Gentle Transnational Spirits

The Okazaki Art Theatre's Immigrant Ghost Stories

Ana Elena Puga



Figure 1. Matsui Shu, Uejo Miki, and Ohmura Wataru lounge on a long slide to the heavens in Kamisato Yudai/Okazaki Art Theatre's Immigrant Ghost Stories. *Coproduced by Okazaki Art Theatre and NAHA Cultural Arts Theater, Okinawa, Japan, 2022. (Photo by Oshiro Wataru)*

The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.

—Avery F. Gordon (1997:8)

The "ghost" who cleaned my room every day at my hotel in the northwestern Tokyo neighborhood of Ikebukuro was probably an immigrant. As I dashed for the elevator one morning, I caught a glimpse of a young woman in a head scarf and a pandemic face mask pushing the cleaning cart. From behind our respective face masks, we exchanged mumbled good mornings

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in equally accented Japanese, yet we never had a conversation. Another day I splurged on breakfast at a more luxurious hotel. The nameless pandemic-masked "ghost" who took my order spoke English with a South Asian accent. He served my coffee, taught me the Japanese term for eggs-over-easy, then quickly moved on to the next table. These migrant workers—all masked in times of Covid-19—do not call attention to themselves, nor does anyone ask us to pay much attention to them. As the Japanese population ages, it is the migrant workers who keep the wheels of the capitalist economy grinding away.[1] *Imigure Kaidan* (イミグレ怪談, Immigrant Ghost Stories), which I saw during its Tokyo premiere on 15 December 2022 in a bunker-like basement black box space at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, draws attention to their existence, as well as to the existence of the many Japanese, especially Okinawans, who have migrated to and from other parts of Asia and Latin America, from the postwar period to the present.

Written and directed by Kamisato Yudai,[2] and coproduced by his Okazaki Art Theatre (founded in 2003) together with the Naha Cultural Arts Theatre, *Immigrant Ghost Stories* played in Tokyo for three nights and one matinee. Two additional matinee performances had to be canceled when Covid spread among the actors. On those days, instead of a live performance, a video was played of the work's Okinawa debut and Kamisato came out afterwards to describe his research and rehearsal process, as well as take questions from the audience. Alongside the migrant ghosts, the specter of the virus was everywhere. At the door of the theatre, in order to be allowed in, audience members had to first hold their hand over a thermometer that somehow magically took our temperature. I breathed a sigh of relief when the gadget flashed an "OK" (in English) at me. As I settled into my seat a few minutes before the production started, a uniformed young woman from the Metropolitan Theatre's staff asked that to help prevent the spread of the virus we refrain from removing our masks and keep conversation to a minimum. Spectators obeyed by maintaining almost total silence broken only occasionally by the softest of whispers, creating an eerie mood even before the action began. I concentrated on watching the sparkling orange lights that created a night sky above the upstage area of the minimalist set.

Three physically present actors in bare feet, and a fourth who appeared briefly as a talking head on video, embodied different types of ghostly presences who in turn narrated immigrant ghost stories, not only with words but through gesture, dance, and other physical movements. With little of the psychological backstory that can bog down realism, characters with the same names as the actors' actual given names—Shu (Matsui Shu), Miki (Uejo Miki), and Wataru (Ohmura Wataru)—gather for what at first seems to be a school reunion but is gradually revealed as a kind of limbo where the characters themselves are probably dead, ghosts waiting to become stars in the heavens. Yet this theatrical universe is not a Sartrean *No Exit*–like hell. On the contrary, Shu exuded a congenial presence; Miki wore a mantle of wisdom; and Wataru became her wacky foil as he pranced, skipped, leapt, bounced, and twirled his lanky limbs around the stage. Each of the play's four sections depicts a different kind of migration that features a different character: a contemporary Japanese businessman (Shu) builds a rice whiskey factory in Laos; Okinawans who after World War II establish an immigrant colony in Bolivia (Miki); the descendant of those immigrants who has since moved to Brazil (Miki's cousin Bia, played on video by Beatriz Sano, a Brazilian of Japanese ancestry) who struggles to keep the grandfather's pension coming to him from Japan; a former baseball player with a bad knee (Wataru) who migrates domestically from Tokyo to Okinawa, where he encounters ghosts everywhere.

