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SLAB CITY, CALIFORNIA: SPATIAL DYNAMICS IN AN OFF-GRID COMMUNITY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Slab City, California: Spatial Dynamics in an Off-Grid Community

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Spatial dynamics orient our day to day lives and reflect our identities. For most, our rights to personal space are organized legally by land ownership and leasing of properties, while our rights to public space are protected by our local, state and national governments. This is not the case in Slab City, an off-grid community living on the edge of the desert in Imperial Valley, California. Slab City is a community that varies seasonally between populations of about one hundred to several thousand, and for the last half century has existed on the site of a former military camp thanks to the benign neglect of the State of California. This research focuses on participant observation as a research methodology to understand the spatial creation of inhabitants' claims of territory. It uses the concepts of "heterotopia", as put forward by philosopher Michel Foucault, "neo-tribalism" as described by sociologist Michel Maffesoli, and "cosmopolitan canopy" by sociologist Elijah Anderson to place inhabitants' claims in theoretical context. I conclude that these spatial claims, far from being ephemeral and flexible, become even more salient to conceptions of home, territory, and self in the

absence of legally codified land rights, and that the mixed methodology of historiography and participant observation is useful in deciphering complex palimpsests of Landscape.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustrations	vii
Introduction	1
Academic Context of Research	8
Methodology	16
Part 1: History	
Geology	20
Indigenous Tribes and the Cahuilla	25
Salton Sea/Imperial Valley Boom	28
Camp Dunlap	31
Infrastructure and Essential Services	43
Slab City Residents and Tribal Groups	44

Table of Contents, continued

Part 2: Personal Narrative

January 2: Departure and Arrival	52
January 3: Reconnaissance	58
The Lay of the Land	61
January 4: Community Meeting	69
Dynamics of Territoriality	74
Boundary Makers	81
January 8-12: Snowbird Rally	92
January 11: Community Canopy	107
Breaking Camp	113
January 13: Homecoming	115
Conclusions	119
Further Study	123
Endnotes	124
Bibliography	129

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. A Resident's home	4
Figure 2. A remnant bunker, which has since been inhabited	4
Figure 3. Slab City location shown on a LANDSAT Earth Image	5
Figure 4. The Historic Full Extent of the Colorado River Delta	22
Figure 5. A Section of the Salton Sink Ecologies	26
Figure 6. Salton Sea and Vicinity	29
Figure 7. Department of the Navy Map of Camp Dunlap, 1944	31
Figure 8. Camp Dunlap Photo 1-Main Entrance	33
Figure 9. Camp Dunlap Photo 2-Swimming Pool	34
Figure 10. Camp Dunlap Photo 3-Water Treatment Plant	35
Figure 11. Camp Dunlap Photo 4-Evaporation Beds	36
Figure 12. Camp Dunlap Photo 5- Post Office	36
Figure 13. Camp Dunlap Photo 6-Outdoor Theater	37
Figure 14. Camp Dunlap Photo 7-Car Shop	38
Figure 15. Camp Dunlap Photo 8-Gas Station	38
Figure 16. Camp Dunlap Photo 9-Quartermaster's House	39
Figure 17. Camp Dunlap Photo 10-Mess hall	39
Figure 18. Military buildings as residences in 1988	41
Figure 19. A remnant of a likely Bush Bunny campsite	48

Figure 20. A current map of Slab City for visitors	49
Figure 21. One of the two food Stores in Niland	51
Figure 22. A Greek Revival Style building in Niland	51
Figure 23. The entrance to Slab City	55
Figure 24. A view of the sky looking north	56
Figure 25. A previously claimed campsite	57
Figure 26. Shops on Sellers' Row	59
Figure 27. The Shoe Tree, a Slab City tourist attraction.	60
Figure 28. Initial reconnaissance walks	62
Figure 29. The Coachella Canal	63
Figure 30. The All American Canal being used as a Slab City amenity	65
Figure 31. Swimming in the canal	66
Figure 32. The Lizard Tree Library	67
Figure 33. Books and shelves in the Lizard Tree Library	68
Figure 34. Ben's newly uncovered slab	77
Figure 35. A pet cemetery	79
Figure 36. Another pet cemetery	80
Figure 37. The extent of a Resident's claimed space	82
Figure 38. A munitions storage building	86
Figure 39. A neatly organized Slab	87

Figure 40. A slab with a view of the Chocolate Mountains	88
Figure 41. A very private slab site	89
Figure 42. A hut under the branches of a blue palo verde tree	89
Figure 43. A home site with white plastic picket fencing	90
Figure 44. Two very mobile Resident's sites	90
Figure 45. A secluded location and a Confederate flag	91
Figure 46. A map of the Slab L.O.W.s rally area	95
Figure 47. Snowbird campsites	96
Figure 48. The Slab L.O.W.s main courtyard	96
Figure 49. The Slab L.O.W.s, densely packed in Slab City	96
Figure 50. Way-finding signage	97
Figure 51. Garbage facilities	99
Figure 52. L.O.W.s signage	101
Figure 53. Snowbirds on a trip to the Salton Sea	104
Figure 54. Snowbirds on a trip to Salvation Mountain	105
Figure 55. The Range	109
Figure 56. The school bus pick up site	111
Figure 57. Gravesite of Billy Jewel Sullivan	117

Introduction:

This thesis in landscape architecture examines the concept of territory in Slab City, an “off-grid” community that is located a few miles east of Niland in Imperial County, CA (Figure 3). The question it seeks to address is how territory is demarcated and maintained by groups and individuals who reside there, in the absence of codified rules of ownership. Of particular concern, is the physical form of the landscape as expressed in Slab City’s site-specific spatial boundaries and their relationship to the social surveillance mechanisms that have been established to control and defend these boundaries.

Slab City takes its name from the concrete slabs that dot the community, and which originally served as the foundations for the buildings of Camp Dunlap. Camp Dunlap was a military base opened in 1942 with the goal to train United States soldiers for anti-aircraft missions in World War II’s African Theater. It remained in operation only a few years, and was decommissioned in 1946.

Dismantlement of the camp began immediately after closing. The buildings, though intended to be permanent,¹ were constructed on concrete slabs. When the buildings were dismantled and removed, the concrete slabs were left and thus remain a visible marker of the camp’s presence and its original layout.² These slabs currently rise between six inches and three feet above the desert floor, depending on how the shifting sands have filled in the area surrounding them, and whether, or not, they have been maintained by Slab City inhabitants since the camp closure.

In 1961, the United States Defense Department officially transferred Camp Dunlap's land back to the State of California, and today, the land is managed by the California State Lands Commission.³ The Commission has, in other words, taken the role of absentee landlord and plays no part in the day-to-day governance or management of the land. Since returning to State ownership from the Marines, California, under the auspices of the State Lands Commission has attempted to lease the land, without success. As such, the state has exerted no on-site management of the area for over half a century. This arrangement has proved quite attractive to those individuals in search of the freedom from government regulation, by providing the opportunity to live off the grid with minimal oversight.⁴ This, however, does not mean that Slab City exists completely independent from government services as the community does rely upon local police and fire protection.

There are currently three main groups inhabiting Slab City. The largest group is the Snowbirds. Over the course of the winter season, several thousand Snowbirds will pass through Slab City, some spending just a few days at a time, others spending several months. The term Snowbird refers to a traveler, typically of retirement age, who leaves his permanent home in the Northern United States or Canada in search of warmer weather in the winter.⁵ In this discussion, I include in the Snowbird category those who maintain a permanent home in another location as well as those who have decided to retire to a life of travel in their Recreational Vehicle (RV). Members of this group

generally have sufficient financial means, and sufficiently limited personal responsibilities, to be able to focus on recreation as their primary pastime. Some are drawn to Slab City because there are no camping fees, while others come in appreciation of the freedom offered by “off grid” experience Slab City offers.

The second group of inhabitants in Slab City is the Residents. For the purposes of this discussion, I define Residents as those individuals who have chosen Slab City as their primary place of domicile. Residents may have an RV, but are more likely to live in some combination of a tent, trailer, or informal built structure (Figure 1). All portable materials left over from Camp Dunlap were removed or scavenged in the time between its closure and its transfer back to the State, and so these Residents’ structures are for the most part built of materials that have since been brought into Slab City. However, a few homes incorporate structures abandoned, but not destroyed, at the time of dismantlement of the Camp (Figure 2). As most of these structures are not climate controlled in any way, some Residents leave Slab City in the hottest part of the summer, returning to their residence as soon as the temperature allows. Residents typically have limited financial resources, but do not consider themselves “homeless”.



Figure 1. A Resident's home, constructed of both scavenged and purchased material. Photo by Author.



Figure 2. A remnant bunker, which has since been inhabited. Photo by Author.

The final group inhabiting Slab City is the Bush Bunnies. This derogatory term has been a documented part of the lingo in Slab City for at least 25 years, and is applied to itinerants who drift through Slab City, often camping on the outskirts of the site in the surrounding creosote bushes.⁶ This group consists of itinerant individuals who are simply passing through the community, and who are often looking to avoid interactions with the authorities that they might experience in other locations. There is also an ethnic distinction operating here as well, as Snowbirds and Residents are almost all White Caucasian, while Bush Bunnies are usually Hispanic.⁷ Bush Bunnies rarely stay for more than a few days in Slab City.

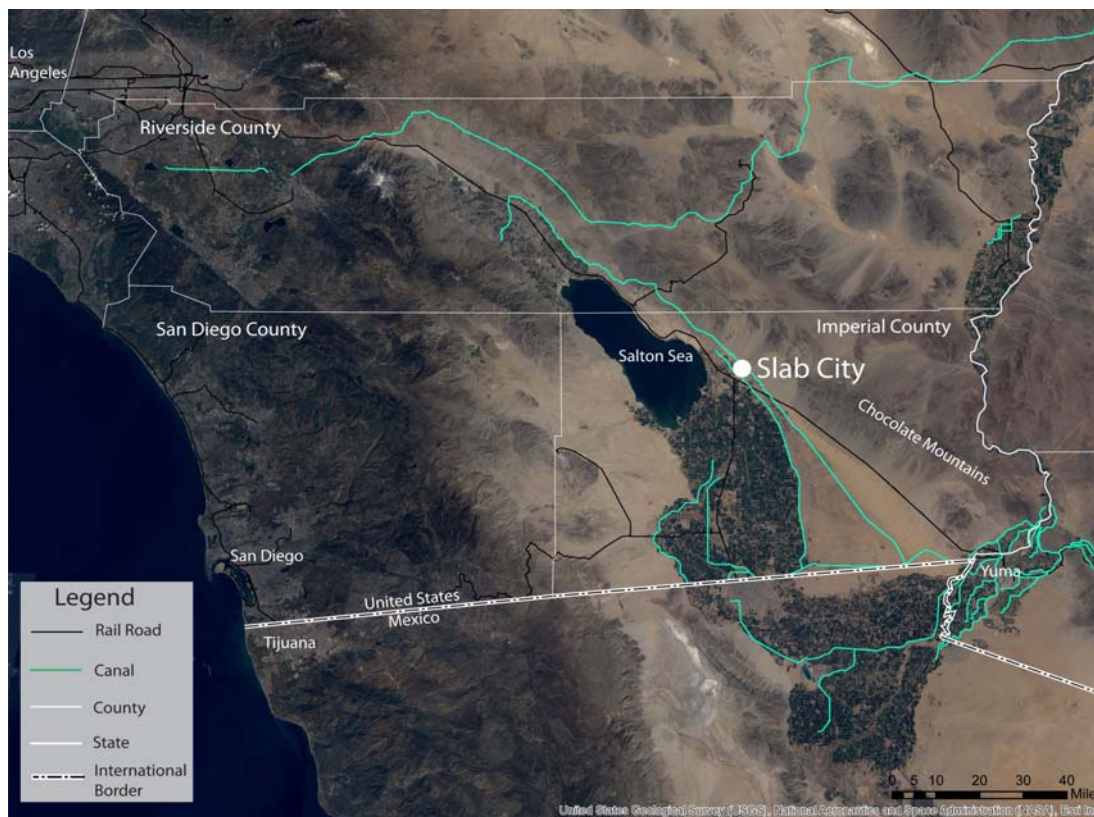


Figure 3. Slab City location shown on a LANDSAT Earth Image.

Overtime, as these different groups: recreational, permanent, and itinerant, jointly occupied the site and co-mingled, they developed social structures and forms of interaction which left marks on the land. As mentioned previously, this thesis attempts to unravel the marks created by the people of Slab City as they demarcated their spatial territories. It starts where the work of another Master's thesis, "A Singular Land Use in the California Desert," by Dorothy Phelps, ends.⁸ Phelps, a graduate student in geography at the University of California at Riverside, was the first to document the history of Slab City, (which she referred to as "Section 36") up to the late 1980s.⁹ At the time of her work, it had been less than one generation since people had started living in Slab City, and memory of the community's founding was still fresh in the minds of the Residents. Today much of this memory has been lost, though as this thesis will show, the early history of Slab City still informs how the current residents view and use the land. Phelps' thesis ends with a discussion of imminent changes in legal and spatial status that were expected to occur in Slab City, but now almost 30 years later, Slab City still exists much as it did then. This thesis explores and describes the different physical objects, spatial and social structures that have interacted to form, stabilize and maintain the character of Slab City, since the work of Phelps. Equally important, it will likewise end with a discussion of imminent changes in legal and spatial status that have the potential to impact the existing spatial characteristics and territorial boundaries that contribute to the unique vernacular landscape of Slab City.

Research on the informal settlement history of Slab City comes with its own unique challenges. For example, there is no official founding date or official population statistics or Census data for Slab City. Yet there exists an unofficial lore of its founding. According to the local lore, as passed down by Slab City Residents,¹⁰ and as recorded by Slab City's unofficial resident historian Robi Hutton,¹¹ itinerant agricultural workers were the first post-military inhabitants of the community. As chronicled by Hutton, these workers were simply looking for a temporary place to stay while they harvested crops in the Imperial Valley's irrigated farmland.¹² While the evidence of these workers' history in Slab City exists only in narrative, the idea of Slab City as a temporary camping refuge for those who are hard off was formed at this time.¹³

In the late 1960s, the early migrant groups were superseded by groups of Snowbirds who began pulling their RVs into Slab City to overwinter. As this new group of itinerant campers began living in Slab City for longer periods of time, they started erecting immobile structures on their campsites to supplement the amenities provided by their RV's. Eventually these individuals became Slab City's first Residents.¹⁴ The distinction between Residents and Snowbirds was probably somewhat blurred in the early years of Slab City. Eventually RVs broke down, some Snowbirds likely had financial reasons for staying longer, and one by one, individuals made the decision to switch from being travelling Snowbirds to predominantly stationary Residents.

Academic Context of Research:

In order to understand the multi-faceted aspects of Slab City's unique history of settlement and its current boundary markers and systems of surveillance, the research presented in this thesis is necessarily interdisciplinary and exists at the intersection of the fields of Landscape Architecture, Geography, and Sociology. It relies heavily on the writing of distinguished members of each field and it draws upon all of them to create a more synthetic reading of place.

This thesis relates strongly to concepts of territory written about by Jeffery Hou, Chair of Landscape Architecture at the University of Washington, who has written extensively about the insurgent multicultural and transcultural claiming of public space in cities, but is differentiated by its focus on those who choose to live outside the formal structure of a city and by the homogeneity of the ethnic culture of its inhabitants. Hou also is mainly concerned with group claims on territory, while my thesis considers both group and individual claims on territory.¹⁵

The work is also related to that of Don Mitchell, chair of the geography department at Syracuse University, who has written about power, politics and place-making by economically disadvantaged social classes. He has also written about migrant workers in Southern California, some of whom have no doubt passed through Slab City. My thesis also considers power relationships and access to space, but differs from his

work in that it does not take a Marxist labor theory or social justice approach to understanding Slab City. It also takes as its subject migratory Snowbirds rather than migratory workers.¹⁶

Abbilyn Miller, Ph.D. University of Illinois, and now program analyst with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has written on the way in which conceptions of privacy and home affect reactions and conceptions of those in non-traditional living arrangements such as tent cities, as well as daily life in homeless shelters. While my thesis considers the creation of homes by individuals of limited economic means, as well as the choice of non-traditional living arrangements, it differs from this work on homelessness in that Slab City Residents do not rely on city shelters, homeless programs or other supportive urban infrastructures to survive. In fact, Slab City residents do not consider themselves homeless. Homelessness often deals with individuals or groups who are displaced, but this concept breaks down in the context of Slab City, because choice and freedom are so often cited as reasons for living there.¹⁷

As I trace the contemporary use of the site, two terms will become critically important. The first, heterotopia, which I use to describe the character of the space in Slab City, was originally coined by the philosopher Michel Foucault in his article “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias” (1984). As defined by Foucault, the term combines the real and imagined, and like a utopia, exists because of a specific cultural ideal. But unlike

utopias, which are idealized versions of society that can never really exist, heterotopias exist in real space and time. As such, they can be located and delineated. Also, and of particular importance to Slab City, as Foucault also noted, heterotopias are capable of, “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”¹⁸ The juxtaposition of incompatible spaces is very important in any discussion of Slab City when one considers the various groups on site. Snowbirds and Residents are very different groups, but they regularly intermingle, showing up at the same events across Slab City. Different groups live in different areas, and there are as many ways to trespass in Slab City as there are campsites to trespass upon, and yet, even though the residents of Slab City create spatial boundaries, they honor freedom of movement. This ironic juxtaposition, I argue, is possible because Slab City functions as a heterotopia.

