

Dams as Ethnographic Inflection Points: Affordances and Foreclosures

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Openings

In my fieldwork practice, I have worked towards attuning to ethnographic inflection points: I have understood these points as moments of pause or whiplash that create or allow for ruptures in narratives or time. There are other ways to consider inflection points. One way to think of an inflection point is via Roland Barthes' notion of the "punctum" in a still photograph: "a sting, speck, cut, little hole...an accident which pricks me (and also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (1980:27)¹. Another way to think of an inflection point is the subject "you" or "I" in a dialogue—these changes meaning depending on who is speaking, what Michael Silverstein (1976) would call "deixis". Another way to think of an inflection point is as the suffix "-ed" in English, which changes the temporal outlook (tense) of an activity or a verb.

For this project, I untangle [ethnographic] from [inflection point] in order to explore how and why these are generated. Anthropologists do not simply mechanically acclimate to their social—and otherwise—environments. Instead, I ask: what is afforded us when we consider the routes that our attention takes, and where it is held? In conducting research on water systems in Phoenix, Arizona, I take the dam as the generator of inflection point—and the system it creates and the ruptures in time and space it affords as a space of unfolding, an ethnographic problem-space.

¹ Some of my ideas around the ethnographic inflection point—primarily the photographic example from Barthes—were formed during a class called Multi-Sighted Ethnography that I took in Winter 2018.

The Dam

The Roosevelt Dam is a cornerstone of Phoenix's water control system and arguably the foundation on which the entire city is laid. It was built in the early 1900s, a joint venture of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Salt River Valley Water User's Association, a group of wealthy Anglo landowners in Phoenix, which was keenly interested in economically expanding Phoenix for Anglo inhabitation. Put simply: for providing the legal and material frameworks for settler colonialism. The dam is the first major controlling point of the Salt River, a powerful river in the forest east of Phoenix. The other dams on the Salt River, which flow west towards the valley in which Phoenix has expanded since the late 1800s, are Horse Mesa Dam, Mormon Flat Dam, and Granite Reef Dam (which has been decommissioned and is now part of the CAP Colorado River canal system).

The Roosevelt Dam as an object of conceptual interest is a bit tangential to my overall dissertation research. My research focuses on the "American Dream" as a story about the capacity for liberal democracy to create paths of financial success and equality for all; a fantasy that is ultimately suggestive of a normative ethos for what is often called the "middle class". Within this ethos, intergenerational social mobility through individual striving and homeownership is expected (Alba 2012: 158) to result in a well-deserved reward for a life of hard work—in other words, retirement. For over fifty years, age-segregated retirement communities across the Sunbelt have promised older adults a low cost of living and leisure time in their later years to be filled with golf and warm weather, surrounded by like-minded friends and neighbors. These communities have also fundamentally shaped environmental, political, and economic materialities across the American Southwest. This version of middle-class

retirement has stark material and racial limits, particularly in Arizona, one of the first states to welcome retirees *en masse* and whose GDP has benefited from the widespread migration of retirees since the late 1950s—but whose water resources are under increasing pressure (Reisner 1997; James, 2021). Fundamentally, my research asks: Why are people today retiring to the desert during a time of ecological crisis, and what iteration of the “American Dream” does this fulfill?

The Roosevelt Dam provides a methodological opening to think with the broader questions that my dissertation asks.

As vectors of power and control under settler-colonial regimes, dams are conceptually heavy with the weight of a political economy that was developed on behalf of violent racial capitalism. As metaphor, dams are outside time—controlling the flow of rivers in perpetuity, unless they are torn down—and are forced breaks in the typical flow of natural presence. As metaphor, dams are inflection points out of which ethnography might unfold. The following two encounters, extrapolated from fieldnotes I took while on a trip to Roosevelt Dam in February 2023, are instructive for considering the way that ethnography might generate out of an inflection point.