1. See Hollifield and Sharpe (2017) for details on how Japan has changed from a country that barred foreign workers into a country that is beginning to acknowledge that migrant workers are necessary to fill labor shortages in many economic sectors.
2. I am following the Japanese convention of putting the family name before the given name.

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Figure 2. Wataru (Ohmura Wataru) looks on in amazement as Miki (Uejo Miki) tries to communicate by video call with her cousin Bia (Beatriz Sano) in Brazil. Kamisato Yudai/Okazaki Art Theatre, Immigrant Ghost Stories. *Coproduced by Okazaki Art Theatre and NAHA Cultural Arts Theater, Okinawa, Japan, 2022. (Photo by Oshiro Wataru)*

Designed by dot architects, a firm based in Osaka, the set includes a giant slide that seems to lead up to the sparkling heavens. The lighting by Takada Masayoshi and Ueda Go made the slide inconspicuous at first, then much more visible at the end, when the actors lounged on it while drinking and chatting, as if comfortably positioned on a floor. Wataru and Miki sat cross-legged; Shu lay back, propped up by his elbow. The men seemed unaware that they were heaven-bound ghosts; Miki might have known yet didn't seem troubled by the prospect. Other elements of the scenic design included a dozen different wooden crates of various heights that could be used as chairs or tables. At stage right, a large gray box unit supported a monitor for the supertitles to be projected and held a flat screen on which the character from Brazil appeared.[3] The back of the unit was also used to store the very small amount of stage properties used in the production; the actors would take them out as needed.

Like Kamisato's previous plays, especially *+51 Abiashion*, *sanboruha* (＋５１アビアシオン、サンボルハ, +51 Aviación, San Borja, 2015) and バルパライソの長い坂をくだる話 (Baruparaiso no nagai saka wo kudaru hanashi; 2017),[4] *Immigrant Ghost Stories* complicates a Japanese identity that is increasingly acknowledged as heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. Specifically, Kamisato's work explores a variety of transnational Japanese–Latin American identities. As in his earlier

3. In what seemed like mostly a symbolic attempt at inclusion in Tokyo, since few if any of the audience members were likely Spanish speakers, subtitles were provided in Spanish as well as English. There were a few native English speakers in the audience. The Spanish and English language subtitles may have proved more useful when the play premiered in Naha, Okinawa, on 28 October 2022 in conjunction with the Uchinanchū Festival, which every five years brings together people from the worldwide Japanese diaspora.
4. Translated and published in English as *The Story of Descending the Long Slopes of Valparaiso* (2020).

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works, *Immigrant Ghost Stories* both narrates and depicts transnational identities in a style that blurs the borders between fiction and documentary, storytelling and physical theatre. Transnationality is staged both as an economic practice, in the case of the Japanese businessman based in Thailand in order to run a distillery in Laos, and as a sociocultural necessity to keep one foot in at least two different countries, in the case of the Japanese-Brazilian character, Bia, who video calls from Brazil to ask her Japanese-Bolivian cousin living in Japan, Miki, to help obtain the family registry she needs in order to renew her grandfather's passport, and thus maintain his pension payments. Through language, imagery, and movement, *Immigrant Ghost Stories* evokes past generations that suffered violence yet nevertheless haunt the present as gentle spirits, whether as reincarnated animals, reincarnated people, or simply repeated patterns of physical gesture and movement.

Yūrei—幽霊, Faint Spirits

Angry female ghosts have a long history in traditional Japanese folktales and theatre, especially noh and kabuki. In the noh and kabuki versions of the tale of *Dōjōji*, for instance, jealous women morph into giant serpents. In countless versions of the kabuki play *Yotsuya kaidan*, the murdered Oiwa comes back from the dead to terrorize her husband, Iemon, and drive him insane. In one version of *Yotsuya kaidan*, as well as in many other works, women who died while pregnant come back to present the bloody baby to their surviving spouse (Shimazaki 2016:194). In traditional folktales, one version of which was famously recounted by Lafcadio Hearn in the early 20th century, a murderous "snow woman" haunts the outdoors (1904). In an urban legend that began in the 1970s, the *kuchisake-onna*, or slit-mouthed woman, wanders the streets with scissors in hand, ready to make you look like her. In contemporary manga, horror films, and animated films, such vengeful figures have been reinvented, perhaps most popularly as the witches in Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001). By contrast, rather than aggressive demons or evil female figures, Kamisato's ghosts are mostly male and mild-mannered, interwoven into ordinary life, supernatural yet easy to mistake for the living. Of the many words for ghosts in Japanese, the one used in *Immigrant Ghost Stories*, *yūrei* (幽霊), means "faint spirit" and does not necessarily denote a malevolent force.

