

## MANZANAR, DIVERTED: WHEN WATER TURNS TO DUST

Directed by Ann Kaneko

InterSection Films, 2021, 84 minutes

Reviewed by Jeanne Ferris

**IN 1781, THE KING OF SPAIN GRANTED PERPETUAL RIGHTS TO AN ORIGINAL PUEBLO SITE AND THE LOS ANGELES RIVER.** Thus, water as currency became the most critical factor in developing LA as a major city, with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) as a prime player. With an increasing population and a drought, a private firm, the first Board of Water and Power Commissioners (the precursor to the LADWP), identified a new water source in the eastern Sierra. William Mulholland, the chief engineer of LADWP, became the infamous architect of the 233-mile-long Owens Valley Aqueduct (OVA), central to the California water wars of 1924.

In *Manzanar, Diverted*, director, producer, cinematographer, and editor Ann Kaneko deftly cuts from an opening shot of the Mulholland Memorial Fountain cascades to a closeup of a clear natural stream. Payahüünadü (place of flowing water) stars in this indie festival favorite. The aerial and panoramic cinematography of glistening snow-capped mountains, a desolate valley, and Manzanar (a concentration camp for Japanese American citizens during World War II) is *National Geographic* worthy.

Nüümü tribal historic preservation officer Kathy Bancroft (Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone) begins, “People lived on these creeks for thousands and thousands of years—then outsiders came and messed with the balance of things.” She refers to the once deep green, verdant valley as now a sarcoidosis-producing dust bowl—a direct result of OVA.

As early as 1907, LADWP aggressively purchased ranches with water rights, and a duplicitous land swap led the Big Pine tribe to cede their ancestral water rights. As a result, an unresolved tribal dispute remains in the twenty-first century.

Clever use of split-screen images (past and present) shows comparisons in the evolution of the burgeoning LADWP’s rise to power. In addition, geographic maps, sepia-toned stills, and archival video clips support facts chronologically.

A few remaining apple-producing trees stand lonely in Manzanar, where the water table is higher versus the desert—an LADWP public relations misnomer.



“LADWP cut down the dead trees because they are silent witnesses,” landowner Nancy Masters said.

Ms. Kaneko encapsulates Payahüünadü’s history with the US’s prejudicial actions against two cultures (often ignored in school textbooks) with an overview of the original land-grab. Usurpers, assisted by a US militia, forcibly relocated the Nüümü and the Newe (Shoshone) to Fort Tejon in 1863.

The cross-cutting shots of pithy interviews include Sue Kunitomi Embrey, Manzanar survivor and vanguard for its National Historic Site status, testifying before the US Senate; Sue’s son Bruce Embrey and granddaughter Monica Embrey; Manzanar survivors and staff; landowners; and Native Californians.

Five years in the making, this woke documentary casts a spotlight on many inequities, but the stark images of the dystopian landscape speak for Earth, mutilated like a crime scene.

The once beautiful shores of Patsiata (Owens Lake) hold memories of violent massacres. Today, the dry lake bed reveals Nüümü ancestors’ remains and archeological artifacts.

But, because the resulting salt flats release dust particles that stick to everything like powder and are a choking hazard, an LADWP industrial site blights the horizon. Its purpose is to mitigate the dust with shallow flooding and gravel, a \$1.2 billion campaign to bring it under federal health standards since 2013.

“I have always been water conscious, living in LA. My mother taught me that—but now I realize that it is much more than conservation that is necessary to change things,” Ms. Kaneko said. “Things need to change in terms of infrastructure and policy.”

Unfortunately, most of the four million Los Angelenos “are ignorant of what is being done on their behalf,” said Andy Lipkis, founder of TreePeople.

A respectful soundtrack honors both Japanese and California Native cultures. I also liked the creative audio; for example, joy-filled shrieks brought to life the photographs of children swimming in a full Manzanar Reservoir.

Manzanar, Diverted reflects Dr. Masaru Emoto’s succinct description of water: “To understand water is to understand the cosmos, the marvels of nature, and life itself.”