Alternate Heirlooms

Hallie Maxwell
Boise State University

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Hallie Maxwell

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In my body of work, *Alternate Heirlooms*, I explore the formation of identity through displacement and reckoning with the past. As a descendant of hibakusha, survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, I have inherited sets of complex lived experiences tied to migration, loss, and trauma. The exhibition consists of video, installation, sculpture, and text works. Line, form, and minimal use of color are dominant in my installation and sculptural works. Through these formal qualities, I create mournful and dominating presences in the main gallery space. In the side rooms of the gallery lay works whose smaller scale creates an intimate quietness. My use of material links to yet subverts Japanese tradition.

My works made of traditional Japanese materials are juxtaposed and complemented with the color and narrative of my video *The Burning of Gifted Sakura*[1]. Through interviews, conversations, and interactions with my grandparents I developed my video and text works. I tell these narratives through the lens of a descendant, processing stories and reading between the lines. I take a personal and confessional approach, trying to make sense of seemingly inconceivable family histories. I want participants to feel like they know my family, lessening the barrier between them and a not-so-distant past. With the passage of time, age, and gaps in understanding between generations, the understanding of what is real becomes blurred.

Groups of oppressed and displaced people such as the Japanese Americans forcibly incarcerated during World War II have often chosen to stay silent by not telling their children about their experience.[2] Maurice Apprey uses the term “transgenerational haunting” to describe this in Black communities, “choosing to be silent does not mean that the next generation will not experience in uncanny ways the experience of the previous one.”[3] Apprey uses the terms ghosts, hosts, and guests to illustrate transgenerational haunting. Ghosts of original trauma, such as a slavemaster, haunt the host of the traumatic event. This haunting reappears in the guest,
who is a proceeding generation. They are then burdened by this internalized conflict of history whether they are aware of it or not. By combining narratives of my family and my own experiences, I explore this silence between generations and the desire to understand similarities.

Translation

“My four great grandmothers were all born in America. I’m named after one, I look like another; I don’t know much about the third, and I knew the last”[4].

According to superstitions passed down to me, your name defines your personality and is your destiny. My great-grandmothers of Japanese descent were both born in America in the 1910s. One was born in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, California and the other in Ninole, Hawaii. They were Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans, the bridge between American culture and their immigrant Japanese parents. Both of their lives changed when they moved to Japan in the 1920s. They needed to learn how to be Japanese in imperialist Japan, when Japanese culture was its most rigid and unforgiving. In my interviews with my grandparents I learned that my great-grandmothers hid their ability to speak English. Therefore, they did not teach their children English. Later, those children (my grandparents) would conceal the Japanese language from my mother so she could speak English without an accent. This narrative is present in my audio work Mama[5]. The work consists of paulownia wood boxes in a suitcase and the audio from interviews with my grandparents. The voids of the traditional wooden boxes would have held objects such as tea bowls that are no longer present. Small in presence and laid on the floor, the work quietly asks the audience to be seen and heard. The suitcase appears as if it was found in the back of a closet in a family home. The specificity of the hard shell case points at the era it
would have been used to travel with. Voices are muffled within the suitcase, requiring the viewer to move closer in order to understand them.

In the audio of *Mama*, the interviews touch upon topics such as matrilineal relationships, language, and survival. It is revealed that my great-grandmother would whisper “mama” in English to her mother to avoid scrutiny in imperialist Japan. My great-grandmothers had to hide their American-ness during the war. At the same time in America, Japanese Americans hid, burned, and buried their Japanese-ness in an attempt to avoid persecution.

Through the use of traditional Japanese materials, I show an attempt at bridging my exterior and interior identities. My use of these materials becomes an act of translation of my lived and inherited experience as I reverse their traditional expectations. Through the reversal of sumi ink as the substrate and calligraphy paper as a mark, I search for meaning in this inherited identity that is the reverse of expectations. My work 34.39649, 132.45257; 34.05028, -118.24052; 19.93851 -155.16853,[6] speaks of the many reversals and concealments of language throughout my family’s history. The title of the work and paper that has topographic markings prompts the viewer to think of place and migration. Rich velvety sumi ink is painted on the wall creating a void-like triangle, whereas my use of calligraphy paper gently absorbs light. Upon inspection of the title, the viewer can discover the three coordinates: the birthplaces of my great-grandmothers and the T-bridge in Hiroshima, the target the atomic bomb was dropped upon.

