

Virtually American?

Denationalizing North American Studies

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Moving *Beyond Manzanar*: Transnationalizing Japanese American Internment Experiences¹

Introduction

I pass a small signpost for a historical monument, like a footnote on the highway. Something makes me slow down, back up, and get out of the car, stepping back into the silence of the landscape. There doesn't seem to be much there—a couple of sentry huts built of stone, what looks like an abandoned warehouse but was once an auditorium, a few tall trees and a patch of green that says there's water out there somewhere. Beyond the green, a small white monument stands dwarfed in the shadow of the mountains. This is all that remains of the Manzanar internment camp. (Houshmand, "Never to Repeat")

These are the words of Zara Houshmand, an Iranian American writer, theater artist, and multimedia designer. Houshmand went on a meditation retreat to Whitney Portal, California, in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing committed by Timothy McVeigh in April 1995. Initially, the media

had blamed the attack on Islamic terrorists, thus provoking a wave of hate crimes against people of Middle Eastern origin. When Houshmand, who was not personally affected by the Oklahoma bombing, happened to visit the site of the Manzanar internment camp on her way to Whitney Portal, it seemed more like a confluence of events (Thiel, "Deja Vu") (fig. 1). She was not only deeply impressed by the



Fig. 1: The security post, Manzanar, 2002. Photo by the author.

¹ I am most grateful to Mita Banerjee, Zara Houshmand, and Tamiko Thiel for their kind feedback and insightful comments on this essay. I would like to thank Zara Houshmand and Tamiko Thiel for allowing me to reprint parts of their *Beyond Manzanar* installation.

'absent presence' of this former site of Japanese American incarceration but also by the striking similarity of the desert landscape and its mountain background to Iran. Houshmand recalls:

I imagined history repeating itself in the most literal way, on this very land, and the irony of mapping such a prison onto the prisons that memory and longing make: the alien looking inward on the landscape of exile, here in this desolate corner of California where the American dream was betrayed. There's a poem somewhere, I thought. ("Never to Repeat")

The poem was eventually written, yet not immediately; Houshmand instead shared her experience with Tamiko Thiel, an American visual artist of Japanese German heritage.² The grid of roads drawn in the desert during World War II by the military furthermore reminded Houshmand of the geometric layout of an Iranian garden. Thiel continued the chain of associations speaking of 'Manzanar' being named after the apple orchards planted by Euro-American settlers, as well as the gardens that Japanese Americans had created in all of the internment camps. In her autobiography *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973)³ Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston similarly describes how Japanese Americans assumed agency through the creation of camp gardens:

Gardens had sprung up everywhere, in the firebreaks, between the rows of barracks – rock gardens, vegetable gardens, cactus and flower gardens. . . . You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids toward the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all. You could hang suspended in some odd, almost lovely land you could not escape from yet almost didn't want to leave. (99)

The possible subversive quality of the gardens is contained at the same time. The gardens may serve as places of temporary escape and inspiration, but they remain situated and thus associated with a place of confinement, atrocity and trauma.⁴

At the outset of their artistic collaboration which became the virtual reality installation *Beyond Manzanar* both Houshmand and Thiel were struck by the layers of meaning they had discovered in the creation of gardens, which connected the Japanese, Iranian and American cultures.⁵ More importantly, the

² Thiel's immediate family (her grandparents, her mother and siblings) had lived in Hawaii and were not interned during World War II. The internment experience thus did not scar her family history as it did that of Thiel's Japanese American friends.

³ For a recent study on Houston's autobiography in terms of transnational Asian American studies see Davis.

⁴ In his essay in this volume Glen Lowry similarly argues that Stan Douglas's gardens also function as spaces of confinement, disciplining the working class.

⁵ *Beyond Manzanar* was the artists' own idea, and although they applied and received some funding for it (most notably the IAMAS grant, see later in this essay), it is not a commissioned work of art. For example, Houshmand and Thiel were turned down for funding by the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program (CCLPEP) (<http://www.library.ca.gov/grants/cclpep/>) that had been established as part of the 1988

two artists realized that they both shared similar experiences and memories, belonging to groups that represent(ed) 'the face of the enemy.'

Long before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans had suffered from Anglo-American prejudice, practically since the arrival of Japanese people in the United States in the late nineteenth century.⁶ After December 7, 1941, the US government authorized extensive searches of the homes of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans, wrongly suspecting them of committing acts of sabotage, treason and giving support to the enemy. In fact, no evidence for any such activities was ever found, and it has been proven that racist as well as economic reasons played a major role in government policy.⁷ Between March 1942 and March 1946 over 120,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated in what were officially called 'relocation centers.'⁸ More than two-thirds of those incarcerated were American citizens by birth. Almost forty years later, in 1979, at the height of the Iranian hostage crisis, a suggestion to intern Iranian Americans circulated in the United States.⁹

Charting the Coordinates

In his presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2001, George Sanchez reflected on the actions of the federal government in times of crisis which he sees rooted in the fear of everything foreign: "from Chinese

Civil Liberties (redress and reparation) Act. At the time (the mid-1990s), the program wanted to focus on projects that directly involved people who had been in the camps.

