Civil religious dissent: patriotism and resistance in a Japanese American incarceration camp

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During the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans, the largely Buddhist population of Idaho’s Minidoka incarceration camp organized elaborate Christmas festivities each year. Many outsiders and white employees at the camp saw these celebrations as signs of assimilation into American culture, but this article argues that the material productions of the festivities expressed more complicated attitudes. Christmas cards, decorations, and trees contained messages of dissent and patriotism within an adoption of American civil religious practices. Incarcerees demonstrated the flexibility of that contentious category, civil religion, by using iconic symbols and practices of the American holiday to express their frustrations with the nation. Christmas cards replaced the classic image of snow-covered houses with one of snow-covered barracks. Decorative displays juxtaposed idealistic portrayals of past family holidays with their current, grim reality. The voluntary substitution of sagebrush trees for evergreens acknowledged their transformed circumstances and showed resolve to sustain tradition. Through these acts of civil religious dissent, incarcerees visually depicted the wounds caused by a government stripping its citizens of their fundamental rights.

**Keywords:** civil religion, Japanese Americans, World War II, incarceration, Christmas, resistance, material culture
... But we have to be real Americans,  
Just like the Pilgrims or Puritans;  
We have to go without some things  
And take just what Old Santa brings.

L.K.¹

A sixth-grader wrote this verse in 1943 in anticipation of his second Christmas behind the barbed wire of Idaho’s Minidoka Relocation Center. The class assignment proclaimed his identity as an American by comparing his current hardships with those of iconic Americans of the past. Although the student saw himself within a narrative that requires fortitude and sacrifice to be a “real American,” the context of his involuntary holiday sacrifice adds nuance to his concession. He had no choice but “to go without.” He was not happy about the dearth of presents but knew nothing could change the situation. L.K. committed no crime, nor was he charged with one, but like 120,000 other people of Japanese descent, he could not return to his home on the Pacific Coast until 1945. He was likely transported to Minidoka with his family in the early fall of 1942 after spending several months imprisoned within the Western Washington State Fairgrounds.

Several months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Delano Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 allowed the US military to clear the West Coast of all people of Japanese descent. Tens of thousands of American citizens, residents, and orphaned children alike were herded onto trains and buses leaving the lush Pacific Coast for dry, monochromatic deserts or mosquito-infested Arkansas deltas. Economic competition, war hysteria, and political motives provided momentum for the incarceration, and the eviction orders targeted people exclusively along racial lines—“aliens and non-aliens of Japanese descent”—without considering citizenship, military service, or evidence of sedition (Daniels 1993; Robinson 2009).

In the fall of 1942, Minidoka incarceration center, located near Twin Falls, ID, opened its gates to 10,000 Nikkei (people of Japanese descent) from the Seattle and Portland areas. Each of the ten incarceration centers modeled a small town surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers. In vast housing blocks, each family moved into a single room furnished only with army cots. The barracks, flimsy wooden structures covered in tar paper, baked inhabitants throughout the summer and allowed cold winds to enter in winter. At token wages, incarcerees joined well-paid civilians recruited by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the government agency formed to manage the incarceration, to operate schools, hospitals,
general stores, post offices, farms, newspapers, and mess halls. In addition to losing their civil rights and living in wretched conditions, shifts in traditional social hierarchies caused further stress and frustrations. For the men, women, and children incarcerated during the war, the Christmas season was a break from everyday routine and an opportunity to celebrate an American holiday with the rest of the country.

This article examines material productions to show how a subjugated minority group used the most prominent religious holiday in the United States—Christmas—to express their frustrations and protest their mistreatment and loss of civil rights. Complementing diaries, newspapers from in and outside of the camp, church bulletins, government records, and oral histories, Christmas cards, Christmas displays, and Christmas trees made by incarcerees at Minidoka disclose a microhistory of an American minority group’s civil religious practices. As historian Jill Lepore explained, the utmost value of microhistories lies in their capacity to show how a seemingly singular occurrence “serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole” (2001: 133). Incarcerated Minidokans inserted their political agenda into what many people would consider normative practices of the dominant culture.

These material expressions demonstrate the diverse ways in which civil religion is practiced and developed in the United States and reveal how injustices inflicted by the state can lead to complex negotiations between national loyalty and self-understanding. Sociologist Robert Bellah (1967) popularized the concept of civil religion to describe the ideology that justifies and provides meaning for national symbols (like Mt. Rushmore), rituals (like saying the Pledge of Allegiance), and ideals (such as democracy, freedom, and equality). Religious studies scholar Arthur Remillard recently demonstrated the particular value of listening for unique constructions of civil religion among “minority voices” and urged scholars to uncover the “interactive civil religious history of manifest destiny” and the West (2011: 164, 168). This essay demonstrates the flexibility of civil religion to encompass diverse and sometimes contradictory expressions.

Incarcerated Japanese Americans found ways to use American symbols, participate in national rituals, and remain committed to the country’s ideals while simultaneously acknowledging and protesting their current suffering caused by the United States government. Jane Naomi Iwamura calls this engagement “critical faith,” which “does not abandon civil religious principles … but … reinterprets these ideals in relation to the Japanese
American experience and to make known that experience” (2007: 942). At Minidoka, Christmas was one of the primary vehicles within which these revisions of civil religion occurred. Civil religion in the United States was built on a foundation of Protestantism, but does not require the adoption of Protestant religion itself. The secularization and universalization of Christmas helped the holiday become part of America’s civil religion by the nineteenth century. More than the birth of Jesus, public holiday observances celebrate the American values of family, home, and good will toward others. The holiday’s promise of hope also extends beyond its theological origins in the birth of a savior at Christmas. These sentiments were precious commodities behind barbed wire regardless of a person’s religious inclinations, reinforcing Nikkei’s place in America. Identifying Christmas with American patriotism also had a long history. The earliest commercial window displays, which appeared in Macy’s New York department store in the 1820s, associated the holiday with American patriotism (Marling 2000: 83).

