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Abstract

In the city of Hiroshima, Japan, sciences, history, and personal narratives meet. Atomic bomb survivors became the keepers of this town's history and one of the most tragic chapters in the history of humankind; and as their voices fade to old age and death, there is a sense of urgency to keep their narratives alive. These are my personal reflections.

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Keywords

Hiroshima, Atomic Bomb, Personal Narratives

Cover Page Footnote

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Hiroshima: At the Intersection of Sciences, History, and Personal Narratives. Reflections.
Travel Diary. Hiroshima. January 2013.
Gloria R. Montebruno Saller

There are few places in the world where sciences, history, and the arts as personal narratives meet, and one of these places is the city of Hiroshima, Japan.



I read most of the books available in English on The Manhattan Project. I watched the original documentaries on atomic bomb testing, Los Alamos and “Project Y”; Enrico Fermi, Emilio Segrè, Hans Bethe, H. H. Staub, and Victor Weisskopf; these are name of cities, programs, and scientists I have been familiar with even before I entered graduate school. The like of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein only add to that long list of world scientists that contributed to the creation of the original weapon of mass destruction, thus widening the scope of nuclear investigation and weaponry accumulation (Rhodes, 1986; Kort, 2007).

In a speech delivered to the Association of Los Alamos Scientists on November 2, 1945, Oppenheimer did not apologize for the aftermath of the drop of the Atomic bomb on Hiroshima; as a scientist, he believed in the peacetime applications of atomic energy (Kelly, 2007, pp. 366-373). On August 31, 1946, John Hersey's "Hiroshima" appeared in *The New Yorker*. In this article, Hersey's provided a detail account of six atomic bomb survivors' recollection of that fateful day. Hersey's details included graphic description of survivors' wounds and painful treatments (Hersey, 1946).

Yet, it is the words by those people that were on the ground on that day, and through their personal narratives, that scholars, scientists and artists were able to convey to people outside of Japan the impact that the atomic bomb had on a nation, a society, a culture, and its people.

These people's narratives are part of Japanese literature. And literature as a form of art, allow us to peek into the hearts and minds of those survivors that became the protagonists in a movie plot that the best cinema studios had not been able to produce yet. These survivors used their words as brushes, and painted pictures of what their minds registered on that day. With skillful motion, they used their words to draw on history's consciousness a canvass of emotions and experiences, hoping they would become repositories of records to be spread to future generation, and thus helping to avoid a repeat of history and its mistakes.

These personal narratives, as works of art, endowed, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, with "meaning and value" (Bourdieu, 1993), supported me during my first visit to the city of Hiroshima.

I traveled to Hiroshima in January 2013. I took my students to Hiroshima to learn about this city's history and the legacy of the atomic bomb in both Japanese and world history. From Hiroshima station, we get on a tramway. In twenty minutes, we reach our destination. Getting off the tramway, I turn around and there it is, before my eyes, the Atomic Bomb Dome. My brain still does not register much. It is my first time in this town. All I know about Hiroshima, I read it in books published in English and Japanese; I learned from both Japanese and American documentaries; I studied in graduate school seminars; I watched in Japanese and American movies.

I cross the crowded street that separates me from the dome, and I walk by the dome. My students start taking pictures. Had I been in any other city in the world, I would have probably started clicking away at this monument standing before my eyes. Yet, I do not feel like taking a

picture. The sun is in my eyes. Suddenly, I am behind the dome. Through an iron fence, I look at the bricks lying around. I stare at what once were windows. My eyes look up at the dome. I look down at what is left of this building. It is somehow surreal; my brain still does not respond to the images the way I thought it would. What kind of art work am I staring at? This question will haunt me for a long time, as I proceed and pick up my pace.

I am calm; I am walking fast in an attempt to warm up.

It is a very cold day, on a January afternoon.

I keep walking in the direction of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, going through the vast park. It is very quiet; and that is when more questions start crowding my mind and my heart. “How quiet was this place on that fateful day?” “What could be heard?” “What did people do?” “Were they looking at the sky?” “Did they hear the plane approaching?” “What did it smell like?” For some odd reason, I am also fixating on smells.

I look around me; very few people are going by. I look behind me; the dome is at some distance from where I stand. This is a big park; this is a vast space.

I take my students inside the museum to attend a lecture by an atomic bomb survivor, Miss Keiko Ogura. The lecture is intense; this woman’s words, spoken in English, are intense, and they reach deeper into everybody’s hearts. In silence, we watch a graphic documentary. War is no video game; this is reality; this was somebody’s reality. This is what pain looks like. This is what suffering looks like. This is what war does to people; this is the making of history and men, and men wrote this chapter of history.

I hear sobbing; I lift my head, abandon my thoughts, and look around. My students are in tears. Those images are touching the depths of their hearts. This is the most real part of our trip. My young students must face the legacy of a sad chapter in the history of the United States, Japan, and the world. This is as real as it gets. This moment can change their lives forever. And I know that they will never forget.

It is difficult to console young minds, and trying to answer their silent question, “Why?” I do not have words; but I hug them; I pat them gently on their back; I need to make them feel safe. My heart is in turmoil. Emotionally, this is a draining experience. Moreover, I seem to have run out of words; in reality, I cannot talk. If I talk, I cry. My heart is heavy. My spirit is crushed.

