This art essay represents the very beginnings of a biographical project on the life and art of Estelle Ishigo, a white woman imprisoned with her Nisei husband in a Japanese American concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Ishigo who was born in California in 1899, experienced an especially difficult early life. She described herself as a “mistake,” unwanted by her wealthy parents, and was raised by a nurse until the age of twelve when she was turned over to a series of relatives and strangers, one of whom sexually abused her. Shortly after graduating from high school, Ishigo set out on her own, living a life she later described as “roaming the streets alone, looking for adventure.” While a student at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, Ishigo met her husband, an experience that she described as love at first sight. Defying U.S. antimiscegenation laws, Ishigo and her future husband, Arthur, drove to Mexico in 1928 and married. Working as a teacher at the Hollywood Art Center on December 7, 1941, Ishigo was soon fired because she was married to a Japanese American man.

Ishigo spent most of her time while imprisoned, first at Pomona and later at Heart Mountain, documenting everyday life by drawing and painting. She worked in the Documentary Section of the Reports Division.
Jane Dusselier

at the pay rate of $19 per month. As a War Relocation Authority employee, her artwork was government property and therefore seized by a U.S. archivist when she was released from Heart Mountain. Resisting government orders, she smuggled out many of her drawings and watercolors, carefully packing them between her clothes and Arthur’s as they prepared to be sent back to Los Angeles by train.

Ishigo clearly valued the documentary function of her artwork, reporting that she “hoarded and kept every note and sketch . . . because I wanted to cry out to all those beyond that desolate horizon, look what you’ve done. Why? It makes no sense at all.” Much of her artwork focused on bleak conditions. Heart Mountain was the farthest north of all the imprisonment facilities, and thus winters were especially harsh. Trips to collect coal were frequent and harrowing daily experiences (see fig. 1). When snow was not covering the barren land that characterized Heart Mountain, dust storms would occur often, appearing suddenly on the horizon and catching many internees outside even the limited protection provided by their shoddily constructed living quarters. Risking skin and lung injuries from piercing grains of sand, the imprisoned children often had to dash to their living units at the end of school days (see fig. 2).

Women and children were central subjects in much of Ishigo’s work. She documented the lack of privacy in latrines and bathing facilities (fig. 3) and the crowded housing conditions. Single women often lived together, sharing housekeeping and childcare, in an effort to create survivable environments for their children and themselves. In figure 4, the viewer looks into one such living unit shared by a group of women likely separated from their husbands, who experienced a separate yet parallel incarceration in Department of Justice facilities. Even with the moisture stains on the ceiling and modest furnishings, the scene appears livable until we realize that there are four children and five women in a room with only four cots. Three youngsters are in bed with two sharing a single cot. Although some type of bedding likely lined the wall out of our view, the thought of nine people sleeping and living in a room only sixteen by twenty feet is daunting at best.

Ishigo complained that watercolors made the scenes of everyday life too “clean and untroubled” and so chose to focus more heavily on creating
charcoal and pencil drawings. But her watercolors may better speak to the heterogeneity of camp life, which was marked by a wide range of ambiguities, emotions, and experiences. Although these imprisonment facilities were clearly oppressive environments, most internees were busy performing daily activities to manage the routine hardships of camp life and accomplishing the tasks necessary for survival. In figure 5, we see a woman, presumably a mother, struggling with a toddler who appears reluctant to go along even though a rainstorm is approaching. To the left, an internee carries a washboard and bucket to or from the communal laundry facility highlighting one of the more common and time-consuming chores in the camps. Without plumbing in the living units, trips to laundry rooms were necessarily frequent and exhausting. Keeping clothes clean was made even more taxing in the context of Heart Mountain’s desert-like environment, where freshly laundered clothes were often soiled by fine, flour-like dust before they were even dry and removed from clotheslines.

Moments of reprieve, contentment, diversion, and even enjoyment were carved from the traumas of internment, as imprisoned Japanese Americans organized activities and attended camp events. Sporting events such as baseball and games were frequent as were camp-wide events such as Memorial Day observances (fig. 6). In some of Ishugo’s watercolors there is a relative feeling of normalcy. In figure 7, we see elementary school children and high schoolers walking to and from classes, but the presence of Heart Mountain and the barracks off to the right remind us of where we are. Perhaps the image of the vulture-like birds flying above is emblematic of the vulnerabilities of Ishugo’s human subjects. For Ishugo, being imprisoned at Heart Mountain engendered a range of what she described as strange emotions. In an attempt to understand her experience, Ishugo later wrote: “Strange as it may sound, in this desperate and lonely place, I felt accepted for the first time in my life. The government had declared me a Japanese and now I no longer saw myself as white. I was a Japanese American. My fellow Heart Mountain residents took me in as one of their own.”