⁶ See Yuji Ichioka's *The Issei* (1988) for a documentation of early Japanese immigration and anti-Asian exclusion laws.

⁷ In 1944, the Supreme Court had upheld the legality of the forced evacuation and incarceration of Japanese Americans on the basis of military necessity. Today we know that the government knowingly withheld information from the courts, supposedly out of national security reasons (cf. Daniels, Taylor, and Kitano). This seems especially relevant since in the context of 9/11 a similar governmental strategy enabled the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act which significantly strengthened the federal government's powers to conduct surveillance, enforce stricter visa and immigration regulations, transportation security procedures, and to delay notification of a warrant to a suspect. For an account of the Japanese Canadian internment experience and redress movement see Miki; Miki and Kobayashi.

⁸ A number of expressions are commonly used to describe the ten facilities administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) in which Japanese Americans were detained during World War II. These terms include: 'evacuation centers,' 'relocation centers,' 'detention camps,' and 'internment camps.' Even the term 'concentration camp' was already widely employed at the time the camps were established. Drawing attention to the fact that the process of exclusion and forced removal was unlawful, the terms 'internment camp' and 'incarceration,' will be used preferentially in this essay. For the difference between "internment" and "incarceration" see Roger Daniels, "Incarceration" 301. Daniels also treats the problem in "Words Do Matter."

⁹ In March 1980, Japanese-American senator S.I. Hayakawa proposed a bill to allow the internment of Iranian nationals in the United States. See Eastham and Fogarty.

Exclusion of the 1880s to Japanese American internment of the 1940s, from Mexican repatriation of the 1930s to our present anti-Muslim and anti-Arab period" (10). In times of crisis, "the distinction between US citizens and foreign nationals in the US is lost, and 'foreignness' itself is used as a racial categorization that makes everyone in that group suspect as an enemy of the nation" (Sanchez 10). Sanchez called upon American studies and ethnic studies scholars to speak out for a tolerance of difference in order to ensure a continued diversity of experiences shaping US history, society and culture in times of "global interconnectedness" (10-11). His demands were echoed and expanded by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in her presidential address three years later. She believes that as American studies scholars "[w]e are likely to focus less on the United States as a static and stable territory and population whose most characteristic traits it was our job to divine, and more on the nation as a participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products" (Fishkin 24).¹⁰ Thus the study of 'global flows' or the "diffusion of cultural forms" is at the center of transnational American studies.¹¹ As American studies scholars we should furthermore engage ourselves in "investigations of public memory and monuments in comparative perspective" (Fishkin 33).

Today, Japanese American experiences are finally achieving cultural meaning through what Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls 'cultural forms' and Marita Sturken refers to as 'technologies of memory' (cf. *Tangled Memories* 10). The translation of experiences into these media of memory needs time, power, a location, and a form. In the case of Japanese American internment, the temporal and hegemonic aspects of remembering have been characterized by a long period of silence and invisibility. The spatial aspect of Japanese American remembering and/or forgetting becomes evident in the immediate erasure of the internment camps by the federal government after the war. Absent markings of the landscapes of internment also influenced environmental perception in terms of erasure. In this sense, Japanese Americans needed both to regain a voice – after a long period of silence – and to reclaim a place in the American national landscape of memory because many of the former internment camp sites, such as the one in Manzanar, had been eradicated by the federal government shortly

¹⁰ In the last chapter of *Cultural Complexity*, Ulf Hannerz also refers to an imagined "global cultural flow chart" (221). See also Hannerz, *Transnational Connections* (1996).

¹¹ Fishkin's call is echoed in the theme of the 2006 annual meeting of the American Studies Association: "The United States from Inside and Out: Transnational American Studies." Emory Elliott sought to clarify the transnational turn's agenda when he asked in his presidential address: "What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational?" For him a focus on "cultural diversity in the United States and abroad and the internationalization of U.S. studies" (9) can provide the best model for transnationalism. Winfried Fluck, who defines the turn's goal as "the redefinition of the field of American studies as transnational, transatlantic, transpacific, hemispheric, or even global studies" (23), also cautions Americanists not to run away "from the task and interpretive challenge for which [American studies] was created," namely "the analysis of the cultural sources of American power" (30, 29).

after the closure of the camp in 1945, and last remnants had been reclaimed by the desert.¹²

Considering the 'absent presence' of Japanese American internment experiences, Sturken asks "what is the appropriate memory here? What kind of memorial is demanded? Can a memorial properly memorialize the event?" She believes that "the most powerful kinds of memorials demand forms of re-enactment in the sense that they force viewers to participate rather than to find a comfortable distance" ("Absent Images" 46). Unknowingly heeding Sturken's suggestion, the artists Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand were struck by the 'absent presence' of the Manzanar internment camp and also by its significance in exemplifying the treatment of 'an Other.' They virtually 'recovered' the site, also widening its scope and perspective by working across cultural boundaries. Their 3D virtual reality art installation, called *Beyond Manzanar*, employs techniques of computer games transporting visitors virtually inside the Manzanar internment camp.