Inflection 1: Quail

At Theodore Roosevelt Lake, I lingered at the observation deck on the lake-side part of the dam for a while. As I watched the water, I noticed two birds swimming away from the dam out towards the lake. A large orange pylon cut off the water at the edge of the canyon before the lake spread out—it was a filter, I later learned. The birds swam straight towards it, and once

they got there, were stymied by the border. They paused in the water and pecked at it. I watched as they swam along the pylon, periodically pecking at it, ultimately unsuccessful in passing through. They followed the pylon along its perimeter before reaching land on the other side of the canyon.

The orange pylon filter created a controlled porosity: it determined what could and could not pass through the water, what could and could not get close to the dam and to the energy infrastructure that is the dam's reason for being. I felt sad watching the birds, which a stop into the Visitor's Center led me to believe were quail, a native species to the forest. Their movement was precluded and controlled—they were forced into certain ways of being and movement in particular ways because of the infrastructure that also forces other ways of being and movement: of water and of human life.

Inflection 2: Cemetery

At the Roosevelt Dam Historic Cemetery, I met Debra, a woman who had taken it upon herself to clean it up. She told me that she is a snowbird, spending the summer months in Michigan. The grave Debra was working on that day was an elaborately carved headstone, one of just a handful in the entire cemetery that still existed from the time it had been erected. Debra explained that archeologists at the Bureau of Reclamation had informed her that many of the headstones had been either pushed over by cattle or stolen. She pointed to a headstone in the row in front of us that she had helped to clean up: it was reddish stone, the same color as the mountains that surround Roosevelt Dam, and dedicated to "John Loser, a native of Germany

killed April 23, 1908. One of the unforeseen costs of the Roosevelt Dam. Erected by fellow workmen.”

“It’s amazing that you do all this yourself,” I said to Debra. I wanted to know how she got into it—I had met many snowbirds who spent most of their time volunteering, but this seemed particularly time and labor-intensive for a retirement activity.

Debra leaned on her shovel. “Well, I asked for some help from the Bureau. They sent over prisoners from the jail in Globe last spring to do some work.”

Conclusion: Porosity

The two inflection points I discuss above tie together events that, taken together, offer the seeds of ethnographic conceptualization. The swimming quail and my conversation with Debra on a windy, overcast day opened a kind of ethnographic rupture through which I could see some of the environmental, social, and historical effects that the Roosevelt Dam has generated.

As I watched the quail, I was deeply sad, and struck by the way water filtration creates hierarchies of movement that capture and contain species in surprising ways. The lake would not have existed for the quail to swim in had the Dam not been built², but neither would the pylon which restricts their movement. The conversation with Debra allowed resonances to echo with other forms of labor that incarcerated people are often forced to do—for example, like fighting fires in Arizona and California—and how some undocumented people were incarcerated and tortured by Joe Arpaio in Phoenix. The space Debra’s comment opened was

² There is another part of this story which I do not discuss here due to word count constraints, and which has to do with the communities that were washed out by the building of the Dam and the other forms of land expropriation that the physical location of the Dam initiates.

one in which could flow the experience of people who dug a ditch around a cemetery that was built for people who were killed during the construction of Roosevelt Dam and its reservoir, people who had few employment options, who lived in segregated tent cities, and who died for American imperialism. In the moment, I felt that a narrative was rupturing, that this retiree had ripped open a thread in time and released structures of pain, persecution, and biological and social death.

These inflection points speak to an ethnographic problem space that becomes possible via the vehicle of the dam, an agent of controlled filtration. In this case, porosity—of water, of history, and of the accidental encounters that the Dam affords—is the mode in which the ethnographic problem-space is formed.

The Object

For this project, I have created a paper mâché bowl, what I am thinking of as a “layered material history”. The strips of paper I used to create the bowl are torn from ethnographic descriptions that I wrote about the Salt River Dam system, archival materials about the building of Roosevelt Dam taken from the Bureau of Reclamation National archives, and photos I took of the water system between December 2018 and February 2023. The art piece is meant to be representative of the way that ethnographic problem-spaces are held by encounters and events within an archive of historical fact and research experience. The ink from these materials has run together, leading to the words disappearing and the photographs becoming incomprehensible. The porousness of the glue and the material is meant to elicit reflections on

the way that ethnographic material might appear, or disappear, while the problem-space is taking shape.

