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Manzanar: Lasting Remnants and Reflections on an American Injustice

By Rocío Gomez

If there is something to say about the National Park Service (NPS) it is that it undoubtedly serves a great purpose. Preserving and conserving public lands for Americans of all ages and for generations to come is a noble legacy whose future rests in the hands of today’s youth. If the proper care is exercised, the public
will remain captivated by the country’s natural splendor for many years to come. However, not all NPS units are meant to inspire us with the splendid grandeur of arresting natural landscapes. Part and parcel of preserving and conserving the natural beauty of the land is preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the country.

As a Latino Heritage Intern at Manzanar National Historic Site (NHS), my duty as a member of the interpretive team is to share the history of the incarceration of over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry during World War II. Two-thirds of those incarcerated were Nisei, the first generation of persons born in the United States to immigrants from Japan, known as Issei.

Situated along U.S. Highway 395 in the Owens Valley of California, what was once known as the Manzanar War Relocation Center was also the site of the short-lived and bustling town of Manzanar, and the home of the Paiutes of the Owens Valley for over a thousand years. Memories of displacement and oppression resonate in the layers of history featured on display inside Manzanar’s visitor center. As expansive and developed as this site is in telling the story of Japanese American incarceration, my time here has taught me this history has yet to become a widely recognized or discussed topic in the United States more broadly.

Inside Manzanar’s visitor center, working at the front desk can be a deeply gratifying and fascinating experience. Through our interactions with the visitors, we can gauge how far we have come as a society in terms of acceptance and cultural awareness in the United States, but I have experienced encounters that prompt me to sometimes question how far we have actually come. The treatment of the word “American” by some members of the public who visit Manzanar forces me to question whether or not we have surpassed the prejudiced rhetoric that fueled the discriminatory government policies the public learns about at Manzanar. Furthermore, from my time spent here, it has become apparent that the history of Manzanar has become disturbingly relevant, seeing as many people who walk into our visitor center will openly discuss and draw comparisons between and associate the current political climate in the United States with different chapters of Manzanar’s history.

My experience at Manzanar has exposed me to numerous different perspectives on what visitors think about the Japanese American experience during World War II and our role in interpreting that story. Manzanar NHS presents an abundance of
episodes in American history that challenge the visitor to contend with the way white Americans have passed judgment on marginalized communities in the past and the present. A true measure of the efficacy of our site to incite this thought process lies in the inquiries and comments our visitors share with us. In this article, I will provide personal accounts of how my status as a person of color (POC) and my perceived ‘otherness’ have enhanced my learning experience through my projects and strained interactions with visitors as I attempt to interpret Manzanar’s history. Additionally, I will also provide historical accounts from the site to demonstrate Manzanar’s ability to facilitate imperative conversations about the progressiveness, or lack thereof, of American society, further emphasizing the National Park Service’s role in preserving places that serve as benchmarks of American history.

A Summer of Pride

2017 was the first year that Manzanar NHS partnered with the Latino Heritage Internship Program (LHIP), an initiative of the Hispanic Access Foundation (HAF) that seeks to provide Latinx students an opportunity to work at NPS units in an effort to bring diversity to the field of preservation and conservation.\(^1\) LHIPsters\(^2\) are sent to a number of different NPS units nationwide and are expected to perform a wide range of duties for ten weeks during the summer at their respective sites. The tasks performed range from interpretation to wildlife analysis, land preservation, and media. LHIPsters are also encouraged to facilitate events aimed at attracting the local Latinx communities and reminding them how vital their support and attendance is for the NPS.

According to an NPS survey examining park unit visitation from April 2008 to March 2009, Hispanic visitors averaged about 9 percent compared to 78 percent of attendance by White /non-Hispanic visitors at national parks.\(^3\) The numbers for African

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1 “Latinx” is an inclusive term used to identify females, males and gender-non-conforming members of the Latin American community who do not identify with the traditional “Latina” and “Latino” labels.
2 LHIPsters is an informal name used when referring to LHIP interns.
American, Asian, and Native American visitors were even lower. Perceptions of lack of safety, over-priced entrance fees, and the need for more information on recreational activities are cited among several other reasons accounting for low Latinx park unit visitation. This is also the case at Manzanar and engaging with Spanish-speaking Latinx visitors has become a rare treat. Conversing in the language I was raised with brings me great comfort, and it gives me an opportunity to share my knowledge with a demographic I believe the site’s history will deeply resonate with. However, U.S. Highway 395’s direct access to Los Angeles, which is only four hours away, has helped foster a diverse visitor population at Manzanar, including growing numbers of Latinx visitors, a hopeful sign that the times are changing since the survey.

In the first ten weeks of my internship, I was very fortunate to have worked on projects that expand on the Owens Valley’s history. Additionally, because so many facets of American history have transpired on this land, my time spent here has reinforced my conviction that this site is appropriately suited for honest discourse on the state of the union and the American public in any decade.