By studying the experiences of Japanese Americans, this article accomplishes a second goal, showing that subtle forms of resistance occurred within a population often deemed completely submissive to government discrimination. Recent scholarship refutes the long-held perception that Japanese Americans expressed little dissent during the war and took decades to take ownership of the incarceration experience (Bahr 2007; Muller 2001; Yoo 2000). Scholars have interpreted the practice of Japanese arts, such as ikebana (Japanese flower arranging), judo, and the construction of Japanese-style gardens, as passive resistance to the US government’s domination (Helphand 1994: 160; Okihiro 1981: 224–6). But expressing dissent through American practices like Christmas celebrations produced more complex messages of simultaneous protest and patriotism that complicates the duality of Japanese solidarity and American authority. In a particularly subversive way, incarcerees used America’s primary religion and its most prominent holiday, both elements of the country’s civil religion, to express their discontent.

The argument fits between theories established by Eiichiro Azuma and Iwamura by showing that diverse communities of Japanese Americans found ways to reconcile their experiences in the United States during the 1940s. In Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America (2005), Azuma illustrates how nineteenth-century Japanese immigrants blended Japanese ideologies of nationhood and colonization with American pioneer mythology to create a
rhetorical space between the two countries. However, his study acknowledges that this perspective was largely, if not exclusively, limited to the intellectual class of Japanese businessmen and diplomats. No evidence suggests that the majority of immigrants, farmers and tradespeople, thought along those lines. Minidoka’s Christmas celebrations extend Azuma’s study to show how similar, but more pervasive negotiations occurred among Japanese Americans of varied religious and economic backgrounds by the 1940s. Iwamura’s essay, “Critical Faith: Japanese Americans and the Birth of a New Civil Religion,” demonstrates how critical faith manifested itself within the community’s third and fourth generation during the 1980s and 1990s when Nikkei received reparations from the US government. Japanese Americans created “new myths, symbols and rituals to support a transformed sense” of identity without rejecting traditional tropes of American civil religion that honor justice, democracy, and patriotism (2007: 942). My investigations reveal that Japanese Americans were engaged in critical faith much earlier, in the 1940s, but did so through established myths, symbols, and rituals. Redress and ethnic pride movements revived the revision of American civil religion begun in the camps. While these negotiations are based in Japanese American history, material productions can be used to analyze the civil religious practices of marginalized groups in any country. The manner in which Japanese Americans expressed their disillusionment, but retained allegiance to the country during World War II, can inform researchers examining other cases of government injustice.

The Christmas celebrations at Minidoka, particularly the dining hall decoration competitions, surpassed the camp’s other community activities, and the level of participation at Minidoka eclipsed similar events held at other incarceration camps. Nearly every memoir and oral history from the camp mentions the annual decoration contests that distinguished Minidoka’s Christmas activities from those in other camps. Every December, Minidokans organized dances, variety shows, caroling, gift giving, visits from Santa, decorating, and tree trimming with little to no outside help or suggestion. Some incarcerated recall their contributions in astounding detail, and most Minidokans participated, whether they were Buddhist, Christian, or non-religious. WRA employees regularly expressed their amazement at the enthusiasm and ingenuity of the incarcerated population. While WRA programs encouraged cultural assimilation, the agency did not organize or direct Christmas celebrations in the camps.

While some Christians credited “the birth of Christ” for Minidoka’s annual show of enthusiastic unity, most
incarcerees framed it as an expression of Americanism (Stafford 1943). This further verifies its role as a civil religious practice. Incarcerees used American symbols to adorn homemade Christmas cards and decorate their dining halls. Some decorations were blatantly patriotic, like portraits of Uncle Sam with Santa Claus (Figure 1), or more subtle, emphasizing the importance of the American home and family.4 Exhibiting impressive ingenuity, a housing block constructed a Santa riding in a sleigh and suspended flying reindeer from the ceiling of their dining hall (Figure 2).5 At first glance, their ambitious holiday creations do not look any different from those found across the nation in the early 1940s—the same wartime motifs and a similar blend of patriotism with traditional Christmas symbols. White camp employees and journalists from outside the camp often read the exuberant Christmas celebrations as direct proof of assimilation and an acceptance of the incarceration. However, incarcerees often juxtaposed traditional imagery with grim portraits.
of their reality. Beneath the flying reindeer, sits not a house, but a replica of a camp barrack. In a manner similar to L.K.’s poem, Christmas cards, decorations, and trees created at Minidoka conveyed both loyalty and an objection to the government’s actions.