Beyond Manzanar transcends Japanese American internment experiences by means of its technology, structure and availability. In this essay I will show how *Beyond Manzanar* not only conveys visual memories of the past and makes a meaningful statement about the immorality and injustice of the Japanese American internment, but how it also manages to project these memories and their transnational significance permanently into the future beyond the confinement of US American borders through its availability on the World Wide Web.

Before taking a virtual tour of the installation in order to analyze *Beyond Manzanar*'s scope and effect, I will first briefly summarize the installation's origins and theorize the field of virtual art installations. I will then situate the art piece in several of its current locations in Japan, the United States, and Germany.

Creating Installation Art in Transnational Contexts

In 1995, recognizing the political and aesthetic potential of the Manzanar site for metaphorically exploring both the wartime experience of Japanese Americans and the discrimination against Iranian Americans, Houshmand and Thiel began a collaborative process to create an art piece that would use their

¹² In 1992, almost fifty years after the closure of the Manzanar camp, the federal government stepped in to position Japanese American experiences and memory in the national narrative. On March 3 of that year, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the establishment of Manzanar National Historic Site and turned control of the site over to the National Park Service (NPS). Manzanar remains the only national historic site of an internment camp that is being restored and since 2004 features an on-site museum and interpretive center. In January 2001, Minidoka Internment National Monument became the 385th unit of the National Park System. Yet, to this date, Minidoka does not have any visitor facilities or services available.

personal experiences as frame of reference. Neither Thiel nor Houshmand could anticipate the political climate that would follow the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The images representing the torture and violence that occurred in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo under the veil of the so-called war on terrorism, changing our visual perception of war tremendously, lay also in the future. At that time, in the mid-1990s, both artists were working for a company where they created virtual reality environments. Realizing the potential of the medium, Thiel and Houshmand wanted to go beyond a mere life-like reproduction of the 'real' world and create virtual realities deserving of the designation (Houshmand).

In their effort they were following current discussions in the field of cyberculture within media and communication studies trying to theorize multimedia interactivity as more problematic and complex than merely moving a computer mouse or pressing a button. Communications scholar and interactive designer Janet H. Murray points out that one of the interesting possibilities of computers is that they allow narrative to be moved to a realm structured by games. She writes, "Just as Art Spiegelman used the format of the comic book to tell the story of his father's experiences, a digital artist might use the structure of the adventure maze to embody a moral individual's confrontation with state-sanctioned violence" (Murray 131). Some cyberculture critics go even further in their visions of how interactive technologies can revolutionize social memory. In this vein, Sparacino, Davenport, and Pentland believe that the museum could become "a living memory theatre" by incorporating wearable computers to create immersive museum environments. New technologies should be used to clad us in memory devices in order "to imprint us with the memories of the past and project them indelibly into our future" (Sparacino, Davenport and Pentland 81).

For *Beyond Manzanar*, a realistic reconstruction of the internment camp site, with guard towers and barracks, became the framework. Yet, being virtual reality, it also provides "an experience that is impossible to get from visiting the real site" (Thiel, "Constructing Meaning"). Inside the virtual camp, the artists planted a Japanese and an Iranian garden as "magical healing spaces like those the mind builds when reality fails" (Houshmand). They "combined techniques of computer games and theater design to create a highly symbolic, often surreal environment with a poetic reality stronger than photorealism" (Thiel and Houshmand, "Virtual Reality Installation"). Virtual reality's performative quality seems indeed to imply a close relation of the medium to theater.¹³ "As in a theater setting," art historian Elizabeth K. Menon contends, "the viewer/user watches a performance played out by actors (visually manifest individuals or objects) based on a script (which controls the action and physically exists, although it is not literally visible)" (29). Compared to theatrical performance,

¹³ In *Computers as Theatre*, Brenda Laurel argues that Aristotle's elements of the dramatic arts could be connected to the realm of human-computer interaction.

the range of interaction possible between the art installation and its viewers/users then allows for a greater degree of freedom and engagement.

Four contexts seem relevant if one explores *Beyond Manzanar*. First, it widens the scope of the topic of Japanese American experiences by including Iranian American and Japanese German American ethnic communities; its message is universal. Second, it was created in response to attacks on people of Middle Eastern origin after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, during which the media had erroneously linked the attack to the Middle East.¹⁴ Third, it refers to attacks on Iranian Americans and to calls for their internment during the 1979-1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis.¹⁵ Comparably, two weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, a third of the respondents in a poll said they would favor the detainment of Arab American citizens until their loyalty could be proven (Bai 21). Finally, the installation parallels current instances of xenophobia and criticizes assaults on Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.¹⁶ The provocative juxtapositions make *Beyond Manzanar* an artistic achievement that may trigger profound empathy in visitors who have neither experienced the Japanese American internment like Thiel's family, nor suffered under exclusionary sentiments and discrimination like Houshmand.