A trailblazer in exploring translation and fragmented text art is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.[7] She “subverts traditional spectatorship by juxtaposing multiple narrative strands to make ‘an interstice through which we slip.’”[8] Cha communicates displacement through fragmentation. During Japan’s occupation of Korea, the Korean language and culture was
suppressed. Her work reflects the act of learning language. She does not hand meaning over, resulting in readers needing to decode the work. Due to my family’s history I relate to this concealment of language. My great grandmothers could not teach their children English. Therefore my grandparents learned English in their teenage years. They later did not teach my mother Japanese in order for her to fit in with American culture without an accent. My personal experience is a result of these concealments in order to assimilate. I do not speak Japanese and all of my understanding of Japanese is done through translation. More important than the language itself, I translate the gap between generations and traditions.

With my video and text works, I take fragments, just as they are often revealed in conversation, and intertwine them with memories. Conversing with my grandparents becomes an indirect act of translation. They speak to me in English, however, the culture of concealment forces me to piece together a narrative line. A line that is not linear, like in my mizuhiki works that I will discuss further. I have inherited the nature of being a radicant artist from my family’s history of migration. According to Nicholas Bourriaud, a radicant artist has “no single origin, but rather successive, simultaneous, or alternating acts of enrooting.” Radicants are plants that can root from their vines, unlike plants that are rooted only in soil or spread through soil rhizomatically. Therefore with radicant artists “it is movement that ultimately permits the formation of an identity.”[9] The journey that a radicant artist takes is their identity rather than finding identity from being rooted in one place. I use the label Japanese American to best describe my identity created by the movement between two nations. However, labels are limiting, suggesting a perfect hybridization of cultures and excluding feelings of neitherness and the complex identities of individuals. According to Bourriaud “today’s artists do not so much express the tradition from which they come as the path they take between that tradition and the
various contexts they traverse, and they do this by performing acts of translation.”[10] My work is not a reflection of Japanese or Japanese American culture, but rather speaks of the journey I take in understanding identity.

Haunting

I will now return to Apprey’s term “transgenerational haunting” after discussing translation. Transgenerational hauntings are translations of original traumas in the bodies of future generations. The ghosts of the atomic bombing exist within me as abstract anxieties. Rather than reciting history with my work, I am translating what I have received in my experiences and oral histories. Through repetition and submission to tradition I confront these hauntings.

“...piece of the hair, the fingernails, so she put it with the sand in the box. That’s all we have left of my father’s memory”[11]

This section of my audio work Mama came from an interview about my Great Grandfather. I explore this further in sculpture. Upon the floor, dimly lit in a small room lies a form that is cocoon and corpse-like made of black silk mizuhiki cord, titled All that Remains.[12] Mizuhiki paper cords are traditionally used for gift-giving in Japanese culture, typically appearing on envelopes given for special occasions. The form is made of a repetition of awaji knots, which symbolize a wish to stay tied to someone forever.

While a majority of my family survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, my great-grandfather was at the epicenter of the explosion. My great-grandmother searched for his remains the day after but could not find any. According to my grandparents the remains of people were so charred and disfigured that they were beyond recognition. This is what they tell me now as an adult. But when I was a child I believed that he was atomized, vanished from the
face of the earth. And I would wonder, where did he go? I believed he could be in the apparitions I saw in the dark at night and that small fraction within me. Through interviews with my family I have learned that we do have some small remains of my great-grandfather, reflected in a section of the audio in *Mama*.

We inherit not only gifts and hauntings but also ways of doing and making. According to Soestu Yanagi and Buddhist thought, repetition is submission to the “Given Power” of tradition, a power that transcends individuality.[13] This submission makes movements automatic, allowing the creator to not focus on dualistic ideas. However, there is an anxious repetition in Japanese Diasporas that is not zen. Nor would I consider it to be submissive in a Western sensibility. The completion of 1,000 repetitions is auspicious in Japanese culture. For example, made popular by Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, folding 1,000 paper cranes is said to grant a wish. Other repetitions such as 1,000 French knots on a senninbari are completed to protect the wearer of the garment. I see repetition as a way of creating a sense of control and making a better future in an unpredictable world. My works have the obsessive repetition of a perfectionist. These repetitions are present in many of my works but reach a climax with the *Kuzu*[14] an installation made of thousands of mizuhiki cords. The process of creating *Kuzu* consisted of making sections of knotted screens at a time, conforming them to parts of my body as they were made. Then the sections were pieced together over time, creating an ever-growing and shifting work. *Kuzu* responds to the space in which it is installed with each iteration. Representing the dynamic changes and shifts from displacement and replacement.

