide housing for laborers, but to rid highways and city centers of visions of poor, unhealthy migrants in squatters’ camps. In many instances, vacant dirt lots, parking lots, and public city centers became spaces of leisure and rest for these migrant families. In a small Texas town where predominately ethnic Mexican laborers stopped, for example, their main street’s downtown, became, for at least some local businessmen, a site of where “[t]he danger of epidemic and the nuisance occasioned by the unsanitary situation of the thousands of laborers who come here during the cotton-picking season has long been a matter of acute anxiety” [28]. As a result of the businessmen’s worry of ethnic Mexican labor infiltrating main street, a Farm Security Administration migrant labor camp was built in the far rural areas immediately outside of the town, where labor could be easily accessible to cotton farmers but also out of sight of the city’s downtown economic sector. Viewed as dirty and disease-ridden, in this instance it was the proximity to an oppositional “healthy” public with which the racialized migrant laborers were moved to the literal edges of society.

New Deal encampment policy designs were largely pressured by moral panic. Poverty, homosexuality, disease, race, and manliness were major axes along which all forms of housing were designed, imagined to function, and maintained. As noted earlier, home ownership was central to the New Deal government’s conception of citizenship. [29, 30] Policies such as the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration, and the later New Deals’ Wagner-Steagall Public Housing Act (1937), the Lanham Act (1941), and the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (1944) were all geared towards middle-class, heterosexual, and predominantly white families. Historian Kenneth Jackson writes of the New Deal housing policies, “The lasting damage done by the national government was that it put its seal of approval on ethnic and racial discrimination and developed policies which has the result of the practical abandonment of large sections of older, industrial cities.” [31] While urbanized issues of home ownership and public housing resulted in the discrimination of middle-and-working-class black and brown families, poor transient migrants, especially

black and brown laborers, continued to be largely dismissed by the federal government<sup>7</sup>. [1, 7, 15, 16, 17, 26]

### **3 World War II and postwar**

As the Great Depression came to a slow as a result of the United States' entrance into World War II, the camp space began to take on different occupations. The drafting of many young men mixed with the massive and rapid industrialization resulted in migrants moving into large city centers for factory jobs. [32, 33] As a result, many of the New Deal encampments became empty and it became difficult for state agencies to justify asking for federal monies to maintain these camps. The federal agencies in charge of these camps began to sell the land and buildings to private companies and other government agencies. Along with the incarceration of perceived enemies of the state through Executive Order 9066, specifically ethnic Japanese, German, and Italian peoples, came the crises of housing these incarcerated. [34, 35, 36] The FSA and CCC sold multiple labor camps to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) for the purposes of transforming migratory labor camps into incarceration camps. By adding shack-like barracks and ten-foot-high barbed wire fencing to the parameter of the camp grounds, these labor camps, within weeks, turned into highly surveilled prisoner camps. [37, 38] The afterlife and longevity of some of the New Deal encampments, then, were used to surveil national enemies of the State<sup>8</sup>. A systemic and institutional shifting of land and the built environment to other government agencies is what I coin in my dissertation as "spatial scripts". [39] A theory of spatial scripts seeks to understand the logic behind the space and material aspects of the camp being used towards the surveillance of different racialized bodies throughout the 20th century. The spatial transformation of camps into Immigration and Naturalization Service Alien Internment Camps, for examples, underscores how the federal government used remote, outside spaces for the concentration of perceived threatening bodies. Threatening to the local public arena in the case of poor, unsanitary squatters' camps; threatening to the farmers and agricultural economy in terms of the migrant, unstable laborer – this is heightened if the laborers are Black and Brown; and threatening to the larger security of the Nation State. This process of transforming camp space into carceral spaces was heavily concentrated in the mid-twentieth century as the US expanded its control over issues of public and private life.

The structure of the camp, then, became a mechanism through which to surveil threatening bodies. The geographic location, the speedy and cheap architecture, the meticulously-planned landscaping, and the layout of these camps were intentionally constructed outside the realm of social and political feasibility which resulted in the encamped to lack the rights to have rights<sup>9</sup>. [40, 41, 42, 43] As scholar Naomi Paik writes, "The camp, ultimately, constitutes a dense node of state power, one that reveals how the

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<sup>7</sup> The crisis of housing migratory labor in the United States was not an issue until an alarming amount of white populations inhabited squatters' camps. The white figure was the one worthy of redeeming. Mexican and Filipino migratory labor, on the other hand, were understood as perpetual proverbial birds of passage, having always migrated for labor and therefore less in a state of emergency as their white counterparts. In relation to the perception of nonwhite agricultural labor in California, Historian Devra Weber argues that growers claimed, "they [minoritized agricultural laborers] were foreigners who neither wanted nor deserved an 'American' standard of living." These views consequently resulted in the study of and the creation of relief policies aimed at poor white individuals and families. Federally-funded migratory labor camps were thus engineered and developed with the figure of the poor, white, citizen laborer – a figure worthy of redemption – in mind.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that some camps also were converted into prisons.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault's conversation of biopower is particularly useful to understanding the role of the state in the control on humans.

government contravenes the rules that define and enable its authority". [44] This state power, the power of building liminal camp spaces for threatening communities, stems from the New Deal era. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden Gulag* argues, the economic possibilities of military Keynesianism, and thus the military industrial complex, were set during the Great depression, employed in WWII, and operationalized in the Postwar industrial era. [32, 45, 46] So, if this is the case, what does this mean in terms of architecture and the building of camps and prisons? What does the figure of the camp and more specifically the architecture of New Deal encampments say about prisons in the postwar era? And if there is an economic link between New Deal economic Keynesianism and WWII industrialization, is there a material connection? On this last point, in my larger dissertation, I argue yes. This is precisely what my theory of spatial scripts attempts to prove: that there were ideological, material, and architectural links between what I call New Deal encampments and other camps and prisons in the post WWII era.

## 4 Conclusion

At the center of encampment is the need for surveillance over pathologized, seemingly unregulated bodies who have done nothing legally wrong<sup>10</sup>. [47] During the early twentieth century, when the U.S. nation-state was continuously expanding hold of issues of migration, public health, and housing, the nation-state became the regulator of those seen as existing outside of the scripted norms of society and who were viewed as in need of guidance. Camps became their solution.

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<sup>10</sup> Browne offers a racial lens to the study of surveillance and argues that surveillance is both a discursive and material practice that reifies limitations of movement along racial lines. Encampments function in a similar way as a surveillance mechanism for people of color and poor folks.

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