Beyond Manzanar draws upon the wide array of computer games that employ a first-person perspective. Such computer games try to (re)create a world, not necessarily an existing one, as realistically and believable as possible. Yet, Thiel and Houshmand's art installation transcends virtual reality because it adds objects and layers that break the reality of the created environments, and it thus requires further contemplation and interpretation.

Bringing in the Audience

In the following, I will provide a description which nevertheless cannot replace the actual experience of the installation. I will summarize the layout, but it will be different from the individual experience other visitors might have. Unlike other virtual reality pieces the viewer/user does not need 3D goggles or wired gloves to negotiate the space. Using a joystick mounted in front of the life-sized projected image on the opposite wall, viewers/users can freely move within the virtual space. Thiel and Houshmand created a nonlinear narrative, which the person in control of the joystick constructs as she is exploring the

¹⁴ Two American Midwesterners, Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirator Terry Nichols, killed 168 people with their attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁵ During the crisis, the administration of President Jimmy Carter took preliminary steps against Iranian college students living in the United States (Daniels 307).

¹⁶ The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) responded to numerous incidents of violence and harassment against Arab Americans, Muslim Americans and other individuals or groups that are perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent (Anti-Defamation League).

virtual space. While only one user may control the actual movements and decide which course or road to take, other visitors may watch and share the experience.

The starting point of the virtual environment is a white area that could be interpreted as a desert. The slowly emerging regular lines only signify a camp structure to those who already know. A ground plan with rectangles representing barracks emerges, as well as an enormous mountain range, the Sierra Nevada, which majestically marks the horizon. Similar to the way the mountain landscape frames the scene, *Beyond Manzanar* is framed by two prayers. The very first sound you hear is the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer; and the final poem of the piece is a Buddhist Mandala. The audiovisual experience is augmented by the sound of howling desert wind and the rustling of footsteps in the desert sand. If one follows the open road in a conscious or subconscious effort to find a way out or run away, one will automatically come upon a barbed wire fence. With the width of the landscape suddenly taken away, one recognizes the enclosure of the camp, underscoring, as the artists explain it, "the emotional impact of confinement" (Thiel and Houshmand, "History"). Although the mountain range of the Sierra Nevada still dominates the horizon beyond the fence, guard towers are now visible as well. The fence represents more than a physical object as texts in three different languages appear interwoven within the barbed wire; they are poems about exile and internment in Farsi, English, and Japanese. Houshmand's translations of the writings of thirteenth century Persian Sufi mystic Rumi that are part of the 'fence poems' read:

If you had been slashed apart by separation / Then I could explain the pain of longing to you. / Whoever lives far from where his roots grow / Seeks the day when he may know that union.

The messenger brings sad news, / but words cannot obscure the truth: / Write 'prison' on the garden gate; / that word does not a prison make.

The texts speak profoundly of the pain of separation, the kind of separation any traveler to another country, willingly or unwillingly, has experienced. Rumi, who lived in a time of political upheaval and whose family fled one step ahead of the Mongol invasions, employs conventional themes of Persian poetry: exile and separation from the beloved are usually understood as a metaphor for separation from God, the human condition as a 'fallen' state, and the emotional quality of longing as an expression of spiritual aspiration.¹⁷ The Japanese Americans at Manzanar during World War II were not only unwanted immigrants, but had become enemies of the country where they had actually grown new roots. Yet, despite their imprisonment, they did not give up. In the context of the installation, the second poem could be interpreted as revealing imprisonment/freedom and fences/gates as mere mental constructs. The Persian poems, in this sense, reference a state beyond the immediate troubles, an internal state rather than an external resolution that may exude hope for anyone confined.

¹⁷ I am very grateful to Zara Houshmand for explaining the reference to Persian poetry to me.

The Japanese 'fence poems' are contemporary expressions by Sojin Tokiji Takei, the principal of the Japanese language school on Maui, Hawaii. He was interned in different internment camps, although never at Manzanar. His poems universally express the feeling of confinement, but also the boundlessness of nature experienced in prison. Nature, however, is not always compassionate, as nothing grows in the wasteland:

How many more thousand miles / Does this wasteland continue? / Beyond the end of the horizon / And over the mountain – / Again more wasteland.

There is no fence / High up in the sky. / The evening crows / Fly up and disappear / Into the endless horizon.

The two last "fence poems" are taken from the earliest anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Manyōshū* dating back to around 770 AD. Compared to Takei's lines, their portrayal of the deep sorrow of confinement is even bleaker:

Though the saying goes / That the heavens and earth are vast, / My experience is / That they have shrunk upon me.