Repetition can also be a way to lay to rest, to reckon with the past and tradition. Lynne Yamamoto’s work, *Submissions for Chiyo*,[15] consists of “1,500 muslin squares arranged in a grid, each obsessively embroidered with nine stitches of the artist’s hair.”[16] Yamamoto
memorializes her ancestor, who died of suicide, through repetition. Combatting the cultural shame of suicide, she brings humanity and honor to a hidden figure of her family history. All that Remains lays to rest this ancestral ghost of my great grandfather. The form was made to the dimensions of my body, representing the atomized shadow of my great-grandfather within me. It lays upon unfired white ceramic slip that represents the unknown earth my great-grandfather died upon.

Shadows play an important role in my work. Studies of Holocaust victims and their children show that traumas can be passed down from generation to generation. This trauma, according to some descendants, exists as a “dreadful shadow” that “dominate[s] their emotions throughout life.”[17] In my work I link this metaphorical shadow of trauma to the phenomenon of shadows left by those who perished in the atomic bombings. These shadows etched in concrete reveal the outline of the people who stood there, now absent. My use of two-dimensional forms on the floors and walls reference these shadows.

The exploration of identity is also reflected in my forms and use of line. I have long been influenced by Ruth Asawa, partly due to her identity but also because of her use of abstraction to reflect her experience of identity.[18] Karin Higa argues that Asawa’s abstract work “defies easy categorization” by exploring “a number of binary relationships through its indeterminacy: movement versus stasis, interior versus exterior, form versus space, art versus craft.”[19] My work is both two-dimensional and three. It is as much drawing as it is installation. I continue this exploration through forms made of knots. According to Susanne Kuchler the knot “both embodies mathematical principles and has the tendency to evoke a range of emotional, personal sorts of thoughts.”[20] Knots then become a way of showing thoughts, their connections between lines reflect a search for their joining. Maurice Apprey asks in regards to transgenerational
haunting “What do injured communities put into the wound? How may they suture the rupture, the wound of an absence?”[21] I use line as a way to “suture” the gap between myself and my family that has been created by displacement and trauma.

**Alternates**

I have not returned to the site of tragedy in my family’s history since I was 8 years old. I have sought to return with my family but different circumstances, finances, and natural disasters have been a barrier. My experience of this place exists in stories, childhood memories, and objects. That is, until I have extended my search for truth at local sites. As a radicant artist I look for connections with my narrative and narratives at sites that are new to me. Incarceration in a concentration camp would have been my family’s history had they not moved from the West Coast of America to Hiroshima.

“We were all scavenging for history there, and we did it with our heads down, focusing on the land. There were no barracks, only piecemeal remains of concrete foundations, an occasional shard of thick, white, institutional pottery or bits of rusted metal. These fragments were evidence in our archaeological search for truths.”[22]

This quote by Karin Higa exemplifies the desire to reveal family histories through site. How does this search change when we get further removed from these stories through time and distance? I filmed *The Burning of Gifted Sakura* at Bainbridge Island and Minidoka National Historic Site, locations tied to the removal of Japanese Americans. This included the Bainbridge Island Japanese Exclusion Memorial and Suyematsu Farms. At these sites, I searched for witnesses and remnants of history through foliage and structures. I continued this search with my pilgrimage to Minidoka. Just like the boxes of gifts in my narrative of *The Burning of Gifted Sakura*, I have wanted to and yet avoided visiting Minidoka despite it being so close to where I live. There has always been an excuse: it's too emotional, not the right time, and not connected to
me enough. It points to the conflict within myself, of being of Japanese descent yet having the 
shame of an American. Of being a descendant of the victim and the perpetrator. Of being 
Japanese American, and yet not sharing this tragedy shared by a large majority of the 
community. I expand my understanding of history to include the alternative of complex 
reversals. Thus the camps are an alternate reality, the haunting I could have inherited.

The video opens at the dock at the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion 
Memorial where the first Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and 
placed in concentration camps. The camp where the residents of Bainbridge Island were 
eventually incarcerated was the Minidoka War Relocation Center, which is now the Minidoka 
National Historic Site. As an unrooted wanderer, I am intrigued by beings that have stood still 
and live in deep time. Bainbridge Island locals told me that the tree by the dock was a witness to 
the removal of Japanese Americans. Witness trees are trees that were alive during major 
historical events. The National Park Service established the Witness Tree Protection Program in 
2006.[23] My first relationship with witness trees was when I visited Hiroshima with my 
grandparents. There we saw the hibaku trees that survived the atomic bombing. Hiromi Tsuchida 
photographed hibaku trees in the 1970s and 80s to document their survival and regeneration.[24] 
Gazing at these witnesses brings questions of what narratives they could tell if only we could 
engage in dialogue with them. Contemporary artist Kelly Akashi photographs witness trees at 
Poston, the site of her family’s incarceration. As a descendant, she gazes back at these survivors 
as a way of “scavenging for history”. [25] In *The Burning of Gifted Sakura* I look back at the 
witness tree through video recording. I overlay this footage of my opening narrative, the desire to 
communicate with my ancestors and yet there is an invisible wall that has disrupted this 
connection.
Rea Tajiri’s documentary *Wisdom Gone Wild* [26] explores the stories that are revealed when her relationship with her mother changes as she develops dementia. “Through her film and video projects, Tajiri has experimented with narrative and documentary forms to question fabrications of history”. [27] In the documentary, her mother’s dream logic emerges that layers past and present generations, her own experiences with that of her daughter; or her daughter and her sister. This relates to how histories have often been concealed in Japanese American families. Just as there is a dream logic in the documentary, I explore a similar logic through the blending of identities in my video.