**Christmas Cards**

Christmas cards designed at Minidoka exemplify how incarcerees shared their current plight with others. Surviving homemade cards show haunting images that may look like typical winter landscapes, but reveal melancholic conditions within the camp. Despite limitations placed on paper production during World War II, the Christmas card business boomed as the need to keep in touch with loved ones became more urgent (Marling 2000: 316). Incarcerated Japanese and Japanese Americans exchanged Christmas cards with friends and family in different camps, loved ones who had relocated to other parts of the United States, and, like other Americans, with sons and brothers fighting around the globe. Domestic mail to and from the camps was not censored. While incarcerees and white administrators sent commercially produced cards available at the camp co-op (Figure 3), they could also send cards designed by incarcerees that depicted their current environment. It remains unclear how many people used the latter, but the images displayed on the cards express multiple views of the incarceration. Some homemade cards show haunting images that may look like typical winter landscapes, but reveal melancholic conditions within the camp.

![FIG 3](image_url)

*Commercial Christmas card with 3D Santa beard from Rohwer incarceration camp, Arkansas: (a) front, (b) inside. (Courtesy of the Yoshikawa Family Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.)*
One card made at Minidoka shows a close up view of three barracks (Figure 4a). The paths between the buildings are covered in snow and mud, and the sky overhead is dark and cloudy. The dwellings themselves are constructed of thin boards with curtainless windows. The side of one building bears a large number “5.” This harsh, gloomy, institutional environment is unwelcoming and lacks Christmas cheer, altering the usual spirit of the message within, “Season’s Greetings” (Figure 4b). But the image closely resembled incarcerees’ reality (Figure 5).

Images of snow-covered houses commonly appear on holiday cards, and people would have recognized that motif when glancing at the cards made at Minidoka (Marling 2000: 109–10). But they portray an atypical vision of the home. Figure 4 shows the traditional winter scene with a twist: snow-covered barracks. The scene feels lonely and silent, though smoke spills from a chimney to remind recipients of the families dwelling within. Families, many of which had been forcibly separated, are omitted from the traditional scene. The “homes” are shabby
and, for those who knew what lay inside, crowded and public. The artwork corresponds with Delphine Hirasuna’s observation that artwork from the incarceration camps rarely depicted human activity, emphasizing the loneliness caused by the removal and division of families (2005: 67). No light streams from the windows either, as it did in similar winter scenes found outside the camp. Its absence represented incarcerees’ dim situation. The artist of this card expressed a dejected attitude that many incarcerees felt at living in such conditions and broadcast the fact that his or her community was being forced to hold their Christmas celebrations in barracks rather than conventional homes. Japanese Americans lacked the holiday’s crucial elements: home and family.

Anthropologist Jane E. Dusselier argues that the production of artwork enabled incarcerees to “[reposition] themselves in hostile environments” (2008: 1). Creative work not only “helped lift the dark clouds,” it “create[d] more liberative futures for people … in environments of loss” (Dusselier 2008: 37, 161). While a minority of incarcerees reacted aggressively to the incarceration or subsequent draft, most waited for liberation, pragmatically making the best of a bad situation. Not wishing to provoke antagonism during a time of war or recognizing the potential penalties for outspoken protest, artwork provided a “liberative,” safe medium to acknowledge negative elements of the United States. Dozens of memoirs, letters, diaries, and oral histories attest to the therapeutic nature of Minidoka’s Christmas celebrations, but the production of crafts did more than simply distract them from their situation (see Groves 1998; Ikeda 2000; Ikeda and Yanagihara 2003; Nakata 2004; Shimomura 1983). Like Dusselier argues about other artwork, creating Christmas cards and displays provided “physical [and] … mental landscapes of survival” (Dusselier 2008: 1). They operated as a device through which to express their distress and anger. This point particularly resonates for a community such as this that felt ashamed of their incarceration and was embarrassed by their squalid living conditions. During the 1982 congressional investigation of the incarceration, a former incarceree confessed, “I could never tell my four children my true feelings about that event in 1942. I did not want my children to feel the burden of shame and feeling of rejection by their fellow Americans” (quoted in Hatamiya 1993: 96).

Another card made by a Minidokan incarceree (Figure 6), a block print, shows an eagle’s eye view of the camp from the east and is similarly void of people. Partially due to its artistic style, this card depicts a cleaner, crisper illustration of the camp. With militaristic precision,
rows of perfectly aligned barracks fade into the distance; oversized guard towers loom down from surrounding hills. In reality, Minidoka was located in a very flat area, so the artist exaggerated not only the size of the towers, but also their geographical placement to increase the impression of imprisonment. Mountains can be viewed in the distance, but the grade in the immediate area is level (Figure 7). The artist did not, however, depict the barbed wire that surrounded the camp during some of the war, perhaps substituting the dominating hills in its place. Taking artistic license in this way enabled the incarceree to project a sense of entrapment. The perspective also calls attention to the environment surrounding the camp, a space void of other inhabitants or structures, adding to the sense of isolation. An American flag flies at the far end of the camp, an ironic statement of both patriotism and the civil injustice within the camp. Nothing in the image indicates its location or purpose. Without contextual knowledge, a viewer could easily mistake it for a military camp. In contrast to the
sketch that emphasized the substandard conditions of the camp, this card focuses on the military presence and order. Since the construction of the camps was based on the military’s “Theater of Operations” housing designed for temporary usage and quick assembly, most camps had a similar aura (Burton, Farrell, Lord, and Lord 2002: 35).