Kamisato said in the postshow discussion that he found this kind of interaction between the living and the departed typical of depictions of ghosts in Okinawa, where he lived for six months conducting research before writing the text. In the presentations he offered in lieu of the canceled performances, Kamisato mentioned a series of books by Kohara Takeshi (*Ryūkyū kaidan*, Ryūkyū Ghost Stories, 2011), as one of the inspirations that informed his understanding of ghosts as quotidian forces.[5]

Because many Okinawans emigrated to Latin America after World War II, during which it is estimated that one out of every four Okinawans lost their lives, the ghosts of postwar immigrants from Okinawa to Latin America are inextricably associated with the ghosts of the war dead. The post-WWII migrants to Latin America could obtain support from existent Japanese immigrant communities established in the late 19th and early 20th century by workers in rubber plantations, railroad construction, and mining. According to Avery F. Gordon, haunting takes place when a history of violence that may be unseen or unrecognized nevertheless exerts a tangible force in the present (1997:3–28). For instance, as the wise character with a didactic bent, Miki suddenly interrupts a lesson to a slack-jawed Wataru (and to the audience) about the hardships and injustices inflicted on post-WWII migrant laborers from Okinawa in Bolivia:

> MIKI: We hear similar stories nowadays too.
>
> WATARU: Uh-huh.
>
> MIKI: Yeah, in Japan.
>
> WATARU: Japan. (Kamisato 2022:18)[6]

After this exchange, the actors linger in a pause, allowing spectators to draw their own connections between the postwar exploitation of

5. The Ryūkyū Islands, located in southwestern Japan, form a chain that includes Okinawa Island.
6. All quotations from the performance text are from the unpublished English translation by Aya Ogawa supplied by the playwright.

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Figure 3. Shu (Matsui Shu) looks on as Mako/Miki (Uejo Miki) confronts Wataru (Ohmura Wataru). Kamisato Yudai/ Okazaki Art Theatre, Immigrant Ghost Stories. *Coproduced by Okazaki Art Theatre and NAHA Cultural Arts Theater, Okinawa, Japan, 2022. (Photo by Oshiro Wataru)*

Japanese immigrants in Latin America and the current exploitation of migrants from other parts of the world, including Latin Americans of Japanese ancestry who now labor in Japan. With no transition, Miki resumes her narration of how a Japanese immigrant colony was founded in Bolivia, succumbed to disease, was abandoned, and resettled elsewhere. Then suddenly Uejo-as-female Miki in the stage present becomes Uejo-as-male ghost, an anonymous young male Okinawan immigrant to Bolivia in the postwar period, an immigrant who lost both his father and his brother in the war. This character embodies the link between the war violence and the subsequent wave of emigration to Latin America where violence was once again encountered in the wilderness as well as in the exploitation of labor. The young man is fearful and homesick as he looks up at the night sky, where he believes his father and brother now dwell as stars. Though he is neither angry nor threatening in any way to the characters in the stage "present," he nevertheless haunts the stage by bringing to mind interrelated cycles of historical violence: the war and its aftermath, migrations out of Japan, and migrations into Japan.

Reincarnations

Suggestions of intertwined human and animal reincarnations in *Immigrant Ghost Stories* startle and haunt both the characters and at times the audience. In the play's first scene, "Ghosts of Thailand," a gecko suddenly appears to Shu on a bathroom stall door in a bar after he urinates. We learn this when Shu recounts the anecdote to Miki and Wataru, who then join him in miming the scooping of water with a ladle from a bucket that Shu used to flush the traditional toilet. As Miki and Wataru stand behind and to the side of Shu, "scooping" along with him, they form a comical chorus line. The gecko, says Shu, seemed "like maybe it was a reincarnation. Someone had been reborn and had come to tell me something important." His reaction to this visitor from another world is surprising: He finds some string and ties the stall door shut so that the gecko cannot escape.