I look for similarities in experiences that could be shared thematically with other members of my family and combine them. I take snippets of interactions without the completed story to represent my actual experience of fragmented knowledge. There are many different characters in *The Burning of Gifted Sakura* and *Mama*. However, the individual identities of them are often vague or not revealed. I anchor these unknowns with three main characters: myself, Baba, and my Great Grandmother. Most of the other characters are referred to by pronoun, resulting in the viewer attaching their identities to relationships with the main three characters. Viewers piece together storylines that are disconnected by time and yet thematically connected.

**A Gift that’s Not Mine to Hold**

The atomic bombing is not addressed directly in my video. But rather I have examples of other losses that are stand-ins for the grief that is not openly mourned. One point of loss is when my great-grandmother's belongings are taken and given away as gifts. I respond to the footage with memories of stories I have been told. In the narrative I list a series of names, such as “the
emperor, the empress…” which correspond to dolls. The loss of these Hinamatsuri, or Girl’s Day, dolls represents a rupture in a line of inheritance. These dolls are typically passed down through generations. Additionally, the dolls are arranged on red steps. This creates a hierarchy but also indirectly represents a family tree. I focus not on the specific personal family hurt of the sister-in-law taking the dolls. But I prefer to point to this parallel, that there was a rupture in her identity too. The sister-in-law is the only named character to have faced incarceration in the American concentration camps of World War II. Her forced removal created a disconnection from Japanese identity, which she then attempted to reclaim by taking Japanese heirlooms.

In a study of the postwar generation in Japan, Ayako Fujisaki found that “experiences that do not go along with victimhood tend to be left out of stories told by members of the postwar generation, and resurface as ‘ghosts,’ or disavowed figures.”[28] In my experience with members of my family, I have found that like Rea Tajiri’s mother, these “ghosts” begin to appear later in life. My great-grandmother began to sing to me before her passing, the lyrics she altered reflected her losses and love in life. In a section of The Burning of Gifted Sakura I tell the story of illegal bartering with farmers in the aftermath of the bomb. In the narrative, I speak of how a character traded potatoes for someone’s shoes and has a closet full of other people’s clothing that will never be worn again. This narrative is overlaid on the footage of the root cellar that incarcerees built at Minidoka. While it is one of the site’s largest remaining structures, the cellar is collapsing and in disrepair. The leaning lumber creates an uneasiness. This is intensified by the slow zoom outwards. The more the camera reveals the structure, the more it appears precarious and correlates to the emotion of the narrative.
Conclusion

My work is the result of being from no single origin, but rather, a result of multiple reversed displacements, concealed identities, and transgenerational hauntings. My family’s story, while unlikely, is not unique. I am a fifth generation Japanese American in a time when most fourth and fifth-generations have not been born yet. Today the past is rapidly disappearing. Sites such as Little Tokyo or Japantown are changing, elders who survived the war are passing, gentrification is uprooting local businesses, and younger generations have long moved away from these centers. Therefore Japanese American identities are becoming less and less attached to site. My experience reflects this and anticipates further removal and migration. There is a desire to avoid history, to bury unsavory pasts that we do not want to claim. And yet, despite concealment, it reappears, demanding to be understood.
Endnotes

1. Figure 1
4. Quote from The Burning of Gifted Sakura, Figure 1
5. Figure 2
6. Figure 3
7. Figure 4
11. Quote from Mama, Figure 2
12. Figure 5
14. Figure 6
15. Figure 7
18. Figure 8
25. Figure 9
27. Figure 10
Maxwell, Hallie. 2024. 34.39649, 132.45257; 34.05028, -118.24052; 19.93851, -155.16853.

Sumi ink and paper. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.
Akashi, Kelly. 2022. Witness. Gelatin silver mounted on aluminum in hand patinated aluminum artist's frame. 42 x 52 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches.
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