Nothing in either card from Minidoka refers to Christmas explicitly. Perhaps the images were reappropriated for this purpose, but someone still selected them to use as Christmas cards. Their subject matter of the home contrasted with the patriotic cards with flags and even military tanks and weaponry that became “all the rage” in the 1940s (Figures 8 and 9). Few of the images on these cards directly relate to Christmas, though the sprig of holly and snowy houses allude to the holiday. Patriotic fervor towers over classic imagery of snow-covered houses in Figure 9. The sentiments expressed on the Minidoka cards resonate more closely with cards produced during the Great Depression. In situations where families were divided and lacked an abundance of material goods, card illustrators portrayed the essence of Christmas—time spent at home with one’s family. While camp barracks did not resemble traditional homes,
tens of thousands of Americans resided within them. The homemade cards may have been intended as ironic statements of their holiday abode or a practical means of showing the recipient what their new residences looked like.

James Scott offers helpful language with which to talk about these forms of resistance enacted by a dominated group. He suggests scholars look beyond the public transcript to surface hidden transcripts when groups are not free to express their dissent. He explains that "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 1990: 4, xii). Dusselier supplements this suggestion by claiming that political power "can reside in portable spaces such as art" when denied in the public forum (Dusselier 2008: 5). The material productions presented in this article support these conclusions. What many saw as complacent adoptations of American cultural practices contested the confinement and loss of constitutional rights. The objects offer proclamations of both loyalty and protest, representing the attitudes of many incarcerees who believed in American ideals and pledged their loyalty to the country, but were hurt by their eviction and incarceration. Whether the inclusion of these mixed responses was conscious or not, expressing resentment and dissent through familiar, particularly American forms gave the Minidokans’ Christmas artwork a subversive touch.

Christmas cards provided a space for Japanese and Japanese Americans to express opposition to the incarceration and the conditions of the camps in degrees they might not have felt comfortable doing through speech.
or writing. The sketches and block prints of Minidoka at Christmas convey ideas and feelings that could not be expressed verbally. While many incarcerees saved letters and personal cards from the war, these particular examples were unsigned and blank inside. The Mamiya family, the owner of these cards, saved them for the artwork alone. The quantity and method of distribution of these handmade cards remains unknown, but their inclusion in incarcerees’ paper collections attests to their impact on some individuals.

**Christmas Displays**

While Christmas cards were individual expressions of widespread realities, the larger camp community produced visual representations of their experience through their entries in annual decoration competitions. Minidoka’s Community Activities Committee, composed of Nikkei committed to increasing the quality of life in the camp, organized a Christmas decorating competition each year. The intense creative energy during the first year transformed initial plans for tinsel-draped trees and crepe paper garlands to thematic displays with distinct subjects and styles. Fierce competition suggests that pride and honor were wrapped up in the annual contest. Public announcements in the camp’s newspaper, *The Minidoka Irrigator*, carefully detailed the rules and guidelines for the competition. The emphasis on equality and fair play increased each year, suggesting past conflicts (Anonymous 1942b, 1943, 1944a). Photographs of the displays at Minidoka show a striking similarity to department store window displays found in American cities at Christmas.

The contest’s popularity likely stemmed from the fact that it offered Minidokans a bit of excitement, an outlet for creative energy and something to anticipate during the year. This event and other Christmas activities provided a much needed break from the otherwise dreary camp life. Primary accounts suggest that no event brought greater pleasure to incarcerees of all ages and backgrounds, though an *Irrigator* article scolding three housing blocks who did not raise their quota of US$35 for the Christmas Fund reveals that social pressure to participate existed as well (Anonymous 1944b). The community celebration comforted some incarcerees, allowing them to temporarily forget their current circumstances. One Minidokan later wrote, “The coming together of families in our block gave us hope and a deep sense of pride and made most of us temporarily forget our disheartening situation that we were committed to for the duration of the war.” Nikkei could also show that they celebrated Christmas in the
same manner as Americans outside of the camp. And like
the cards, the activities provided space to express their
frustrations.

Celebrating Christmas had become a patriotic act
by World War II. Americans took pride in what they
perceived to be distinct Christmas practices: a unique
blend of patriotism with a secularized Christian foundation.
Nikkei community organizers stressed the importance
of celebrating the holiday as Americans. Without irony
Minidokan Yuji Hiromura wrote, “Here behind barbed
wires on top of sage brush cleared soil, we are about
to celebrate our Christmas in an atmosphere none too
familiar to us; but in an atmosphere where the Yuletide
spirit will not go unprecedented. Christmas in an American
relocation center … the American way” (Hiromura 1942).
She stated that they were Americans first and foremost,
regardless of their current situation.

During World War II, the popular media, public schools,
and retailers emphasized the importance of celebrating
Christmas. The holiday embodied ideals the country was
fighting for: home and family, hopes and dreams, peace on
earth and goodwill toward men. Most displays at Minidoka
depicted patriotic military themes, nostalgia for the
traditional American home, or a combination of the two.
Nostalgia for an idealized past plays a role at Christmas
every year, but this sentiment increased during the war
because Christmas symbolized the American way of life for
which soldiers and those on the home front were fighting
(Waits 1993: 195). If it was discarded, there would be
nothing left to preserve. To this effect, Hiromura described
the “sacrifices we have performed and sacrifices we must
make to insure for future Christmases like those of days
of old” (1942). Minidokans had more reasons than many
Americans to long for past holidays and they expressed
that feeling in their cards and decorations.