More recently, the historian and social critic Charlie Hailey, who writes extensively on campsites and other temporary living arrangements, has discussed the physical structure of Slab City in terms of “heterotopic zones of domestic exile, homelessness, and encampment.”¹⁹ Hailey’s zone typology relates directly to the groups previously described as Snowbirds, Bush Bunnies, and Residents, respectively. He also notes that these different zones overlap and are constantly in need of defense by their individual inhabitants. The resulting territories and their boundaries, their physical and social maintenance, and the social tension this produces is explored and described in this

thesis. More critically, this thesis links these defensive spatial and social interactions to another defining principle of heterotopias, which is the fact that boundaries within this setting isolate the space and yet, at least conceptually in the minds of the inhabitants, remain fluid and porous. This, however, does not mean that these boundaries actually move, or that the heterotopia is freely accessible like a public place. “To get in,” Foucault notes, “one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.”²⁰ In other words, entry to Slab City is technically open to all, but acceptance into the community involves a more complicated process of observation and acceptance. Slab City is remote, and those who enter proceed down a single main road, easily seen and noticeable by all. To arrive after dark is considered bad manners, and to move into a spot too close to neighbors or already claimed by another camper or resident is to risk being run off.²¹ Again, different groups of residents have different social expectations, hence different processes of surveillance and acceptance. The campsite arrangements of these groups reflect these differences.

As mentioned previously, a major focus of this thesis is the documentation and description of the spatial boundaries that separate the different campsites of Slab City into neo-tribal units, which is the second significant theoretical underpinning of my analysis. The French sociologist Michel Maffesoli defines neo-tribes in terms of the social interactions that take place outside the confines of both intimate familial relationships and large-scale class structures. According to Maffesoli, these interactions are mostly

small, every-day, seemingly insignificant interactions. Often unnoticed, these interactions may take place waiting in line for a train, at the water cooler, or across the bar at a pub, but at the core, they inherently require proximity to others. Maffesoli also argues these small interactions and shared proximity can, in certain circumstances, create shared experiences that form the basis for broad social cohesion. When this cohesion is particularly strong, Maffesoli observes, the resulting social units become neo-tribes. “This communal sensibility,” he writes, “favors a proximity-centered ethos; that is simply put, a way of being that offers an alternative to both the production and distribution of goods.”²² Status and acceptance in Slab City, therefore, is not based on social class, as exchange theories of economic sociology would suggest.²³ This particular form of social bonding is most evident in the RV groups that take up temporary residence at Slab City. This line of reasoning is borne out in the social research of Ann Hardy, who argues that for RV groups, campsites become special anchoring places where rituals, as basic as sitting round the campfire and sharing morning coffee, bond members of the group so significantly that the bond might persist for months or even a year until the next meeting.²⁴

Finally, I link the theories of heterotopia and neo-tribalism. Heterotopia describes Slab City as a whole. Neo-tribalism describes the major groups who reside in Slab City in carefully separated spatial arrangements. These groups are united through the concept of cosmopolitan canopy as described by the American sociologist Elijah Anderson. In, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*, (2011) Anderson writes about specific, non-exclusionary, urban

spaces that promote interaction for all residents regardless of their social group.²⁵ In these places different races, ethnicities and classes are all welcome and able to interact with each other. As Anderson observes, cosmopolitan canopies are not only places for individuals to carry out specific activities, they are also places where individuals learn about members of other groups, and enjoy their company in relative safety from uncomfortable or even potentially dangerous exchanges. Slab City is not urban, of course, but as my research will show, certain places within it do perform the same function as the canopies Anderson describes in his research. Specially designated places provide the opportunity for different neo-tribal groups to interact and enjoy each other's presence in Slab City. By allowing different neo-tribes to co-exist in relative peace and safety, Slab City as a whole is stabilized. While Anderson describes a type of urban utopian idealism in the character of his canopies, Slab City is a heterotopia, and as such its canopies do not share quite the same quality. While Anderson's canopies may actually have the effect of changing the ideas and preconceptions of those who enjoy its shelter, eventually leading to a less ghettoized city, in Slab City, neo-tribal affiliations and their resulting tensions do not necessarily dissipate outside the boundaries of the canopy.

I originally conducted my thesis research in order to ground truth Slab City maps and discover how the different residents of Slab City define and control territory. Knowing that many of the spatial arrangements I would see are not legally codified, I assumed that they would be inherently unstable. I went to Slab City to observe whether

or not my hypothesis was true. As noted by Anthropologist James Peacock, “The ethnographer may follow such a [positivist] procedure to a degree, but the unanticipated realities of fieldwork often jar it loose.”²⁶ My participant observation in Slab City did not conform to my hypothesis. In fact, I discovered the mechanisms that stabilize Slab City both spatially and culturally are quite robust. Tightly knit neo-tribal groups have specific cultural practices that define space in a way fluid enough to react to the changing seasonal populations, but rigid enough to be clearly readable to both residents and visitors alike. They include: signage, both at individual campsites and along the main roads, logos that relate to individual groups, property boundaries made out of anything from rocks to old tires to wire fences, and a camp site set-up pattern that signals a closed community. Ongoing surveillance of these spaces by Slab City community members ensures that trespasses are minimal and quickly corrected. In some ways, the lack of legally codified property rights inspires a hyper-vigilance on the part of the visitor to ensure that trespass does not occur.

Moreover, specific spaces in Slab City such as the Range (an outdoor concert venue), function as Cosmopolitan Canopies and provide spaces for safe interactions between different groups. Coming together in these spaces creates a greater sense of community among all the groups by allowing individuals to enjoy the company and presence of other groups without being culturally or spatially threatened by them. In this respect, Slab City itself is not a problem that needs to be legally, social, or spatially solved,

as Phelps attempted to do in her thesis. In fact, as many Slabbers have stated, legal status could threaten the very sense of place that draws so many every year.²⁷ Slab City, I argue, exists as its own set of cultural and spatial dynamics, which have evolved over time to be self-reinforcing, and self-sustaining. Like American culture generally, Slab City exists in a tension between individual freedom and community responsibility. What I hope to illustrate is that the lack of formal government in Slab City allows for higher levels of each. All Slab City inhabitants can do as they please, but everyone must uphold and defend the spatial and cultural dynamics in place, as new inhabitants continually make their way to Slab City. These new Residents, Snowbirds, and Bush Bunnies have to quickly learn to read the dynamics in place, and this requires full participation by inhabitants already aware of them.

Keeping all these concepts in mind, this thesis is structured in three primary sections. Following this introduction and the immediately following discussion of methodology, I will present a historical narrative of the site. This begins with the geology of the area and how this formed the basic structure of the site; extends through the site's past use as a Marine camp; and ends with its present incarnation as Slab City. I will then proceed to tell my personal narrative of the site, including both what I did and insights I learned while in residence on site from January 2 to January 13, 2014. Following the narrative I will discuss conclusions and suggestions for further related study.

Methodology:

The primary methodology of this thesis is participant observation. Although much of the research on the history of the site was conducted prior to visiting the site, it is the participant observation fieldwork which remains the lens through which all additional research is considered. As James Peacock writes, "...research in fieldwork often begins with encounter, then proceeds to interpretation".²⁸ This field work methodology blends an anthropologic investigation of social and spatial relationships with my personal experiences on site.

My site residence consisted of two weeks of participant observation as a Snowbird living in an RV in Slab City. While much shorter than a typical anthropological fieldwork study, the time allowed me to experience the site quite extensively, visit all significant landscape features, and participate for the full duration of a five day Snowbird rally. Landscape Architecture research typically involves gathering information from site users, and analyzing this information from an external perspective. In a site as atypical as Slab City this is not sufficient. Participant observation combines the role of the user and the researcher together to reveal that which might otherwise be lost in communication between the two roles. Peacock also notes that participant observation consists of three parts, "...experience, establishing an identity in the community, and interpretation".²⁹ In my case, my experience was that of living in Slab City for two weeks during a Snowbird

rally, my identity became that of a lone curious traveler, and my interpretation is the analysis of my personal narrative.

To complete my study of the site I combine the results of this participant observation with historical archival research and key texts. One of the major key texts that I referenced was the Geography Master's thesis of Dorothy Phelps, published in 1989. This work was the first academic publication on Slab City, and it is referenced significantly in other writing on Slab City, either directly by citation or through use of material it contains such as maps, diagrams and photographs. The current source for the most up to date published information is online, at www.slab-city.com. The website was administered by a permanent resident of Slab City, Robi Hutton, until March of 2014. Since that time other Residents have taken over management. I was able to supplement the information in Phelps' work with material from the website, which I verified on the ground. I was also able to have conversations with several residents who provided their own unique perspective on the history of the slabs.

For additional historical information related to Camp Dunlap, I was able to work with the Imperial County Historical Society, based out of the Pioneers Museum in Imperial, California. Their archives contained several articles on the Camp, as well as an information booklet assembled by E Clampus Vitus, a fraternal order dedicated to the history of the American West.³⁰ This booklet is critical to the history of Camp Dunlap, as

it contains some of the only known photographs of the completed Camp. Photography was forbidden inside the camp, and since it was in operation for only a few years, photographs are very rare. The booklet also contains several personal stories that describe the relationship of the camp to the civilian areas in the valley.³¹

A staff worker at the Pioneers Museum also provided me with the name of one of the workers at Camp Dunlap. Dorothy Doty, now 93, lives in Brawley, California, and was able to recall her time working at the camp the summer before it opened. She worked in a lieutenant's office, mostly doing secretarial work, but was able to provide personal insight to what it was like to have been at Camp Dunlap during its operating years.

Through historical research, I will tell the story of the site, situating the current activities of Slab City and its spatial relationships in a complex web of history. This will allow the reader to make sense of the contemporary site analysis. This site analysis will be typical of the field of Landscape Architecture. How are spaces defined? What spaces have been specifically programmed and what spaces have been left un-programmed? Upon arrival at Slab City is there a typical "See, Approach, Arrive, Park, Enter" pattern of experience? Who controls spatial relationships in Slab City and how? Through an extended site visit, the answers to these questions were ascertained, and in this thesis, maps, diagrams, and my personal narrative of experiences describe them.

Residents, when asked what Slab City is like, will often decline to answer. Instead, they suggest that those interested should come out and see for themselves.³² In order to acknowledge the personal lens through which I am viewing Slab City, I will discuss my own experience of what it was like to travel through the site. My personal experiences are a crucial adjunct to the historiography. Slab City is a place that is not immediately understandable to outsiders. Merely reading about the site does not allow one to truly understand it. Indeed, my limited two-week residency barely begins to reveal the complexity of the site. Rather, it suggests a way to reveal physical characteristics and social aspects of Slab City's spatial and social structure, as well as the internal mechanisms that maintain these structures, which are not discernable from a more distant perspective.

In summary, the methodologies employed in this thesis are different, yet complementary. The historical research sets the stage, detailing both the material and cultural make-up of the site. My personal narrative describes how those who visit the site experience these characteristics.

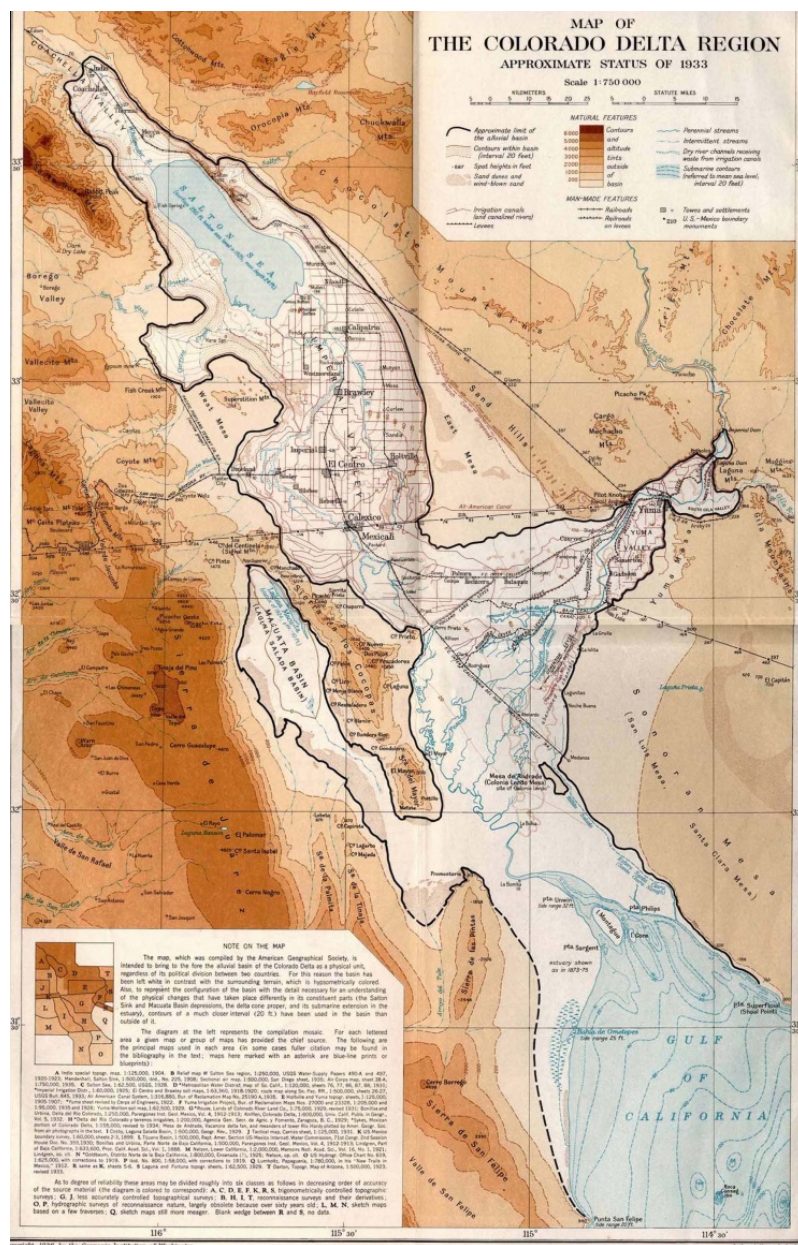
PART I: History

Geology:

Slab City lies at the south east end of the Salton Sea. The San Andreas Fault's southern terminus lies about 25 miles northwest of Slab City, while the Imperial Fault lies approximately 25 miles to the south. The intermediate zone between the two faults is called the Brawley Seismic Zone, named for the town in Imperial County. The exact mechanics of the connections to the two faults are not entirely understood, but because of the unique geology of the area, the Brawley Seismic Zone tends to experience earthquake "swarms." These swarms can consist of several thousand small earthquakes. The most recent such event began on August 25, 2012, and consisted of several hundred small earthquakes, the largest of which peaked at a magnitude 5.5.³³ These earthquake swarms are quite different from the typical, "shock-aftershock," pattern of most earthquakes. In the swarm pattern, several quakes gradually reach a crescendo, and then become less strong as the swarm winds down. The entire process typically lasts 24-48 hours, with quakes occurring every few minutes to hours.

The region's faults have also produced another unique geologic feature, the Salton Sink. The Imperial Valley lies just north of the East Pacific Rise, an expansive underwater range of active volcanoes that roughly parallels the coast of South America and stretches from Baja California all the way to Antarctica in the south. This spreading plate boundary and the resulting motion of the San Andreas Fault have resulted in subsidence

in the Imperial Valley. The Salton Sea is currently measured at 227 feet below sea level, according to the National Park Service making it the 10th lowest land elevation in the world.³⁴ As the Colorado River emptied into the Gulf of California over millions of years, its delta produced a huge earthen dam, cutting off the Salton Sink from the Gulf of California. As the Colorado River hit this delta, its meandering path would alternate between flowing south and into the Gulf of California, or north, and into the Salton Sink area. This latter flow produced a large inland lake called Lake Cahuilla. Occasionally this lake became large enough that the river flowed directly into it, dispersing sediment over what we now call the Imperial Valley, and producing soil suitable for large scale industrial agriculture.



primarily sandy soil that formed as streams ran down from the Chocolate Mountains. The United States Department of Agriculture lists several soil types in section 36, (Slab City's boundary) but the most significant are Carsitas Gravelly Sand, and Rositas Fine Sand. Carsitas soils are found on alluvial fans and remnants of alluvial fans. Despite the fact that Slab City averages only about 3-4 inches of rain a year, over time, water flowing off of the Chocolate Mountains and into the Imperial Valley produced these fans around the edge of what was once ancient Lake Cahuilla. Carsitas soils are characterized by having 15-30 percent rock fragments, and 7 to 35 percent gravel, with organic matter making up less than 0.5 percent. The Carsitas soil series was established in 1974 in Riverside County, California. Rositas soils are deep sandy soils on dunes or sand sheets. Slopes range up to 30 percent and small hummocks create micro relief. These soils are composed of less than 0.5 percent organic matter and less than 10 percent clay, are extremely permeable, and are characterized as excessively well drained. The Rositas series of soils was established in Imperial Country, California in 1918.³⁶

Prior to the creation of the Carsitas profile, the area was mapped as being primarily Superstition Gravelly Sand, Niland Gravelly Sand and Fine Sand, and Rough Broken Terrain. This designation, first completed in the 1920s, loosely corresponded to soil that formed during different levels of Lake Cahuilla, with the larger grained more gravelly soils related to lower lake levels.³⁷ Of critical distinction is that the soil in Slab City is not alluvial soil deposited by the Colorado River, but rather much more gravelly

soil whose source material was the Chocolate Mountains. This made the site of Slab City unsuitable for industrial agriculture, and the site remained undeveloped through the early 1900s, when agriculture was rapidly expanding in the region.