Appendix. Ethnographic Descriptions, Archival Materials, and Photographs Used for the Bowl

On March 18, 1911, President Theodore Roosevelt traveled, with a large entourage, eighty miles east of Phoenix, into a mountainous forest area, to dedicate a dam, now known as Roosevelt Dam. At the time, Roosevelt Dam was the biggest water infrastructure project in the West, a joint venture between the Bureau of Reclamation, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Salt River Valley Water User's Association, a group made up of powerful white landowners in Phoenix. The dam that Roosevelt dedicated that day was at the time the largest masonry dam in the world, and the lake it created the largest reservoir. It was the result of over 10 million dollars in funding: there had been an immense amount of drama related to its construction and funding, mostly due to the Salt River Valley Water User's Association attempt to renege on its promises to repay the federal government for the construction costs.

On February 21, 2023, I landed at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, rented a car, and drove two hours into what is now known as Tonto National Forest. It was windy and rainy, and the road, which veers northeast before abruptly turning south, was potholed and winding. For the last twenty minutes of the drive, the road hugs the bank of Theodore Roosevelt Lake, the nearly 23-mile-long reservoir that captures and contains water from the Salt River. To get to the Dam,

the road heads up into the mountainside and narrows to one lane before the parking lot turnoff, where I parked next to an RV and a black sedan with Florida plates. I walked to the observation deck and looked at the Dam. Its appearance today is very different to 1911: in 1989, it had been totally resurfaced with concrete and its height had been raised over 70 feet to increase storage capacity in the reservoir.

Roosevelt's dedication speech anchored around two of his Presidential banner projects: the first were the policies aimed at "irrigating the arid and semi-arid West" of North America. Roosevelt cites the Reclamation Act as second only to the Homestead Act, which were part of a political apparatus meant to make landgrabs in the western part of North America legal. He describes them both as "laws for the small man...for the man who farms his own land". The second project Roosevelt cites, and the one which he has "forced through" Congress, is the construction of the Panama Canal which, if not for Roosevelt, "would have been forty or fifty years in the making." Although Roosevelt's speech does not frame these projects as such, they are cornerstones of American imperialism, part of a grand plan to generate power through energy, to control environments on behalf of a political-economy that was still taking shape. Roosevelt extols how he "took possession of Panama" in order to build the canal, linking grammars of ownership and expropriation across continents and collapsing imperial temporalities.

The Salt River is one of the most important waterways in Arizona. It used to flow west all through Phoenix, and was used for hundreds of years prior to Anglo settlement by native.

Spanish, and Mexican farmers. Today it is dammed in five locations: Roosevelt is the largest and the oldest. On the day I visited, the road leading to Horse Mesa, Mormon Flat, and Stewart Mountain Dams was closed. But I have visited them and their reservoirs on other field trips: they each have marinas, they are each securitized in some way, and they each are billed as good locations to camp and hike and ride horses. In Tortilla Flat, a small one-street tourist town downwind of Mormon Flat Dam in what is called the Superstition Mountains, there is a restaurant called the Dutchman's Inn, a country general store, and a post office. In the air above the county store, an effigy hangs from a noose. An origin story posted on the wall by the Dutchman's Inn describes the fantasy of a hidden trove of wealth in the mountains by the Dam—and the "Old Dutchman", Jacob Waltz, who found it. According to the placard, the restaurant's founding was a direct result of Waltz's travels. "It took a lot of looking, walking, and digging to find the rich Petalta gold mine among 125,000 acres of Superstition Mountains and even more killing of hombres".