“A Paiute Story from Manzanar”

Before I started my internship at Manzanar NHS in June 2017, I desired to familiarize myself with the projects that I would soon be assigned to. I made several inquiries a few months in advance and found out I would be working on an exhibit showcasing the Button family. The Buttons are a local Paiute-Shoshone family from the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation. Park ranger Rose Masters sent me the copy of an oral history conducted by Manzanar NHS in 2007 with the family matriarch, Irene Button, and her son Richard. When I finally arrived at Manzanar on June 3rd, I was already acquainted with the family’s story. Within the first week of my arrival, the park ranger I was assigned to work with, Mark Hachtmann, contacted the family, so we could meet with them as soon as possible.


^4 Ibid., 14.
Throughout the course of those first ten weeks, Ranger Mark and I met with the Buttons at least five times. Their family history is deeply rooted in the Owens Valley, and we wanted to ensure that the exhibit showcased their story in a tone and manner of which they would approve. With such an intimate connection to the land, it was prudent of us to remind the public that although the Button lineage spans over a thousand years in the Owens Valley, their story is not to be romanticized. Their wish was to be portrayed as a modern family who are proud to have retained a culture the government vehemently tried to suppress through official policies up until the mid-twentieth-century. The artifacts they donated for the exhibit reflect the story of a family that shares universal values with the rest of the world, a prime example of which is featured on display as the heart of the exhibit; the Paiute cradleboard. The cradleboard was made in the 1970s by one of Irene’s sisters, and it was used by one of her grandchildren.

Featured as a permanent exhibit at Manzanar NHS, “A Paiute Story from Manzanar,” displays the Button family’s story and personal artifacts. At the public reception for the exhibit, over seventy members from the Paiute and Paiute-Shoshone tribes in the Owens Valley were in attendance. That day was not only a celebration of the Buttons, but of the Native Americans whose
history in the Owens Valley is wrought with oppression, displacement, and reemergence.

The Button family’s story communicates to the public that their resilience is derived from memory and their past. The Paiute of the Owens Valley have been dealt a myriad of injustices in the last two centuries, and the exhibit serves as a visual reminder that despite the vehemence of the oppressive forces to either rid the valley of Paiutes or indoctrinate them into an “acceptable” way of American life. However, even in the face of generations of discrimination and marginalization, the Paiute people still hold true to their culture and their history. Their story is not one to be forgotten or erased, and the Paiutes will continue to hold a claim as an integral part of this land and American history.

**Japanese Gardens**

My second assignment during my initial ten weeks at Manzanar was to create a Japanese Garden Tour Guide for the gardens that were built by the Japanese and Japanese American incarcerees at Manzanar from 1942–1945. There are eleven gardens, or rock ponds, that have been uncovered and stabilized to date. These gardens stand as lasting remnants of the incarcerees who found comfort in setting their sights on the small pockets of landscape they built and cultivated during their incarceration. I expanded on work done by Jeff Burton, the Cultural Resources Manager and archaeologist at Manzanar. He had previously mapped out four different routes on-site to guide visitors and provide direct access to the gardens. According to how long it would approximately take the average visitor to go through each route; a time limit was given to each route. My assignment was to produce a garden tour map with these four routes and provide a bit of history and information to highlight the significance of the gardens.

Figure 2. Mess Hall Garden at Block 9, built by the stonemason from Los Angeles, Ryozo Kado, for the incarcerees who were evacuated from Terminal Island.
Many Japanese and Japanese American incarcerees created spaces that distracted them from the dull surroundings of their imprisonment. Several of the gardens were built by incarcerees who were previously landscapers or gardeners either in the United States or back in Japan. The gardens provided a sense of normalcy and a relief from the sea of brown barracks that seemed to stretch to the base of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. At a time when the country was against an entire community for their “otherness,” the construction of these gardens could also be seen as a sign of the harmonious fusion of Japanese and American culture that so many Nisei struggled with.

Jeff Burton points out in Manzanar’s garden management plan that the gardens are a crucial visual aid in interpreting the complexity of this duality. “The Japanese gardens attest that the incarcerees embraced their Japanese heritage even in the face of persecution, even when the dominant culture had defined “Japanese” as something to be afraid of, and ashamed of. Reflecting the dual heritage of their creators, many of the gardens integrate “American” elements like rectangles of green lawns with “Japanese” elements like naturalistically designed ponds and rocks.”

Figure 3. Garden at Block 15, near barracks 7, ca. 1943.

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Nintaro Ogami was the foreman that oversaw the landscaping of the hospital complex’s garden. When his son, Arthur Ogami was informed that the NPS intended to preserve his father’s gardens, he remarked, “I think it’s a real nice idea, for the gardens to be renovated and re-beautified again…It just gives you a good feeling. And it also shows that people cared. Even though we were confined, people care about themselves about their surroundings…I think that people [who came] to Manzanar…in confined areas, we still had the desire to make things comfortable.” Deeply rooted to the valley, the gardens are fragments of time that will endure as symbols of resilience against oppressive forces, a reality the Owens Valley has been a witness to for the past two centuries.