Indigenous Tribes and the Cahuilla:

Despite the fact that Lake Cahuilla appeared and reappeared several times through prehistory, when it was present it appears to have been relatively stable in terms of water levels for hundreds of years at a time. The last naturally occurring extended period of the lake lasted approximately 200 years, from approximately A.D. 1300 to 1500.³⁸ The lake was a very hospitable environment for indigenous tribes, offering freshwater fish and shellfish populations, brought to the area by the Colorado River. Indigenous tribes are known to have settled the shoreline quite extensively. However, during the mid-16th century, the course of the Colorado changed, and the area returned to desert conditions very rapidly. The lake disappeared completely within about 50 years, and was likely too salty to support marine life after only 25 years, or less than one generation.³⁹ The drying out of the lake was part of the oral history of the Cahuilla Tribes when early American settlers entered the area in the 1850s.⁴⁰

It is the Cahuilla tribes that were able to take advantage of this rapidly changing ecology and moved into the area, likely from the Santa Rosa Mountains to the northwest. While the previous tribes relied on the lake for food, the Cahuilla tribes practiced a more complex food system, combining hunting and gathering with simple agriculture on the valley floor that supplemented their food supply. The way in which land within the valley was divided also proved critical to the sustainability of Cahuilla society. Each Cahuilla tribal group had territories that cross cut the valley from valley floor into the adjacent

hills and mountains. This territorial division provided each individual tribe with multiple ecosystems in which to look for food. For example, mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), screwbean (*Prosopis pubescens*), and pickleweed (*Allenrolfea occidentalis*) could be gathered on the valley floor, while Agave (*Agave deserti*) and pinyon (*Pinus monophylla*) could be gathered on the higher mountainous elevations.⁴¹

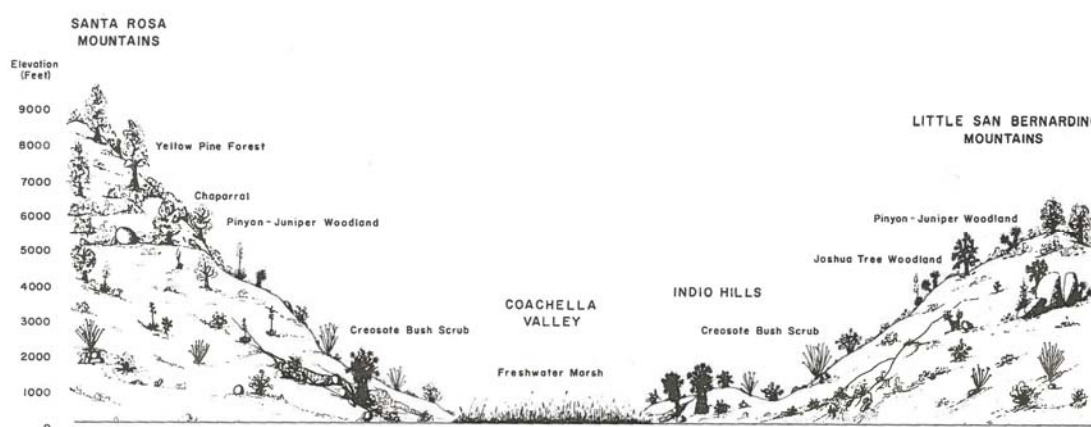


Figure 5. A Section of the Salton Sink Ecologies. Courtesy of Philip J. Wilke.⁴² Slab City exists in the Creosote Bush Scrub ecology.

The combination of agriculture and multiple plant communities for gathering allowed the Cahuilla to settle the valley. They formed permanent camps, and remained in large groups throughout the year, rather than breaking into smaller family groups during times when food became scarce. These large clusters of populations formed around spring locations in the valley floor, and although gatherer groups might occasionally go into the higher elevations for days at a time, the Cahuilla did not follow typical hunter-gather seasonal dispersion patterns.⁴³

The Cahuilla also had a social structure that supported their economy and agriculture. Marriage and kin ties produced social structures in which any individual might have a dozen or more relatives scattered across the Salton Sink to whom and from whom the giving of gifts would be required. These gifts were most commonly food, and the resulting reciprocal food networks resulted in redistribution of food resources across the various tribes of the Cahuilla. This social arrangement allowed for increased stability of the Cahuilla food economy over the entire Imperial and Coachella Valley regions.⁴⁴

It is clear that the combination of territorial distribution and social structure allowed the Cahuilla to thrive in a very harsh environment. This spatial division and cultural control of the resources of the valley allowed the Cahuilla to achieve large populations, estimated at up to 10,000 individuals.⁴⁵ Physical archaeological artifacts have shown that populations ranged all over the area once covered by Lake Cahuilla. Although it does not appear that there was a permanent settlement on the site now known as Slab City, several artifacts of the Cahuilla have been found on the Slab City site, likely indicating that the area was part of the territory of one of the smaller tribal groups.⁴⁶

Salton Sea/Imperial Valley Boom:

The feasibility of large-scale irrigation in the Imperial Valley was considered as early as 1850, but it was not until 1901 that a canal sufficient to divert water from the Colorado River was complete. This canal, built by the California Development Company, originally went into Mexico, running west across most of Baja, before turning back north and into the Imperial Valley. The original structure had difficulty with the silt load of the river, and to deal with this, a series of diversions were created. Uncharacteristically heavy flooding in 1905 taxed these temporary diversions to the breaking point, and the entire flow of the Colorado River flowed north into the Salton Sink from the fall of 1905 to February 1907, creating what is now known as the Salton Sea.⁴⁷

The Southern Pacific Company, under a direct order from Theodore Roosevelt and the direction of Edward (Ned) Harriman, was responsible for closing the breach in the canal, and took control of the California Development Company's holdings briefly before selling them to the Imperial Irrigation District (I.I.D.) in 1916. By 1923, the I.I.D. had acquired the subsidiary distribution canals in the Imperial Valley as well. In 1928, the United States Congress passed the Boulder Canyon Project Act, which provided for several construction projects including the Hoover Dam. In addition to its agricultural irrigation function the dam was built in large part to control silt and flooding issues downstream. The act also included construction of the All American Canal, which would divert Colorado River water to the Imperial Valley without entering Mexico, as its

United States. By the mid-1960s, over 500,000 acres of farmland were irrigated by the I.I.D. This acreage, in conjunction with the region's 365 day growing season, has made the Imperial Valley one of the most productive agricultural areas in the United States. Additionally, in 1936, the I.I.D. began building hydroelectric plants at various points along the canal. Today, the I.I.D. supplies electricity to 145,000 customers, and is the third largest energy supplier in California.⁵¹

Camp Dunlap:

The concrete slabs for which Slab City is named are the primary legacy of Camp Dunlap.

During World War II, (WWII), the United States military wanted a base that simulated the conditions of the African Theater, and the rugged, open terrain between Niland and the Chocolate Mountain Range was ideally suited.⁵² Not only was the climate appropriate for acclimatizing troops to African heat, but the isolation of the area and its proximity to a desert mountain range meant that the area could be used for high angle gunnery training.

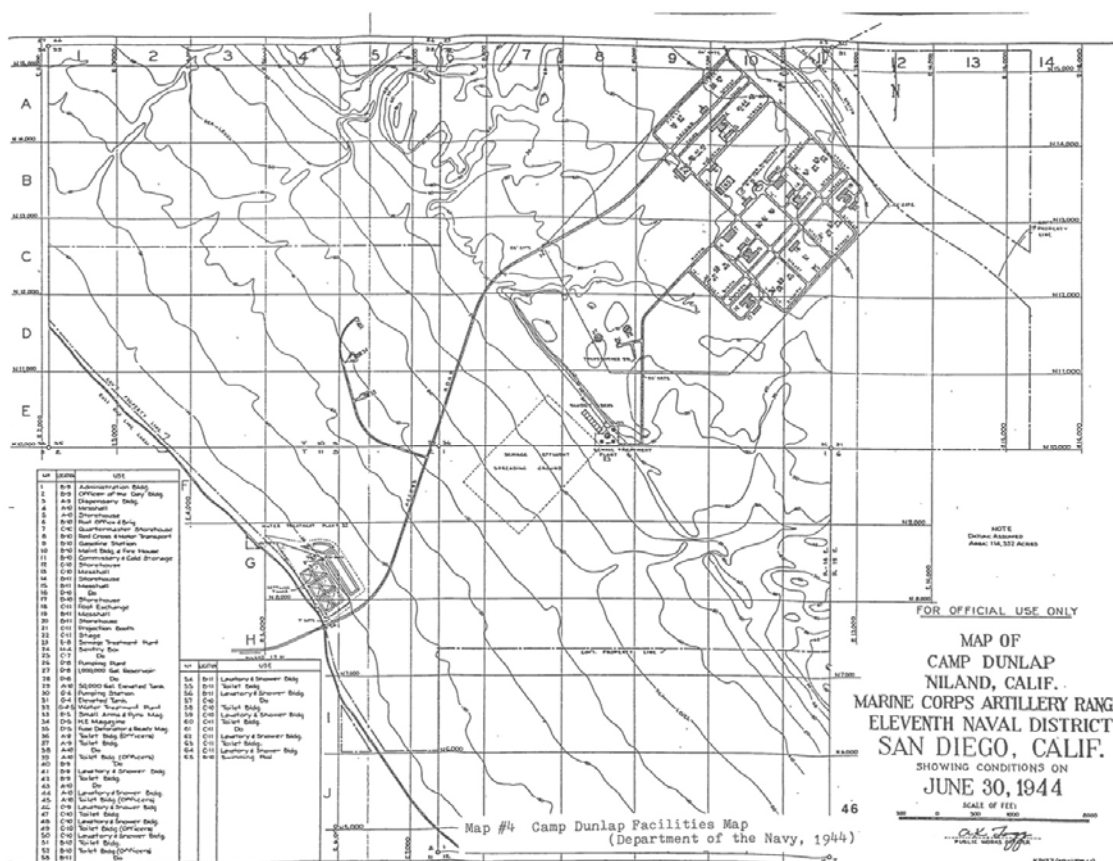


Figure 7. Department of the Navy Map of Camp Dunlap, 1944. Courtesy of Dorothy

Phelps' Thesis.⁵³

Artillery could be fired with a range of up to six miles without danger to any adjacent community.⁵⁴ Additionally, the nearby Salton Sea could provide an area for marine maneuvers, while the inland location provided protection from Japanese naval attacks.⁵⁵

The base was constructed under the authority of the First War Powers act of 1941, which allowed for, “more efficient concentration of the government,” and freed the government from certain bureaucratic restrictions.⁵⁶ As the site was barren desert, and the country was preparing for war, its acquisition by the military was not complicated. Condemnation proceedings took place in District Federal Court of California. California was compensated for the land, and the Marine Corps took possession with a Declaration of Taking in district federal court on February 6th, 1942.⁵⁷ Construction followed immediately and Camp Dunlap opened in October, just seven months later.

Soldiers being trained for Africa were likely to experience only temporary encampments rather than permanent structures, and as the camp was designed to simulate on-the-ground conditions as much as possible, the layout of the camp largely followed the “Diagrammatic Layout of a Tent Camp,” from the Staff Officer’s Field Manual, published by the US War Department in 1943.⁵⁸ The layout generally proceeds from the entrance of the camp to the officers’ quarters, to staff buildings and tents, through a mess area for dining, and on through a tent area for soldiers. The plan of a Camp Dunlap from 1944 shows a similar form (Figure 7). The access road, (now known

as Beal Road) which connects Slab City to Niland and State Route 111 leads to the “head” of the camp and the officers’ area. Camp Dunlap Photo #1 (Figure 8) shows the entrance to the camp. Note the shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla in the background, distinguishable as a small ridge directly below the Chocolate Mountains.



Figure 8. Camp Dunlap Photo 1-Main Entrance. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

There are two significant differences between the typical layout plan described in the Staff Officer’s Field Manual, and the specific layout of Camp Dunlap. The first is a product of the specific location of the camp at the base of the Chocolate Mountains. A wash enters the eastern edge of the camp, pushing the southeastern part of the camp layout off center. The resulting layout is asymmetrical. The second major variance is the swimming pool inserted in the axis of the camp. In the typical layout, kitchen and

kitchen vehicles separated the officers' and soldiers' quarters. In Camp Dunlap, the swimming pool disrupts this sequence. It is not known whether the pool was simply a recreation venue, or somehow important to training. Most likely, given the extreme climate of the desert, it offered relief from the heat. Figure 9 shows the pool with the pool maintenance building in the background.

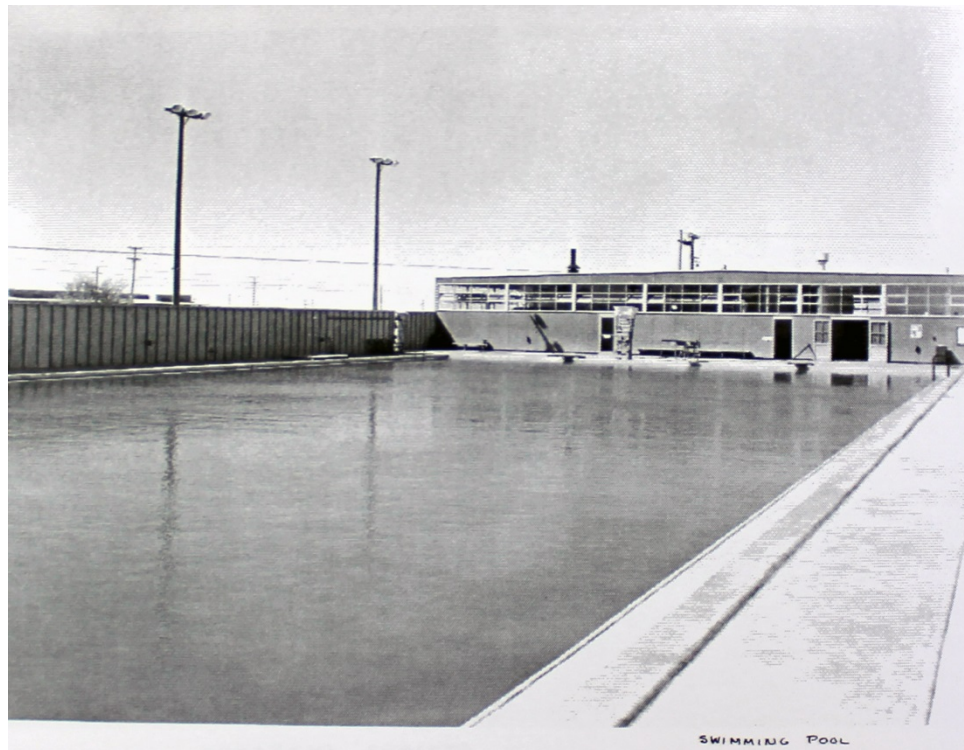


Figure 9. Camp Dunlap Photo 2-Swimming Pool. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

Since the camp was built to recreate the conditions of a field camp, few buildings were constructed, and most living quarters consisted only of tents. Approximately 50 buildings were constructed on site. Although the number of buildings was low for a camp almost a mile square, the infrastructure brought into the camp was quite

significant. The Imperial Irrigation District provided electricity, while water was supplied by the East Highline Canal. Figure 10 shows the water treatment system. Sewers were built, which connected to a “single stage biofiltrate system,”⁵⁹ before emptying into evaporation beds southwest of the camp. The camp had its own Post Office. Recreation facilities included not just the swimming pool, but tennis courts and an outdoor theater as well (Figure 13).

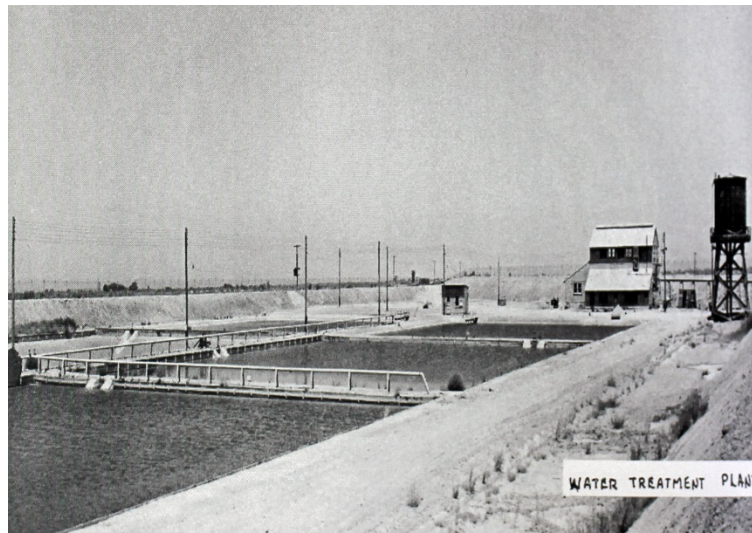


Figure 10. Camp Dunlap Photo 3-Water Treatment Plant. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

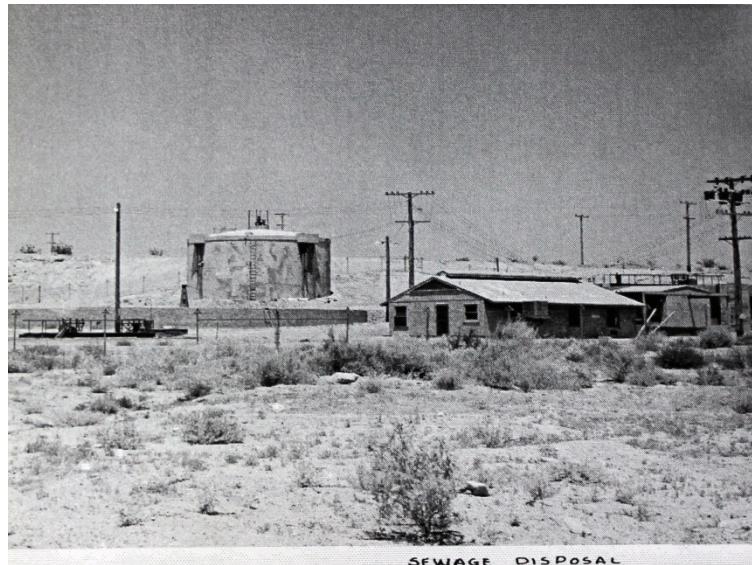


Figure 11. Camp Dunlap Photo 4-Evaporation Beds. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.