As much as she identified as a Japanese American, Ishugo’s artwork exhibits the eye of an outsider. Many of her sketches are those of a social critic looking in from outside the barbed-wire confines of Heart Mountain.

Images from the Estelle Ishigo papers (Collection 2010).
Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
FIGURE 1 (above)
GATHERING COAL AT HEART MOUNTAIN RELOCATION CAMP
Oil on canvas. 24 x 20 inches.

FIGURE 2 (below)
DUST STORM, 1942. Watercolor.
FIGURE 3  **UNTITLED** (women and children bathing), ca. 1942-45. Watercolor.
FIGURE 4

HOME, 1942.
Watercolor.
22 x 18 inches.
(Above)
FIGURE 7  **UNTITLED** (school yard scene), ca. 1942-45. Watercolor.

(Opposite)
FIGURE 5  **UNTITLED** (camp scene), ca. 1942-45. Watercolor.
FIGURE 6  **A BASEBALL GAME**, 1943. Watercolor. 21 x 16 inches.
Her whiteness may have allowed her to at least imagine herself outside the fences. And her whiteness may have allowed her to more easily express the emotional sense of outrage and indignation so present in her art (see cover art).

Ishigo rarely appears physically in her artwork. I found only one piece of art where Ishigo includes herself as part of the image. This watercolor recalls Ishigo’s postinternment involvement with a community band comprised of Japanese Americans (fig. 8). Ishigo appears with her white hair, violin in hand, about to climb the stairs leading to the stage. Created in 1954, this painting predates a particularly painful event in Ishigo’s life when some members requested that she leave the band, citing Ishigo’s whiteness and inability to speak Japanese as points of tension. Ishigo complied with this request but not before writing a pointed letter dated June 14, 1955, in which she stated: “Even though I may not appear to be of Japanese ancestry I have never thought of myself as being any different than anyone else. How can we share the pleasure of all our ancestral cultures in America if we segregate ourselves behind a barrier of language?”

Her childhood, steeped in a profound sense of not belonging, may have prepared her for this episode as well as it likely helped her survive four difficult years of imprisonment.

As a Los Angeles watercolorist, Ishigo was involved in the artistic movement known as the California School. Artists trained at the Otis Art Institute were influenced by realism, paying close attention to the details of everyday life and painting with vibrant colors. California School painters also preferred landscapes that were simultaneously representational and symbolic, with a single subject or scene making statements about a larger reality. This influence, I believe, can be seen in Ishigo’s use of the landscape to enact subjectivities. In many of Ishigo’s watercolors and drawings, Heart Mountain itself is featured prominently as a defiant and looming presence. For Ishigo, Heart Mountain seemed to bear witness to the complex lives of imprisoned Japanese Americans. Her practice of capitalizing and placing the words, “The Mountain,” in quotation marks further emphasized its significance to Ishigo’s life and art. As she stated: “Imprisoned at the foot of the mountain, towering in its silence over the barren waste, we searched its gaunt face for the mystery of our destiny.”
This aspect of the landscape is employed to tell her own story, to reterritorialize place. Significantly, the use of Heart Mountain can be seen in a wide range of art created by Japanese Americans imprisoned at Heart Mountain, possibly pointing to a shared significance of the landscape for some Heart Mountain internees.

Ishigo often linked the meaning of the mountain to a mysterious, rather essentialized understanding of Japanese American identity. As she stated: “Some spoke the name of the mountain with the same ancient reverence felt for their own mountains in Japan.” For Ishigo, the mountain appeared to encompass unexpressed feelings, the unspoken, the complexity of camp life. Perhaps an understanding of the mountain as a silent witness foreshadowed the intense atmosphere of silence surrounding the internment for decades after the closing of the camps. Part of Ishigo’s understanding of her experiences was certainly intertwined with featuring the mountain in her work. Ishigo turned to the landscape to reterritorialize the place of the camp, a process of becoming anchored in hostile environments. Through this process of reterritorialization, hostile spaces were altered into arenas of identity articulation where differences were declared and subjectivities enacted. As Ishigo stated on her release: “‘The Mountain’ seems to appear silent and alone but never gone. . . . ‘The Mountain’ was our secret.”9

Notes
2. Ibid.
3. Estelle Ishigo, “The Estelle Ishigo Papers, 1941-1957,” docs. 78-12, collection 2010, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
4. Days of Waiting.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 93.