IMAGE, ENCOUNTER, & TRANSMISSION IN HIROSHIMA POSTWAR MEMORIAL CULTURE

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At the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims, a hallway descends counterclockwise, leading visitors into a subterranean chamber of reflection. In the center of this room is a monument—a clock's hands etched into stone: 8:15 AM. The frozen time refers to the morning of August 6, 1945, the instant that the atomic bomb dropped by the United States exploded over Hiroshima. Recovered timepieces, halted at the moment of the blast, are a token relic in museum commemorations of the attack. The frozen clock is reproduced in places like the Hall on account of its ability to be imbued with meaning, to prompt remembering, to make a demand of its viewer: bare dial, pointer hands akimbo, an enormous terrain of time, space, and experience collapsed into image.

My project investigates memorial transmission in the context of postwar Japan. Specifically focused on the legacies left by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, I engage a selection of testimonial artifacts—written testimony, video recording, and live presentation, produced between 1950 and 2021—that serve to illustrate the significance of encounter between artifact and audience through the theoretical construct of image, which I will expand on later in this paper.

Proximity to, or distance from, the experience of the atomic bomb as 'event' is a central problem in this memorial transmission. Hiroshima's stopped clocks contend with the out-of-reach in its function as image—to distill, be laden with, and evoke meaning—in a production of immediacy. They uncannily recall Walter Benjamin's image of gunmen '"at the foot of every clocktower, firing on the clock face to make the day stand still.'"[1] For Benjamin, firing upon the clock face marks a temporal stand, a moment in which, rejecting the relegation of the moment to

[1] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

sink ever-further into history—into 'pastness'—but to be totalized as full present— 'now-time'—of its own. The moment is irreducible; it is lived.

Benjamin's stoppage depicts a radical consummation of historical agency to no longer be passed by. In Hiroshima, atrocity stops the clock; instead of being let loose from the constraints of the clock, the moment lies suspended. De jure, this is history, confined to the past and out-of-reach, but a wavering shard of this now-time remains ongoing in the semantic rubble of the clock-image. This saturation of experience, an unsettled memoryscape, hangs over the present, demanding fidelity while forever deferred.

Besides interpreting the temporal distance between the present and the moment of the bomb, attempts to articulate the catastrophe are also mediated spatially, socially, modally, and by the imagination itself, challenging the limits of representation and communicability. As Kyo Maclear repeatedly insists while introducing her work on witnessing and the bomb, "*It is profoundly difficult to fully imagine what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki*."[2] To communicate the 'unspeakable' or the 'irrepresentable' is stock in postwar memorial culture. Simply, transmission of this memory deals with, and cannot even access directly, subject matter which exceeds understanding. In my analysis, I investigate how a selection of testimonial artifacts traverses these distances and contends with impossibilities of discourse, finding that prioritization of the encounter between audience and image, as I construct it, re-produces an experiential proximity inaccessible to approaches which instead privilege genealogical proximity to the 'original' historical source (i.e., the moment of the bombing).

The specific testimonial artifacts to which I devote my study are a written *hibakusha* (a person affected by the atomic bomb) memoir (NAKAMAE Taeko, 1950), three recorded video

[2] Maclear, *Beclouded Visions*, 4.

interviews with *hibakusha* (KIMURA Hisako, 2005; IMORI Kiyoko, 2006; DESHIMA Tsuyako, 2006), and a presentation I attended by videoconference with a person trained in Hiroshima to take on specific *hibakusha* testimony (OKAMOTO Toshiko, presenting the testimony of NAKAMAE Taeko, 2021). While drawing on a variety of currents within and between fields such as history, anthropology, and cultural studies, I ground my approach in visual culture studies and its broad treatment of the image as a site of meaning-making. Thus, in all cases, I treat the image as the semiological unit of my analysis (the unit of communicating meaning). I identify the evocation of image in testimony as a rhetorical choice, the mode of delivery specifically inviting encounter and producing proximity between artifact and audience therein. Much of the material at hand is not literally, or solely, visual. As W.J.T. Mitchell points out that "all media are mixed media," I utilize the term 'image' to denote an actively produced, (multi)modal unit of discourse.[3,4]

I coded discursive evocations of image in these testimonial artifacts to map how three types of account engage the problem of proximity in different ways. Nakamae's memoir and the series of video presentations typify a common discursive move in postwar memorial practice. These works privilege proximity to the 'moment' of historical trauma as the site of meaning-making; in this case, memory and the experience of history is to be preserved and passed down via this stake in the past. The 'authenticity' of these narratives is assumed to be best preserved when shared by *hibakusha* themselves on account of their literal proximity to the initial generation of memory. Image*,* in testimonial works of this tradition, is conjured as a device—the

[3] Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 170.

[4] Note some slippage between 'media' and 'mode': I am not saying exactly the same thing as Mitchell. Media, here, denotes the medium by which something is delivered and mode how it is engaged. Anything that has a 'medium,' 'mixed'/'multi' or not, can be assumed to be multimodal in some valence.

audience might begin to 'see' and thus begin to cultivate some understanding of an irreducible, irrepresentable moment that nonetheless must be transmitted.