Figure 12. Camp Dunlap Photo 5- Post Office. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

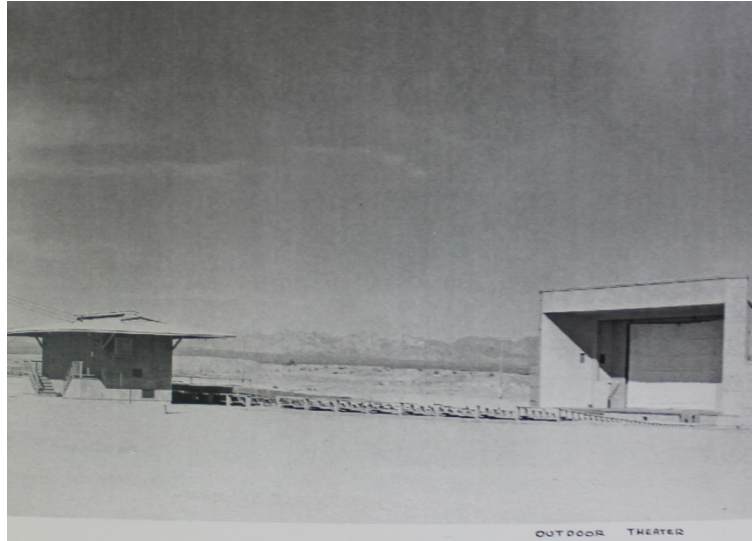


Figure 13. Camp Dunlap Photo 6-Outdoor Theater. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

The camp essentially functioned as a small town. Services and amenities included a vehicular maintenance building and a small gas station (Figure 14). A quartermaster's storehouse (Figure 16) was located just to the west of the soldiers' tent area. Mess halls (Figure 17) were located in several locations around the camp. Additional buildings included a fire house, a brig, a department store and a dispensary. Of course, being a military camp, there were several munitions buildings at various locations around the camp.



Figure 14. Camp Dunlap Photo 7-Car Shop. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.



Figure 15. Camp Dunlap Photo 8-Gas Station. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.



Figure 16. Camp Dunlap Photo 9-Quartersmaster's House. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.



Figure 17. Camp Dunlap Photo 10-Mess hall. Courtesy of Imperial Valley Historical Society.

Unfortunately, historians have not yet found records of the number of troops and officers who passed through the camp. Complicating matters, during the time of its operation, pictures were not allowed within Camp Dunlap's facilities. Estimates of the population of Camp Dunlap from personal recollections vary significantly, from under 1,000 to several thousand.⁶⁰ Regardless of the total number of troops at Camp Dunlap,

local residents viewed the presence of troops in the Imperial Valley as a positive economic development. Soldiers would regularly come into Niland and Calipatria on their days off and spend time enlivening the social scene. On special occasions, locals would be invited to open houses on base, where the swimming pool and movie theater were available to all.⁶¹

For all its promise as an effective training facility, Camp Dunlap was soon eclipsed by another location, Rancho Margarita, now called Camp Pendleton. This shift was caused by a number of reasons. Summer heat at Camp Dunlap was simply too high⁶² and regularly caused health issues. Additionally, since the area was so remote, it was difficult to find skilled workers for the maintenance and upkeep of the facilities. Also, the African Theater was already winding down just as Camp Dunlap was opening. Less than three and a half years after it opened, Camp Dunlap was decommissioned in 1946. In 1961, ownership of the area officially reverted to the state of California.⁶³

Several of the buildings of Camp Dunlap were removed from their slabs and sold to residents of Niland (Figure 18). They are still present today. Much of the material left behind has since been scavenged or “harvested” by Slab City residents. The concrete slabs were not removed due to the cost.



Figure 18. Military buildings as residences in 1988. Courtesy of Phelps Thesis.⁶⁴

The slabs that remain from Camp Dunlap continue to organize life in Slab City today. The primary road into the slabs which once lead to the officers' area now leads to Sellers' Row. The gridded road system creates specific spaces which have now been assigned to certain groups. Other remnants such as the swimming pool and the water tanks have become landmarks for the Slabs.

In a sense, decommissioning Camp Dunlap created a social vacancy in the landscape, but it did not create a true void or emptiness. A spatial system for training soldiers for the frontlines of WWII has since been reinterpreted as Slab City. This

generative vacancy provided the unique opportunity to create overlapping and intersecting layers of a new community in the middle of the desert.

Infrastructure and Essential Services:

Most citizens of the US receive at least some civil services from their local, state, or federal government, and while this may still be true of Slab City Residents, as police and fire services to respond to calls in Slab City, its Residents have specifically chosen to live as “off the grid” as possible, and many prefer to keep to themselves. Most who need to receive mail rent Post Office boxes in Niland.

The majority of structures in Slab City are Recreational Vehicles, (RVs). While some Residents have built more permanent structures, (even monuments), the majority of people who spend a significant part of their lives in Slab City do so in homes that move around. In fact, as Slab City has no sewer services, and dumping is not permitted in the desert where the lack of water inhibits biodegradation, the basic processes of life require Slab City inhabitants to move their homes regularly in search of nearby RV facilities.

While most Snowbirds drive their RVs to the local RV service station between Brawley and Calipatria, approximately 10 miles south of Niland, others, especially those who live in Slab City on a more permanent basis, have dug “honey holes” in the ground, into which they place their RV dump hose, burying it with dirt and sand. As for electricity, the hum of generators can be heard most mornings and evenings, but most RV and permanent campsites use solar power.

Slab City Residents and Tribal Groups:

Slab City, or “The Slabs” is a 640 acre, (1 square mile) self-reliant community of Snowbirds, Residents and Itinerants. This eclectic mix of people that includes many artists, off-grid enthusiasts, and hitchhikers has unofficially dubbed Slab City, “the last free place on Earth”.⁶⁵ As discussed in the introduction, those who choose to live in Slab City are a uniquely heterogeneous group whose distinct populations create separate yet overlapping areas of use and community.

The Snowbirds, the most numerous group inhabiting Slab City, actually consists of several different sub-groups, each with its own distinct character. The largest group in the Snowbird category is the Loners on Wheels, or “L.O.W.s.” As noted in its stated by-laws, the L.O.W.s group is specifically for single, mostly retired campers who seek to build community with like-minded individuals.⁶⁶ Individuals with spouses or significant others are not permitted to join. Further, they cannot remain in the group if they meet someone or become a “couple” while a member. With over 50 local chapters across North America, the group usually divides the year into an active camping season, and a luncheon season which consists of monthly get-togethers. This group held a rally in Slab City in January 2014 during my tenure at the site. The five-day schedule included talks by Slab City Residents on topics such as RV maintenance and solar power as well as field trips to the Salton Sea and around the tourist sites of Slab City.⁶⁷

Another long-time RV group at Slab City, the Wandering Individuals Network, or W.I.N., is geared toward more active RV'ing, with activities such as dance-offs and kayak trips. Although only singles may join, its membership policies do not include a marriage or couple prohibition once accepted into the group. There is a requirement, however, that all participating campers be able to sustain themselves in their RVs for 4 days without any outside services such as food, water, waste removal, or energy.⁶⁸

The third largest contingent of RV campers is “the Canadians,” comprised of two groups, “Little Canada,” and “The Looney Birds.” Other groups with names like, “The Washington Sun Chasers,” and “The Apple Dumpling Gang,” are smaller and cycle in and out of residence at the Slabs.⁶⁹

There is significant variation both within and between RV groups, but each group functions within Slab City as a fairly cohesive unit. RVers in these community groups connect with each other online or in person. Members come from different social classes, and have different political or religious beliefs. Nevertheless, members of these groups develop a sense of community through experiences, “shared taste, emotions, lifestyles and consumption patterns”.⁷⁰

This form of social cohesion, as noted previously, falls under the definition of the term neo-tribalism. It is easy to see how slab city reinforces neo-tribalism. Among Snowbirds, the desire for travel and mobility, and the pursuit of these goals in retirement

is a strong community bond. The physical reality of Slab City requires specific consumption patterns as well. Trips to town for propane, water and food are specific to the RV lifestyle at Slab City, and become bonding rituals and opportunities for community building through shared experience.

Residents of Slab City differ from their Snowbird neighbors in several ways. Perhaps most significantly, permanent Residents are often entrepreneurs who provide goods and services, to enhance the day-to-day comfort of the Snowbird retirees. These services can include everything from solar panels to RV cleaning services, and provide much-needed income for the permanent Residents.⁷¹

Additionally, and in contrast to the Snowbirds, the homes of the Residents are permanent, even though many of these structures began as mobile, ready-made RVs, or even a school bus. Over time, these structures have been made permanent by the addition of living space (Figures 39-41). Constructed spaces often consist of scavenged material put together in an ad hoc manner that does not follow standard construction codes, and goes without the official approvals and regulations granted by a building inspector or planning board.

In this sense, the most significant difference between Residents and Snowbirds is their material possessions, and how this impacts their spatial territory. Residents tend to be collectors, while Snowbirds tend to have only what they can pack with them at the end of the season. This is most notably evidenced by the fact that Snowbirds regularly

perform end of season clean ups of their slab sites, while the incentive for permanent Residents is to keep as much material on hand as possible in case it becomes useful at a later date.⁷² This physical structure, in turn impacts the type of social community that Residents and Snowbirds form, beginning with how they enter and occupy sites at Slab City. Snowbird neo-tribes are typically close knit, often rolling into Slab City in large caravans, while Residents typically arrive as individuals or family groups, and are then incorporated into the community. There are, however, significant differences within the group of Residents, including why they have chosen to live on the Slabs. Some have moved to Slab City to pursue specific goals, while others have been driven there by a combination of poverty, a desire to live in solitude, or simply a lack of other options.

The final group in Slab City consists of those who are just passing through. Again, there are several subgroups within this larger category. The first are typical RVers, who generally live in their RV year round. They are usually far more mobile and nomadic than the Snowbirds that stay in the Slabs for much of the season. They may return to the Slabs regularly, or annually, but the Slabs are just one of their regular stops. There are also the curious non-RVers. These typically are single 20 and 30-somethings who live within driving distance, usually Los Angeles, Phoenix, or Las Vegas, and choose to go to Slab City to satisfy their curiosity. They may stay a day or a few days, often sleeping in their cars. The last subgroup is the “Bush Bunnies.” These individuals, as previously mentioned, live on the outskirts of Slab City and arrive and leave on a daily basis. These

are typically severely impoverished individuals and families who have little more than what they can carry, and perhaps an old car. They are truly just passing through, and Slab City offers at least a small amount of accommodation for no cost (Figure 19).⁷³



Figure 19. A mattress decomposing on a slab is the only remnant of a likely Bush Bunny campsite. Photo by Author.

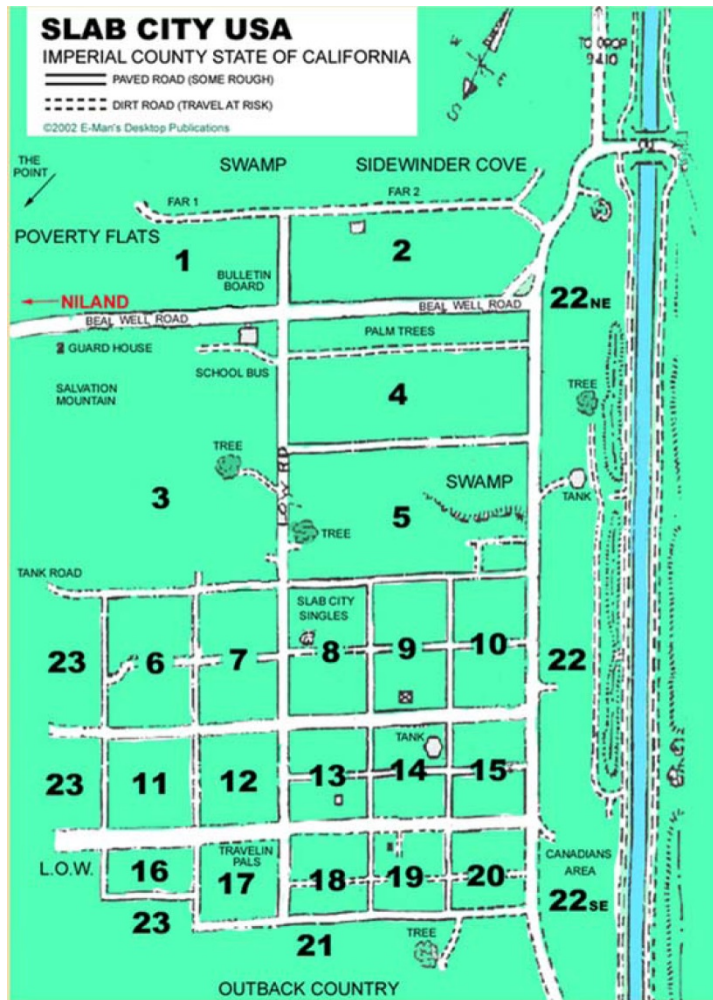


Figure 20. A current Map of Slab City for visitors. The numbers refer to different “areas” or “drops” of Slab City. Courtesy of SlabCity.org.⁷⁴

Figure 20 shows a map of Slab City provided by Slabcity.org. Slab City colloquial speech has picked up the naming system of the military to refer to the different sections created by the roads of Camp Dunlap. “Drop” or “Area” is added before each number in referring to place in Slab City. Drop 1 and Drop 2, labeled here as “Poverty Flats” ironically are where the more affluent Snowbirds, who typically have Class A RVs set up camp.⁷⁵ Most of these set up individually or in small groups of friends, but not in larger

RV clubs. These areas in Camp Dunlap were the officers' areas. Drop 4 and Drop 5, are home to many of the long term Residents, and the few entrepreneurs in Slab City. These areas in Camp Dunlap correspond to where most of the Marine base facilities buildings were located. Several of the RV groups regularly set up in Drop 6 through Drop 23, where most of the soldiers' tents were located in Camp Dunlap. The Bush Bunnies are typically located in areas south of the formal grid of slabs, in the area on this map labeled "Outback Country."

While not technically Slab City Residents, there is another group intricately connected to life on that Slabs, the residents of Niland. Niland, the closest town to the Slabs, is essentially a lifeline to Slabbers. Not only does it have the nearest gas station and food store, Niland also provides fire protection for Slab City.⁷⁶ This isolated, impoverished town is the lifeline to the Slabs, and with only 1,006 residents counted in the 2010 census⁷⁷ it likely would not survive without the meager goods and services it is able to provide to the inhabitants of Slab City.



Figure 21. One of the two food Stores in Niland is now closed down. Photo by Author.



Figure 22. A Greek Revival Style building in Niland, now home to a recycling center. Photo by Author.

Part II: Personal Narrative

January 2: Departure and Arrival

The forecast for New York City called for 8-12 inches of snow. I was due to take off before the snow was to start, so I figured I was safe. But my flight left from JFK, so of course we were delayed, and my carefully padded schedule was under threat. Where I was going it was considered rude to arrive after dark and I did not want to start my stay in Slab City by annoying the people I was travelling across the country to study. Participant observation requires at least partial acceptance into the group one plans to study, and I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot.

I was planning to pose as a one of the community's many Snowbirds – winter vacationers in search of friends, warm weather, and the joy of the open road. I planned to blend in as much as I could with the Snowbirds, following their schedules and activities over the course of my stay, participating with them as much as possible. My hope was that I could then turn the lens of this participant observation, typically used to describe social structure, toward the discovery of spatial structure. All this of course, was predicated on my timely arrival in Slab City.

Already anxious about my arrival time, the cab ride from the San Diego airport to the Spring Valley suburbs took longer than I hoped. Fortunately, when I arrived at the Cruise America rental location to pick up my RV, the attendant was waiting. Luckily, I

had watched the required instructional videos in advance, so I was able to take a quick spin around the 19 foot compact motor home in which I would live for the next two weeks before I started on the last leg of my journey. It was almost 2:00 in the afternoon, and it was a little over two hours to my destination. In January the sun sets shortly before 5:00. After the attendant informed me that I would be charged for returning the vehicle with less than 3/4 of a tank of gas, or 2/3 of a tank of propane, I signed on the dotted line and was on my way.

I headed east on Route 8 through the Jacumba Mountains. The narrow pass approaches 4,100 feet as it weaves through the mountains and down into the Imperial Valley. As one descends, the boulders in the mountains eventually give way to gravelly washes, and then desert sand at the valley floor. The presence of irrigation creates a sharp green dividing-line that separates the desert from the agricultural fields. Route 8 intersects Route 111 in El Centro, which very aptly, is right in the center of the Imperial Valley. With a little over 40,000 residents, El Centro is the largest city in Imperial County. This was where I planned to get a few supplies, since I wasn't sure how much I would find as I headed north. I pulled into the Walmart, loaded up on fruit, bottled water, Gatorade, cereal, boxed milk, and microwavable dinners.⁷⁸

I drove north on route 111, through Brawley, which has half the population of El Centro, and then through Calipatria, which has only 7,000 residents. As the cities

diminished in size, the built landscape changed from strip malls and housing developments to perfectly square fields of leafy green vegetables. The smell of fertilizer was strong and it stung my nose. I closed the air vents. By the time the smell went away (or perhaps I just got used to it) I was pulling into Niland. It was 4:30 PM. I had 25 minutes, plus or minus if you count twilight, before dark set in. Christmas lights were still up, and they flickered in the twilight. Niland, with only 1,006 residents, is not much of a town. It took only a minute to drive through from end to end and past the columned city buildings that were constructed 80 years ago in anticipation of an economic prosperity that never materialized.⁷⁹ I found signs for the municipal dump and headed east on Beal Road. Three miles of rough pavement later the painted sentry box I had studied and stared at in photographs stood before me, catching the last rays of the setting sun and my RV's headlights. I made it on time.



Figure 23. The entrance to Slab City is marked by reclaimed Sentry Boxes. Photo by Author.



Figure 24. A view of the sky looking north at twilight from my campsite on Sellers' Row. Photo by Author.

I pulled into Slab City, found a spot off the main road, and parked the RV. There were RVs parked on either side of the site, about 30 yards in each direction. This seemed far enough away, and would do for the time being. I got out, looked around, and made sure there was nothing in the immediate vicinity that looked worrisome. It was all clear and it was quiet. A generator was humming somewhere off in the distance. By the time I had walked a circle around the RV it was dark. The light goes quickly in the desert. It's bright, and then it's dark. It was the first night of the waxing crescent, and the sky was perfectly clear. I looked up. When you live in New York, you forget that there are so many stars.