I was driving away from the observation deck when I noticed, on the hill above the road, white crosses stark against the green foliage, reflecting the overcast light from the stormy, rainy day. I turned the car around and parked. The cemetery is behind a mobile home neighborhood, and the path to get there winds up the hill. I ascended as the wind blew, and because of the weather conditions, there was a kind of organic quietness that one feels when spending time next to a large body of water. A creaky iron gate announced the entrance to "Roosevelt Cemetery Circa 1906-1915." I opened it and noticed, up on the hill by the border fence, a person with a spade, hacking into the earth. I meandered towards the sounds, along a pathway lined with scrubbed

white rocks. Mounds of rocks were piled in front of the white crosses I had noticed from the road—some were quite short, much smaller than I would expect an adult-sized grave to look. As I wound my way up the paths, I saw Debra, dressed in warm outer gear, shoveling the ground by a tall saguaro cactus. We waved to each other.

“It’s cold today!” I said.

“I’m out here because it’s wet,” she called to me. “The ground is easier to dig.”

She was wearing a visor and thick gloves. A wheelbarrow was set up by the grave she was working on, which was marked with a large headstone. Debra told me that she moved to Globe, the next town over, last year, after only intending to come on a week-long vacation. Now she is a snowbird, spending the summer months in Michigan. She happened to come across the cemetery on one of her explorations of the area, and noticed that it was in bad shape. She decided to clean it up, and explained that all of the mounds I saw in the cemetery were ones she had created from existing gravesites. The smaller ones were for children.

The grave Debra was working on that day was an elaborately carved headstone, one of just a handful in the entire cemetery that still existed from the time it had been erected. Debra explained that archeologists at the Bureau of Reclamation had informed her that many of the headstones had been either pushed over by cattle or stolen. The one we stood in front of was covered in lichen and we had difficulty reading the name and dates on the weathered stone. She pointed to another headstone in the row in front of us: it was clean reddish stone, the same color as the mountains that surround Roosevelt Dam, and dedicated to “John Loser, a native of Germany killed April 23, 1908. One of the unforeseen costs of the Roosevelt Dam. Erected by fellow workmen.” Next to it were two wooden headstones, one for “Moses Murphy, Age 37

years” and the other for “Aiden Murphy, Age 13 years.” Debra told me that one day when she was working out here, a family had come by and laid flowers on the Murphy graves: their descendants. They had explained that Moses was an unpopular foreman and had died under mysterious circumstances shortly after his son got into a tragic accident.

“It’s amazing that you do all this yourself,” I said to Debra. I wanted to know how she got into it—in the course of my research, I had met many snowbirds who spent most of their time volunteering, but this seemed like a very particular case. For one thing, most of the snowbirds I have met do not choose to do manual labor at their primary retirement activity.

“Well, I asked for some help from the Bureau. They sent prisoners over last spring to help out.”

Later, I looked it up. A writeup on the website *Silverbelt* notes “The Forestry Crew from the local Globe prison pitched in by digging and creating a much-needed preventative fuels break around the perimeter of the cemetery.”

In the moment, I thought of the incarcerated people who are tasked with fighting fires in Arizona and California. I thought of the incarcerated people tortured by Joe Arpaio in Phoenix. I thought of incarcerated people digging a ditch around a cemetery that was built for people who were killed during the construction of Roosevelt Dam and its reservoir, people who had few employment options, who lived in segregated tent cities, who died for American imperialism. In the moment, I felt that history was rupturing open, that this white retiree from Michigan had ripped open a thread in time and released and unleashed structures of pain, persecution, and biological and social death into the cool February air.

I squeezed a smile and said that must have been interesting.

“They were nice guys, if you could believe it!” Debra said. She told me she had to go back to her work but said she was open to chatting more if I had any other questions. She gave me her email and I walked away.

Construction on the Roosevelt Dam ended up being much costlier and taking much longer than the Bureau of Reclamation expected. It was their first big project.