In this sense, Nakamae's memoir is the most proximal to the moment of the bomb, written five years after the bombing, in 1950, which Taeko experienced firsthand. Despite this proximity, Taeko's work is not mistaken for a direct reproduction of her 'original' experience; her style is quite literary. Testimonial devices can be traced throughout her narrative, including many which would go one to become postwar memorial tropes. For example, she emphasizes descriptions of the everyday and its subsequent devastation, engages the reader through rhetorical questioning, and is acutely aware of her senses and their moments of failure. [5]

While Taeko's written testimony contains both elements of encounter and distance between the moment of the bomb, the images evoked in the presentation, and the reader, the video interviews with Kimura, Imori, and Deshima are more dramatically mediated. Rather than presented as dialogue between presenter and audience, the interviews were recordings of *hibakusha*, made in 2005-6, speaking with an interviewer. They were also much more documentary-style than Taeko's, including little image either in the visual mode available due to the medium of film or as consistently in their words as in Taeko's case. I hazard that the indication here is that, in the function of these videos as testimony, the word and gesture of first-generation *hibakusa* are sufficient to create a story-image for an audience. Rather than creating material for an audience to engage, these examples have an archival air.[6,7,8]

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[5] Taeko, document.

[6] Kimura, video.

[7] Imori, video.

[8] Deshima, video.

All the latter cases, in their privileging of proximity to the moment of the bomb, are problematized by critiques of 'authentic' testimony or the 'original' offered by performance and trauma studies. The source moment of the bombing, put another way, is the moment of trauma. As Suzanne Little describes in "Repeating Repetition," not only is original, authoritative experience compromised as memory and subjectivity complicate the notion of one 'true' experience of reality, but even when intended to, testimony does not reproduce it. Transmission does not preserve and pass down the supposed original, but repeats it, and in this act, recreates it.[9] Patrick Duggan, a theorist in the same field, points out that the irrepresentability of trauma only holds if fidelity in transmission is equated to reproduction. Rather, it is precisely in the wavering between 'reality' and re-creation that testimony finds its potential to engage with its audience: this "'reality' can only be made available to us through the mediations of… representation and processes of signification."[10,11] These thinkers understand that, if untarnished memory is the aim, simply "putting [memory] into words would turn it into a lie."[12] Rather than detracting from the performance of testimony, the absence of original authenticity re-opens a space of engagement with the audience and recreates an experience with full affective capability.[13]

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[9] Little, "Repeating Repetition," 44-8.

[10] Duggan, "Mimetic Shimmering," 58-73.

[11] Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 28.

[12] Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 92.

[13] Following the problematized concept of the 'original' and the plural, ongoing, and productive space of encounter opened in re-creation, note theories troubling authorship and textuality which underlie the arguments made here through performance and trauma studies, i.e., in Barthes.

In light of these interventions, I come to Okamoto's presentation. Unlike the presenters of the latter testimonies, she is not a *hibakusha*. She is from a younger generation and not from Hiroshima; she is a Legacy Successor, someone who has trained with first-generation *hibakusha*—in this case, Taeko—to present their specific testimony. So, she must work differently: she is sharing another's story, troubling claims of genealogical proximity and authenticity. Crucially, she follows the same re-creative paradigm as suggested in performance studies. While she takes great care to faithfully represent Taeko's story, the impossibility of her sharing the proximity to Taeko's experience that Taeko would facilitate the prioritization of a new proximity: that with the audience at the point of encounter.

In a sense, Okamoto must take the latent demand of experience present in Taeko's now-time of the bomb to her audience, rather than the reverse. The mechanism of this shift is her reliance on image as this point of contact. As outlined throughout this paper, image, here, carries a broadly rhetorical sense, but is also represented strikingly in Okamoto's presentation in the traditional sense. Okamoto employs a slideshow punctuated with drawings made by *hibakusha* and students who had been previous audience members, maps and flow charts (this being representative of a trope in depictions of the bomb's effects), and creative intervention with the slideshow as medium such as using a transition to an all-white slide to simulate the bomb's blinding flash. Okamoto takes these images from Taeko's gestures, as seen in her memoir, but presents them with a new dimension, one which prompts involvement from her audience. Another interesting moment came as, aware of the potential intensity of this experience, she encouraged us to close our eyes and stop seeing if doing so feedback became too much, so that we would not have nightmares. Of course, the entire enterprise is specifically in the interest of conveying 'too much' meaning—this gesture demonstrates how the irreducibility of the bomb

has been transmitted so that it may both inhabit its new audience and be made sense of interactively.[14]

Rather than treating the past moment as the site of meaning-making, the type of presentation Okamoto demonstrates fully commits to the evocation of image. In this arrangement, the memorial past is no longer simply past. The image demands a proximity to its audience; through this engagement, its meaning is co- and re-created in the present at the image's site of encounter. In prioritizing proximity to the image through encounter, rather than to the 'original' historical source, the practice of attending to the dead is maintained as a present force.

[14] Okamoto, videoconference.

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