

Translating Memories: Two Moments from the Hiroshima Peace Park

Avram Alpert

University of Pennsylvania, Program in Comparative Literature

Abstract

This essay considers the relationship between translation and public memorials in a globalized world. In it I argue that an understanding of some questions in translation studies can help to shape and guide memorial practice. More specifically, I argue that memorial studies should not attempt to impose universal ideas about memory onto specific sites. Rather, we need to understand the difficulty of translating in two ways: first, from conflicting private memories to a shared public space, and, second, from universal concepts to particular spaces. I ground these reflections with the historical case study of the Hiroshima Peace Park. With regard to the first difficulty of translation, I consider how the memory of the bombing was translated into a public call for peace (instead of, for example, justice or retribution). Then, with regard to the second difficulty, I consider how an artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko, attempted to question the construction of the Peace Park by translating some of his own ideas about memorials to the local site of Hiroshima. I suggest in conclusion that elements of Wodiczko's work have a positive potential for how to understand translation and its place in memorial practice at both levels of difficulty.

Introduction

The acts of translation and memory might appear at first glance to be quite distinct. One is meant to mediate between the differences in languages, while the other is an internal or public process of commemorating a lost event. Yet the difference between them quickly dissolves if we remember that there is no language, indeed no communication at all, without translation. As linguist Roman Jakobson argued, "the meaning of a word is nothing but its translation by another sign which can be substituted for it" (quoted in Bennett 1993: 579). The word "pencil," for example, only has its meaning in so far as a pencil, or an image of a pencil, or a description of a pencil, can be substituted for the word. It is only in this movement, this translation between word and object, that meaning is made.

This is certainly also the case with public memory. Private memory already requires translations: to tell you what happened, I must constantly translate from the fading images and feelings of my experience to a language which you can hear and understand. This is then further complicated in matters of public memory, where the images and recollections of thousands become translated into a single public space. And this is very much an act of translation which we must take seriously: public memories, after all, are more plural, fractured and politicized than pencils.

My interest in this essay is to look at two moments when the memory of the bombing of Hiroshima was translated into public space. The first was when the space was originally designed as "The Hiroshima Peace Park," and the memory of the atomic bomb was effectively translated into the idea of peace. Connected to this, I will look at

how a struggle was waged by survivors of the bombing over the history and meaning of what peace meant after Hiroshima.

In the second moment, I consider translation at the level of cross-cultural transactions, asking not just how memories are translated, but how the practice of memorialization is itself being translated internationally. My interest here is the place of the United States and its citizens in the local construction of Hiroshima memory. I will focus on the role of the U.S. government in the original design of the Peace Park and then artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's memorial project made at the Park in 1999.

In the first moment, I raise questions about how memories are translated; in the second I ask what the place of U.S.-based artists and critics should be in raising these questions in the first place. Using the work of translation theorist Naoki Sakai, I argue in conclusion not just for the importance of how we translate memory, but also how we represent and comprehend that translation. Through the investigation of these moments, I argue that memorial studies should not seek a general framework to implement around the world, but rather an ever-evolving set of local strategies attuned to the difficulties of translation.

Moment One

It is generally assumed that the 1949 Park design was the first major proposal by Japan's consummate modernist architect, Tange Kenzo. However, as historian Inoue Shiochi has pointed out, Tange had in fact previously won an important architectural competition for his design of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." The layout of the space was simple and elegant: an isosceles triangle with exhibit halls at the base

and a commemorative statue at the southern tip. The ideology of the space, however, was more complicated: it was made essentially to praise Japanese imperialism and the idea of a “Greater East Asia” under Japanese control. As Japan began to lose the war, however, Tange's plan was aborted.

If we look at the design for the 1949 Peace Park, we will immediately see striking similarities. The Peace Park, similarly structured in the form of a triangle, appears to be the inversion of the original layout. This continuity with the previous design is further confirmed by the monuments that are at the center of each design. The original was a large, Shinto-style commemorative monument, while the Peace Park cenotaph is smaller and disfigured. When seen together, Tange's two sites read something like the conservative narrative propagated by the Japanese government after the war, which generally goes like this: We were duped by the military into believing in our prowess and grandeur and we foolishly pursued imperial glory. Now we are a humbled and peaceful nation and our concern is to spread economic prosperity and perpetual peace.¹

This narrative of a clean break with the past has coincided with the disavowal of the lingering problems associated with the original conditions of the site. As cultural critic Lisa Yoneyama has noted, foremost among these issues is the legacy of *hibakusha*, or survivors of the bomb, especially those of Korean descent. *Hibakusha* in general have retained a status of second class citizens in many segments of Japanese society. The Korean survivors, meanwhile, were only present in Hiroshima because they had been made to re-locate there as forced labor, and after the bombing their marginalized status meant they received inferior treatment for both physical and psychological injuries. The original design of the Peace Park did not address these issues directly, and instead

¹ See Carol Gluck, "The Past in the Present."

demanded a unitary voice in the name of peace over and against the struggle against past injustices.

