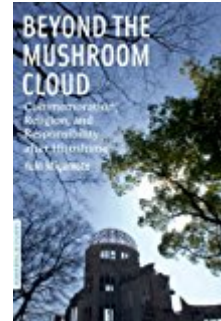


Yuki Miyamoto. *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud: Commemoration, Religion, and Responsibility after Hiroshima*. Bordering Religions: Concepts, Conflicts, and Conversations Series. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. 160 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-4050-0; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-4051-7.

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## How to Start Remembering and Hate the Bomb

As noted by Yuki Miyamoto in *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud*, since 1945 there have been two thousand atomic tests on land, sea, or air while currently in the world there are some twenty thousand nuclear weapons. At this writing, the international community is alarmed by Iran and North Korea, two countries that are pushing the envelope by either attempting to develop or further develop a nuclear weapons program. We live under the mushroom cloud, Miyamoto observes, but we tend to look at it from a distance, from an abstract vantage point. The mushroom cloud becomes a symbol of our collective indifference, even though we are all under threat.

Perhaps Americans tend to look at the mushroom cloud from afar because there is no real desire for a robust national introspection. Gerald J. De Groot alludes to this possible reality, writing: “Americans like to believe that they were a force for good in the twentieth century, yet that conception is confused by the fact that they are the only ones ever to have used the Bomb.”[1] Such introspection would invariably involve a certain unpleasantness, like what the late American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. experienced when visiting Hiroshima in November 1984. In his journal, he wrote about touring the museum devoted to the atomic bombing, calling the experience “shattering.” The exhibits, he wrote, “left me

with an appalled sense of the end of the world.” He was accompanied by his wife who was “plunged ... into a deep depression” after visiting ground zero and the museum.[2]

In addition, popular American imagination tends to reject the revisionist academic writings that argue that World War II could have just as well ended without the use of atomic bombs. One academic writes, “the number of American deaths prevented by the two bombs would almost certainly not have exceeded 20,000 and would probably have been much lower, perhaps even zero.”[3] For the old GIs who recall being readied for a possible invasion of Japan proper, such thinking defies common sense.[4] The Battle of Okinawa, which ended some two months prior to the atomic bombings, is often cited by those who argue against the revisionist history, noting that Japanese resistance was staunch up to the bitter end. Indeed, the death toll of Okinawa, an island considerably smaller than Japan itself, was quite high: lost were the lives of 130,000 Japanese troops, 70,000 to 160,000 Japanese civilians, and over 12,000 American military personnel. In that same battle, kamikaze pilots sunk thirty-six US Navy ships.[5]

For non-Americans, the mushroom cloud may seem

afar because the United States is the only nation that ever resorted to using nuclear weapons against an adversary. Moreover, few countries are members of the so-called nuclear club—only eight nations possess nuclear weapons (United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea), possibly nine (adding Israel). The reality of few nation-states being actual nuclear players may make the mushroom cloud all the more abstract, despite the fact that everyone on the planet is at risk should there be a hostile (or accidental) nuclear launch.

Another factor in this overall discussion is how people gaze at horror. If there is a constructive way of doing so, it is easier said than done. Alan Wolfe, for instance, cautions against dramatizing genocide, explaining, “Far from arousing the world’s conscience ... such an approach dulls its moral imagination; we become so overwhelmed by instances of mass murder that we find ourselves reluctant to intervene in any of them for fear that we will have an obligation to engage in all of them.” Wolfe adds, “For better or worse, most human beings ... can expose themselves only to a limited amount of hate.”[6] Applying such insight to the nuclear threat, one might fear that too much focus on the massive death toll of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will simply desensitize people while simultaneously generating a sense of helplessness about the nuclear age.

From the perspective of Miyamoto, most of us are thinking about the nuclear problem all wrong. *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud* focuses attention on the *hibakusha*, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb survivors (the Japanese term “hibakusha” is derived from the words “bomb” and “exposure”), arguing that their collective experience and insight, the way they remember the horror of August 6 and 9, 1945, can provide the necessary universalist perspective. This in turn could lead to a peace that is intolerant of nuclear weapons. According to Miyamoto, who grew up in Hiroshima and refers to herself as a second-generation bomb survivor, the *hibakusha* have renounced retaliation and denounced nuclear weaponry while offering “a new vision of a community of memory that transcends existing boundaries (national, social, and cultural)” (p. 13). Any discussion about nuclear weaponry, the author insists, must think in terms of universality, otherwise the discourse about nuclear weaponry remains situated in a “nation-state framework” (p. 14). Since radiation is “an indiscriminate force that transgresses national or state borders”—the fallout being no respecter of nations and thus capable of harming all people—the threat posed by nuclear arms

is a universal issue (p. 15).