**Finding My Place in Manzanar**

These projects not only widened my breadth of knowledge on the Japanese American incarceration, and Owens Valley history; they also broadened my perspectives on the obstacles faced by the children of immigrants in integrating into American society. My parents raised me with their own ideas about what being American meant to them, and they sometimes contrasted the lessons I learned in school about what being an American should mean to me. This

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left me longing for a sense of belonging in my youth. My parents emigrated from Mexico and growing up in the United States, I struggled with my identity and at times would reject my Mexican heritage to appease societal expectations in an attempt to seem more American. Much like myself, many U.S. born children of immigrant families must find a balance between two components that American society has projected as being mutually exclusive: assimilating into American society and retaining our cultural heritage. Growing up, my parents could not understand my siblings’ and my own frustration to find a sense of belonging in this country. To them, we were raised in America; therefore, we are American. But the simple fact that our parents were not raised in a multicultural environment may have hindered their understanding of our feelings of invalidation by the oppressive nature of American society. Since I began interning at Manzanar, I have finally found my own perspectives on this internal struggle reflected in this history. In discovering that I share the same internal struggle with many Nisei incarcerees I forged a personal and spiritual connection to the site.

In the past several years, I have come to terms with my own identity as a Chicana; I know who I am and where I stand, and I do not need the validation of others to know my worth. But as I inhabit this space at Manzanar, I find that I continue to be reminded of my “otherness” by some visitors. Sometimes, my presence and non-white features prompt the need for some of them to need to figure out what “I am” through both transparent and subtle inquiries.

These particular exchanges with visitors can be disappointing, but this experience has shown me that many Americans are still unsure on what to make of non-white persons working in the NPS and, to a greater extent, society as a whole. And yet, there are visitors who still either struggle or do not care to associate non-white persons living in the United States with the term “American.”

**The Visitors and Rocío**

Close to the end of my original ten-week internship at Manzanar, I received an extension to stay on for another year. As a result, I started working more shifts at the front, giving the other rangers an opportunity to focus on other projects.
The lobby entrance of the visitor center leads into the bookstore, run by the Manzanar History Association. As soon as visitors step beyond the threshold of the bookstore and into the hardwood floor to the exhibits they are met with an imposing black and white image of a woman with a stern look on her face. She points to a sign hanging above her porch that reads, “JAPS KEEP MOVING. This is a white man’s neighborhood.” It’s a fitting remnant of the pre-war animosity toward Japanese Americans who followed them throughout the course of the war.

This image, being the first to welcome visitors, sets a sobering tone as people navigate through the exhibits to learn a history that may be difficult to digest. Some visitors who are eager to articulate their abhorrence for the mass evacuation and incarceration of Japanese Americans will either share their thoughts before going into the exhibits or after having walked through them. Our role as interpreters is not to engage with visitors by expressing our own opinions, but rather share our knowledge about the site to facilitate a discussion. Every now and then, in my efforts to do just that, some conversations that start with a simple inquiry about the site will gradually morph into questions concerning my ethnicity. What I am is not their business to know, so why do they ask? At first, these encounters were a benign occupational hazard to me, a small hint that people are simply not
accustomed to seeing non-white employees working at NPS units. It only became disconcerting when I realized some visitors would disregard social decorum and sound judgment just to ask me, in as many or few words, “What are you?”

In September of 2017, a man and his family approached the front desk, so I proceeded to greet them and offer a park brochure, and he followed up with a question. Admittedly, I do not remember the precise nature of his question, but I do remember the terribly puzzled look on his face. I could not entirely pinpoint why, but it made me deeply uncomfortable. Then I found myself discussing the Button family exhibit. By this time, the exhibit had been finished, and I was proud to mention it to the visitors. The moment I said, “Paiute family” the man’s expression morphed from confusion to amazement in one split second. Pointing his right index finger near my face, he interrupted and exclaimed, “Ah! So you’re Paiute?” I was not so taken aback by his interrupting me as I was by the blatant manner in which he so proudly (and falsely) determined what my “race” is.

“No,” I responded curtly. In the time I spent describing a project, I was proud of having worked on he was just trying to “figure me out.” He lowered his index finger in dismay. “Oh,” he said. I took the liberty to explain in detail, “No, I’m not Paiute. I was just talking about our latest exhibit showcasing a local Paiute-Shoshone family from Lone Pine.” He seemed thoroughly uninterested in what I had to say after my admission. I encouraged him to take his family to look at the exhibits inside. “Okay. Thank you,” he said sheepishly and walked away. Within that same month, I had another similar exchange, but this next query was far more bewildering.

It was a particularly busy day inside the visitor center. There were three of us at the front desk, and we were either helping with purchases or answering visitors’ questions. I was standing behind the register when I greeted a family of five. As I offered the man, whom I presumed to be the father, a map of the grounds, he took a similar action to the man in the previous encounter. He began to quietly examine me, even squinted his eyes to narrow his peripherals. Needless to say, this was quite vexing. Then he asked, “Are you related to someone here?”