A display with the motif “Santa Remembers Minidoka”
juxtaposed an idealistic Christmas of the past with
the current situation of Minidokans. Housing Block
17 assembled a large Santa and stood him next to a
signpost. A sign reading “Seattle 1941” pointed toward
a scene of a typical American home at Christmas with
stockings hung from a fireplace near a large decorated
evergreen, “signifying what Christmas had once been”
(Figure 10) (Anonymous 1942a). This half of the display
showed an idyllic, family-oriented holiday of the past. A
second sign, “Minidoka 1942,” pointed toward a detailed
model of Minidoka set in front of a mural of the Idaho
landscape (Figure 11). The latter portion of the display
protested the celebration of Christmas in an impersonal,
isolated institution, while the former expressed their
desire for a normal American experience. But while many Minidokans celebrated Christmas in this manner before the war, most did not do so in such an elaborate manner mimicking middle-class American domesticity. This display of what was for many an invented past claimed an American lifestyle within a protest of their current situation. Nostalgia is often described as longing for a fictional, idealized past: “the good old days.” This definition helps frame the situation for some of the non-Christians at Minidoka, but Kathryn Lofton’s definition of nostalgia provides a more encompassing explanation. Lofton claims that nostalgia is “that which we believe someone else has destroyed, leaving us alone with ourselves” (2011: 207).

“Santa Remembers Minidoka” expressed that type of nostalgia by showing that Japanese Americans used to prepare for Christmas just like other Americans, but now the government had removed their ability to do so. Even

FIG 10
Dining hall Christmas display similar to “Seattle 1941” at Minidoka incarceration camp. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.)

FIG 11
“Minidoka 1942,” a dining hall Christmas display, depicts the dark reality of Christmas in an incarceration camp. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.)
if they had not celebrated the holiday before the war, they may have longed for what was no longer possible.

Few people outside of the camp saw these creations, though white camp administrators judged the displays. As this article discusses later, at least one newspaper reporter also saw the decorations, but this limited audience suggests that Minidokans made these displays primarily for themselves. Thousands of Nikkei saw the decorations. Like the Christmas music played over camp loudspeakers, the displays’ placement in the mess halls made them unavoidable. But while the WRA lacked direct involvement in display production, the administrators’ status as judges reinforced the cultural supremacy of white Americans in the camp. Nikkei knew they were under constant surveillance as the existence of these photographs produced by the WRA attests (Phu 2008: 337–8). Anyone wishing to express explicit protest within a display would likely have been censored by fellow Nikkei before administrators had a chance to see it. The genres of holiday cards and displays limited the capacity for outward rebellion as well. Creating dark images of the camp and surrounding landscape already pushed against social and visual norms to depict light, happy content during the holiday season. The context of the celebration—with or without explicit censorship—dictated the product to some degree.

As more Japanese Americans joined the US Army, displays related to the war became more popular. The scenes heralded patriotic messages of military sacrifice, while continuing to remind observers of the unjust incarceration. Incarcerees wrote “Keep the Home Fires Burning” in large letters above a 1943 display (Figure 12) that drew the viewers’ eyes toward photographs of boys in the service from that block sitting atop the mantel of a grand fireplace. Behind the pictures sat a large painting

FIG 12
The families residing in Block 36 at Minidoka incarceration camp included photographs of their sons and husbands serving in the US Army within their 1943 dining hall Christmas display. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.)
One could argue that this backdrop merely designates the place from which the soldiers came, but the fact remains that their only remaining home was an incarceration camp. Despite their loss of civil rights, these men joined the armed forces to fight for a country that imprisoned them; and their incarcerated families created a display demonstrating that fact. Families may have designed the backdrop to point out that dissonance. The absence of military symbols beyond the men’s uniforms honored the soldiers without explicitly affirming military operations. Military service was controversial in the camps, but major protests did not begin until the second generation became eligible for the draft soon after the creation of this display. While numerous Minidokans would resist the draft, the camp supplied a disproportionately large number of volunteers in 1943 (Muller 2001: 54). Displays like “Keep the Home Fires Burning” that allowed for interpretive breadth gave incarcerees on both sides of the issue a place to work together.

However Minidokans felt about the war, observing Christmas had become a patriotic duty just like buying war bonds and growing Victory Gardens. As war rationing increased, contest rules encouraged participants to conserve material by awarding points to blocks using fewer purchased items (Anonymous 1944a). Minidokan Shigoko Soso Uno described trimming sagebrush wreaths with “curled tin cans,” sewing curtains out of flour sacks and constructing “life-size cardboard angels.” Assembled entirely of scrap metal that would be donated to the war effort, a display at Block 41 showed a Japanese American soldier crouched in a foxhole, reading a letter from home (Figure 13). Not only did the display celebrate Nikkei men abroad, it fulfilled a patriotic obligation to provide raw

FIG 13
Dining hall Christmas display from Minidoka incarceration center built with scrap metal to be donated to the war effort. (Courtesy of the Bain Family Collection, Densho Digital Archives.)
materials for military equipment. Minidokans celebrated Christmas without forgetting their obligations to those fighting the enemy.

The emphasis on patriotism, nostalgia, and the general secularization of American Christmas celebrations encouraged non-Christian Americans to partake in the holiday. By the 1940s, an increasing number of non-Christians in the United States celebrated Christmas. In 1939, Rabbi Louis Witt wrote to The Christian Century to explain why Jews should join the festivities. Many Jewish leaders ardently disagreed, but Witt believed the positive aspects outweighed any hesitations people might have. The ideals of Christmas were not solely Christian, according to Witt, who saw the holiday as a unique opportunity for Christians and Jews to join together in a cultural celebration (Restad 1995: 158–9).