Figure 25. An area near my campsite had previously been claimed, as indicated by the row of rocks in the sand. View looking west. Note the Salvation Mountain cross in the background along the ridge. Photo by Author.

January 3: Reconnaissance

I awoke to the smell of something burning. After confirming that nothing in the RV was on fire, I remembered that the primary shrub of Slab City was creosote bush, so named because of the smoky smell of its leaves. I got out and assumed that I would find several creosote bushes around my campsite. Instead, about 40 yards behind my RV, out in the wash, I saw a man burning garbage. This would not be the last time in Slab City that I would see and smell such a thing. Later that very afternoon I would again see smoke. But this time it came from the RV of a Resident burning to the ground. No one was injured, but the event did allow me to confirm that the Niland Fire District does in fact include Slab City in their coverage area. As for the man with the garbage fire, the dump in Niland is miles away, only open periodically, and you have to pay money to use it. Burning was understandable. Still, it's not a pleasant way to wake up.

It was early. The Chocolate Mountains to the east were catching the sun, glowing in the morning light. A few more generators began to hum. I looked up and down Seller's Row, the ad-hoc market center of Slab City, realizing that's where I had inadvertently parked the night before. At its best, Sellers Row is a convenient place to get a mechanic to fix your RV, to buy new solar panels, or to just browse artists' tables. At its worst, Sellers Row is a bad version of a yard sale. Based on the set up I observed while I was there, it was somewhere in between. Tables of scrap materials and old machine parts

for sale would pop up one day only to disappear the next.



Figure 26. Shops on Sellers' Row. Photo by Author.

This morning, two women were browsing one of the tables. They had Canadian flags on their backpacks and were out for a stroll with their black and white Great Dane. My neighbor to one side was tinkering with something on his roof that looked like a solar panel. A tiny, fluffy dog was running around his camper, eyeing the Great Dane. A couple, maybe in their late 60s, rode into Slab City on bicycles outfitted with baskets. The woman called out to the man, "There be the shoe tree!" as she pointed to a strange dead tree, about 10 feet tall, covered from top to bottom in shoes. I realized that my camp site was across the street from one of Slab City's tourist attractions. For the next two weeks, at least a few times a day I'd see a car with three or four people in their 20s pull up, take a

few pictures in front of it, and drive back down Beal Road out of Slab City. Beal Road is the only way for cars and RVs to get in and out to the Slabs, and whether you're coming or going, someone is going to see you. In a place where being physically present is the only true claim to space, I soon discovered the knowledge of whether someone was in the Slabs or had left was a valuable commodity.



Figure 27. The Shoe Tree, a Slab City Tourist Attraction. Photo by Author.

The Lay of the Land:

My task for the day was to “ground truth” the two maps of Slab City that I had been studying for months. I obtained the first map from the website slabcity.org, which according to several Residents of Slab City, is run by a man in the Midwest who has only been to Slab City once or twice for a quick visit many years ago. He runs the web site to solicit membership donations from gullible web surfers such as myself. Still, the map was useful. It correctly located the RV groups and the major landmarks, both of which were helpful in navigating the site (Figure 20).

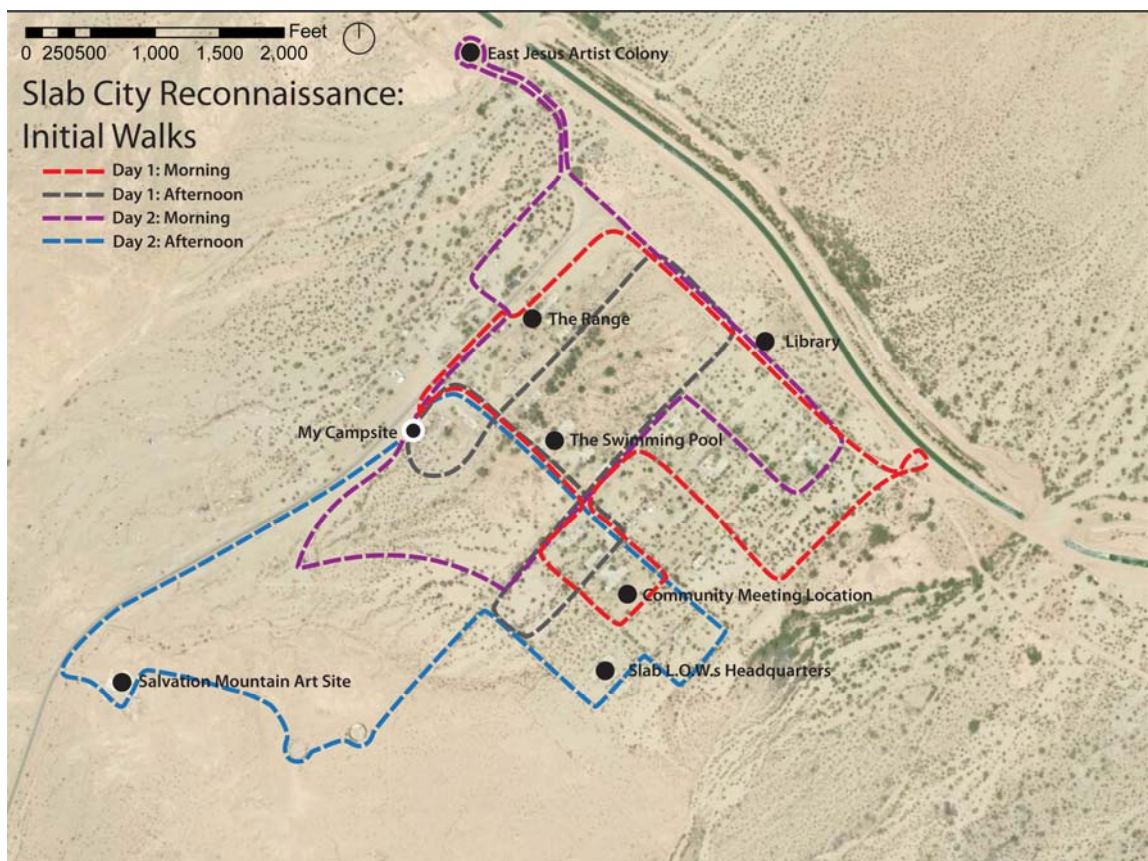


Figure 28. Initial Reconnaissance Walks.

The second map was the historic map of Camp Dunlap that I had discovered in a 1989 thesis on Slab City by Dorothy Phelps, a student at the University of California at Riverside (Figure 7). This map included the overall layout of the camp, the gridded road structure, and the location of the buildings.⁸⁰ I found I could easily locate the concrete foundations, or the slabs that give Slab City its name, based on the gridded road structure. I did, however, discover several smaller foundations, perhaps no larger than 8 to 10 feet in length and width adjacent to several of the larger slabs that were not marked on this map. Later, a Resident of Slab City informed me that the smaller slabs were the platforms for water tanks. But I have not been able to substantiate that information.

Moving outward toward the northeast perimeter of Slab City, I stumbled upon 15 foot high piles of sand, which did not look like natural sand dunes. I remember reading that huge amounts of sand were excavated by the Imperial Irrigation District to create the canal system, leaving behind piles of sand along the canals.⁸¹ This process exposed fossil shells from ancient Lake Cahuilla, which lined the dirt mounds.⁸² After climbing a few of the mounds, I discovered a dry canal bed with plants growing up from sandy bottom. I crossed the dry canal, and after climbing over a few more piles of sand I discovered the Coachella Canal and sat down to rest. The Coachella Canal flows north and brings Colorado River water from the border of Mexico to the north end of the Salton Sea and into the Coachella Valley, over 120 miles away. All the agricultural fields I saw the day before, stretching out as far as I could see, depend upon canals just like this one - lines of

blue stretching to the horizon. This canal represents a firm edge to Slab City and separates the community from the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range. This range went into operation to train pilots for World War II, but unlike Camp Dunlap it was never abandoned and is still in active use, today even hosting the Navy Seal's desert training facility.⁸³ Bombing drills are frequent, and they are the reason why residents of Slab City occasionally awake to what sounds like thunder. But today, there is no activity, and the canal is peaceful and quiet.



Figure 29. The Coachella Canal, with the Chocolate Mountains in the Background.

Photo by Author.

I was only there a few minutes when a white pick-up truck arrived. I began worrying that I may have gone afoul of the amply posted no trespassing signs, but the

truck stopped 25 yards away. A man hopped out, walked around to the other side of the truck, opened the door, and two dogs - a Golden Retriever and a Golden Doodle - hopped down to the ground. I figured anyone with a Golden Doodle was not a threat, so I went over to say hello. Besides, the area around the canal was just a big open space with nowhere for me to hide. As I walked toward him, the man threw a ball into the canal and the dog jumped in after it. I introduced myself and he told me his name was Rob. He noticed my camera, and asked about it. I told him I was just looking for interesting things to photograph.

Rob suggested that I check out the Imperial Dunes, and the Salton Sea at twilight. “There are huge flocks of birds everywhere and you could get some good pictures, as long as you don’t just go to the tourist areas,” he advised. He told me that the better spots were off of the farm roads along the irrigation canals just west of Niland. I asked if that was legal, since it was private property. He looked at me as if he didn’t get that question very often. I found out he was from northern California, and was headed back there tomorrow. He had come down for a few days to get away. He said he spends a few months of the year in Slab City, usually with his wife, two boys, and parents. He told me that even though I might find the current weather ideal, it was still a little too cold for his parents, and they wouldn’t be coming to Slab City until February or March. By then, he explained, it would be warm enough to swim in the canal. His family uses it as a lazy river, floating down about a quarter mile in tubes then towing the tubes back up the canal

with the truck. I have to admit, if I were one of his boys, I'd probably love going to Slab City. Rob was still throwing the ball into the canal, and we ran out of things to discuss, so I said goodbye and headed back into Slab City proper.⁸⁴



Figure 30. The All American Canal being used as a Slab City Amenity. Photo by Author.



Figure 31. Swimming in the canal. Photo by Author.

By the time I had finished verifying the rough location of everything on the two source maps, it was late afternoon. I found that I was using the Phelps map as my primary guide, since it had more detail on the historic buildings and the road structure was sufficient for finding my way around. By this time I realized that there were big gaps in the maps – additions to the historic infrastructure on the Phelps map – that included a library, several pet cemeteries, various large sculptures (mostly made from scrap material and garbage), a horseshoe pitch, a garbage dump, and no less than 10 yards away from my RV, a human gravesite. I decided to dedicate the following afternoon to mapping these features. I made my way back to my RV, had some lunch, and walked another loop

around the Slabs. I ran the generator for an hour or so, made sure that I closed the RV roof vents, wrote in my journal, did a little reading, and went to sleep.



Figure 32. The Lizard Tree Library. Photo by Author.

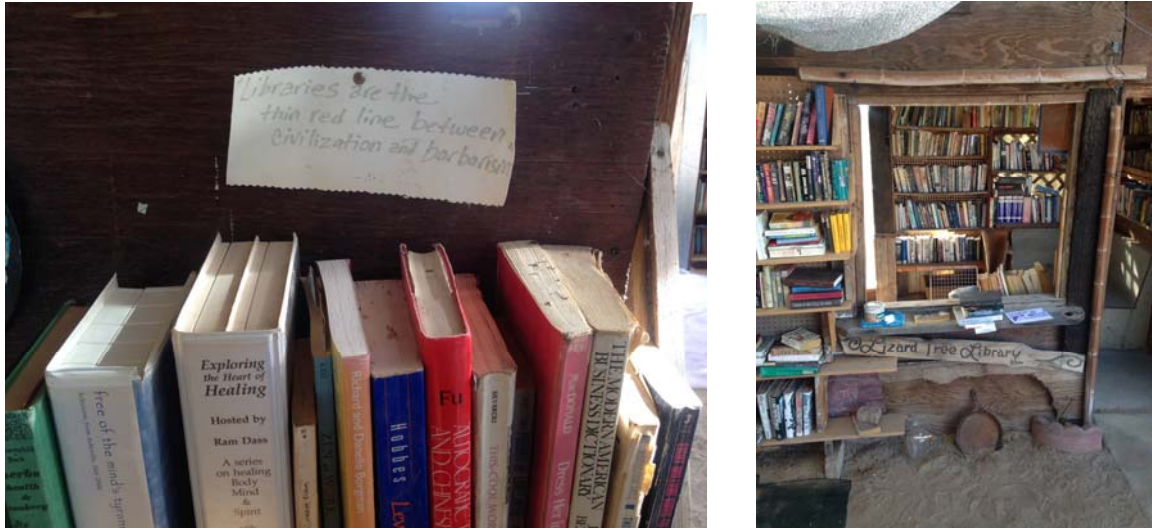


Figure 33. Books and Shelves in the Lizard Tree Library. Photos by Author.

January 4: Community Meeting

The next morning I realized it was a good thing that I had found the horseshoe pitch at the corner of Edith Lane and Low Street the day before. (Street names are unofficial, but well signed nonetheless.) According to the Slab City website, that was where today's community meeting was to be held. I got there right at 10, and found a few people were already gathered. The leader of the group saw me walking up and invited me to join. I said I'd like to, and thanks for the invite. I began to take notes.

There were 15 attendees at the meeting including myself. Most of the attendees were age 60 plus, with the exception of one man with dreadlocks, piercings, and a long beard, who looked like he was my age - 35 or so. Four people rode up in golf carts, which for those with business to attend to, seemed to be the typical mode of transit in Slab City. One woman rode up in a motorized chair. Most attendees brought folding chairs, but a few, including myself, stood just behind the circle. Overall the group was about half Snowbirds, and half Residents. It was becoming easy to tell who belonged in which group. In general, Snowbirds live a life of leisure, and look like it. Their clothes are clean, and they take steps to shield themselves from the sun's rays, such as wearing a hat or visor, and even in the heat of the day, long sleeves. Full-time Residents of Slab City generally have skin that shows signs of long term sun exposure, and their clothes are worn out. An outsider to Slab City might view these as class differences, and in fact,

outside Slab City, they might well be, but that is not the case at this meeting. Both groups appear to have roughly the same status in the meeting, as concerns from both groups were addressed. Below is the list of topics discussed at the Slab City Community Meeting 1/4/2014:

1. Theft/Violence/Crime:

- a. Someone makes a joke about a stolen heart.
- b. There is a missing pocket knife, and a request to please turn it in if you find it.
- c. A cell phone was found at Salvation Mountain.⁸⁵
- d. A couple was heard fighting again, a possible domestic situation.
- e. Yesterday's fire was brought up, apparently the trailer of a long term resident burned to the ground. It seems to have been accidental and no one was hurt. Everyone who lived there was outside when the flames started. Some attendees wanted to know where and who it was. Once it was determined that everyone was ok, the group moved on.

2. Open Issues

- a. A woman states that a man has been defecating in the wash behind her camp site. She further states that he has a shovel and is burying it, but that people do cut through the wash, and dogs go back there. She seems to be a new resident,

because she asks the group whether or not it's appropriate to say something to the man about it. She finds it gross, but understands that things are different here. The leader of meeting suggests that a little information might be the best way to proceed. The camper might not know about composting toilets and just need that suggestion. Others remarked that it was good that he was at least burying it. Another woman observed that people living here have been doing the same thing for years, and it really wasn't that bad a thing to do. The leader then suggested that maybe the information might need to go the other way, and that the woman should ask the man where he was going, so that she could avoid it.

- b. A man stated that he heard Leonard on National Public Radio (NPR) yesterday. (Leonard Knight was the artist who created Salvation Mountain and who after suffering from cancer, died at age 82 on February 10, 2014, shortly after my stay at the Slabs.) He thought that the radio segment might end up bringing more people to the Slabs. The leader of the group said that it was media season for the Slabs because, as she stated, "it's cold where they are and it's warm here." She also noted that next week there would be a group from *National Geographic*, and that the reporter who contacted her asked if it was safe, or if he should stay in town. Someone mentioned it was a long haul from Calipatria and the nearest motel. She said that she told the reporter to, "man up, and sleep in your car."

Everyone chuckled. The woman on the hover chair said she had a similar experience with reporters who did not realize that it is a three-hour drive from LA, and that they lose the light when they get here. She said she told them, “You don’t get it if you don’t stay.”

c. Talk then drifted to the people who were moving in, and moving out.

Apparently a much loved neighbor was moving back to the Slabs, and was looking for a place to camp. Someone asked about “that guy who was harassing all the women,” and someone else said he had moved out yesterday. They saw his white truck leaving (I wondered to myself if this was Rob, who I had met yesterday. He was travelling alone, and the timing and truck matched).

Someone also said a man in a Subaru tried to chase someone else off of their slab, but it didn’t work. Instead, the Subaru driver was “run off”, but they thought he was still “around somewhere.”

3. Trash Pickup

a. The leader of the group then brought up the idea of having a dumpster in Slab City from November to March. Everyone thought the dumpster was a great idea. The issue was how to fundraise for it. A woman noted that there were now over 500 people from all over the world active on the main website, and they thought this group would probably contribute to either an online

fundraiser campaign. She mentioned that this was how, “Builder Bill,” was able to get some of the funds for his stage. Everyone thought online fundraising was a good idea, but they still needed a volunteer to organize it. Someone made a joke that it would have to be a D name, so that it could be, “Dumpster Dan, or Dumpster Dave or something.” Apparently this person’s name was Lorenzo, because someone else suggested that, “Dumpster Lorenzo,” had a nice ring to it. In the end no one volunteered, but everyone agreed that it would be a great idea, especially since the dump in Niland was slated to close down soon. They also thought it would be best to start with a giant dumpster for a few weeks, and open it up to everyone so that people would clean up their campsites. For this maybe they could take up a collection, even just a dollar a piece at the concerts at the Range, or maybe go around to the different campsite areas to collect.

4. Anything else?

- a. An older woman remarked that she heard the piece about Salvation Mountain on NPR. No one seemed to mind that this had already been brought up.