On February 24, 2023, I decided to check out the lower part of the Salt River Project dam system. I stopped first at Stewart Mountain Dam. It was a beautiful sunny day and lots of people were in the forest for recreation—I passed by horse trailers and big trucks driving with boats attached to their axles. It took me awhile to figure out where to park the car—I eventually parked in a lot called “Water Users Recreation Center” and walked down a horse path towards the Dam. The path was sandy and followed the Salt River. I walked about a mile along the river towards the dam, passing through the Saguaro Ranch and a horse stable. The Ranch looked like the camp in Lost. A gardener was mowing the lawn and it smelled like freshly-cut grass as I passed by a great lawn, a pool, and little cabins. Pathways led to the river. It was all in the shadow of Stewart Mountain and the Dam: the parking lot for the ranch was butting up against a security fence for the dam and “No Trespassing” signs. Birds were bathing in the river. I had a strange sense of unreality: there were no other people around, and the only inhabitants seemed to be the birds, the ranch, and housing for Salt River Project employees down the road. When I passed the housing, I could see a basketball hoop over the security fence.

Next I drove down to the Saguaro Lake Reservoir, and enjoyed the view of the marina and the boaters and little birds for a while. I watched some ducks paddle in the water and chirp in annoyance or fear as the water lapped up onto the banks when motorboats went by.

I sat by myself on the edge of the water, for awhile near a man in a leather jacket who sat in front of his motorcycle and smoked a cigarette.

The archives of the Bureau of Reclamation in Denver, Colorado are located in a developing suburb 20 miles north of the city center. The entries that detail the infrastructural control of the Salt River illuminate the banal mundane-ness of an American imperialism manifest as bureaucracy and graft—and ultimately lead to the violent expropriation and categorization of land.

Entry 4, Box 28 contains a confidential report detailing fraud committed between 1910-1913 by Mr. Howard Reed, Engineer for Reclamation. He was selling water to people on the Salt River and collecting the cash on his own. "The Zanjeros were reporting water deliveries to the following described land for which service no money has been received by the US Reclamation Service and for which no applications have been written." One of the recipients of the defrauded water was Phoenix Savings Bank and Trust

James Sprague, chief clerk of the operation and management department of Reclamation was part of the inquiry trying to bring Reed down. In his deposition of August 3, 1913, he said that as of August 1, 1913, the city of Chandler was "overdrawn by about 2700 acre feet"

An interview with a former zanjero indicated that some users were given water whenever they wanted, even in times of want.

Water was given to Class C (speculative land) over Class B (cultivable land). Described in detail in statement given by WA Farish, Engineer, on October 3, 1913.

Cooperative water groups started by farmers were deemed illegal

Entry 3, Box 3 contains homestead applications. In order to apply for water rights from homesteads under the 1902 Reclamation Act, landowners had to be part of water user's associations so that they would be regulable. "The purpose of this provision is to have all rights to the use of water which are administered from these systems under the same general rules and regulations and under one control in each case; and it will doubtless be deemed advisable by the Secretary of the Interior from time to time to place more and more responsibility upon the water user's associations, in order that they may gradually be prepared to assume the management of the entire system...as contemplated by section six of the Reclamation Act."

On April 19, 1906: a letter from the Secretary of the Interior was sent to the Director of the Geological Survey described the rights of "claimants and occupants of lands in private ownership within an irrigation project to the use of water from the government works." Claimants had to reside locally on the land to successfully defend their claim.

On April 4, 1906, a telegram was sent with "Instructions as to applications for water rights under the reclamation act of June 17, 1902."

The relation of water users' associations to government is described as being "an integral part of the project and directly associated with the Government in carrying out the details thereof." Two forms were created to apply for water rights: "form A for homesteaders who have made entries of lands withdrawn and form B for private owners of lands embraced within said project."

Looking at all of the drafts of the forms, I am struck by how slow and bureaucratic all of this was.

In a letter to the Dept of the Interior General Land Office, clarification was made regarding form b (private land ownership) that the forms were not applications but rather contracts. And therefore "a provision should be inserted to the effect that no member of or delegate to Congress shall be admitted to any share or part of any such contract or agreement"

In a letter to the secretary of the Interior on December 2, 1910, the chief law officer described the distinction between leasing water rights and land sales

Entry 3, Box 4E contains information related to the way in which Department of the Interior officials were working, from 1902-1913, to streamline the allocating of land and water rights contracts post-Reclamation Act. Too many contracts were being filed for small issues.