The theme of the book, hence its title, is that people must get beyond the mushroom cloud. For Miyamoto, the mushroom cloud is “that spectacular symbol of wartime triumph and scientific achievement, emblem of the division of nations, and dark cloud covering a morass of guilt and self-recrimination” (p. 2). The same mushroom cloud, the author maintains, also acts as a barrier between those who were victims of the atomic bomb and those who were not. She believes that we can go beyond the mushroom cloud, and achieve unity on the important issue of nuclear arms, by understanding the *hibakusha* (p. 15).

Following the introduction, *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud* is divided into three sections: “Commemoration,” “Religious Interpretations,” and “Responsibility.” Each section consists of two chapters. The first two chapters address the issue of remembrance with a special focus on the Yasukuni shrine (where 2,460,000 spirits are deified, including WWII fighters) and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Chapters 3 and 4, the most interesting parts of the book, explore how the atomic bombings have been interpreted by two important religious groups, the True Pure Land Buddhist sect of Hiroshima and the Roman Catholic community of Nagasaki. The last section, which actually consists of a single chapter and a very short postscript, focuses on women in Japanese atomic bomb film narratives in order to argue that such stories offer a remembering that is broad and inclusive of all humanity. (A short afterword, written in haste as the book was going to press, acknowledges the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan that led to the disaster at the two nuclear power plants in Fukushima.)

In the book’s reflection on commemoration, the author calls for a community of memory that breaks out of the nation-state. Nevertheless, in her discourse on the ethics of remembering, which borrows insights from Avishai Margalit’s *The Ethics of Memory* (2004), Miyamoto concedes that many cultural realities make the construction of a universal community of memory a near impossibility. From the author’s perspective, the memory of the atomic bombings is broader than the nation-state. Survivors of the 1945 atomic blasts include not only Japanese citizens, but also Japanese Americans, Koreans, and even POWs of the Allied powers. She also includes in this grouping the “atomic soldiers” who were exposed to radiation during the Trinity test at Alamogordo, New Mexico. In fact, she extends the *hibakusha* designator to the “downwinders” of all subsequent nuclear tests, in-

cluding those in Nevada and the Marshall Islands.

From Miyamoto's perspective, the 1994-95 controversy concerning the Smithsonian's *Enola Gay* exhibit exemplifies why the nation-state framework is a terribly flawed community of memory. The Smithsonian failed to provide an inclusive memory of the Hiroshima bombing that would acknowledge not only the American heroism and sacrifice in carrying out the war but also those in Japan on the receiving end of the atomic attack. Similarly, she offers a generally negative critique of the Yasukuni shrine because of its nationalist and triumphalist narrative. The museum connected with Yasukuni, she writes, is concerned with "regulating national interest and the power of state" by fostering an "ideology of sacrifice and triumph," all of which restricts the "interpretation of death" and "forecloses the possibility of a dialogue through which the living might be changed by the dead" (p. 70).

For Miyamoto, the Hiroshima city's commemorative endeavors pertaining to the atomic bomb "provide an alternative way to build a community of memory unrestricted by national boundaries" (p. 29). This is achieved in part because the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which was reopened with a new wing in 1994, "offers a critical reflection" on the city's past as part of Japan's military-industrial complex (pp. 72-73). The second floor of the museum presents the nuclear problem from a global perspective, making history relevant to the present. The exhibits are designed to "open dialogue with the dead to produce critical reflection" (p. 73). The photographs and artifacts of the atomic bombing, for instance, neither support a nationalistic agenda nor advance victimhood. Whereas the Yasukuni shrine offers visitors a monological narrative (which is in keeping with the nation-state construction of memory), the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is about a dialogical narrative (which allows for a universal perspective).

During his aforementioned visit to the Hiroshima museum, the American historian Schlesinger was surprised that the Japanese did not hate Americans. A cultural informant explained to him: "It is partly our guilt over Pearl Harbor. We know that, if there had been no Pearl Harbor, there would have been no Hiroshima. And it is partly that the immensity of the common fate transcends national frontiers." [7] This is in harmony with Miyamoto's account of the Buddhist leader Koji Shigenobu (b. 1935). Representing the True Pure Land sect, Koji sees the bombing as the fault of the city of Hiroshima, the Japanese, and humankind. The bombing

of Pearl Harbor is now regarded as a second-level mistake. Overall, Koji attributes the Hiroshima bombing to a karmic cause, all part of "an infinite web of shared responsibility" (p. 105). In any case, according to this Buddhist perspective, the victim and victimizer dichotomy is false because both are actually of one body. War, after all, is an "act of humankind" (p. 101).