Dynamics of Territoriality:

After the community meeting I stayed around and talked to a few of the attendees, just to say hello and introduce myself, but the woman running the meeting, who I've since learned is Lynn Bright, a Canadian, took off right away. She runs the Oasis Club, a private eating club (this notion of private is important – she is actively selecting who can be a part of her neo-tribal unit) in the Slabs that serves coffee and breakfast a few times a week. Lynn was definitely in charge of the meeting, and she seemed to be the *de facto* leader because of her personal charisma – to me, this was not the type of group that would have officially elected a leader. (It was not until next week's meeting that I would understand the extent to which Lynn was a major force in Slab City.) Although Lynn was a Resident, it did not appear that she or anyone else in the group made a distinction between the needs of Snowbirds or Residents. This was an open community meeting, and any concerns brought up were addressed. Only the Bush Bunnies went unrepresented at the community meeting. None were present, and no issues concerning them were raised.

Despite the fact that I had spent the prior day mapping the spatial territories of the various groups of RV Snowbirds, Residents, Bush Bunnies, and tourists passing through, I was now seeing that there were a few places in Slab City that were open to all. The community meeting was one such place.⁸⁶ However, before I could characterize

these unique places in Slab City, I had to get a more complete understanding of how each group, or neo-tribal unit, defined and maintained its territory.

After the community meeting, I began the next task on my list, which was to observe the different ways people organize and control space in Slab City. This was really the fundamental question that brought me to the Slabs. I wanted to understand how it was possible, in a place with no codified rules of ownership, to establish and control personal space. Although Slab City was spacious, it accommodated many people in close quarters and had enough turn-over of campsites to make this process complicated. I assumed that the different groups each had different rules and each likely had their own ways to create, claim and hold onto space in Slab City. As an outside observer, I hypothesized that this was related to neo-tribal spatial markers,⁸⁷ and my function as a participant-observer would simply be to experience and document them. I was beginning to understand that this was only part of the story. I recalled the painted sentry box that marked the entrance to Slab City. Here a remnant of war, specifically designed to guard against intrusion was reimagined as a welcoming sign of homecoming, complete with iconography of birds and trees. I began to realize that Slab City does not persist merely because different groups have found ways to keep each other separate. Slab City has also found ways for different groups to come together.

These observations led to a second reconnaissance of the site. This time I wasn't verifying the maps, but trying to see how the different neo-tribes inhabited, used and marked the land. I soon realized from my own experience that a major part of this control begins with recognition and acceptance – in other words - membership in a particular group. For instance, shortly after I left the group meeting I walked past a few men who were chopping down brush and carrying it over to a burning pile. I nodded and said hello. Later in the day, on the way back to my RV, I passed the same place. This time a man waived at me and called out, "Hi neighbor." Surprised to already be considered a neighbor by anyone, I walked closer. "I seen you before," he said. I was worried that I had overstepped and was somehow being called out for trespassing, but I was close enough now that I didn't feel that I could walk away. He asked where I was from, when I had arrived, and what I was doing. I said I was just passing through and taking pictures. "I want to show you something," he said and he pointed at a small patch of concrete. "I seen you before walking by when we were clearing. Look what was under all that brush. A slab! We didn't know it was there. It's just about perfect." I soon learned the man's name was Ben, and that he and his wife Mariah lived on a slab right next to "The Range," an old mess hall slab that had been converted into a stage that held weekly concerts. Ben was a 20 year Resident of the Slabs, and had been in the same place for the entire time. "We just been workin' on cleanin' it up this whole time, and now it's in good shape. Plus look here, we just found this new slab, who knew it was here? It ain't got a crack on it." As

Ben's example demonstrated, in an informal community constantly under threat of being reclaimed by the desert, maintenance work was one of the best ways to lay claim to space (Figure 32).



Figure 34. Ben's newly uncovered slab. Photo by Author.

What intrigued me about my interaction with Ben was that he was a Resident, not a Snowbird, and I did not expect Residents to accept me as a neighbor. In fact, after my interaction with Lynn, I was expecting he would avoid my presence. But it is important to also note that by calling me over and asking me questions Ben was observing me, just as I was observing him. He was trying to place me into a group, and he was apparently

satisfied that I qualified as some version of a Slab City inhabitant. I thought that he was just especially friendly, and he was, but it wasn't until several days later when I began to have interactions with the Snowbirds that I began to question my own assumptions about how my presence in Slab City was categorized by others.

While there is no codified legal claim to any given campsite, I found that my movement around the edges of campsites was always somewhat tense. Slab City is mostly an open area, and many times inhabitants would see me coming, and stop to stare, wondering how close I would come to their homes. A few times I changed my direction based on the glare of a campsite inhabitant. Charlie Hailey writes:

“...Campsites themselves, particularly within the fluctuation of Slab City’s population, become zones of contention between known and unknown, conditions of home and exile, and place and placelessness. Each iteration of camping, as well as each moment of interaction, becomes important in understanding the forces and relationships involved; and it is within the context of the frontier that these ‘moments’ might be understood in Slab City. The frontier, like the campsite and the activity of camping itself, serves as a ‘mediating ground’ – creating a field for performance and interaction and an interlocutory process working between occupant and place.”⁸⁸

These moments of interaction that Hailey describes are what transform the act of trespass on the part of the outsider to the act of invitation on the part of the occupant. As I approached Ben’s Slab for example, I did my best to perform the part of a non-threatening neighbor. I was the unknown to him, just as he was to me, and the edge of

his campsite represented the point by which he had to decide whether or not he would allow me to co-occupy his home, even temporarily, or exile me back out of his space.



Figure 35. A pet cemetery.



Figure 36. Another pet cemetery. Photo by Author.

Boundary Markers:

As I walked away from Ben's campsite, I heard barking. It was Ben's dog Gracie who had spotted someone approaching from the opposite direction. Gracie reminded me that I had seen, and heard, a lot of dogs around the Slabs. As I walked around each block for the next few days, it was often the bark of a dog that informed me (and certainly others) that I was invading someone's territory. A dog bark was essentially half doorbell, half alarm bell. After the bark, I usually realized that I had overlooked a "private" sign or a row of rocks or tires that often formed property boundaries in the Slabs.



Figure 37. The extent of a Resident's claimed space, as marked by a row of garbage. Photo by Author.

Sometimes, the barking proved to be an excuse to say hello. After all, it was only appropriate that the owner emerge from his or her tent or RV to attempt to quiet the animal, apologize, and say hello. In this way dogs function as an informal way to meet and greet other Slab City inhabitants.

I also soon noticed that dog walking was a major activity in Slab City. Many Snowbirds travelled with their dogs for company, and since there really was no fenced in place to let a dog run free for exercise, neighbors would often meet up on dog walks. While the human inhabitants of Slab City fell relatively neatly into neo-tribal social group affiliations, the dogs knew no such boundaries, and were often responsible for breaking the ice between passersby on the roads.

While dogs many have broken boundaries, in their death and burial, they became another way Residents claim space. Both Snowbirds and Residents own dogs, but it is only the dogs of Residents that are buried in Slab City. The two pet cemeteries that I found were decorated traditionally as gravesites, and as such they were designated as places of respect. This level of meaning in Slab City is not present for Snowbirds, and so these cemeteries become ways in which Residents show the authenticity of their connection to Slab City. They are not claims to specific space, but rather to Slab City as a whole.

Despite the abundance of dogs in Slab City, it wasn't only the sound of dogs barking that alerted people to my presence. Although loud music performances were fairly common, Slab City is generally very quiet, and sounds carry long distances in the dry desert air. I often had the experience of being in my RV and hearing footsteps that sounded like they were right outside my door, only to open it and see that they were coming from someone walking along the main road, at least 100 feet away. The gravelly soil made a loud crunch whenever you stepped off the pavement, and around the edges of Slab City, where the pavement was most significantly degraded, even the roads crunched. I also observed that people set up permanent camp sites along these roads according to the amount and type of interactions they wanted to have with other inhabitants.

More social Snowbirds and Residents generally set up along the main roads. Even if they put up fences or had large guard dogs, they weren't standoffish. The farther back into the Slabs one ventured, the farther the campsites were from each other, and the more likely they were inhabited either by one person, usually a man under 40, or a young family with school aged children, rather than a retired Snowbird couple.

Tourists rarely go past Salvation Mountain, the Shoe Tree, or the Range if they visit Slab City. The bottom line is, the farther I went into Slab City the more likely I was to find myself in a place where I was not wanted. Those Residents near the main roads of the Slabs, and Snowbird retirees who preferred community were generally friendlier. I

was later told by a group of “main road” Residents that those on the periphery of Slab City paid a price for their privacy. The truly nomadic bush bunnies and hitchhikers were more likely to take things from their campsites as they passed through. According to the Residents, due in large part to the fact that resources are so scarce, this is one of the more significant crimes a person can commit in Slab City. Those living at the edges of Slab City have fewer neighbors to watch out for them, and are more susceptible to crime. Also, Residents generally have fewer resources at their disposal and less mobility than Snowbirds, making losses much harder to replace. Many Residents do not have cars, so leaving Slab City to look for materials can be very difficult.

Residents’ homes are often quite simple. Some consist only of a full sized trailer or RV that no longer runs. Other Resident camp sites appear to have started out as a lone van or a car, and over time as materials became available, the Residents added pieces to create a larger structure (Figures 39 and 41). A few Residents have even been able to take up residence in the remaining structures that still exist from Camp Dunlap. At the southwestern edge of Slab City an old artillery storage bunker was, at the time of my visit, inhabited by a father, son, and pet dog. The bunker had been painted with a bright blue stripe (Figure 38). While the storage bunker is a physically secure, lockable space, many Residents’ homes are not as strongly demarcated or secure. Spatial boundaries, whether they take the form of rows of garbage (Figure 37), shrubs (Figures 39 and 41), or the extent of a slab (Figures 39 and 40), become important markers of trespass into claimed

space. To cross that boundary is to violate that claim. In a squatters' community where property is not legally owned, the ability to create a safe space in a defined territory for oneself and one's family is really a minimum requirement for the creation of one's home.⁸⁹



Figure 38. A munitions storage building is now occupied. Note the truck for scale. Photo by Author.



Figure 39. A neatly organized Slab. Soil has been graded for easy vehicular access to the slab, while tires make the extent of the claimed space. Photo by Author.



Figure 40. A slab with a view of the Chocolate Mountains. The road has been highlighted in blue. A row of rocks lines the extent of claimed space, (in red) and the face of the slab and a wall of tires (in yellow) form the inner sanctum of the set up. Photo by Author.



Figure 41. A very private slab site. Plywood, cardboard, and tarps provide privacy screening for a slab nestled within dense creosote bushes. Photo by Author.



Figure 42. A hut has been built under the branches of a blue palo verde tree. Dead palm trees fill a courtyard area while rows of rocks mark the extent of claimed space. Photo by Author.



Figure 43. Just off the road a home site uses white plastic picket fencing to mark the extent of a courtyard and the Resident's claimed space. Photo by Author.



Figure 44. Two very mobile Resident's sites. Photos By Author.



Figure 45. A secluded location and a Confederate flag send a strong message that visitors are not welcome. Photo by Author.

January 8-12: Snowbird Rally

Of all the residents of Slab City, I found Snowbirds to be the most reserved in sharing personal information with me. The Residents were either friendly or not, but Snowbirds fell into another type of category, or even multiple categories depending on the type of relationship they want to have with you. Snowbirds were typically quite polite, but not necessarily friendly. The Snowbirds as a group comprise several different tribal units, making them much more complex than they seem at first. The Snowbirds who arrived for the rally set up camp sites that were by far the closest in proximity to each other of any group in the Slabs. This physical insularity was largely mirrored in their social openness to other groups.

I spent the last few days of my stay in Slab City interacting with the Slab Loners on Wheels (L.O.W.s). The Slab L.O.W.s is the local Slab City chapter of an international group of RV travelers. The group was founded over 40 years ago by Edith Lane, a single RV camper who travelled around the southwest, and joined with other single campers to start the group.⁹⁰ My aim was that through participation in the Slab L.O.W.s I would gain deeper insight into their spatial dynamics.

The Slab L.O.W.s have a U-shaped headquarters, comprised of three trailers set up around the perimeter of a large slab. Members of the group started arriving on Wednesday, pulling into their designated blocks on the eastern edge of the Slab City, and

by Friday morning, about 100 members had arrived. Dinners, lectures and meetings are held on the headquarters' internal courtyard patio area. Outside the headquarters building at the top of the "U" shape was a large fire pit, which hosted morning coffee gatherings and evening campfires (Figure 46).

Outside the headquarters the members of the Slab L.O.W.s checked in and got the itinerary from Robi Hutton, the website manager and historian of Slab City who was also the organizer of the event. I was also able to pick up this information there, since there was no membership list at the table. The Slab L.O.W.s then circled the headquarters with their RVs and trailers, sometimes only about 10 to 15 feet apart from each other. This is much closer than any of the other campsites in Slab City, which typically are at least 30 feet apart. As more L.O.W.s arrived they continued to park next to each other in tightly packed campsites, expanding the circle. In the Slab L.O.W.s campsites the space between the trailers formed a narrow alley lined with chairs, essentially creating a gauntlet for potential outsiders who planned on reaching the headquarters. The space appeared to belong to all the RVs that defined it as the main doors of both RVs often opened into the same space. It was narrow enough, however, to signal that if you did not know the owners of those specific RVs you should not pass through the courtyard between them (Figure 47). For the entirety of the rally I felt uncomfortable when getting too close to these areas.

The final arrangement of campsites reminded me very much of a wagon circle formation like the ones made by pioneers in old Hollywood westerns (Figure 49), because as more members arrived, the original circle added two additional rings that expanded out into the adjacent blocks. Once everyone had arrived there were three rings of Slab L.O.W.s camped around their main headquarters. A passerby on foot or in a car would clearly be able to tell that a specific group had claimed the area, and a non-L.O.W.s RV camper would not think about setting up camp within the clearly defined rings of Slab L.O.W.s campers. The Slab L.O.W.s' gauntlet of surveillance was an effective deterrent to outsiders, and I never saw anyone other than Slab L.O.W.s or their invited guests in the block that contained the inner ring.

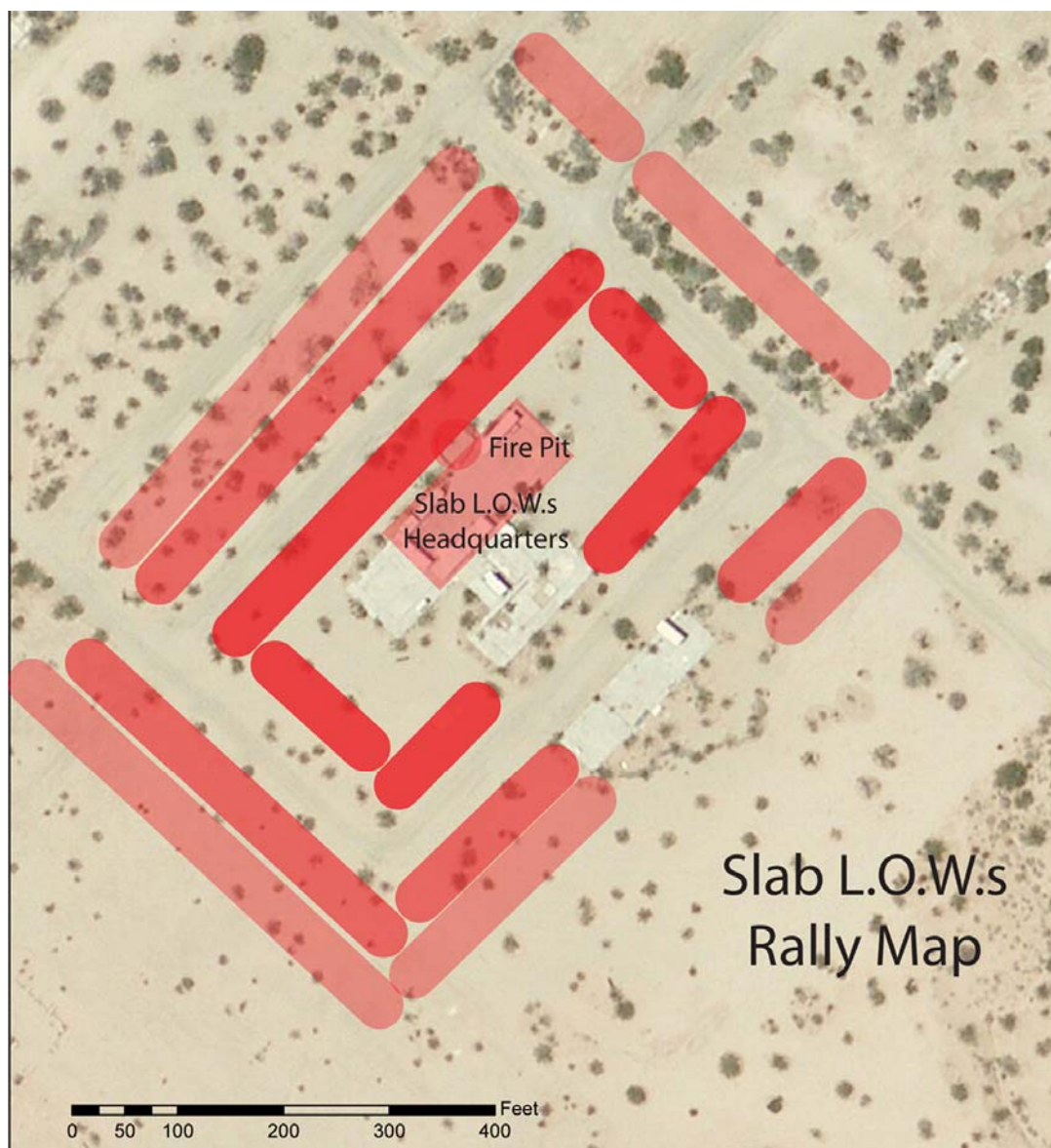


Figure 46. A map of the Slab L.O.W.s Rally Area, showing concentric areas of campsites.

Background LANDSAT image courtesy of ESRI.