Buddhists and other non-Christians at Minidoka enthusiastically organized the decorating contests and other Christmas activities. In case anyone might suggest that Christians had more interest or any advantage over non-Christians celebrating the holiday, a column in the Irrigator pointed out, “Did anyone notice that the original five members of the Christmas Contest committee … were all Buddhists?” (Anonymous 1944d). No further comment explains why the author thought this distinction was significant, but non-Christians undoubtedly knew how to present an American Christmas, even if they had abstained from prewar celebrations. The column writer sounds slightly defensive, as if people might assume the competition was a Christian project. Only about a quarter of Minidoka’s population identified as Christian, but older Nikkei knew about the traditions from their children who attended public schools. A Japanese teacher in camp confirmed that the students “knew and celebrated Christmas the same as Caucasian children, … even the Buddhists.”

The decoration contest stood out as a highlight to Buddhists like Fumiko Groves, who recalled the excitement in an interview over half a century later (1998). The idea of Christmas as a performance is a compelling concept. Whether incarcerees directed this act toward outsiders, their white captors, or each other, Christmas was a learned activity for some.

Perhaps because of the participation of people from multiple faiths, Minidoka’s celebrations rarely motioned toward the religious origins of the holiday, though Christians invited everyone to attend their religious services. The secular emphasis frustrated at least one pastor who resented the pressure to diminish religious themes in order to include non-Christians. A school teacher mentioned to Arthur Kleinkopf, the school
superintendent, that children preferred singing “American” Christmas carols rather than religious ones. Since secular Christmas jingles are typically more popular with children than slow, religious hymns, their secular nature may have been coincidental. But in the schools and elsewhere in camp, the Americanness of the holiday was emphasized, not its Christianity.

Decorative projects provided a creative space within which people of different faiths with conflicting attitudes about the incarceration could work together. Believing in Christ or not, incarcerees who felt a need to express their frustrations could work together on a project with those who wanted to construct displays fully supporting the United States. I do not claim that many Minidokans consciously planned to sneak notions of dissent into Christmas decorations, but rather that the need to express those feelings manifested itself within their designs. These displays show the complicated emotional predicament of many Japanese Americans at this time: they remained loyal to their country, but were severely wounded by its actions.

**Christmas Trees**

At Minidoka, Christmas trees served the double purpose of observing an important aspect of a traditional American holiday and meeting an immense aesthetic need for a community taken from the Evergreen State and deposited in the barren landscape of Southern Idaho. First generation immigrants originally came from temperate zones and had never been exposed to land characterized by frequent dust storms, a limited range of color, and flat expanses dotted with sagebrush (Limerick 1992: 1045). An evergreen tree represented home as much or more than the Christmas celebrations as every incarceree could identify with the memory of trees. Kleinkopf’s journal records a trip to Twin Falls during which an incarceree requested, “I’d just like to get out of the car, walk over to one of those trees, touch it, and put my arms around it.” He wrote that incarcerees “were thrilled beyond words by the sight of trees, flowers, and green fields.” The pain underlying this evocative description of “the lady who wanted to caress the tree” could be slightly mitigated through celebrating this particular aspect of an American Christmas. Decades later, former incarcerees from several camps wrote about friends and former neighbors who shipped them evergreen boughs from the Pacific Coast (Uchida 1982: 129). The WRA supplemented deliveries of coal and food with this essential Christmas icon.

Incarceres sought additional or alternative trees for a variety of reasons, however, constructing them from the...
plentiful sagebrush and tumbleweeds surrounding the camp. Many people required a tree within their family’s apartment in order to re-create a traditional family practice and decorate their living space. Families could continue this tradition if they were willing to substitute a severely different looking and smelling tree. Some preferred the sagebrush as more representative of a Minidoka Christmas. Others saw religious meaning in these trees that were at once traditional and radical. The incarceree Norio Mitsuoka wrote about a special Minidokan tree after the war:

Christmas without a Christmas tree just wasn’t Christmas. When … we found ourselves living on desert land devoid of evergreen trees … there was one man … who decided to make himself a tree.

Days before Christmas … you could see him twisting small strips of green crepe paper. Kyono with his work hardened fingers would be twirling the crepe paper strips one by one to form needles for his tree. I think for the trunk and branches of his tree, Kyono used a stripped Sagebrush. Sagebrush has a pungent odor which is both pleasant in a way and repugnant in another … When Kyono had enough needles, he began assembling them onto the bare brush. It was a tedious job of many hours … When the tree was completed it looked beautiful to us and slightly envious that he would have a tree for Christmas [sic].

When I look back at those days I can picture Kyono with his children or friends celebrating Christmas. A small room with bare stud walls; cots with army blankets; simple home made furniture; a small pot belly stove for warmth and Kyono’s Christmas tree. All in an area not unlike that of the first Nativity—Desert land of Sagebrush, Greasewood, desert flowers and Cheet grass—land where sheep and shepherds cross on their annual trek to the high pastures.

Yes if baby Jesus were to look at that scene BABY JESUS WOULD HAVE BEEN GLAD. (1991: 212–13)

This vivid portrait of a man meticulously attaching pieces of crepe paper on sagebrush conveyed the need for incarcerees to celebrate their past traditions and bring color to the desert land. Crafting a Christmas tree enabled Kyono to re-create an important aspect of the home around which his family and friends could gather. Mitsuoka still felt the need to qualify their opinion though, noting that the tree was beautiful “to us.”