One of us may feel / That life holds only pain, and other / That our lot is shameful, / Yet since we are not birds, but men, / We cannot find escape in flight.

The installation offers no way out of the camp by means of overcoming the fence. While the viewer/user sees the passes that lead out of the valley, the fence remains a barrier underscoring the emotional impact of confinement. The person navigating *Beyond Manzanar* – like the Japanese American internee – has become a prisoner. "Confined within the camp, you have nowhere to go but inwards, into the refuge of memory and fantasy," Thiel and Houshmand explain (Thiel and Houshmand, "History"). Condemned to wander through the camp, one notices racist World War II-era newspaper headlines materialize and disappear again: "It takes 8 tons of freight to k.o. 1 Jap," "We don't want any Japs back here ever!" These anti-Japanese headlines literally "fill the air with hate" (Thiel, "Constructing Meaning") (fig. 2). War screams can be heard, and barracks grow out of the ground plan. The barracks seem inhabited, as photographs illustrating the internees' daily lives at Manzanar can be seen through the barrack windows. Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In" can be heard, offering an ironic comment to the situation of obvious confinement. Two love songs by former internee Mary Kagemura Nomura add to the acoustic



Fig. 2: The sky fills slowly with headlines of war and hate. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

experience.¹⁸ Possibly lured in by Kagemura's voice the viewer/user may enter one of the camp barracks. Once inside, the door that functioned as portal will close, trapping the viewer/user inside the barrack. Literally having become a prisoner, the viewer/user encounters 'shadows' of Japanese Americans or – to be precise – black and white photographs or cut-out silhouettes of other internees. Some of the photographs seem suspended from the virtual ceiling like Japanese scrolls. Other photographs displayed in a gallery-like style, yet mounted on what looks like a wallpapered living-room wall, tell the story of Japanese immigration to the United States. People sit at a festively decorated table in the old homeland. Some photographs show immigration papers and document Japanese American life before the war. American-style family and wedding photographs are hung next to a young Japanese American who is proudly wearing his US Army uniform. The photographs suggest that a homogeneous national identity defined by origins or residence alone is not possible; instead Japanese American ethnicity is defined and complicated by an acceptance of both parts.

Yet, what might be called a (Japanese) American Dream of acceptance and achievement is broken and becomes a nightmare as the context of the installation changes to camp photographs now mounted on the bare barrack walls. At the same time, miniaturized rows of barracks appear where the wooden floor should be. Floating above the barracks, deprived of stability, one beholds photographs of Japanese Americans walking down Bainbridge Island pier under armed guard.¹⁹ In virtuality, the forced removal of Japanese Americans becomes very real.

Then the scenes of Japanese American removal and internment change to the depiction of Iranian American scenes in another wallpapered room: Iranian American college graduates, American-style Iranian American bride and groom, and a grandmother with her grandchild stand for happiness and stability, for an 'Iranian American Dream.' Even a picture of President John F. Kennedy is framed among the family photographs. Especially to an older generation of Iranian Americans who were eager to send their children to the United States before the revolution to be educated, Kennedy seemed to represent the best of America. The image of Kennedy that Thiel and Houshmand constructed for *Beyond Manzanar* is meant to be a portrait woven into a Persian wall carpet, which was a very popular item in the carpet shops of Tehran in the 1960s and

¹⁸ Setting the poems of her future husband Shiro "Shi" Nomura to music, Mary Kagemura sung and recorded the songs and mailed the record back to him in camp. Nomura and his wife were also the initiators for documenting the history of Manzanar in the Eastern California Museum, Independence.

¹⁹ These images were also visually referenced by director Scott Hicks in *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), which was based on David Guterson's award-winning novel. Hicks re-enacted the Bainbridge Island scene to depict the forced removal of Japanese Americans from fictional San Piedro Island. Similar to Hicks, Thiel and Houshmand also used photographs to establish various spaces in their installation. In fact, Houshmand had read Guterson's novel just before her initial trip to Manzanar and was deeply affected by it.

1970s.²⁰ However, like the 'Japanese American Dream,' the 'Iranian American Dream' becomes a nightmare with the Iranian hostage crisis represented in newspaper headlines and photographs. Some of the headlines read: "Teheran students seize U.S. embassy and hold hostages," and "We interned the Japanese, why not intern the Iranians?" The accompanying photographs underscore the latter message showing blindfolded men herded together (the US hostages being shown off by their Iranian student captors), as well as gun-toting women wearing headscarves. As in the Japanese American internment nightmare scene, one hovers over rows of miniaturized barracks, which thereby thematically link the events around the Iranian hostage crisis with the Japanese American incarceration.