Figure 47. The close proximity of Snowbird Campsites forms a barrier. Photo by Author.



Figure 48. The Slab L.O.W.s main courtyard area is used for dances, games, and meetings. Photo by Author.



Figure 49. The Slab L.O.W.s densely packed in Slab City. The rally was the highest density of campsites seen in Slab City. Photo by Author.



Figure 50. Way-finding signage near the entrance of Slab City. Photo by Author.

The location of the Slab L.O.W.s campsite was easy to find. Large signs at the main intersection in Slab City marked the direction of the headquarters (Figure 50). These signs were a fascinating indication of the cultural context of the group. One sign bore the phrase, “Pack it in, pack it out,” a scouting and National Park Service motto, which Snowbirds were sure to recognize and understand. An “Area 1” sign referenced the rumored alien crash site in New Mexico. Another sign pointed to the Slab City Oasis Club, using a font that is typically associated with the tropics. An advertisement for Slab City Radio, illegally broadcast on frequency 96.3 FM, includes a skull reminiscent of the Hell’s Angels logo. It’s certainly possible that some of the Slab L.O.W.s were former members, who’ve now slowed down their lifestyle. Regardless, it’s a reference that regular travelers on US highways would understand. The Slab L.O.W.s sign was the largest of all, and bore the logo of the international L.O.W.s organization. It was impossible to miss, and RV after RV headed toward the campsite and headquarters.



Figure 51. Garbage facilities clearly marked for Slab L.O.W.s only. Photo by Author.

To further reinforce their territory, in case someone somehow didn't pick up on the RV arrangement, or all of the clearly displayed L.O.W.s bumper stickers, the Slab L.O.W.s erected signs around their campsites that reserved the adjacent space for their camps (Figure 52). Unfortunately, a woman named Emma had set up her camp about a week before the Slab L.O.W.s rally began on one of these adjacent blocks. I met Emma on one of my first walks around the Slabs, when her gremlin-like Brussels Griffon named Razzle wouldn't stop barking at me. She came out to quiet him, and introduced herself. Emma was a Snowbird, but she was not affiliated with any formal group. She was from England originally, had lived and worked in New York but had lost her job a few years after the economic crisis in 2008. She said it had always been a dream to get a camper

and travel around the country, and she wanted to do so while she still had a little savings. She ended up in Slab City because she said it was the easiest way to stretch her savings for as long as possible. I wondered if she planned to return to work at all, or if her legal status in the United States was dependent on working. Slab City was probably appealing to her not only because it was free, but also because it was off the grid, and any immigration issues were unlikely to cause problems out here.⁹¹ While I did see several Border Patrol cars in Slab City while I was there, I doubt Emma would have drawn the attention of anyone.



Figure 52. The signage that Emma had missed that marked her area as claimed for the rally. Photo by Author.

Emma anticipated staying in Slab City for a few months at least, but as the Slab L.O.W.s started filling in around her she expressed a bit of unease. She certainly didn't feel as if she was in any danger from a group of single, mostly female retirees, but as more and more slab lows set up camp, she got the distinct feeling that she did not have the approval of the group. Some stares, a few short conversations, and RVs encroaching on what she had originally considered part of her campsite were enough to send the message. She was in the wrong place. I asked her if she thought about moving, but she said that since the L.O.W.s rally was only a few days, it wouldn't be worth the hassle, but that if she came back another time, which she was planning to do, she would set up camp in a different place in order to avoid all RV groups altogether.

I certainly understood her sentiment. Arriving at the Slabs, I assumed that I would be most like the Snowbirds. I was travelling alone in a comfortable RV. I was from someplace snowy and cold, and looking to relax in a warm climate, get to know people and learn about living in Slab City. I was not poor. I was at Slab City by choice. But the L.O.W.s made me rethink this assumption, and to question my initial, rather naïve, long-distance pre-conceptions. This new insight was reconfirmed during one of the daily lectures held by the Slab L.O.W.s. The lecture was on "boon-docking", or how to camp without water, sewer, and electrical hookups. Being a student myself, I was used to situations in which group learning led to conversations, even friendship, and I thought this would happen quite naturally. I was wrong. The Snowbirds asked me where I was

from and what I was doing, how long I would stay and where I was headed to, but that was the extent of their interest in me.

After attending the lecture, it became clear to me that the Slab L.O.W.s group was not interested in making friends with a 30 something family man from New York, who was unlikely to ever see most of them again. The Slab L.O.W.s are a tight knit group. Most of them travel for extended periods of time, from a few months a year up to full-time. Most of them saw each other several times a year, usually at other campsites up and down the west coast. They seemed accepting of my tagging along on activities, but I wasn't invited to any of the group's dinners. I attended evening events, such as the campfire and the dance, but I found that I did not belong at them. As a man without any pre-existing friends in the group, and 30 years younger than most of the other attendees, I stuck out even more. Most of life in Slab City takes place outdoors, with only critical activities such as bathing, sleeping and dressing taking place in the RVs, so I did not expect to be invited inside an RV by anyone, but in contrast to the permanent residents who often called me right over to their campsite if they saw me walking by, none of the Slab L.O.W.s Snowbirds ever did the same.

Despite these obstacles, I did get to know a few of the Snowbirds in the Slab L.O.W.s group while I stayed in Slab City. When I arrived at the check in stand on the first day of the rally at the Slab L.O.W.s headquarters I was given a schedule of events for

the rally. Every day consisted of a set schedule, which provided several opportunities to attempt integration into the group. Below is Thursday's which was fairly typical:

Thursday January 9th:

7:00 – 8:00 AM Coffee at the Fire Ring

7:00- 8:00 AM Walk About (aprox. 15 minutes, meet at fire ring)

7:30 AM Dog Walk

8:00- 9:00 AM Breakfast

10:00 AM Seminar: RVing with Solar by Solar Mike of “The Sun Works”

11:30 – 3:00 PM Trip – Salton Sea, Sonny Bono Marina, Mud Pots (pack a lunch)

3:00- 4:00 PM Happy Hour (announcements)

4:00- 5:30 PM Dinner

6:00 PM Radio Mike DJ (Slab City Radio 96.3 “Da Bomb”)

Dance & Fire

Other Evening Options



Figure 53. Snowbirds on a trip to the Salton Sea for bird watching. Photo by Author.



Figure 54. Snowbirds on their trip to visit the Salvation Mountain site in Slab City. Photos by Author.

Morning coffee was an acceptable time for me to join the Snowbirds, and I was permitted to sit through the seminars, but it was on the field trips that I really got to know a few of the Slab L.O.W.s members. On the trip to the Salton Sea, two members, Bob and Annie, wanted to go on a hike along a trail to the Salton Sea. I also wanted to go, so I tagged along with them while the rest of the group headed on to the next site. They were both from the Northwest, had been travelling for a few years, and had met at a L.O.W.s rally a few years ago. Perhaps they were so open with me because they were also somewhat outsiders in the L.O.W.s. A about a year ago, they officially became a couple. They still travel separately, since they have family in different areas (they were both grandparents), but they consider themselves together. If the L.O.W.s found out, they could potentially be kicked out of the group. I asked them why they didn't just join another RV group, or just camp separately on their own as so many other Snowbirds did.

They replied that they liked the community of people in the L.O.W.s too much to just walk away from it, and they really enjoyed staying in Slab City on a regular basis. If they were found out, so be it, but they had made too many friends and liked “boondocking” too much to leave. It made sense to me.

January 11: Community Canopy

Despite the fact most of the different groups of Slab City maintained distinct spaces within its boundaries, there were several places where all were welcome and intermingling was common. A few of these I had discovered throughout my walks through the Slabs. The Library, Sellers Row, the Community Meeting, and even the Canal all represented spaces where anyone could go, but the place where the greatest mixing occurred was the Range. The Range is an open air stage, built on the large slab that originally housed a Camp Dunlap mess hall. The slab is quite large, approximately 40 feet by 70 feet. The stage is only a few feet high and located at the back of the slab. Old trailers behind and to either side of the stage complete the scene and form the backdrop to the social drama. There's enough stage lighting to see what's going on, and enough overhead lights for the audience to see where they are going. Chairs, benches, and couches in every state of disrepair provide seating for about 150 attendees.

Builder Bill, a long-time Resident, constructed the Range about 10 years ago. Every Saturday after sundown Bill plays a few songs to begin the concert. Those who want to play after Bill have to sign up on a list. Usually there are at least a dozen acts, and they include everything from Slab City family bands, to punk bands from Fresno, to electronic music DJs. Rock trios and foursomes seem to be the most typical. Saturday nights at the Range draw a large crowd. As a hitchhiker complained to me, most of the

time there just is not much to do in Slab City, and so a free and convenient concert is quite a draw.

As one of the younger residents of Slab City told me, the Range is where pretty much everyone goes to, “let off some steam.” There are no judgments on those who attend concerts at the Range. Even those performers who are barely competent musicians are usually allowed to finish their sets without getting “the hook.” This live and let live attitude at the Range forms a model for interactions between neo-tribal groups within Slab City generally. Slab residents define and defend their space, according to their group’s norms, but the Range provides relief from this by existing as a space where boundaries are temporarily dissolved.



Figure 55. The Range. The gravel lot in the foreground is used as a parking lot. Photo by Author.

When I arrived at the Range it was just a little after sundown, and people were still filling in. Snowbirds, residents, and tourists, of all ages and types were there. In front of me was a young woman in her early 30s with her 11 or 12 year-old son. They had been driving through the area and had heard about the free concert. They were talking to a few Residents camped out by a small food stand. The small stand had a grill that was run by Builder Bill's girlfriend. There was no fixed menu. She sold whatever she wanted to on any given night. Tonight it was hamburgers - two plus a soda for five dollars. Most of the permanent residents were milling around the food stand or standing in the left part of the audience area. As it had been at the Community Meeting, it was easy to tell the Residents

from the Snowbirds. If I couldn't tell what group an individual belonged to based on age, the condition of their clothing quickly suggested a potential answer. While this also revealed my personal biases, I still relied on this differentiation. In the back to the right of the audience were a few lines of Snowbirds. Up close to the stage were younger people, mostly hobos and hippies,⁹² but some travelling musicians as well, dancing along in the same discombobulated shuffle to anything anyone played. Not surprisingly, drug use was openly practiced at the Range. In the back of the audience, a Snowbird was talking with a young permanent resident about the best Slab City marijuana sellers. Alcohol was also present, as about a quarter of the audience had brought beer with them.

Sitting to my right were a few more Residents, but rather than alcohol, they had brought musical instruments. One Resident was playing a ukulele and another had maracas. Both played along to every song. This was no small feat, since the music ranged from covers of "Crosby, Stills and Nash" to the original electronic dance punk solo act "Dr. Stryker" in which a man in his early 20s wearing a lab coat screamed into the microphone about testosterone injections. Despite all this apparent unseemliness, the Range even drew out Slab Cities families. A couple walked by me, a woman carrying a three-year-old on her shoulder with her husband behind her carrying the family cat in the exact same manner. Everyone including the cat had glow stick necklaces. The Range was one of two places I saw children in Slab City. The second was a slab used as a school bus stop.⁹³



Figure 56. The school bus pick up site. Photo by Author.

The space of the Range represents a unique meeting ground in which everyone can meet and freely mingle without fear of prejudice. As Elijah Anderson writes in *Cosmopolitan Canopy*, “Such neutral social settings, which no one group expressly owns but all are encouraged to share, situated under a protective umbrella, a canopy, represent a special type of urban space, a peculiar zone that every visitor seems to recognize, appreciate and enjoy...for the experience of being among the social types they find here.” For this unique city, the Range functions as a uniting space where each neo-tribe provides benefits to the others. A Resident built the space, and many Residents perform. Snowbirds provide a customer base and audience. Tourists fill seats, buy food, and

sometimes even perform, increasing the size and variety of the gathering. Only the Bush Bunnies are absent, or at least blend in with tourists enough to be invisible.

Breaking Camp:

On Saturday the 11th, I attended another community meeting, again at the horseshoe pitch, and again led by Lynn Bright. About a dozen of the attendees I recognized from the prior week's meeting and several more were new. A few of the new attendees were Snowbirds I recognized from the rally, and a few were Residents I had seen around Slab City over the previous week. The meeting proceeded much the same way as the first I had attended, going over crime, upcoming events, and updating everyone about the progress that had been made in getting a garbage service to come to the Slabs. At the end, however, there is news that the California State Lands commission is in the process of trying to find a group in Slab City to take over ownership of the land. Apparently the area has run afoul of California's own environmental regulations, and since there has never been a workable lease proposal for Slab City submitted to the Lands Commission, they believe that the best way to limit their own liability on the unproductive site is simply to give it away.⁹⁴ The State Lands Commission originally tried to give the land to the non-profit group that organizes the maintenance of Salvation Mountain, Salvation Mountain Inc. Lynn sits on that board, and so was aware of the issues. When Salvation Mountain Inc. declined, she became afraid that someone else would be found to take ownership of the land, and so Lynn submitted paperwork to start another non-profit of Slab City community members to take ownership. Lynn described the process and her rationale in an open letter posted on February 15 to the slab-city.com website.⁹⁵

Obviously, news of this development was quite upsetting to several of the long term residents in attendance at the meeting. (And based on ongoing postings at slab-city.com, it has continued to be a major issue of contention.)⁹⁶ Slab City functioned without any formal ownership for decades, and despite the assurances by Lynn that the non-profit would be open to anyone who wanted to join as a voting member, some in attendance expressed a fear of change resulting from the codification of their rights. Interestingly, the Dorothy Phelps 1989 thesis ends with a similar question. At that time, residents were concerned that there were bids to lease the space that would result in their inability to reside there, either as Snowbirds or as Residents. A similar concern was brought up at the January 11th, 2014 community meeting. If the planned Community Land Trust failed, Slab City community members were worried that they would be kicked off the land. If that happened, some argued, the Community Land Trust could sue the California State Lands Commission for some sort of breach of contract and just hold up the entire process for a few decades. Most of those in attendance decided that this was the best possible outcome. The status quo would simply be frozen, and most of the residents would be dead before it was resolved.

January 13: Homecoming

As the Slab L.O.W.s rally came to an end the Snowbirds began packing up their campsites and talking about where they would be travelling next. Most were not returning home, and many discussions included plans to meet up at other sites in a few days or weeks. “We’re all headed up to Joshua Tree, are you coming?” “In A few days, maybe Tuesday, after I see my friend in Yuma. Usual spot?” “Yep. See you there.” The Snowbirds talked about the campsites they were planning on visiting with a familiarity built up over months and years, and this was a language that I could not speak. A few of the Slab L.O.W.s asked me where I was headed. “San Diego,” I replied. It was technically true, as I was flying out of the airport there. Having tried so hard to fit in with them, I was too embarrassed to admit that I was flying back to New York City.

I too was leaving the Slabs, and like the Snowbirds I packed away everything in my RV and pulled out of Slab City. The spot along Seller’s Row that I had called home vanished behind me. Without the presence of my RV, the space I had occupied was now indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape. I assumed it would be occupied soon. I hoped so. Sunsets from that point were especially beautiful, as the light reflecting from the Salton Sea made a glowing red disk upon which the distant mountains of Anza-Borrego appear to float. The gravesite I found behind my camp which had initially startled me began to make more sense. Besides being a beautiful spot, I was able to

appreciate the idea that the man's identity might have been so wrapped up in living in Slab City that those he knew saw fit to make him a part of it upon his death.



Figure 57. Gravesite of Billy Jewel Sullivan, located behind my campsite. In a way it would always be occupied. Photo by Author.

The drive back to San Diego was uneventful, and the flight to New York City even less so. My flight landed at 9PM, I took a cab back to Brooklyn and walked up the stairs. Halfway through the second flight my French Bulldog, Edith, heard me and started yapping. My husband was still awake, welcomed me home, and told me that my 2 year old son had just gone to bed. I took a peak at him in his crib and smiled contentedly. I was back with my tribe.

Conclusions:

While my initial focus on researching Slab City involved an inventory of the spatial markers and territory, my field reconnaissance ultimately revealed a more nuanced physical and social understanding of the place and its residents, and how they interact. This new understanding both answered my questions as to what persists from the past, and reveals how these spatial remnants of prior habitation take on new uses and meanings over time. In other words, it revealed how the site's history is both a framework and palimpsest for what exists today that is constantly being re-interpreted by the site's successive waves of inhabitants to suit their personal needs.

While I titled the first part of my work "Reconnaissance," it was in reality also a form of participant observation – or personal immersion in Slab City that began as soon as I passed through the site's concrete guard post entrance markers and I selected my campsite, began walking around the community observing its layout with a camera in my hand and talking to the residents. Though very similar in many ways to a normative landscape architecture site-analysis, my two-week residence and slightly longer resident engagement and observation period confounded my preconceived notions of the site. While I had expected spatial relationships to be fluid, flexible and minimal, in keeping with the informality of the physical landscape (at least as seen romantically by an easterner from New York City), my experience on the ground was very different. I had a heightened sense of trespassing and boundaries, even though these forms of demarcation

were not legally codified. In effect, Slab City, in part due to its isolated location and ad hoc history, has very strong neo-tribal identities, as my almost continuous feeling of being out of place quickly revealed. In places where identities are so strong, and property rights are not legally designated, I found, contrary to my expectations, that spatial signifiers, no matter how small, had become hardened and significant.

Slab City's idealized allure for visitors is that it is exceptionally free, because it exists outside of social norms, as mentioned in the introduction, as a heterotopia of freedom. As examined previously, heterotopias exist as a combination of the real and the imagined, brought together for some ideal in a non-hegemonic way. In the case of Slab City, the reality of strict spatial regulation and the conception of freedom coexist. In other words, Slab City physically persists as it does because its inhabitants both overtly and inadvertently support this image of freedom, and benefit from it economically and socially.

One may ask if Slab City is fundamentally different from any other city or town. Most cities, as diverse and multicultural as they are, do not really exist as heterotopias. Cities attract residents for many reasons, and while they may have a specific character, they rarely unite inhabitants with a cultural ideal. Heterotopias are places of otherness by definition, and so are not common. Any city might contain a number of heterotopic spaces, but the city itself is not a heterotopia.