Fortunately, composure took hold of my demeanor this time before I responded. “No. Are you asking if I’m related to a park ranger who works here?”
“No,” he said abashedly, but not completely without guilt. “I mean to someone who was interned here.”

“Oh, no. Not at all!” I feigned naiveté, but my disbelief was genuine. As he walked away I questioned why someone would think to ask such a question? Quite frankly, I do not know what prompted him to ask me this in that moment, but in hindsight, I came to the conclusion that the only reason this gentleman could have thought to conjure up such a bizarre question is because he may have thought, “Why else would she be here?”

The manner in which some visitors approach me, and the topic of ethnicity is not dissimilar to the way they talk about Japanese Americans, or as they are simply referred to at times, the “Japanese.” It’s been noted by myself and the staff here at Manzanar that, more often than not, people who visit this site are genuinely interested to learn about the Japanese American incarceration. Nevertheless, it remains a habit for many of them to single out this chapter from American and designate it as Japanese history. As a consequence, there will be a tendency for people who are not of Japanese ancestry to distance them from this history and regard it as a strictly Japanese experience.

At Manzanar, we educate the public on a very difficult chapter in American history, and the dissociation of Japanese Americans from the term “American,” albeit perhaps done unintentionally, is a common and persistent remark. It serves as a reminder that even in an age of progress and increasing cultural awareness, unfamiliarity with such a pivotal chapter of American history is very persistent and present in the many inquiries we receive at Manzanar.

The Visitors and Japanese Americans

“This is a terrible stain in our nation’s history,” is a common remark from some of our visitors. After walking through the exhibits, many visitors feel comfortable enough to articulate their thoughts to us at the front desk.

“What a horrible thing.” “What an awful stain.” At first, I felt ill-equipped to respond to these comments, but rangers have since given me advice on how to approach this matter. As visitors approach us to speak their thoughts and reactions to the site, and we are to let them have their moment and answer any questions they may have. While I have worked enough shifts at the front
desk to learn how to facilitate visitors’ discussions, there are times that I find it hard to grapple with certain comments on the subject matter. And quite frankly, the “stain” remark is one that I have the most trouble acknowledging.

A stain is a mark that physically alters or corrupts the appearance of something. With the proper tools and enough determination, any stain can be removed. But therein lies the detail; this history cannot be removed. It was too great, too turbulent, and too traumatic an episode to be wiped clean. It cannot be a stain because it is a part of the fabric. I can detect the sincerity behind this apologetic remark, but it is a personal frustration with this widespread perception that keeps me from recognizing it. Even more frustrating, as other rangers clearly pointed out, is a remark that is as old and persistent as the history of the Japanese community in the United States.

“Do you get any Japanese that come here?” When visitors ask this question, we know their intention is to ask if any of the former incarcerees themselves have since returned to Manzanar. Anytime we encounter this question we respond with, “We get groups of Japanese tourists sometimes. Sure.” Or, “Do you mean to ask if we get any visitors from Japan?” We use this as an opportunity to educate visitors on the problematic nature of their query. Their use of the term “Japanese” in referring to the people who were incarcerated immediately invalidates the Nisei camp experience. They were born and raised in this country and were taught the constitution. They were told everyone had the right of due process, but after the attack on Pearl Harbor, they all became “Japanese,” and living behind a barbed wire fence was a constant reminder for many that they were believed to be deserving of imprisonment because they shared a common ancestry with the enemy. Therefore, they were deemed insufficiently American.

One way of allowing the visitor to recognize on their own the indiscretion in their question is by modifying the response previously mentioned. “Well, we have a lot of tourists from Japan throughout the year, but do you mean to ask whether people of Japanese ancestry, or former incarcerees, ever come back?” Many people will apologize for the wording of their initial question and say, “Yes. Sorry, that’s what I meant.” Sometimes, visitors are visibly annoyed at the fact that we have broken down their inquiry and made a “big deal” of it, and curtly respond, “Yeah. Sure.”
In our quest to educate the public, or facilitate visitor inquiries and discussion, we occasionally receive visitors who become so captivated by this history that they hold us hostage with their curiosity. However, these particular visitors’ level of interest borders on them attempting to validate their own perspectives and methods of rationalizing the incarceration. Eventually, they will ask if any people who were not of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated along with the Issei, Nisei, and Kibei. Although this is the intended thinking that prompted the question, the manner in which they ask it reflects another troubling factor about how the Japanese living in the United States and Japanese Americans are still perceived by the general public.