Some of my students decide to visit the museum. They are stronger than I thought. I think they need answers, and they go look for them, on their own. And I am proud of them.

I decide to leave. I cannot stay in the building anymore. I can hardly breathe. I need fresh air.

I walk out of the museum and start walking. The snow is falling. A strong cold wind hits my face. I do not see much; maybe I am crying. I know I am in a daze. I wonder whatever happened to the sun that welcomed us in Hiroshima.

I walk toward the bridge; I cross the street, and then I see a bench. I sit, and I realize I am facing the Atomic Bomb Dome. A river separates me from the dome. I ask myself, "Do I take a picture now? Is it appropriate to take one?" I feel I am being disrespectful as I get my camera out of my pocket and take my first picture of the dome. I realize that the picture before my own eyes will be one hard to forget.

As I am sitting on that cold bench and struggle with my emotions as I take one more picture, I cannot find the strength to wipe tears away from my face. Those tears feel cold on my cheeks. And although I do not hear any noise, I look for the voices of the survivors in my heart. I read their books; I watched their witness accounts in documentaries; I saw the pictures in history books and biographies; I heard their painful and loud screams while my eyes went through those typed words, black on white.

There it is, before my eyes, one of five rivers that cross Hiroshima. It is wide; I do not know how wide, but wide enough to contain part of the 100,000 people that died instantly or immediately thereafter on that day. I stare at the water, but I fear approaching the bank of the river. I doubt I will be able to walk to the bank of this river and go down the stairs, and approach its waters.

I am still sitting on the bench; I cannot move; I cannot blink. I am frozen, just like time froze in this place decades ago. Before my eyes, pictures of that August day start playing on the screen of my mind; people crowding the river, packing it tight, as are the trains in Tokyo during rush hours; people throwing themselves into the river in an attempt to find relief from the intense heat. People helping people to water, when in reality it was people helping people to die. Extreme dehydration hates water; extreme dehydration kills many, and both the living and the dead crowd the rivers of Hiroshima. Bodies and body parts alike; men and women; young and

old. Rivers of humanity. Rivers of corpses. Facing up or facing down, still rivers of lifeless beings. And then I wonder, “What color was the water of the river? Was there blood?” “When did it turn black? Before the rain? After the rain?”

The survivors have tried to convey in their writings and through their own words what it felt like on that day; they tried to write what they saw and what they heard; they described the colors and the voices; they put into words the smells that crowded the air; they tried to preserve the memories of the most horrible day in their life. They gave a voice to the dead; they gave sight to the blind; they gave hope to the orphans; they gave comfort to one another; and they kept the memories for themselves and for us. They became the keepers of this town’s history and one of the saddest chapters in the history of humankind; and as their voices fade to old age and death, there is a sense of urgency to keep their narratives alive (Sekimori, 1986; Selden & Selden, 1989; Treat, 1995; Hogan, 1996; Yoneyama, 1999; Okuda, 2008; Rizzuto 2010).

As I sit by that river, I realize that words alone cannot fully convey the atrocities committed on the people of Hiroshima. I realize that to those that demand to build atomic bomb arsenals, or scream about their right to possess weapons of mass destruction, a visit to Hiroshima, and possibly Nagasaki, is a must.

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, there was no scientific knowledge available on the immediate and future effects of radiation. When the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, nobody knew about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When the mushroom cloud formed in the sky over Hiroshima, the world, as it was then known, changed in a heartbeat. A new terrifying weapon entered the political stage, and the first page of a new chapter in the history of the world and humankind saw the light.

In one of his works, Paul Bourdieu asks the following questions: “What makes the work of art a work of art and not a mundane thing or a simple utensils?” (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 258) I would argue it is its creator, the artist itself, and in this case all those survivors’ testimonies, and all the writings by Japanese authors that conveyed in their texts the somberness and the sadness of that day; the somehow grotesque beauty of the mushroom cloud as observed from behind the hills of Hiroshima; the descriptions of the haunting human figures that wandered the streets of what once was a city; the depictions of eyes hanging from eye sockets, and brains visible to the

naked eye; the agony of screaming children skinned alive standing by ashes of their siblings; the eerie silence and thick smoke enveloping people, buildings, and nature.

To understand the cruelty of human kind, the madness of lunatics abusing scientific knowledge, and the tragedy that history can become, one only needs to travel to Hiroshima for a day. Sit on that bench on the other side of the river, and stare at the Atomic Bomb Dome; then, find it in your heart the strength and the courage to listen to the voices of the dead. Those voices are there, among the trees and in the wind; listen with your gut. Close your eyes; and see those people, like grotesque zombies, crowding your space, suffocating you with their haunting presences. Listen to them breathing, wining, and softly moaning; they are dying around you. Listen to the words they do not say; listen to those words they cannot utter any longer; listen to the sounds of their suffering. Then, if you dare, open your eyes and stare straight into the eyes of one of humanity's darkest nightmare.

To understand the intersection of sciences and the arts, of sciences and personal narratives, of sciences and world history, travel to Hiroshima; this is one way of exploring the depth of humanity's heart; investigating the darkness of people's memories; and reflecting on the tragic legacies of one of the most controversial scientific invention of all times.

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