All cities, not just Slab City, contain neo-tribal communities where residents who do not share kinship ties find community with like-minded individuals. However, unlike Slab City, most cities are governed by economic and legal constraints that prevent individual members of these tribal units to impress their beliefs onto the land itself. Or, if they do, these marks are often erased, and re-written by those who come after.

Slab City does, however, like most cities, contain Cosmopolitan Canopies in which different social groups co-mingle. While I have used this theory to describe several of the spaces in Slab City, it is also true, as evidenced by my field work, that most Slab City residents simply want to stay out of each other's (or at least other tribe's) ways. This conclusion concerning boundary and separation within Slab City is evident with the Slab L.O.W.s and their "wagon circle" set up of RVs. In fact, the most "extreme" activity of the Snowbirds was their attendance at the Range. The Range, acting as a canopy space, allowed Slab City to function as a more extreme, off-grid, experience for the Snowbirds.

Participant observation was a critical part of learning about the site. It is only through participant observation that I was able to experience these realities of space and culture. In complex and nontraditional site locations, participant observation can be used to allow otherwise unknowable spatial and cultural dynamics to emerge. However, participant observation does have its limits. While I went to Slab City with an open mind, ready to allow the site to reveal itself to me on its own terms, it was only through the complementary methodologies of theoretical framing and historiography that I was

able gain a more critical distance and see the site for what it really was, not merely a unique place, but in fact a palimpsest of landscape, overwritten by different forces.⁹⁷

My experience of Slab City will always be just a snapshot in time in a long history of this complex site. Site conditions that formed before humans ever stepped foot in Slab City still shape experience there today. The gravelly sand that warned Residents of my arrival and made me feel conspicuous is the same sand that over 100 years ago saved section 36 from the wave of industrial agriculture that swept the Imperial Valley. These gravelly sands will continue to exist on site into the foreseeable future. Only time will tell what future effect they may have. Part of the landscape was converted to concrete and leveled for a tent city, long before RVs began to proliferate in the California deserts. Slab City exists as it does today because successive periods of geologic, ecological, and anthropogenic change have been written into, and been partially erased from that landscape. Whether it was the Cahuilla tribes, the development of industrial agriculture, the US military, or today's groups of heterotopic neo-tribes, each has taken its turn erasing part of the past, and rewiring the landscape for its own needs.

Further Study:

Slab City is at a remarkable crossroad in its history, as it experiments with moving from no management and an absentee landlord to self-management as a non-profit. As I have described, the spatial and social relationships in Slab City are self-reinforcing and very stable. It will be interesting to determine if this stability is a product of the relatively equal footing Slab City inhabitants have with each other, and if this balance will shift as Slab City politics becomes more complex. Voting for board members, non-profit bylaws, and legal ownership of land all have the power to dramatically change the character of Slab City. Will community values triumph over newfound power, leaving dynamics unchanged? Will politics drive Residents and Snowbirds to work more closely together or will they become more antagonistic? Additional research and periodic residencies could trace these changes over time.

Another possibility for further research would be to take a more structuralist approach to the spatial dynamics of Slab City, rather than the experiential approach which formed the basis of my research. Physical structures could be sorted into a typology and quantified. This could reveal an even deeper understanding of territory in Slab City as it exists today, and this evidence based approach could be used to track changes over time.

Endnotes:

¹ There was great hope at the time that Camp Dunlap would be the primary West Coast Marine installment. Industrial agriculture and the canal system were rapidly changing the nature of the county, and many hoped that a significant Marine base would continue to diversify the region's economy.

² Several of Camp Dunlap's buildings were sold off to residents of the town of Niland. See Phelps, Dorothy Ann. *A Singular Land Use in the California Desert*.

³ The California State Lands Commission consists of the Lieutenant Governor, the State Director of Finance, and the State Controller. The commission is tasked with the management, protection, stewardship, and economic development of California's state owned lands. The commission has entertained applications for lease of Slab City, although no successful lease has ever been executed since the land was returned to the state.

⁴ The term "off grid" typically designates a building or structure, often a home, which is self-sufficient enough that it does not require connection to an electrical power grid. While off grid structures or homes can occur anywhere, in Slab City, "off grid" also connotes a cultural separateness achieved by living in a unique, remote community.

⁵ Both Charlie Hailey in *Campsite*, p.186 and Anne Hardy in "Travelling Neotribes," p. 49 define Snowbirds similarly in their writing.

⁶ Phelps notes that the term "Bush Bunnies" was in common use in her 1989 thesis on Slab City.

⁷ The racial characteristic of the various groups in Slab City are based on my personal observations while in residence on site. Almost all Residents and Snowbirds were White, all of the Bush Bunnies I saw were Hispanic. Two African American hitchhikers were also observed in residence at Slab City while I was there.

⁸ Phelps, Dorothy Ann. *A Singular Land Use in the California Desert*. MS thesis, University of California Riverside, 1989.

This Masters' Thesis in geography is the most significant material published to date on Slab City, and has been cited in most of the academic writing on Slab City.

⁹ The Public Land Survey System was set out in the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The country was newly land rich and the surveying system was devised to allow for the easy sale and transfer of ownership of clearly designated parcels of land. Square parcels were measured out from key points call prime meridians. The prime meridian used for the surveying of southern California is the San Bernardino meridian, the initial point of which lies at the summit of Mount San Bernardino in San Bernardino County, California. From this prime meridian point, "townships," or six by six mile square parcels of land were parceled out in a grid system. Within each of the townships, 1 by 1 mile parcels, or "sections," were surveyed and numbered, with 36 being the southeastern most section in the township. It is this section in which the majority of Slab City now exists: Tier 10 South, Range 14 East, Section 36. The Oregon Territory Act of 1848 gave rights to sections 16 and 36 to the state for the maintenance of public schools. The California State Lands Commission maintains jurisdiction and management control over all such, "school lands," in California as it designates them.

¹⁰ Hutton, Robi. "Creosote Leaf Harvesting" <http://www.slab-city.com/history/history-slab-city-cam/camp-dunlap-is-dismantled/creosote-leaf-harvesting/> accessed March 30, 2014.

¹¹ Robi Hutton is a long time resident of Slab City, who until the spring of 2014 managed the website www.slab-city.com, and wrote posted extensively on the history and day to day life on the Slabs.

¹² While the living conditions of Mexican farm workers in the Imperial Valley has been written about extensively and there is much archival material on the subject, there is no clear proof as to the truth of this story about the start of camping at the slabs. That said, "Hooverville" style camps did exist in Imperial

Valley at the time and certainly could have occurred at Slab City. For more information on Mexican farm workers, see *They Saved the Crops*, by Don Mitchell.

¹³ Evidence of this history of Slab City may exist, but so far it has not been uncovered by researchers.

¹⁴ Phelps, Dorothy Ann. *A Singular Land Use in the California Desert*. MS thesis, University of California Riverside, 1989. P 55

¹⁵ See also:

Hou, Jeffrey (ed.). 2013. *Transcultural Cities: Border Crossing and Placemaking*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hou, Jeffrey (ed.). 2010. *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. London: Routledge.

Hou, Jeffrey. 2009. "Everyday Landscape and Urban DIYism in Sanzihou, Taipei". In *Tensions*, 2.0, spring

¹⁶ See also:

They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

Kenneth Olwig and Don Mitchell (eds.) *Justice, Power and the Political Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2009)

"Work, Struggle, Death, and Geographies of Justice: The Transformation of Landscape in and beyond California's Imperial Valley," *Landscape Research* 32(2007), 559-577 (Reprinted in Kenneth Olwig and Don Mitchell (eds.) *Justice, Power and the Political Landscape* (London, Routledge, 2009).

"California Living, California Dying: Dead Labor and the Political Economy of Landscape," in K. Anderson, S. Pile, and N. Thrift (eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (London: Sage, 2003), 233-248.

Lynn Staeheli and Don Mitchell, *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*.

¹⁷ See also Determining Critical Factors in Community-Level Planning of Homeless Service Projects by Abbilyn Miller, Ph.D. University of Illinois.

¹⁸ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5 (1984): 46.

¹⁹ Hailey, Charlie. *Campsite: Architectures of Duration and Place*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2008, p186.

²⁰ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5 (1984): 48.

²¹ While in Slab City I overheard two conversations about individuals who had been "run off". One man moved into a place that had been designated as someone else's campsite, and another man was harassing his neighbor. The first man had apparently left Slab City, while the other left for a few days and then came back and relocated to another campsite.

²² Michel Maffesoli. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1996, p17.

²³ For more information see also: Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, or for a more foundational text see Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*.

²⁴ Hardy, Ann, Ulrike Gretzel and Dallas Hanson. "Travelling Neo-Tribes: Conceptualizing Recreational Vehicle Users," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 11:1-2 (2013): 50, DOI:10.1080/14766825.2013.783584.

²⁵ Anderson, Elijah. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011.

²⁶ Peacock, James L. *The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft Focus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Page 89.

²⁷ At the second community meeting I attended in which the transition to a Community Land Trust was brought up, several attendees, both Snowbirds and Permanent Residents, expressed concern that even the ability to own their own land was something they would never want for themselves. In an open letter to the community now posted online at www.slab-city.com, a long-time Resident of Slab City has decried the pursuit of a Community Land Trust, saying that even if he were paid to own the land, he would turn it down.

²⁸ Peacock. p 89.

²⁹ Peacock. p 69.

³⁰ E Clampus Vitus is an offbeat fraternal order of historians. They are dedicated to the commemoration of history's lesser known and overlooked facts, and drinking together. See "Promoting Offbeat History Between the Drinks." http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/us/14california.html?hp&_r=0

³¹ "Camp Robert H Dunlap," a booklet produced by the John P. Squibob #1853 chapter of the E Clampus Vitus fraternal order can be found in the Imperial Valley Historical Society's archives.

³² This comment was made by a Resident of Slab City at the community meeting on January 4th, concerning reporters looking to write about what Slab City is like.

³³ "August 2012 Brawley, California Earthquake Swarm." USGS, <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eqinthenews/2012/brawleyswarmAug>, accessed December, 16, 2013.

³⁴ "Earth's Lowest Elevations." National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/deva/naturescience/lowest-places-on-earth.htm>, accessed December, 22, 2013.

³⁵ Sykes, G. "The Colorado Delta." Carnegie Inst. Washington, Pub. No. 460. p 193. In San Diego State University Archives, <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/salton/SykesFullCoRDeltaloRes.JPG>, Accessed October 25, 2013.

³⁶ "Web Soil Survey." USDA, <http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov>, accessed December 16th, 2013.

³⁷ Phelps, Dorothy Ann. *A Singular Land Use in the California Desert*. MS thesis, University of California Riverside, 1989. p 24.

³⁸ Philip J. Wilke. *Late Prehistoric Human Ecology at Lake Cahuilla Coachella Valley, California*. Berkley, California: University of California, 1978. Page 58

³⁹ Wilke. p14.

⁴⁰ Wilke. p 5.

⁴¹ Wilke. p121.

⁴² Wilke. p 16.

⁴³ Wilke. p 123.

⁴⁴ Wilke p 124.

⁴⁵ Phelps.p 30.

⁴⁶ Phelps. p 31.

⁴⁷ *Historic Salton Sea*. Office of Public Administration, Imperial Irrigation District, Imperial Valley, California, 1960; page 1.

⁴⁸ *Historic Salton Sea*. p 3.

⁴⁹ *Historic Salton Sea*. p 33.

⁵⁰ *Historic Salton Sea*. p 34.

⁵¹ *A Century of Service: Imperial Irrigation District*. Public Affairs Department, Imperial Irrigation District, Virginia Beach: Donning Company Publishers, 2011, p 67.

⁵² Hailey, Charlie. *Campsite: Architectures of Duration and Place*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2008, p182.

⁵³ Phelps. p 46.

⁵⁴ Phelps. p 42.

⁵⁵ In 1941 a Japanese Submarine fired a few shells at an oil refinery on a beach in Santa Barbara. This was enough to whip up concerns about a west coast invasion. It was also used to foment anti-Japanese-American sentiment.

⁵⁶ United States Code. 2006 Edition, Supplement 5, Title 50 - War and National Defense, "First National War Powers Act," 1941. <http://www.gpo.gov/>, accessed October 25, 2013.

⁵⁷ Phelps. P40.

⁵⁸ U.S. War Department. "Staff Officers Field Manual," 1943. Although the manual was published in 1943, it is likely that it was based on the general understanding of the way camps were to be set up, and similarities to the layout of Camp Dunlap certainly support this assumption.

⁵⁹ Phelps. p 44.

⁶⁰ Phelps. p 53.

⁶¹ Doty, Dorothy. Personal Interview. Brawley, CA. January 9, 2014.

⁶² Phelps. p 49. Summer temperatures in Niland regularly hit over 110° F.

⁶³ Phelps. p 51.

⁶⁴ Phelps. p 52.

⁶⁵ "Portraits from Slab City: The Last Free Place on Earth," <http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2012/10/02/162156270/portraits-from-slab-city-the-last-free-place-on-earth>. Accessed December 15, 2013.

⁶⁶ "Loners on Wheels," <http://www.lonersonwheels.com>. Accessed November 10, 2013.

⁶⁷ "Rallies," <http://www.lonersonwheels.com/rallies.html>. Accessed March 1, 2014.

⁶⁸ "Wandering Individuals Network," <https://rvsingles.org/about-win/> Accessed October 22, 2013.

⁶⁹ "Original Slab City Groups." Slab City Official Website, <http://www.slab-city.com/slab-city-groups/>, Accessed October 22, 2013.

⁷⁰ Hardy, Ann, Ulrike Gretzel and Dallas Hanson. "Travelling Neo-Tribes: Conceptualizing Recreational Vehicle Users," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 11:1-2 (2013): 50, DOI:10.1080/14766825.2013.783584.

⁷¹ Phelps. p 74.

⁷² Residents at the community meeting discussed the need to make sure that any garbage removal plans included a dumpster at the end of the season (late March or early April) so that seasonal campsites could be disposed of properly. Several of the Residents acknowledged being "pack-rats" and having too much material at their campsite. Nevertheless, one Resident said, "just because something looks like junk to you doesn't mean it's garbage."

⁷³ Phelps. p 80.

⁷⁴ "Slab City, USA," http://www.slabcity.org/map_1.asp.

⁷⁵ RVs generally come in three classes: A, B and C. Class A RVs are built on a bus or tractor trailer frame, and generally include the most comforts of home.

⁷⁶ Ninety three percent of Niland residents under 18 and 78.3% of those over 18 are living in poverty. The median household income for Niland is only \$13,588, as compared to \$38,685 for Imperial County, and \$60,883 for California. Education is another area in which Niland lags. Just over 65% of Niland residents over 25 years old have not completed high school, as compared to 37.5% of Imperial County residents and 19.3% of Californians.

⁷⁷ US Census, 2010. Accessed via Social Explorer, www.socialexplorer.com, accessed October 8th, 2013.

⁷⁸ The compact RV I had rented was equipped with a generator powered microwave. The refrigerator in the unit was a propane-based system, and was not as cold as a traditional electric refrigerator.

⁷⁹ Niland was named to reference, "The American Nile," the advertising nickname given to the Imperial Valley Canal System by the California Development Company. The CDC was the first company to start

building canals to divert the Colorado River, but it went bankrupt after the canals broke in the floods of 1905-1907.

⁸⁰ The map included in the Phelps thesis is a Navy Department map showing the condition of the base as of 1944. Although now all that remains are the concrete slab foundations, the map lists the use of each of the structures (mess hall, swimming pool, Post Office, etc).

⁸¹ *Historic Salton Sea*. Office of Public Administration, Imperial Irrigation District, Imperial Valley, California, 1960.

⁸² Frank Popenoe, "Coachella Valley Geological Evolution: Ocean to Grassland to Desert," *Desert Magazine*, March, 1963, <http://mydesertmagazine.com/files/196303-DesertMagazine-1963-March.pdf>.

⁸³ "Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range: Proposed Land Withdrawn Renewal," <http://www.chocolatemountainrenewal.com/documents/Board%20Ranges%20in%20Operating%20Region.pdf>, date accessed March 1, 2014.

⁸⁴ Rob (last name not given) in discussion with the author, January 3, 2014.

⁸⁵ Salvation Mountain is a massive religiously themed installation by artist Leonard Knight along the main road to Slab City on the shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla, which forms a ridge in the desert.

⁸⁶ The areas in Slab City that were open to all included the Community Meeting, the Library, Sellers Row, and The Range.

⁸⁷ My hypothesis of the existence of neo-tribal spatial markers comes from the knowledge that space is contested in Slab City, and that the different communities have different ways of claiming it. I expected these claiming methods to be determined by the group performing the claim.

⁸⁸ Hailey, Charlie. *Campsite: Architectures of Duration and Place*. p 185.

⁸⁹ Miller, Abbilyn, p 176.

⁹⁰ "Loners on Wheels: History," <http://www.lonersonwheels.com/history.html>, date accessed: March 1, 2014.

⁹¹ Emma Wright, in discussion with the author, January 7, 2014.

⁹² The terms "Hobo" and "Hippie" were both regularly used in Slab City.

⁹³ According to the superintendent's office, the Calipatria School District enrolls approximately 10 students per year who reside in Slab City.

⁹⁴ According to the attendees of the meeting the environmental infractions in Slab City relate to the use of paint on Salvation Mountain.

⁹⁵ Lynn Bright, "SCCGI Lynn Bright Letter," <http://www.slab-city.com/sccgi-lynn-bright-letter/>, date accessed: March 8, 2014.

⁹⁶ Michael Gohl, "Letter of Concern to Slab City Community Group BOD," <http://www.slab-city.com/letter-concern-slab-city-community-group-bod/>, date accessed: March 8, 2014.

⁹⁷ The concept of Palimpsest as a theoretical underpinning for the study of landscape architecture and cultural landscape is well established. See also:

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