“Were there any Americans who were interned in the camps?” This question is seldom asked, but the fact that it’s been presented even a few times means it will continue to be put forth. We approach this question the same way we do the previous one; by phrasing it in such a way that allows them to recognize it’s problematic wording without embarrassing them. “Well, more than half of the people who were incarcerated were American—Japanese American. Are you asking about people who aren’t of Japanese ancestry and if any of them were incarcerated?” The recipients of this response vary in their reactions. Park ranger Sarah Bone and I discussed this matter, and she suggested that, due to the frequency of this question, we have devised a calculated response that will work for the average visitor. Most of the people who ask this question will either apologize for their phrasing or acknowledge their indiscretion.

The fact that these questions are asked in this particular manner is very telling about the way our society has conditioned the public on what to make of non-white Americans. When people ask whether there were any “Americans” who were incarcerated, they are simply attempting to confirm their suspicions if any non-Nikkei people were incarcerated. They are right in their assumption, and even though these questions derive from genuine

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7 Kibei is a term predominantly used in the 1940s to describe Japanese Americans who returned to the United States after receiving most of their education in Japan.
8 Sarah Bone (National Park Service ranger), in discussion with the author, February 2018.
9 Nikkei is a term used to describe Japanese emigrants and their descendants living in the United States and Canada.
and sincere conversations, the fact remains that in asking this question they unintentionally perpetuate the idea that the only “Americans” during World War II were the non-Nikkei.

Not many people are aware that two-thirds of the Nikkei incarcerated were American citizens. On one particular occasion, an older gentleman came in with his wife and young daughter. He seemed determined to learn as much as he could about the site, asking very specific questions regarding the way the camp was powered and how we get our water on site today. They were peculiar queries, but nonetheless, we accommodate in any way we can. After an MHA, employee went to look for a ranger to answer these questions, the gentleman moved on to the topic of incarceration. Due to the nature of the conversation, I could sense he was about to ask the dreaded question. To some, this suspicion might seem like a reach, but this question has been asked enough times that it’s clear to us when someone is about to ask.

The gentleman was leaning over the front desk with his arms crossed. “Are there any—,” he seemed frustrated, trying to find his words. “Were there any—,” and he closed his eyes to concentrate, “Were there any plain Americans who were interned in the camps?” He stressed the word “plain.” I did the same in my response.

“Well, more than half of the people incarcerated were plain Americans. Are you asking whether any non-Japanese were incarcerated in the camps?” Seemingly embarrassed, he nodded and apologized. “My mistake. Yes, people who were not Japanese.” After sharing stories of non-Nikkeis who were incarcerated, the man and his family took their leave.

The tendency for people to dissociate the Japanese community living in the United States from the term “American” alludes to an enduring perception of this chapter of American history as solely “Japanese” history. Manzanar’s superintendent, Bernadette Johnson, claims that this may be what is preventing other historically marginalized communities, non-white Americans, from finding some relevance in the story.10 If they see this as something that only happened to the Japanese community, it’s not relevant to them. By labeling groups that are not white as “hyphenated” Americans (Japanese-American, Mexican-

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10 Bernadette Johnson (Superintendent, Manzanar National Historic Site), in discussion with author, February 2018.
American, etc.) creates that ‘otherness’ that can distance people from this history.

Teachers who visit Manzanar generally possess a solid understanding of this history and will enthusiastically ask about any teaching resources they can use for their lesson plans. They are also the ones who insist on the importance of teaching the history of incarceration in classrooms, and that it would better prepare today’s youth to become more involved and engage in policies that offer better and brighter futures for all Americans. It is inspiring to see so many school groups come to Manzanar and express such an honest and genuine interest in the history. But even so, it is obvious that in order for this site to have more impact, more people have to stop referring to this as a chapter of “Japanese” history and recognize that, because it affected Americans and people on American soil, this is a part of American history.

At our disposal are tools that aid us in rendering Manzanar’s story relevant to more people and bridge the cultural rifts that divide American society. In my efforts to bring in the Latinx audience during Latino Conservation Week in the summer of 2017, I chose to highlight the story of a young Mexican American, Ralph Lazo. He is the only known non-Nikkei person, who was not a spouse of an incarceree, to move voluntarily to an incarceration camp.

**Ralph Lazo, a True Ally and Loyal Friend**

Ralph Lazo’s act of solidarity was motivated by his loyalty to his *Nisei* friends and a deep sense of injustice for what was done to the *Nikkei* community. Growing up in Los Angeles, Ralph had fostered a strong connection with the *Nikkei* community, which greatly influenced the reasoning behind his decision to join his *Nisei* friends in camp.
Ralph’s father, John Houston Lazo, was a World War I veteran and raised both Ralph and his older sister, Virginia, after his wife, Rosa, died in 1933. John was a muralist, a painter, and was known to work long hours to support his family, a circumstance that led Ralph and Virginia to fend for themselves and essentially become latch key kids.

While attending Central Junior High in Los Angeles, Ralph established a friendship with the Nisei students that would carry on into Belmont High School. His social group was predominantly comprised of Japanese and Chinese Americans. He was an active young man, having spent much of his time volunteering as a leader in after-school sports programs, even having joined a Filipino community church basketball team. He felt right at home with

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the Nikkei community. Since his father worked long hours, Ralph often found himself having dinner with his Nisei friends and their families at their homes. When President Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, approximately two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, all of Ralph’s Nisei friends and their families were forced to evacuate the West Coast.