Impressions of frustration and fear still linger, when the entire camp seems to disappear upon the visitor's entering a paradise garden. In this environment, the viewer/user is distanced from what has once been the camp, only the mountain range on the horizon continues to convey the same sense of place (fig. 3). Forming a constant backdrop for the shifting layers of superimposed context the mountain panorama thus defines the Manzanar site. The Iranian landscape garden that is accessible

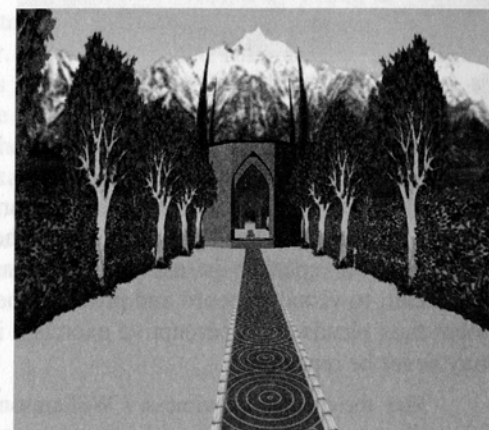


Fig. 3: The Iranian paradise garden. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

only through one of the barracks does not reveal its meaning immediately.²¹ As a representation of paradise it may suggest a 'better' version of reality, one that can only be realized in virtuality; in this way, it is the archetype of virtual reality. Yet, in *Beyond Manzanar* confinement rather than freedom is the subject

Beyond Manzanar gives us virtual gardens, but these gardens have weeds: we are given both hope and oppression, rootedness and dislocation. The gardens comfort, but not for long. They provide refuge, but only as stations on a journey that remains as resistant to totality as cyberspace itself. (Smith 186)

If one approaches the garden gate, the control over the invisible avatar one has been steering so far is suddenly taken away; the projection no longer reacts to the joystick's movements. Agency is lost, and one is pulled out of the camp, which is then visible through the crosshairs of an F-15 fighter jet (fig. 4). The

²⁰ I am grateful for Zara Houshmand's comment here. She furthermore indicated that Kennedy's assassination may have had a special resonance in a culture that loves martyrs.

²¹ An Iranian (American) will probably recognize the features and layout as an idealized chahar-bagh garden, a conventional representation of paradise in Iranian art and garden design.

images are reminiscent of the pictures of so-called surgical attacks; pictures as they were provided to the public during the first Iraq War. Computer war games also use the same technology, yet in a context of leisure. But within *Beyond Manzanar* this is only an apparent moment of empowerment since one has already lost control over the joystick. Thrust upwards in the F-15 fighter one sweeps over the mountains of Manzanar, unable to determine which position one holds in this war, whether one is the attacker or whether one is being attacked.²²

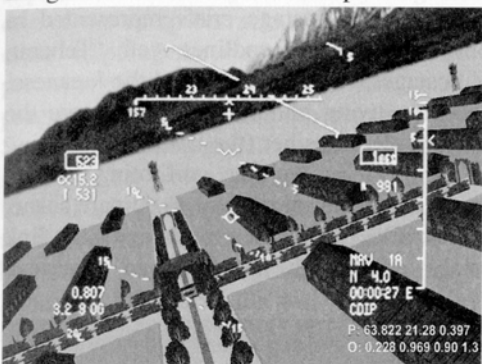


Fig. 4: Video/Game/War—the only way out of the garden. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

When the F-15 finally passes on the screen, a poem – referred to as ‘resolution poem’ or ‘Mandala for Manzanar’ – written by Houshmand appears against the mountain backdrop. It counters the violence of the previous scene. In the poem the speaker is asking the mountains, winds, earth, and sky to remember, to visually record and preserve the history of the site, Manzanar. The poem thus pleads for a perceptive exercise; it expresses the hope that the story may never be repeated:

May the mountains witness. / Williamson, Whitney, Lone Pine, look: / *To the West, a sea of strangers.* / *Each one wears my face.* / Erase the shame, the fear, the witless hate, / Witness now, too late: / Each stranger wears my fate.

Let the winds watch: / *To the South, a million mouths.* / Each tongue speaks my own hope / Each foreign tongue my own, one taste, / Each hunger, one I’ve known.

Let the earth feel: *To the East, a friend unfound yet.* / Embrace the lover yet to be discovered. / Unmake the bed you’ve made; go free. / How like you is the other: simply see.

May the sky see: / *To the North, a need so endless deep.* / That only one whole heart can offer / Ever to console or feed. Then offer this one: / ever watchful never to repeat. [emphases in original]

In the first stanza, the verse is tied to the specific surrounding of the Manzanar site and is thus situated in a Japanese American context; to the west lies Japan, “a sea of strangers” to the speaker who wears the same face, but feels no

²² In reality the occasional sonic boom or high drone of fighter planes from nearby Edwards Air Force Base is the only sound that disturbs the silence and wind at Manzanar today. The fighter plane sequence thus also has a concrete relationship to the particular landscape and may offer yet another layer of meaning to *Beyond Manzanar*.