Folder 23-D contains information regarding the final water right certificate, which included the following language, which gave the US government ultimate ownership over land and water:

“The Act of Congress approved August 9, 1912 provides, among other things: That every patent and water-right certificate issued under this Act shall expressly reserve to the United States a prior lien on the land patented or for which water-right is certified, together with all water-rights appurtenant or belonging thereto, superior to all other liens, claims, or demands, whatsoever for the payment of all sums due or to become due to the United States or its successors in control of the irrigation project in connection with such lands and water-rights.”

If rivers and lakes are spaces of leisure in the West, dams and their equipment are spaces of securitization and control. These are also spaces that are highly defined by projections of whiteness. Perhaps one way to consider the whiteness that has been developed and sustained in the American West is to think of its conceptual parentage: its growth out of the muck of leisure and security of and for itself.

The Hoover Dam is the largest dam in the western part of North America—stopping the flow of the Colorado River—and visitors flock to it from the nearest city, Las Vegas. To get there, visitors must drive through a checkpoint manned by soldiers in fatigues carrying automatic weapons. Other dams have echoes of such security apparatus, but nothing so extreme as the Hoover. Visitors cannot get near to the entrance of the Roosevelt Dam, for instance, but there are no soldiers and no checkpoints in the drive up to it.

And yet, because of dams, even the water in the lakes they create is securitized.

When I visited Theodore Roosevelt Lake in February 2023, I lingered at the observation deck on the lake-side part of the dam for a while: the sun had come out and it had become a pleasant day. As I watched the water, I noticed two birds swimming away from the dam out towards the lake. A large orange pylon cut off the water at the edge of the canyon before the lake spread out—it was a filter, I later learned. The birds swam straight towards it, and once they got there, were stymied by the border. They paused in the water and pecked at it. I watched as they swam along the pylon, periodically pecking at it, ultimately unsuccessful in passing through. They followed the pylon along its perimeter before reaching land on the other side of the canyon.

The orange pylon filter created a controlled porosity: it determined what could and could not pass through the water, what could and could not get close to the dam and to the energy infrastructure that is the dam's reason for being. Beyond this literal porosity, which is required for the construction and maintenance of this systems, I want to think about how dam infrastructure precludes other kinds of porous movement. I felt sad watching the birds, which a stop into the Visitor's Center led me to believe were quail, a native species to the forest. Their movement was precluded and controlled—they were forced into certain ways of being and movement in particular ways because of the infrastructure that also forces other ways of being and movement: of water and of human life.



1. The back of Roosevelt Dam with the orange pylon filter



2. The fantasy of the Old West outside Dutchman's Inn in Tortilla Flat, AZ



SEQ Figure * ARABIC 5. Roosevelt Dam



6. Stewart Mountain Dam in the background of a casita at Saguaro Lake Ranch



7. The marina at Stewart Mountain Lake from above



8. The entrance to Roosevelt Dam Historic Cemetery





15A [941]
Mendocino

Roosevelt
SPEECH AT ~~PHOENIX~~ ARIZONA. (DEDICATION OF ROOSEVELT DAM)

It was a year ago when I first came out of Africa that I received your request to take part in the dedication exercises of this great project and I accepted at once, for this was one of the occasions that I wouldn't on any account have foregone. I listened with great interest to the letter read by Mr. Fowler and I remember just what I had in mind when I wrote him. Fortunately when I was elected President the time had come when it was highly desirable that there should be one president who knew the needs of the west from having lived in the short grass country. I took up this great work, this national irrigation policy as the first bit of serious work which I undertook as president.

About a week after I became president Mr. Howell whose letter you have listened to today, and Mr. Clifford Pinchot called upon me and told me just the status in Congress of the movement for the national government to take up the irrigation policy of the west as a national governmental policy, and fortunately I had lived and worked in the west and knew what irrigation meant to the west. I knew the utter impossibility of expecting the larger schemes to be developed by private enterprise unless we were content to have the larger schemes

Read