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Figure 4. The playwright/director Kamisato Yudai crosses the stage on stilts while wearing a zebra mask, as the cast members file in onstage left. From front: Matsui Shu, Miki Uejo, and Ohmura Wataru. Immigrant Ghost Stories, *coproduced by Okazaki Art Theatre and NAHA Cultural Arts Theater, Okinawa, Japan, 2022. (Photo by Oshiro Wataru)*

The following scene hints at a possible identity for the gecko-ancestor, when Miki embodies the young male Okinawan postwar immigrant to Bolivia who is urinating outdoors. While fearing creatures that might be lurking in the forest, he suddenly feels a bug on the back of his neck. Miki's long hair flies in all directions as they (the female actor embodying the male character) try to shoo away the bug with a flurry of panicked swats to the back of the neck and furious stomping in place. The postwar immigrant to Bolivia is thus associated with the contemporary businessman, both through the action of urinating and the associated appearance of unexpected and unwelcome small animals: a gecko appears to the businessman; a bug appears to the immigrant. The question of whether the postwar immigrant was reincarnated as the gecko, or perhaps even as the contemporary businessman, is left open.

Another animal, a zebra, is a significant motif that recurs in various forms throughout the work. At the start of the play, Shu brings back a zebra mask from Thailand and presents it to Miki as a gift. At the end of the first scene, a "zebra"—actually a man wearing a cloth zebra mask over his head—crosses the stage on stilts. None of the characters see the zebra. Later, Bia describes her elderly grandfather who is nearing the end of his life as having zebra-like black hair with a silver stripe. Toward the end of the play, in the transition between the third and fourth scenes, the zebra crosses the stage again. The animal becomes a symbol not only of the grandfather's possible future reincarnation but also of our own mortality, as well as the dead who shadow our lives, whether we pay attention to them or not, including the soldiers who fought in World War II, the workers who died abroad, and the immigrant workers in Japan today who in some cases are not accepted by society as fully human. In yet another gentle ghostly touch, the actor who embodied the zebra did not receive a credit on the program. Kamisato later told me that it was he under the zebra mask slowly crossing the stage on stilts.

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His mysterious disguised presence seemed to me a playful haunting of the audience.

In other instances, costumes, designed by Ono Chie, furthered the theme of reincarnation. In the first scenes of the play, Wataru wears a one-piece pajama with red-and-green stripes that bring to mind Shu's story of his encounter with the gecko in the Bangkok bathroom. Yet in the final scene Wataru changes onstage into a black-and-white horizontal striped one-piece pajamas that bring to mind the zebra. Did the gecko come back as a zebra? Did the anonymous Japanese immigrant to Okinawa come back as Shu the businessman? At one point, Miki dons a bright red-and-yellow oversized *yukata* that Wataru tells us was worn by his neighbor Mako, yet when he calls her Mako, she insists that she is Miki, not Mako. Has the character reincarnated without awareness of her own transformation? Or is Wataru imagining things?

Transnationality Embodied

The essence of transnationality was deftly captured by Ohmura in a physical movement that evoked the sense of being in two places at once, both close and far at the same time. Bending his knees in a demi plié, he rubbed his hand down the front of his right thigh while saying "far," then he passed his left hand down his left thigh while saying "close." He then repeated the motion from the left thigh to the right thigh: repeating "close" and "far." Like two legs on the same body, people in two different places can work together as if in proximity yet remain physically distant. Like a ghost, like Bia's visage coming to Miki in Japan via video call from Brazil, the transnational figure is both near and far, there and not there, at the same time.

In the last scene, "Ghosts of Okinawa," as a former baseball player with a bad knee, Ohmura fell almost to the ground, then recovered at the very last second to spin 180 degrees in a crouch. Ohmura turned a moment that could have been just a pratfall into a virtuosic movement. He then stood up, took another step, and did it again. Falling and recovering, falling and recovering physically suggested the way in which all of us, migrant ghosts or not, might hover on the edge of disaster yet somehow bounce back.