"Peace" thus became the dominant image associated with Hiroshima memory. As Emmanuelle Riva says when asked what her film within a film is about in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*: "Peace. What else would one make a film about in Hiroshima?" But the obvious critical importance of promoting peace at the site of a nuclear bombing can unfortunately also function as a way to ignore the difficult questions raised by the legacy of the bomb. Peace in Hiroshima, at some level, has served to sidestep grief and re-instate a harmonious order.

One can see this at work, for example, in some of the text written for the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, a centerpiece of Tange's design. One panel there reads:

The damage done by the A-bomb was so catastrophic that this conviction was deeply rooted in the minds of the people of Hiroshima: humanity cannot coexist with nuclear weapons and their use must not be allowed.

Based on this conviction...the city of Hiroshima turned toward the world and began its journey on a path to peace. (quoted in Akiko 2002: 17)²

It is indeed true that the majority of Hiroshima's citizens called for peace.³ However, it does not necessarily follow that the memorial space can or should speak for them, or that they all speak in unison, or that they all agreed about what peace really means after an event as traumatic as Hiroshima. This harmonious path to peace, in other words, is perhaps more troublesome than the panels would have us believe.

² I owe this reference to Sarah Hollenberg.

³ Yoneyama notes that 71,852 out of 78,692 voters (an unusually high turnout) voted in favor of making Hiroshima the city of peace (1999: 228n43).

One example of local attempts to confound this vision of an easy peace occurred in 1985, when activists organized around a plan to renovate the museum. The protests were spearheaded in particular by Korean *hibakusha*, who were outraged that the central memorial space of Hiroshima did not register their continued plight. Naono Akiko has chronicled how a long debate ensued between dissenting *hibakusha*, politicians, academics and activists over how to change this narrative. After much back and forth, the general narrative that moved unthinkingly from bombing to peace was kept, but it was significantly buttressed by acknowledgement of Japan's colonial practices and the lingering mistreatment of *hibakusha* of both Japanese and Korean dissent.

Moment Two

It was in this terrain of embattled memory that Wodiczko's projection appeared. Speaking of the *Projection*, Wodiczko stated, "As an artist, I try to equip unheard individuals with a prosthetic device so that they can more effectively break the silence... I think of the survivors of Hiroshima that I worked with for the *Hiroshima Projection*. In this case, it was a challenge to overcome a silence imposed by their own community" (Wodiczko 2003:38). To overcome this silence Wodiczko projected the hands of survivors against the backdrop of the Atomic Bomb Dome, the only structure to remain intact after the bombing.

The Dome becomes the body for the speakers, whose hands move in agitation as they re-tell their personal histories about Hiroshima and its aftermath. A spectral presence of repressed voices is thus enabled to return to and haunt the formerly closed site. Wodiczko gathered an array of survivors to tell their stories about the troubling legacies

of Hiroshima. These included: Japanese victims of the bombing, Korean victims of the bombing and Japanese imperialism, Japanese victims of the bombing and the imposed silence of their own community, and those survivors still stigmatized as dangerous threats to society because of radioactive fallout. The survivors raised critical questions about the aftermath of the bombing. As one of his Korean participants put it "Those frightening heat rays burnt iron and rocks, and when the whole city was burnt and burnt to ashes, one thing did not burn – discrimination." Other participants would go on to directly challenge the Park's ideology of peace, such as 13 year old Maho Hiraoka, who stated in a testimony not part of the film version:

There's a sort of dark image associated with peace...wait...no, a bright image. Peace itself is bright. The truth of the matter is that I think that the major thing about peace lies somewhere other than with the atomic bomb or dark things like that. But if we are going to live to tell about the fact that the bomb was dropped, I think peace will become a darker image.

(Wodiczko 1999)

By bringing up these testimonies of the unforgivable atrocity of the bombing alongside accounts critical of the Peace Park, Wodiczko continued to challenge the dominant post-war ideology of silence, peace and easy healing.

But Wodiczko's statement that this was a silence imposed by the community has to be understood in a context that he is also well aware of: the legacy of U.S. censorship after the bombing. After all, many of the problems around the original design of the Hiroshima site were caused not just by the bombing but also by post-war U.S. censorship in Japan. General Headquarters, led by General Douglas MacArthur, imposed strict

regulations on what could be said publicly after the bombing. U.S. strategic interests kept knowledge of the effects of the bombing so restricted that even doctors could not publish medical information on treating and healing patients (Dower 1996:127).

Specifically with regard to Hiroshima memory, it has to be noted that public grieving about the effects of the bombing was also prohibited. As historian John Dower has written, after the bombing, "Suffering was compounded not merely by the unprecedented scale of the catastrophe...but also by the fact that public struggle with this traumatic experience was *not permitted*...With but rare exceptions, survivors of the bombs could not grieve publicly, could not share their experiences through the written word, could not be offered public counsel and support" (Dower 1996:127).⁴ As certain forms of public speech were prohibited, others were encouraged. This was particularly true about the discourse of peace, since the U.S. wanted the atomic bomb to be remembered not as a catastrophe, but as what made the end of the war possible. The translation of "atomic bomb" to "peace" thus helped serve U.S. strategic interests.