Ralph’s sister, Virginia, claims that some of his friends goaded him on accompanying them to camp. In jest, one of his buddies allegedly asked him, “Ralph, what are you going to do without us? Why don’t you go along?” It’s unknown what his response was, but I suspect he concurred with their sentiments. After his friends were relocated, Ralph would be virtually left on his own. He had other friends at Belmont High, but he was not as close to them as he was with his Nisei companions. In knowing that they had done nothing wrong to deserve such unjust treatment, Ralph later recalled his reasoning for going to camp with his friends, “It was immoral. It was wrong, and I couldn’t accept it. They hadn’t done anything I hadn’t done...they were Americans, just like I am.” He was seventeen and had just finished his sophomore year at high school when he made the decision to join his friends in camp.

Ralph was not questioned when he registered himself at Santa Fe Station in Los Angeles. In later years, he claimed that the Wartime Civil Control Administration simply did not ask him whether he was of Japanese ancestry. He characterized this as a stroke of luck based on his physical appearance, joking that, “Being brown has its advantages.” His friend from Belmont High School, Yoshindo Shibuya, recounted the bizarre circumstance of finding out about Ralph’s intentions to go to Manzanar. He stated that he had written to Ralph from camp detailing their living conditions. He expressed his wish to see his old friend again, to which Ralph responded by saying that he would visit Shibuya in camp and to save a place for him for when he arrived. A while later, what Shibuya understood as a joke became a reality; Ralph Lazo turned up in Manzanar on June 1, 1942. He was placed in the

15 Ibid., 5.
bachelor quarters in camp and was soon taken in by the Nikkei community once again. Apparently, no one questioned his being there, and his presence was not just welcomed, but genuinely embraced.

Once he enrolled in Manzanar High School, Ralph took on several roles: he started delivering mail for $12 a month and later became a recreational director for $16 a month; he became a high school cheerleader; he was an emcee and hosted special events; he was even elected student body president.

Ralph’s story merits closer attention as a prime example of loyalty and solidarity. I share this story with people every chance I get, to remind people that Ralph saw the Nikkei community as Americans. He knew of their loyalty, and that they did nothing to merit unjust treatment. Ralph had seen the injustice his friends suffered and felt that they should not go through this experience alone. His presence was most appreciated, and his loyalty to his friends after camp speaks volumes of his devotion to the community that embraced his for most of his life. His story is a remarkable one in that he made a stand the only way he knew how; by becoming a part of it. In interviews he said in jest that joined his friends to go along for the ride, but once he was at Manzanar, he began to realize the magnitude of the situation. He was the only person that was allowed to leave the camp any time he wanted, but he did not. He chose to stay, and by staying, he took a stand for his fellow Americans and ensured they would not have to go through the experience alone. His story is a prime example of what can happen if we take a stand for others, and as we find ourselves in times of emboldened prejudice and ignorance, it is necessary that we take a stand for others who face injustice and oppression. It is just as pertinent now as it was in 1942. If Ralph Lazo could relinquish his freedom to stand alongside his friends, surely, we can find other ways of speaking up against injustice.

To further eliminate the perception that this history is not universally relevant, we must analyze the case of Robert E. Borchers.

**A Marine Heeds his Sense of Justice**

Marine Private First Class (Pfc.) Robert E. Borchers was recovering in a hospital after contracting malaria while fighting on
Guadalcanal.\textsuperscript{16} He was a white American, and upon hearing that over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly removed from the West Coast into sites of confinement, he wrote a letter to the American Legion, a wartime veteran’s organization with a strong anti-Japanese stance during World War II, expressing his disappointment in what he claimed was a most un-American act. The letter was published in a December issue of \textit{Time Magazine} in 1943. His remarks were so inflammatory that he was court-martialed for having taken such actions against the American government:

\begin{quote}
I am one of the fortunate Marines who have recently returned to this country after serving in the offensive against the Japanese on Guadalcanal…We find…a condition behind our backs that stuns us. We find that our American citizens, those of Japanese ancestry, are being persecuted, yes, persecuted as though Adolf Hitler himself were in charge…I’m putting it mildly when I say it makes our blood boil…We shall fight this injustice, intolerance and un-Americanism at home! We will not break faith with those who died…We have fought the Japanese and are recuperating to fight again. We can endure the hell of battle, but we are resolved not to be sold out at home.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 1.
Figure 7. Marine Pfc. Robert E. Borchers.

Borcher’s son, Robert F. Borchers, was invited to speak at Manzanar’s Veteran’s Day Program in November 2017. He claimed he did not know about his late father’s actions until he became an adult. Hearing his father’s story instilled in me a great sense of pride in knowing that another non-Nikkei American, like Ralph Lazo, had taken such a bold stance in speaking up against injustice. Pfc. Borchers, however, was not the only serviceman who complained to the American Legion regarding the incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry.

