

A guest in a ghost's home

by Gazelle Samizay

(Excerpt)

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Unless otherwise noted, photos were taken by Gazelle Samizay at Manzanar, CA between 2017-2020.



Apparitions of the Non-Alien: Manzanar
by Vince Schleitwiler

The light in this desert has a clarity that can make you doubt yourself. It is tangible, almost sentient, powerful enough to overwhelm vision and turn it back on itself, as if, in trying to see, you are instead being seen through.

It's a winter afternoon in Seattle, early 2018. I am standing on a dirty sidewalk, under the drizzle of a low gray sky, lost in the images of an impossibly bright landscape spread across four screens behind the window of a storefront gallery. The camera speeds down the road, mountains at the horizon and a fence at the fore. A watchtower comes into view. Then a sign, and an entrance. I am at Manzanar.

My shadow is a word writing itself across time, this video is called. Am I only the shadow cast by someone else's bad dream?

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Later, I have the chance to correspond with the artist. Gazelle Samizay was born in Kabul, and learned about Japanese American incarceration in grade school in Pullman, WA. After the 2016 election and the proclamation of the "Muslim Ban," she decided to face her worst fear—it could happen again.

So she went to Manzanar, following in the footsteps of dozens of other Asian American artists whose work has reflected on the traces of camp. Since 1969, thousands of pilgrims have attended annual programs at Manzanar, but she traveled alone. "I didn't have a guide," she told me.

But she was not without people. Sahar Muradi, her collaborator, confirmed her impression that the landscape recalled their ancestral Afghanistan. Even the little white stones—"baby teeth," Muradi called them—looked like the ones that mark landmines from the old Soviet invasion.

"I have come to remember," Muradi writes.

"Something in the shape of Kabul / this dry earth / this crown of mountains / this canopy of blue." In the video, the landscape is empty, except for Samizay's shadow and dry crunching footsteps. This Manzanar, "A GHOST LAND," is haunted not only by Japanese Americans, but also by the indigenous inhabitants of the land, Paiute and Shoshone.

Yet these could also be ghosts of the studiously forgotten U.S. war in Afghanistan. Or are they victims of indefinite detention at Guantanamo, immigrants on hunger strike in ICE's COVID-infested jails, Black people swept up in a racist prison system? Because camps and cages don't respect the border between life and death, they are places where ghosts proliferate.

The German Jewish refugee Walter Benjamin, who died fleeing fascism, described the historian's work as taking "hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Being Japanese American these days feels like living in someone else's memory.

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Stories of camp are always stories within stories, because every camp is a portal between worlds. Four days after the President signed Executive Order 13769, I was standing on a corner in the International District, the historic center of pan-ethnic Asian American Seattle, waiting for the #36 bus to Beacon Hill. The usual scrum following its arrival was interrupted by a commotion at the bus's doors. I stepped to the side to get a better look.

An older white man exiting the bus was shouting at a slim East African girl in a headscarf. He wanted her to get out of his way. She gave him room, but let him know it was enough—she was a South Seattle kid, not one to take orders from a stranger.

Suddenly, violently, he shoved her aside, yelling, “In America, you get out of

people's way!” I moved between them, as did several others, but he was already hurrying off. In truth, he probably wouldn't have gotten the best of the situation even if none of us were around, and he knew it. If he wasn't already living on the street, he couldn't have been more than a step or two from it. It looked like a strong wind would have taken him down.

We turned and followed the girl onto the bus. A white woman told her she was sorry, that it shouldn't have happened. The driver, an Asian American man, reached over to touch her shoulder as she came down the aisle.

It was too much. The toughness she'd been keeping up fell away at once, and she spun and ran off the bus, crying. I followed her to the corner, but she ran down the block, crossed the street, and slipped into the parking lot of a small building. Later I found out that it was an alternative school, where she was a

student. I got back on the bus and told the driver that it looked like she went to a place where she knew someone, and I hoped it was true.

I had just left a meeting for an event marking the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066. The plan was to feature connections between Japanese American and Jewish history, and invite speakers to discuss the conditions that made concentration camps possible. How could I call upon ghosts, and be so shaken when they appeared?

What had happened? The threat the man presented was mostly show, and while the neighborhood was ready for him, none of us had the heart to chase him down. The girl, sad to say, must have faced down worse harassment on these buses before, without breaking her composure. What would I have said if I'd caught her before she ran away?





The hatred in that broken-down man’s voice echoed with the authority of my government—maybe it was all that held him upright—and he wanted her to know it. That government had just asserted its right to reject her and those who looked like her, to tear apart their families and communities. My own position in the lee of that violence, however fragile or temporary, came before anything I or the others at the bus stop chose to do or not do, as a privilege descending from that same government.

What would it mean for us to try and reassure her, to tell her it would all be okay? If I were her, that would only make me angrier. But she wasn’t me. Actually, for a moment I thought she was my grandmother, or one of my grandmothers’ sisters. And I was overwhelmed with shame.