In the "Ghosts of Bolivia" scene, Miki verbally and physically delivered a timeline of the founding of Okinawan immigrant colonies in Bolivia. As dates and facts flashed on the flat screen behind her, to the accompaniment of drumrolls ending in cymbal crashes, part of the sound design by Nishikawa Bunsho, she punctuated the appearance of each date with a different physical move. From her seated position on a crate, she bent forward, dangling her head and arms and wiggling her open hands, then bobbed back up to say: "June 23, 1945: The end of systemized military combat in the Battle of Okinawa." A second drum roll accompanied arm-waving overhead, ending with the left elbow bent, palm of the hand touching the head, right arm extended out and up at a 45-degree angle, wrist bent to bring the palm up. "August 1948: The Okinawa Relief Association is founded in La Paz, Bolivia." Miki brought her feet up onto the crate and rotated her body 365 degrees before setting her feet back down on the ground. Facing forward again, she opened her arms in a wide "V" over her head, like a flag waver, which according to Uejo's biography in the program is her "special skill": "December 25, 1949: The construction of Okinawa town is approved at the Riberalta Okinawan Association and preparations begin to receive refugees." Another drum roll, ending on a cymbal crash during which Wataru leapt in the air behind her, his arms raised exuberantly in a wide "V," creating a visual echo of her previous gesture. As she announced 19 June 1954, when the first group of immigrants departed from Naha, Miki pumped her fist in the air. Then 15 August of the same year, when the first group of immigrants settled in Bolivia: another fist pump. Besides breaking up the didactic monotony of the history lesson, the gestures and sounds punctuated the passage of time; without resorting to mime or other imitative movement, they nevertheless highlighted the physical toll suffered by Japanese people who emigrated in the postwar period. At the same time, the cheerful, even exaggeratedly humorous quality of the physical movement posed an unsettling counterpoint to the seriousness of the facts recounted. As the first stage direction of the play states: "The line between comedy and horror is paper thin."

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Certain shifts from earnest didacticism to campy playfulness and back again seemed purposefully abrupt. Perhaps the most campy touches of all were the short dances each of the three main actors performed after a booming K-Pop style voice announced their names from offstage. Because Shu seemed the least athletic of the three, his name-dance was the most amusing. The stocky bespectacled middle-aged man started from a face-up position lying on the floor, slowly moved up to kneel and then stand, while draping his right arm sensually around the back of his head and removing it with a vamp-like flourish. He kept a businessman's black toiletry bag clutched in his left hand as the musical tempo advanced from sensuous to boisterous, waved cheerfully at the audience with his right hand, rolled his forearms horizontally, making little circles with his fists, as he raised his arms forward from waist-height to overhead, turned his back to the audience to wriggle his hips, then turned back to face us and waved some more while jumping up and down. Finally, he extended his arms out straight from the shoulders, to his left, forward, then right, flirtatiously flicking his wrists up and down in each position before lowering his arms to an elbows-out horseback riding style and retreated in a gallop vaguely reminiscent of the "Gangnam Style" dance. Besides providing comic relief, the name dances created a hyperidentity for each actor-character. These hyperidentities contrasted with the anonymity of characters such as the nameless immigrant to Bolivia and the groups of immigrants represented only by the dates of their departures, arrivals, and various activities, reminding spectators that many subaltern identities have been erased from historical records.



Figure 5. Miki (Uejo Miki) leaps during her "name dance." Kamisato Yudai/Okazaki Art Theatre, Immigrant Ghost Stories. *Coproduced by Okazaki Art Theatre and NAHA Cultural Arts Theater, Okinawa, Japan, 2022. (Photo by Oshiro Wataru)*

The experience of watching *Immigrant Ghost Stories* made me more aware not just of migrants but of other groups that tend to suffer erasure in Japan, such as the unhoused. One day as I sat in a crowded subway car I noticed a large man standing before me, the first person I had seen in the subway without a face mask. Unlike in the United States, almost everyone in Japan, it seemed, wore face masks in public during the pandemic, even while outside. The man was breathing down on me, I imagined. As I looked at him more closely, at his worn clothes and his weather-beaten face, I realized that he was probably unhoused. The sometimes violent conflicts between the masked and the unmasked in the United States flashed through my mind as I wondered whether to offer him the extra mask in my backpack. I looked up and stared into his eyes, looking for any hint of menace yet found none, then dug out the mask and extended it to him. He took it out of its cellophane wrapper, put it on, and thanked me with a quick nod of the head and an "arigatō gozaimasu" (thank you very much). I might be flattering myself, but I like to think that he was a ghost who felt seen for a moment.

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