In the 1940s, the Department of the Interior, coincidentally the same department that oversees the National Park Service—War Relocation Authority published a booklet titled “What We’re Fighting For” containing several letters written by servicemen expressing great discontent in the government’s treatment of Japanese Americans. Pfc. Dudley C. Ruish also took the time to
challenge the parties involved in making the decision to remove the Nikkei community from the West Coast and to praise Japanese American soldiers. Here are excerpts taken from his letter that was originally published in the Star-Bulletin in Hawaii:

I can see what the Japanese-Americans in our armed forces are fighting and dying for. They are not only fighting for America, but they are fighting for the right of their families to live side by side with more fortunate races that have made our nation the great nation it is today…Probably their last thoughts, as they fall mortally wounded, far from their homes in Hawaii, are, “Well, perhaps this will prove we are American.” …I speak only for myself as I write this letter. I don’t know what my fellow soldiers think on the subject, as I have never brought the subject into open discussion, but knowing my fellow soldiers as I do, I think they would certainly be against those hair-brained schemes of radicals who have nothing better to do during this war than to sit around thinking of ways and means of persecuting a minority.  

There’s great comfort in knowing that these statements were made during a time when they were most pertinent. What makes Borcher’s story more heartwarming was the fact that many Japanese Americans behind barbed wire acknowledged his efforts and wrote to him in gratitude for his stance. A young Taiko Omori wrote to Borchers while she was attending high school at the Poston War Relocation Center in Arizona, “I am one of the very grateful ones who wish to express my sincere thanks to a person who well understands our conditions and who is fighting for our cause. Don’t know how to express it really but just in a few words, thanks a million!!”  

Ray K. Nakabayashi also expressed his gratitude in a similar fashion by stating, “…it is very satisfying to me to see that

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18 Dudley C. Ruish, “Somewhere in the Pacific,” in What We’re Fighting For, 12.
the Marines like yourself have expressed so boldly on a matter like that.\footnote{Ray. K. Nakabayashi to Pfc. Robert E. Borchers, February 19, 1944.} Pfc. Borchers was so enraged by the incarceration of thousands that he felt compelled to make his thoughts known. His letter may have brought the court-martial charges against him (which, according to the rangers, still stands to this day) but it also inspired other servicemen to write in defense of their fellow Nisei soldiers. He risked a great deal in speaking out, and although he was punished, he was also heard by the people his words meant the most to.

A great injustice like this warrants more attention in the classrooms of American history. Not doing so is a blatant disservice to the 120,000 lives that were unfairly treated for only sharing a likeness to a foreign enemy. Had there been more Ralph Lazos and Robert E. Borchers during World War II, it’s possible that the actions taken against the Nikkei community would have been less severe. Regrettably, this was not the case. Nonetheless, many former incarcereees and their descendants have resolved not to let this past be forgotten. This brings me to the most rewarding aspect of my job Manzanar; helping former incarcereees and their families reclaim their history and share their stories.

\textbf{Japanese Americans and Closure}

Manzanar NHS maintains an account on ancestry.com and possesses access to all the rosters from all ten former War Relocation Centers. These two assets may be the most powerful tools we have at our disposal. Occasionally, a visitor will approach the front desk and one way or another, reveal that a relative of theirs, family friend, or they themselves were incarcerated at one of the ten camps. We offer to look up said individual’s roster with the aforementioned assets. This service is not widely advertised, and when we tell visitors, we can provide this service, free of charge; they are thrilled to know of it. They give us the names of those for which they wish to seek more information.

Many times, it will be the name of a parent or grandparent for which we are asked to search. “My dad was a kid in camp, but he never really talked about it,” is a common remark heard from people looking for more information on their family’s history.
Once we print it out and show them the individual’s roster, they are generally overcome by a range of emotions. With this information in hand, they are free to put together a piece of the puzzle that had been lost. It is a great privilege to assist families in taking home a part of their family’s history.

Additionally, there are times when a connection to the incarceration is difficult for some to admit. Such was the case of one Japanese American gentleman whose name I regrettably do not remember. He was an elderly man, and he walked up to the front desk asking to see Alisa Lynch, our Chief of Interpretation at Manzanar. As I called to ask her to come to the front desk, the man burst into tears and turned away from me. He walked toward the books and continued to weep silently. I offered him a tissue, and as he approached me again he said with great sorrow, “It’s been so long since I was here. I was just a child.” Sometimes people become very emotional, and all we can do is let them have their moment and speak. “You know,” he continues as he leans over the front desk, “I haven’t been back here since 1945.” He looked down at a 1944 aerial photo of Manzanar placed underneath the glass.

I thought I might ask him some questions before Alisa arrived. “Where did you and your family live?” He pointed to a cluster of barracks near the mass hall garden at Block 9.