What does it mean, then, for a U.S.-based artist like Wodiczko, or a U.S. born writer like myself to return critically to the site of Hiroshima? Is there a difference between our use of a purportedly universal discourse on memory and the original governmental discourse of peace? With colonial benevolence, do we not once again use the site of Hiroshima to push forward our own ethical and cultural agenda? We seem to be stuck in a paradox: on the one hand a universal need for critical memory; on the other, an ethical demand to acknowledge a particular history.

An effective way of answering such questions has been worked through in the domain of translation studies by the Japanese-born, U.S.-based academic Naoki Sakai.

⁴ Ibid.

Sakai argues that all communication (both verbal and non-verbal) is, from the very start, translation. We must constantly translate our thoughts into language, and the words of others into concepts and feelings we can understand. As Sakai puts it, "we are separated from each other before my language community is separated from your language community" (Sakai 2001:54).

Since Sakai suggests that all we ever do is translate, he is less interested in the fact of translation than in the "representation of translation." He is particularly concerned with what he calls "regimes of translation" and "the schema of co-figuration." Co-figuration, for Sakai, is the process by which two imaginary unities are constructed in opposition to each other. His particular interest is with the unity "Japan," that was brought into being as nation state in the 19th-century through its co-figuration with the imagined community of "the West." Even though such co-figurations occur only because of contact, Sakai suggests that they further require the sanitization of that contact in order to function: in other words, Japan is only Japan because it is *not* the West. He then argues that when such a co-figuration occurs, the regime of translation that prevails is that of *equivalency*, wherein translation is understood as the process of finding within one language a precise equivalent to a term from another language. But since Sakai believes that languages are only ever imagined unities that require within themselves translation, such a desire for equivalency is rendered historically and epistemologically impossible.

An example of such a schema with regard to Hiroshima could be found in the idea of peace. We might, for instance, regard the United States government and the citizens of Hiroshima as two completely distinct entities. We could then say that since the government wanted Hiroshima to be a city of peace and the citizens also wanted this,

there is an equivalence here that allows the translation to hold. But what such a schema does is first to deny the very specific relationship between the U.S. and Japan, and then to assume that the term "peace" does not itself require translation – to assume that it has a singular meaning for all members of the society, no matter how conflicted within itself that society is.

Equivalency is something we could also use to defend Wodiczko's projection, but we would run into the same problems. We could argue, for instance, that since there is an equivalent critique of the past in the local context of Hiroshima, his universal practice of projection is valid. But in suggesting that Wodiczko's projection works because of an equivalency, we would thereby erase the heterogeneity of the *hibakusha* which they themselves have fought so hard to preserve, while at the same time anesthetizing the difficulties of this cultural translation by continuing to sidestep the particular interaction between Japan and the United States.

We can begin a more recuperative reading of Wodiczko's projection if instead of seeing it as a practice of implementing a certain universal discourse on memory, we understand it as the laying bare of the structures of translation. Recall that Wodiczko projects the voices of multiple survivors from different perspectives and backgrounds on to the same edifice. When the Atomic Bomb Dome "speaks," it thus speaks hetero-lingually. If, after all, the problem with the original design was its imposition of a unitary voice onto the site of memory, then the laying bare of translation *internal* to the community is a necessary step in disrupting the memorial space.

I have argued in this essay that memorial studies needs to take seriously the problem of translation, and, furthermore, that we cannot simply conceive of memorial

studies as the search for the best models which we could then translate in equivalent ways around the world. Rather, following Sakai's theory and Wodcizko's practice, I have suggested that memorials need to understand the local structures of translation, and the difficult ways in which groups and persons within a wronged community attempt to communicate their loss. In so doing, we may come a little closer to that impossible dream of a memorial practice which aids both individuals and communities in working through their traumatic pasts.

References

- Akiko, Naona. Embracing the Dead in the Bomb's Shadow: Journey through the Hiroshima Memoryscape Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Santa Cruz 2002.
- Dower, John W. "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory." Hiroshima in History and Memory Ed. Michael J. Hogan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 116-142.
- Gluck, Carol. "The Past in the Present." Postwar Japan as History Ed. Andrew Gordon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: 64-95.
- Sakai, Naoki. "Translation and Nationalism." Cultural Studies in Japan Eds. Steffi Richter and Annette Schad-Seifert. Leipzig: University of Leipzig Press, 2001: 51-58.
- Tavor, Eve. "The Scene of Translation: After Jakobson, Benjamin, de Man, and Derrida." New Literary History 24:3 (1993): 577-595.
- Wodiczko, Krzysztof. Et. Al. Documents of Public Projection, Hiroshima, 1999.
- . "Creating Democracy: A Dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko." Interview by Patricia C. Phillips Art Journal 62.4 (2003): 32-47.
- Yoneyama, Lisa. Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space and the Dialectics of Memory Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.