Mitsuoka also saw religious merit in these new traditions through their environmental similarity to the land of Jesus’ birth. He recognized the foreign landscape of a “desert land devoid of evergreen trees,” but found a way to make that a positive aspect of their holiday observance. The material object allowed them to remember and honor past Christmases, including the original one, and
celebrate this new one. But while the tree held religious meaning for this man, the scene he described was not outwardly Christian. The trees held different meanings for different people. For some, evergreen trees recalled their Pacific Northwest home; they marked a religious holiday for others. Sagebrush trees symbolized Minidokans’ adaptation to their new environment, and like sending a Christmas card depicting their distressing circumstances some incarcerees may have chosen sagebrush to emphasize their limited resources.

A number of teachers created Christmas trees, supplementing their government tree with smaller sagebrush trees, possibly protesting their reliance on the government through this act. A photograph from a Minidoka classroom (Figure 14) shows a typical Christmas scene: fourteen small children gather around a seated Santa Claus, some on the floor, one on his lap, and several leaning close to hear his words. Presumably posed by the photographer or other adults, every child looks intently at the incarceree dressed as Santa. School desks filled with books line the back wall and an evergreen tree decorated with tinsel, garlands, and ornaments sits in a back corner. But a smaller sagebrush tree covered in sparkling tinsel fills the very center of the photograph. We have no firsthand explanation why someone placed the sagebrush tree in a higher place of honor. It may have seemed like a more appropriate symbol for a desert Christmas or perhaps its small size appealed to the children.

Some white observers lauded the creativity of sagebrush trees, but others did not understand this
improvisation of a Christmas staple. Kleinkopf toured some of the classrooms at Christmas and observed that “this lowly shrub, which most people despise, had risen to a place of eminence in the minds of the pupils and teacher.” A white fifth-grade teacher working at Minidoka saw a clear distinction between the sagebrush trees and the evergreens, however, recalling, “A lot of teachers had sagebrush for trees, but I think I had a Christmas tree. Somehow the sagebrush never served the same purpose. But they did use sagebrush” (Roth 1984). In her mind, sagebrush could not be “a Christmas tree,” drawing a qualitative distinction between traditional evergreens and the improvised substitute. Kleinkopf saw the difference between the sagebrush and evergreens, but this distinction made the alternative tree more valuable in his eyes. He failed to indicate whether Japanese teachers were more or less inclined to use sagebrush trees than white teachers, but in either case, privileging sagebrush trees could be read as an act of protest and resistance, refusing the government’s offerings to their abused citizens and marking the difference of camp Christmases.

**Views from the Outside**

While most often ignored in the national press, incarcerated Japanese Americans posed a challenging subject for wartime media. Depictions of the camps varied widely: Superman exposed a fictional escape plot in a Sunday comic strip (Siegel and Shuster 1943); newsreels like *Japanese Relocation* (1943) from the Office of War Information showed dutiful Japanese American citizens sacrificing their freedom for the war effort; an Ansel Adams exhibit displayed Manzanar incarceration camp and its residents amidst natural splendor (Phu 2008); *Life* magazine juxtaposed “troublemakers” with quintessential middle-class Americans making do in tight quarters (Simpson 2001: 32). Many journalists sought ways to portray Nikkei as non-threatening Americans prepared to re-enter society.

To many outsiders, holiday celebrations indicated that desired assimilation. A lengthy article in *The Sunday Oregonian* highlighted the “westernization” of incarcerated who “threw themselves into a furious round of preparations for Christmas.” The reporter, Mel Arnold, described the dining hall decoration competition in great detail, emphasizing the displays showing nostalgia for the past and a yearning to return home. While he did not call them statements of protest, he noted that the displays motioned toward a reversal of the current situation. He could have understood them as copies of window displays, but the difference was clear to him. Arnold quoted a child who
worried about the camp’s guarded gates, “Can Santa get a pass?” and explained that many other children “were fearful that Santa could not drop through the narrow stovepipes.” Rest assured, “36 slant-eyed Santa Clauses showed up ... several climbing through fireplaces that had been set against window openings” (Arnold 1943).

While Arnold defended the Japanese by emphasizing their good conduct and patriotic American spirit, he still talked of “slant-eyed Santas” and referred to the necessity of “westernization.” It is unclear whether he thought an Asian Santa could ever be called, simply, Santa, without qualification.

Such articles likely assuaged the guilt some Americans felt about the incarceration by emphasizing positive aspects of the camp while attempting to alleviate concerns that Japanese Americans might be a threat to national security. These human interest pieces appeared in West Coast newspapers where readers would have known Nikkei in the camps. Arnold’s article assured readers that Japanese Americans were better behaved than any other ethnic group and pointed out the lack of a jail for this city of 10,000 people. Like the reference to “slant-eyed Santas,” the intention was friendly and intended to improve public opinion, but still marked the ethnic group as different. Arnold wrote several news articles bolstering the public image of Japanese Americans, emphasizing their American customs.

Theorist David Morgan explains that people have an instinct to see what they believe an image should be representing or what they want to see (Morgan 2005: 76–7). With a cursory examination, a person expecting to see typical Christmas decorations will likely see typical Christmas imagery, particularly if he or she hopes to find evidence of assimilation. Arnold may not have thought beyond this level of analysis because he found what he hoped to see. Or perhaps he did not believe the publication of a deeper analysis would help their cause.