“We lived right here.” He was quiet for another moment before he repeated, “I was just a child.” I asked him to take a seat on one of the chairs next to the desk. A short moment later, Alisa came out and took a seat next to him. She let him have his moment.

They both left to walk around the site, presumably to find his old barrack. They had been gone for a few hours when Alisa finally returned to the visitor center and talked about their walk. She said the reason he had not returned since he and family left Manzanar was because his wife, also a Nisei incarceree, had a difficult time in camp and wanted to forget all about her experience. Alisa said the man finally returned to Manzanar because his wife had recently passed away, and that he might have come back in search of closure. Many Nisei who were incarcerated associated the camp years with shame and did not want to share these particular experiences with their children. We know this
because of our encounters in the visitor center with the *Nisei’s* descendants, the *Sansei* and *Yonsei* generations.\(^{21}\)

Witnessing this man’s reaction was overwhelming. In that moment, he was reliving a childhood spent in incarceration, and I was incapable of consoling him. He found the courage to return to the site that had brought pain and shame to so many others. This sense of shame, however, is gradually being washed away by the efforts of many who continue sharing the story of incarceration. At Manzanar, we fulfill this mission every day. We preserve this history to remind Americans of the fragility of our constitutional rights. The National Park Service, an institution helmed by the Department of the Interior and considered one of America’s greatest ideas, is essentially preserving the consequence of one of its greatest mistakes. The evacuation and incarceration of 120,000 *Nikkeis* was authorized by the federal government that also oversees America’s national parks. If that is not considered a grand stride in self-reflection, I do not know what is.

**Conclusion**

The Japanese phrase *Shikataganai* means “it cannot be helped.” This phrase was passed on by many *Issei* to their *Nisei* children who were struggling to come to grips with the reality of having the rights promised to them at birth stripped away in the blink of an eye. It is a simple phrase that clearly illustrates the profound concept of accepting one’s fate with dignity and mustering all the strength one can to move on despite their circumstances. I will go so far as to argue that *Shikataganai* may have lost its relevance in the modern world. It will always remain congruent to the story of endurance, but we find ourselves in a time of “taking action.” As we continue to witness injustice and oppressive forces at play, many more people are willing to stand before them and say, “Not if I can help it,” instead of, “it cannot be helped.”

Undoubtedly, there are people who will continue to rationalize the mass incarceration of the *Nikkei* community. There will also be people who will continue to pass judgment on non-white Americans. To give these people something to consider, I will share the parting words from an editorial titled “No Japs

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\(^{21}\) *Sansei* is the generation of Japanese Americans whose grandparents immigrated from Japan. The *Yonsei* is the generation whose grandparents were *Niseis.*
“No Japs Wanted?” It was written in 1945 and aimed at individuals and groups like the Japanese Exclusion League and the American Legion which made no effort to hide their contempt for the Nikkei community. These words resonate with current events and even reflect the contempt expressed toward a particularly marginalized and oppressed community in the United States, Muslim Americans. These words are as damning now as they were in 1945.

The professional Jap Haters, in speaking for 10,000,000 Yanks, have overlooked a number of points. They have overlooked the fact that it is perfectly possible to hate the man you are fighting, to call him a barbarian, without hating and discriminating against Americans of the same ancestry. They overlook the fact that Americans have been fighting not a racial war, but a war against the powers that advocated the “superior race” myth as a basis for their existence. And they overlook the fact that fighting men everywhere judge their fellow soldiers not by the color of their skins, but the way they fight…Those who came back, looking at a “No Japs Wanted” sign, certainly wonder if it was all worthwhile [sic], if perhaps they would not be better off back in the army, where a man’s record means more than his ancestry. To the Japanese Exclusion League and its fellows, then, this message: Keep the American soldier out of your plans for an economically adjusted “pure” America. Soldiers judge men by their actions alone. Nisei fighting men belong. Not all civilians do.  

My exposure to Manzanar and its history has impacted me in countless meaningful ways. I feel my life has been enriched, and I have had the pleasure of working with wonderful people who feel just as strongly about the injustices embodied by the camp as I do. What has become evident to me is the importance of NPS units and their role in educating the public on American history? Manzanar provides the space for us to learn and reflect on our nation’s past.

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If people can look at a troubled and turbulent past and draw parallels to the word of today and think, “It’s happening all over again,” that means there is still work to do. The stories from Manzanar may compel us to examine our roles as members of the American public, but it is what we decide to make of that which measures our progress.

Bibliography


Author Bio

Rocio Gomez is a CSUSB alumna and earned her BA in History with a concentration in Chinese history in 2016. She began working at Manzanar National Historic Site under the Latino Heritage Internship Program in the summer of 2017. Her experience as a person of color working in the National Park Service prompted her to share both her experiences and observances at Manzanar. She hopes to encourage others to learn from the past and stand up for others in their time of need. She will remain at Manzanar until the end of summer in 2018 and plans on seeking employment with the National Park Service once again.