connection.²³ Still, all have to endure the same fate, the “witless hate” born of war hysteria and racism. In the second stanza the poem and the experience become more intimate, the “sea of strangers” becomes “a million mouths” which could stand for the people of developing countries that long to be fed. The speaker, supposedly part of a developed industrialized nation, identifies the foreign tongues as her own tongue, possibly suggesting the interconnectedness of North and South in a globalized world. In the third stanza addressed to the East, the speaker wants the reader to identify with the ‘Other’ as well. The division between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is only a construct. What had been Japanese Americans in the 1940s were Iranian Americans in the 1980s, Arab Americans in the 1990s and Arab Americans again after September 11, 2001. Arabs and Iranians had entered the United States from the East. The third stanza also brings the possibility of a friend or lover. In the fourth and final stanza, the speaker returns to the North and cautions North America, i.e., the United States to responsibly accept their role in the world “to console or feed,” but to also be “ever watchful never to repeat.” The circular structure of the poem finally also seems evocative of Native American literature which also often relies on the four cardinal directions. Houshmand’s poem provides a cathartic resolution to the viewer/user who navigated the space, after wavering between emotional highs and lows due to the constant change between different layers and environments within virtual reality.

Locating *Beyond Manzanar*

The development and production of *Beyond Manzanar* took Thiel and Houshmand over five years, from April 1995 until the end of November 2000. A major part of the production was supported by an artist-in-residency grant from the IAMAS media art school in Ogaki City, Japan. First shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in December 2000, the interest and responses from the viewers/users – some of which spent over thirty minutes with the piece and looped through it several times – impressed Thiel (“Photographs”).²⁴ Between April and May 2001, Thiel exhibited *Beyond Manzanar* in Munich (cf. Hauffen). Germany was at the time, and is even now, in the middle of a so-called *Leitkultur*-debate, which is based on the assumption that there exists a ‘guiding,’ ‘leading’ or ‘core culture.’²⁵ Commenting on legal

²³ Japanese Americans have reported that during the time of forced removal and incarceration they encountered large numbers of Japanese Americans for the first time. In *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Houston writes: “It was the first time I had lived among other Japanese, or gone to school with them, and I was terrified all the time” (Houston and Houston 11).

²⁴ Thiel and Houshmand had received a grant award for the *Beyond Manzanar* virtual reality art project from *WIRED Magazine* and the Asian American Arts Foundation in 1998.

²⁵ The concept was first introduced in 1998 by the German orientalist Bassam Tibi in his book *Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft*. While Tibi spoke of a European *Leitkultur* as a form of multiculturalism, the term soon became associated

constructions of citizenship, Günter H. Lenz has pointed out that "in the case of Germany, citizenship is still based on *ius sanguinis*, on a closed cultural concept (*Volknation*) that has repressed alternative traditions of cultural pluralism" (21). As a consequence, those afraid of a rise of parallel societies within German society not only demand the integration of foreigners and immigrants into German culture, but requested that foreigners and immigrants forfeit their own culture for the sake of complete assimilation "without the full rights of citizenship," (21) as Lenz also points out. At the turn to the twenty-first century, questions of whether defining Germanness in visual or cultural terms was at all possible preoccupied German society. Was being German a concept in flux, something immigrants equally adopted and adapted to at the same time? I concur with Seyla Benhabib who has pointed out that while jurisdiction may frame the limits of our actions, "cross-cultural understanding is furthered primarily by processes of understanding and communication within civil society" (81). *Beyond Manzanar* serves as an excellent tool to start such processes of cultural communication, contestation, and resignification as it may be taken to also convey experiences of discrimination of Turkish-Germans, African-Germans, or Arabic-Germans. In general, artistic expressions seem ideal in initiating such processes that in turn need to be translated into social practice. And it is our task as American studies scholars, "trained in analyzing cultures, exploring cultural contacts, and examining intercultural relations," to take stock of these instances, establishing a North American Studies without borders (Hornung 70).

In the United States, *Beyond Manzanar* was first shown during the Seattle Cherry Blossom and Cultural Festival in April 2001. The festival audience included many former internees, some of which – coming from Bainbridge Island originally – had been incarcerated at Manzanar (Thiel and Houshmand, "U.S. Premiere"). Later that year, San Jose resident Beau Takahara saw the installation at the Siggraph Computer Graphics Conference in Los Angeles and became convinced that *Beyond Manzanar* would ideally fit into the San Jose Museum of Art. The museum, founded in 1969, is dedicated to visual culture in Silicon Valley, presenting twentieth and twenty-first century art to the diverse audiences of the Bay Area. In contrast to other institutions, the museum does not have a very large tourist base, but understands itself rather as a "community anchor": people from the community coming in for only twenty minutes to see an exhibition is no exception.²⁶ According to the census of the year 2000, more

with a monocultural vision of German society. See also Nassehi; and Richter. A collection of essays by prominent figures from the world of politics, business, and art was published by Norbert Lammert, *Verfassung, Patriotismus, Leitkultur: Was unsere Gesellschaft zusammenhält* (2006).