For WRA staff and community analysts hired by the government, Christmas celebrations provided proof that Nikkei could assimilate and adopt American traditions and cultural values. The deception of the eye when looking upon what one thinks is a familiar image, whether a Christmas display or a winter landscape on a Christmas card, leads to other cultural assumptions beyond what the context might otherwise suggest, like an adoption of American values or complacency in the face of injustice. Some people sought reassurance that conditions were acceptable and American citizens were able to live normal lives in confinement. But some viewers would have realized the distance between dark Minidokan Christmas
cards and cheery commercial ones, dining hall and department store displays or sagebrush and pine trees.

Conclusions
My argument challenges the notion that the lack of violence at Minidoka meant that Japanese Americans are somehow naturally submissive people who contentedly accepted their loss of rights. Minidokans used civil religious traditions for their own ends, simultaneously demonstrating their patriotism and dissent. Personalizing this civil religious practice helped Japanese Americans reconcile their commitment to the United States without denying its current injustices. They showed one another and outsiders that they were, as L.K.’s poem iterated, “real Americans” who celebrated the holiday just like others around the country and had the same hopes, dreams, and ideals. Their patriotic Christmas decorations honored soldiers and Uncle Sam. These displays could be read as staged, artificial performances of patriotism to show loyalty to outsiders or white administrators, but private letters, published memoirs, and oral histories all intimate sincerity. Minidokan incarcerees celebrated an American holiday, but reshaped it into a meaningful act for their community. They found a way to lament the actions of the United States, but retain their identity as Americans, much as Jane Iwamura showed through her analysis of incarceration memorials.

The material culture of Christmas at Minidoka revealed this complex balance between patriotism and resistance. Cards depicted cold, grim landscapes with institutional barracks covered in snow rather than the expected snow-covered houses, and dining hall displays juxtaposed the current incarceration with pictures of loyal American soldiers from the camp or with scenes from past Christmases. Further, many incarcerees opted to use sagebrush from their desert surroundings instead of government-supplied evergreens for Christmas trees, reminding themselves and observers of their circumstances. These subtle alterations to traditional Christmas artifacts staked a place in American society, but showed their distress and disapproval of their incarceration.

The traumatic experience of incarceration by their own country could have resulted in violent riots or the complete rejection of all things connected to American culture. And such things occurred in some camps, but most Minidokans chose not to renounce American citizenship, its culture, or its prevailing civil religious traditions. But they did not meekly accept their loss of civil rights and welcome life behind barbed wire either. Their celebration
of a quintessential American holiday, one with Christian roots and emblematic of American ideals, celebrated in a space largely void of Christians and absent of civil liberties, exposes the layered relations between Japanese Americans and the outside forces which sought to control them. With great creativity, the ethnic community used the basic visual elements of the holiday for political means.

notes and references


2 Once derided by historians of religion, the concept of civil religion has experienced a recent resurgence. Fueling the debate are books like Haberski (2012), Rable (2010), and Remillard (2011).

3 Minidoka in particular acquired a reputation as the “good” camp among WRA officials and aid workers because of its large number of military volunteers, absence of riots, and few strikes. Hirabayashi to Eleanor Ring, April 15, 1943, Box 1/Fld 6, Ring Family Papers (4241-2), University of Washington Libraries (UW).

4 “Camp Christmas Decorations” (denshopd-i37-00013), 1943, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Densho Digital Archives (DDA).

5 “Christmas Decoration Contest” (denshopd-i37-00015), 1943, NARA, DDA.

6 Christmas card from Joan to Amy Yoshikawa, undated, Box 1/ Fld 7, Yoshikawa Family Collection, Mss235, Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.

7 “Incarceration Camp Christmas Card” (denshopd-p274-00066), Shosuke Sasaki Collection, DDA.

8 Minidoka Relocation Center, August 1943, WRA no. G413, RG 210, NARA.

9 “Camp Christmas Card” (denshopd-p13-00023), Mamiya Family Collection, DDA.

10 Minidoka War Relocation Center, August 18, 1942, WRA no. D107, RG 210, NARA.


14 The spirit of these words was paralleled in London when a man during the blitz said, “British Christmas is the embodiment of all the ideals we are fighting for” (Golby and Purdue 1986: 140).

15 “Christmas Decorations” (denshopd-i37-00011), December 1942, NARA, DDA.
“Christmas Decorations” (denshopd-i37-00679), December 1942, NARA, DDA.

“Christmas Party Committee Meeting,” December 13, 1943, Reel 330, JAER, UCB.

Block 36, Minidoka, December 1943, WRA no. G-408, RG 210, NARA.

“Christmas Decoration Contest” (denshopd-i37-00014), December 1943, NARA, DDA.

Shigoko Soso Uno to Alice W. S. Brimson, January 11, 1943, Box 1/Fld 3, Emery E. Andrews Papers (1908-1), UW.

“Block 41 Christmas Display” (denshopd-p2-00039), Bain Family Collection, DDA.

Over half of the incarcerated population was Buddhist and around 15 percent professed no faith. “Nisei Assimilation,” in WRA Community Analysis Report No. 9, June 21, 1943, Box 6/Fld 19, Clarence Gillett Papers, Collection 130, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles; Thomas (1952: 65–71).

Kleinkopf, December 21, 1942, 86.

Everett Thompson to Frank Herron Smith, Bishop Baker, the Seattle Council of Churches, and the Methodist Board of Missions, December 14, 1943, Box 15/Fld 5, Church Council of Greater Seattle Records (1368-7), UW.

Kleinkopf, December 7, 1942, 74.

Kleinkopf, October 16, 1942, 25.


Kleinkopf, December 22, 1942, 67.