The Japanese Roman Catholic perspective of the Nagasaki atomic bombing is also characterized by self-reflection, albeit one that many observers would find shocking and eerie. Here a theological interpretation is provided by Nagai Takashi (b. 1908), who suggests that the explosion over Nagasaki, which reduced the church community (of Urakami) from 8,850 to 1,950 living members, was "a great act of Divine Providence" and "an act of grace" (p. 130). Since during the war the church ("the only holy place in all Japan") had been praying for the conflict to end and lasting peace to follow, the Christians who died from the atomic blast constituted "a pure lamb, to be slaughtered and burned on the altar of sacrifice to expiate the sins committed by humanity in the Second World War" and bring a close to the war (p. 131). For Nagai, the timing (or in Miyamoto's words, "a meaningful constellation" [p. 131]) of certain events suggests that God's hand was involved. For instance, clouds over the primary target led the Americans to opt for their secondary target, Nagasaki; the city was bombed the morning the Japanese Supreme Council of War gathered to debate whether or not to continue fighting; the Urakami Cathedral burst into flames the moment the emperor reached the decision to surrender; the emperor announced the surrender on the day of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Although this interpretation exalts the victims of Nagasaki, there is a strong emphasis on collective sin that fosters humility and self-reflection. Miyamoto believes that this Catholic viewpoint transcends national borders because it encourages all of the living to seek repentance and reconciliation.

The author acknowledges that the views of the hibakusha are not a monolithic voice. But a weak aspect of her analysis is that the perspective of the Buddhist Pure Land Sect is largely explained by a single representative, Koji. Similarly, the Catholic community perspective is largely explained by a single representative, Nagai. Although there is some commentary on the message that Pope John Paul II gave at Hiroshima in 1981, he, of course, was not speaking as a member of the Catholic hibakusha community. Another weakness of the overall argument developed by Miyamoto is the reliance on

a television drama, *The Diary of Yumechiyo*, which began airing in 1981, and two “recent” cinema films, *The Face of Jizo* (2004) and *Yunagi City, Sakura County* (2007) (the latter based on an earlier graphic novel) (p. 149). All of these sources are selective. They offer construction material for the viewpoint being offered by the author, but they may or may not be normative. In general, the clarity of the overall presentation belies the cultural complexities, which are beyond the ordinary reader’s capability to independently confirm. The complexities of memory are heightened by Japanese reticence, most poignantly attested by the author’s admission that she “was unable to gather up the courage to ask my mother [who died in 2001] about her experiences in Hiroshima, at the age of six, of the atomic bombing, one mile from the hypocenter” (p. xiv).

The “universal” memory extolled in *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud* is derived from Japanese experience. There may be a genuine desire to speak for all people, but that is not the same as all people speaking. The hibakusha perspective was created within the boundaries of the nation-state, despite the efforts to speak across those boundaries. No matter how noble and sincere the hibakusha are at fostering a universal dialogue, the hibakusha nevertheless remain the central voice. A question persists: can a community of memory genuinely represent all of humanity while existing within the confines of a nation-state? When Miyamoto writes about Fukushima but not the victims of the Chernobyl explosion, the world’s worst nuclear accident, there may be lingering nation-state myopia.

The above light criticism aside, this profound work is heuristic and its aim is good. The ultimate objective of the book is to have nuclear weaponry abolished, a decision Miyamoto thinks is more realist than imagining that “cohabitating with twenty thousand nuclear arms” is normal and tolerable (p. 3). The insights of the hibakusha would be instrumental in making the goal of banning the bomb achievable, the author insists. Near the end of *Beyond the*

*Mushroom Cloud*, a passage reads: “The aim to abolish nuclear weaponry is often criticized as unrealistic. But one claim of this book is that it makes even less sense to discuss nuclear deterrence without taking into account the actual survivors’ testimonies. The survivors’ experiences, the means by which they have sought to come to terms with the atomic bombings, and the ethical vision that arises from those experiences must be incorporated into the atomic bomb discourse. Realizing this aim will depend on our willingness to exceed existing social frameworks in which we remain surrounded by literally thousands of nuclear warheads. It will depend on relating to the hibakusha ... [which] can be obtained only by going beyond the mushroom cloud” (p. 175).

#### Notes

[1]. Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 347.

[2]. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Journals 1952-2000*, eds. Andrew Schlesinger and Stephen Schlesinger (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 583.

[3]. Rufus E. Miles Jr., “Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved,” *International Security* 10 (1985): 121-140, quotation on 121.

[4]. In her sympathetic review of *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud*, Elizabeth McAlister, “A Lifetime Haunted by the Bomb,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 2-15, 2012, 19-20, refers to her cousin, a US Marine combat veteran of the Pacific theater, as one who believed “the lie” and “myth” that the atomic bombings saved his life.

[5]. Charles Carter, “Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” in *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, ed. Roger Chapman (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2010), 253-254.

[6]. Alan Wolfe, *Political Evil: What It Is and How to Combat It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 177.

[7]. Schlesinger, *Journals 1952-2000*, 583.

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