²⁶ Since the museum implemented a free admissions policy in June 2001, visitor numbers more than doubled to over 225,000 people a year, and the visitor demographics shifted to now almost resembling the population demographics of San Jose. For the description of the museum's agenda, I am indebted to JoAnne Northrup whom I interviewed on September 2, 2003.

than 25 percent of the population in Santa Clara County, where San Jose is located, are Asian Americans. During World War II, most of the county's 3,000 Japanese Americans were sent to the Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming (Kato 3). In 2002, the San Jose Museum acquired the *Beyond Manzanar* installation.

Aware of *Beyond Manzanar*'s references to the Japanese American internment and the discrimination against Muslim Americans, the San Jose Museum of Art organized a symposium upon the opening of the installation at the museum in November 2002. The public was invited to explore the various contexts that the artwork encompassed especially after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon a year earlier. The artists presented their work and discussed *Beyond Manzanar* with three other panelists from the Japanese and Persian American communities.²⁷ The event once again embedded the installation in its various transnational contexts, from Japanese American internment and the Iranian Hostage crisis to September 11, 2001.

Beyond Manzanar became a major attraction of the San Jose Museum of Art. The particular siting within a strong Asian American community and within Silicon Valley also adds to *Beyond Manzanar*'s significance. Very fittingly, a copy of *Beyond Manzanar* is part of the photography exhibit *Only Skin Deep*, curated by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. It was shown at the International Center for Photography in New York in winter 2003-2004 and at the Seattle Art Museum in spring 2004 (cf. Fusco and Wallis). *Only Skin Deep* explores how photography and other visual media have shaped and defined issues of national identity and race in America. In spring 2005 *Beyond Manzanar* was part of an exhibition called *Xenopolis: On the Fascination with and Marginalisation of the Other* in Munich, Germany. The exhibition consisted of historical image-text montages and artistic contributions exploring "the Other" as construct. An exhibition in Wolfsburg, Germany, called *Non-Stop: A Project on the Ambivalence toward War and Peace* also featured the installation in 2005. Organized on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II in a city that had been a major site of the German arms industry, the exhibition discussed the nature of war, its motivations and command structure and interrogated the constant presence of war in our media age.

²⁷ The panelists included former internee Dave Tatsuno, who showed scenes from his home movie of the internment camp Topaz, Richard Konda, an attorney active in the national Japanese American redress movement, and Shahin Tabrizi, past president of the Persian Center, a national cultural organization serving the Persian community (Weimers 2B). San Jose has a large Iranian American population, the largest concentration in the Bay Area, which overall has been estimated at 300,000. The talk was moderated by software engineer Susan Hayase, a Sansei, who had served as a member of the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund (CLPEF) Board of Directors during the Clinton Administration. Her parents had been interned at the Amache, Colorado, and Gila River, Arizona, camps, and Hayase was a leader in the campaign to obtain redress.

Conclusion

Wherever *Beyond Manzanar* is installed and runs, it translates issues of vision, memory, exclusion, violence, and identity into a universal language, equally relevant to local and global audiences.²⁸ As the artists have put a smaller demonstration version of their installation on their website and on YouTube, *Beyond Manzanar* is not only universally applicable but also universally accessible.²⁹ The demonstration version is supplemented by additional information on the history and project origins as well as the creative process.

On its website, the San Jose Museum of Art also offers additional information about *Beyond Manzanar* and a message board inviting visitors to read and post comments on the piece. On the message board, one visitor remarked: "This is really an experience into America's dark past. I've only read in text books about Japanese Internment, but the headlines on the background newspapers shocked me. I still have not entered all of the eerie barracks with their separate stories inside" (Dao). *Beyond Manzanar* is a work of information art that is not about data or numbers but about using new media technology as a medium to transport meaning. Here, memory does not designate a storage medium but an experience of the viewer/user. The installation invites visitors to explore the humanistic, rather than scientific, dimension of memory and vision.

Beyond Manzanar represents a "powerful kind of memorial" as Marita Sturken has called successful forms of historical re-enactment forcing viewers/users to interact with the piece ("Absent Images" 46). Its technology allows viewers not only to explore a virtual version of Manzanar but also puts them in control of the viewing sequence and lets them make choices resulting in a personal creation of meaning. Tying visitors into the experience, it also responds to questions about the visual process, of looking at others as well as of being looked at. *Beyond Manzanar* uses the structure of an adventure game maze to make a meaningful moral statement. It links the feeling of (virtual) 'imprisonment' to Japanese American memories of incarceration and Iranian American fears of incarceration. The emotional dynamic experienced by the viewer/user in turn has the potential to be translated into various contexts among diverse audiences. The installation thus not only conveys visualized memories of the Japanese and Iranian American past, but manages to project their wider transnational significance 'indelibly into our future.'

²⁸ Since 2005 *Beyond Manzanar* has been shown at the Art Gallery of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY) and at the Katzen Arts Center of the American University, Washington D.C.

²⁹ See <<http://www.mission-base.com/manzanar/>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHWPw1pEYpU>>.

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