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Beacon Hill, where I live, is a historically multiracial neighborhood just south of the

International District. On another side of the ID is the Central District, the once-and-future heart of Black Seattle, and on another is Pioneer Square, where I stood and watched *My shadow is a word writing itself across time*. Like most urban areas shaped by historical practices of segregation, these neighborhoods are all struggling through various stages of gentrification.

But Pioneer Square is haunted by more than ghosts. It is a hub for transient and homeless folks, and others who need food and shelter, or receive threadbare social services, and many of those sleeping in its sidewalks are Native people from all around the Northwest. This Native presence traces back to when the neighborhood called the Lava Beds, in the early days of Seattle’s growth on Duwamish land.

The Native presence lives on in the Owens Valley, too. A recurring phrase in Muradi’s poem—“Coyote’s children living in the water

ditch”—invokes one name by which the Paiute refer to themselves.

Water struggles in the Owens Valley are legendary, beginning a century ago, when the city of Los Angeles bought up water rights for a new aqueduct. Most of Owens Lake, where thirty-five Paiutes died in an 1863 massacre, was drained to slake the growing metropolis to the south. *Manzanar, Diverted*, a documentary by Ann Kaneko, draws these historical threads together more explicitly.

Samizay’s images allude to this history, as Muradi’s poem laments “the River dragged south / the valley emptied.” The resulting transformation of the landscape undoubtedly shaped the decision to build Manzanar; camps were always built in godforsaken terrain. In fact, one initial idea was to house the entire population in a single place—an all-Japanese American prison city hidden in the mountains!

Water and dust define the Japanese American

experience. The Issei, the first generation of Japanese immigrants at the turn of the century, were renowned for their superior irrigation techniques. Their ability to clear and bring water to “untamed” and undesirable land brought decades of envy from white farmers. The remote areas where the camps were built soon bloomed with gardens, farm plots, and orchards—products of incarcerated labor, but also sources of pride, quiet defiance, and sustaining beauty.

Looking back, I sometimes daydream of an alternate universe where Manzanar was given to us—or we took it, all 126,000 of us! A sanctuary city, a homeland of the future, like those imagined by diasporas the world over. Would we thrive or perish? Open our gates to refugees, or build walls to hold off the world? Or would we be sitting targets, inviting slaughter, massacred in the lakebed like those who came before?

When did we learn to dream of a Shangri-La on stolen land?

The first Japanese Americans to arrive at Manzanar came as volunteers. They signed up to build their own prison, providing invaluable service to the wartime propaganda effort. Samizay’s images have taught me to see that the Manzanar in this universe, sacred and unsparing, is beautiful enough.

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After the President signed Executive Order 9066—a decision so momentous and so careless—it was necessary to summon forth the subjects of his proclamation. “All persons of Japanese ancestry” were to appear, posters declared, “both alien and non-alien.”

It’s often noted that two-thirds of incarcerated were U.S.-born citizens, the second-generation Nisei. But the others, the Issei, were “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” barred from naturalization on racial grounds—even though most had cast their lot in this new land decades earlier, at the very time exclusionary laws and policies closed the

borders to further Japanese immigration.

These Issei, unable to legally own land in most Western states, had hoped that Nisei birthright citizenship would secure their rights and lives in the new country, and staked the community’s future on it. Instead, the Nisei were now “non-aliens,” an awkward euphemism without legal standing, which nonetheless defined the subjects of wartime policies.

A double negative (not-not a citizen) and strange paradox (though homegrown, she is clearly a variety of alien), a non-alien can be defined, simply, as a citizen whose rights are cancellable on racial grounds. Her instability proved too much for the law to bear, and official efforts to redeem Japanese Americans as loyal citizens began in the camps themselves, intensifying as the odds of Allied victory and concerns over postwar influence in Asia increased.

Indeed, the very term *Japanese American* can

be understood as the performative negation of a double negative, *no-no*, a rhetorical trick to conjure away the very being summoned to appear by government proclamation. But ghosts don’t go away because you deny their existence. You just end up with more ghosts.

The non-alien will keep reappearing until she is free to go. And the liberation of the non-alien requires nothing less than the abolition of citizenship.

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Samizay’s images of Manzanar have a context and a lineage: the camp pilgrimage. The camp pilgrimage is a rite of movement, a performance genre, an aesthetic or perceptual counter-training.

The first organized pilgrimages to sites of Japanese American incarceration began during the 1960s Asian American movement. Pilgrimages reunite incarcerated, honor ancestors, build community, and advocate for





historical preservation, and helped drive the successful redress movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Invited attendees have included Iranian Americans after the 1979 crisis, American Muslims since 9/11, and undocumented activists today.

What the camp pilgrimage enacts is not the memorialization but the mobilization of the past, a rite of movement. In 2016, under the Obama administration, Tule Lake-born therapist Satsuki Ina visited the Dilley, TX immigrant family detention center, highlighting incarceration's long-term psychological effects—as a child, she was held nearby, at Crystal City. In 2019, with the Tsuru for Solidarity campaign, she returned to Dilley and to Ft. Sill, OK, a former detention site for Issei and prisoner-of-war camp for the Chiricahua Apache, to fight its designation as a prison for refugee children.

These actions count as camp pilgrimages too.

As an artistic genre, countless writers,

photographers, and other artists have imagined and documented visits to incarceration sites as a way of taking measure of the experience and its legacies. Ghosts are a consistent motif. Recent examples include Daryn Wakasa's short horror film, *Seppuku*; musician Kishi Bashi's *Omoiyari* project; dancer/scholar Michael Sakamoto's butoh photography; and writings by Tamiko Nimura, Brandon Shimoda, and others. An old favorite is "Return to Manzanar," a 1996 article by Martin Wong and Eric Nakamura in their zine *Giant Robot*, documenting their attempts at skateboarding the camp site.

These works tend to appear in waves, following events like the passage of redress in the 1980s or 9/11. They typically emphasize embodied performance, and relations between sight, kinesthesia, and memory. Compulsively or ritualistically, they repeat the demand to prove what has been thoroughly documented, *fingering the jagged grain* of the experience, to borrow Ralph Ellison's definition of the blues. They lay the artist's own body on the line,

gambling on a specific relation between place and embodiment to summon forth the subject of the experience—a tangible, almost sentient absence.

You do not have to be Japanese American to make a camp pilgrimage, though to do so is to ask if you are one of the non-alien's legatees, and whether you can bear to see as she sees, as Samizay's images do.

One classic of the genre is Rea Tajiri's 1991 experimental documentary *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, which layers Hollywood film and government propaganda with family interviews, poetic reflections, and fictional scenarios. At the end, Tajiri travels to the ruins of the Poston, AZ camp, to reenact the one fragment of memory her Nisei mother was able to share, and constructing an image to accompany its words.

The memory is pleasurable and sensory, filling a canteen with water under the desert sun. Rea is my aunt, and the woman she portrays

in this scene is my grandmother.

* * *

Samizay told me it was important to her not to “equate” Japanese American incarceration to today’s Islamophobia. Instead, she spoke of the shadow, which evokes the recurrence of the past, like “the nation’s repressed psychological shadow rearing its head” in the 2016 election.

But it also offers solidarity, across difference, as Muradi’s poem insists: “My shadow upon shadows / painting the earth / writing itself across time.” The great Black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois used a similar image in a 1924 essay, predicting the rise of an Afro-Asian movement against colonialism and white supremacy, which he called “the shadow of shadows.”

In the video, Muradi’s words seek solidarity, but there is no sign of another living person, just rocks, dead trees, dry scrub, and neat



little sets of steps, *one-two-three*, marking entrances to vanished barracks. Then, in a shock of colors and patterns, the camera finds origami cranes: first one, then another, then in long strands, heaped against weathered wood. Soon there are carvings, in Japanese and Roman characters, and a repeated name and date, “Tommy 1943.” The voiceover shifts to the first-person plural: “*We* come to remember.”

These cranes, or *tsuru*, have since become the symbol of a vibrant national movement. Tsuru for Solidarity works to close detention sites and support immigrant and refugee communities targeted by racist policies. It calls upon Japanese Americans, as the saying goes, to *become the allies our community needed in 1942*.

“It is the living who haunt the dead, and not vice versa,” the poet Brandon Shimoda once told me. “There were innumerable times when I was overwhelmed by the acute feeling that I—the grandchild, the descendant, the

living—was the ghost; that I was the restless, disquieted spirit; that I was the one who was transgressing the boundary between public and private space, collective and individual consciousness, life and death; that it was my soul that had been arrested, and that needed to be recuperated and brought home.”

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“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was,” Toni Morrison has written. “Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.” The video concludes with images of water, sparkling with memory.

This is “*wuzu*,” Samizay explained, “the Afghan pronunciation of an Arabic term denoting the Islamic purification ritual.” Footage of feet being cleansed before prayer came from her trip to Tunisia before their revolution. She told me, “This was a small nod

to Muslim culture, and also reflected my own prayer that this all ends peacefully.”

Two years later, I don’t know whether her prayer will be realized. There was a time when it felt like all the Japanese Americans I knew began standing up, warning that it could happen again. And there was a time when it stopped feeling like a warning.

Back then, as I stood on the street, reflecting on the association of memory and prayer, I saw that solidarity in dangerous times requires giving your own stories over to others to be transformed by them, memories of Manzanar finding restoration in a Muslim ritual, like the Japanese American activist Yuri Kochiyama secretly converting to Islam in the 1970s.