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WHEN MEMORY BECOMES DEBRIS: AESTHETIC MODES OF REPRESENTING DISASTER LOSS

Abstract: The concept of public forgetting by Bradford Vivian explains how acts of forgetting are utilized to enhance selective and normative public remembrance. One common example is when tons of debris caused by a natural disaster that once functioned as material memory either on a personal or collective levels were taken away. How do people respond to this kind of loss when such memory has to be disposed of as waste? Japanese disaster memory discourse aims to disseminate knowledge of disaster prevention, preparedness, and commemoration of victims, while the ways disaster survivors make sense of their losses individually have yet to be examined. The Kobe City's monument and the annual commemorative service of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake bring about chronological post-disaster temporality among the general public. However, three different survivor testimonies this article analyzes show that individual kins of the deceased called *izoku* continue to nurture their memories of the deceased relevant to their current lives; their memories are related to the past trauma, but they are simultaneously interrelated memories in the present. James E. Young's concept of texture of memory, Giuliana Bruno's concept of fabrics of the visual, and Ernst van Alphen's concept of reintegration of subjectivity and body are examined to consider the way a survivor/*izoku* connects lost material memory with the present living memory. The series of earthenware works crafted by a survivor/*izoku* are analyzed to consider how she makes sense of absence and presence of the deceased in her present everyday life. The author proposes decomposed memory as a concept of processing memory as debris, where memory needs to be appropriately decomposed and transformed by individuals into interrelated memory.

Keywords: *interrelated memory; act of witnessing; decomposing memory; texture of memory; reintegration.*

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Collective Memorialization of Disaster

The devastating power of a natural disaster strongly affects those who inhabit the area. Anyone who survived the initial massive destruction gains the social right to declare their position as first-hand eyewitnesses to the catastrophe. Despite the assumed value of first-hand eyewitness of a disaster, there is no guarantee that all first-hand survivor testimony will be selected as the component of the collective public memory. How does the selection of preferred survivor narratives shape the collective memory of the 1995 earthquake and its aftermath? James E. Young, scholar of English and Judaic Studies once expressed his surprise at “how little critical attention was being devoted to the forms and meanings of remembrance engendered by memorials and museums constructed expressly to deepen the memory of the Holocaust. . . . no single work has explored the literal process—the construction—of memory in its memorials” (*Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* 172-3). Young calls the ways memorials and museums construct memory of the Holocaust with political, cultural and ideological reflections as “texture of memory” (Young 172). Concretely, he explains that meanings of memorials of historical events emerge for the first time when viewers/visitors make sense of the memorials by relating themselves in their own way to memorials and the past events:

The usual aim in any nation’s monuments, however, is not solely to displace memory or to remake it in one’s own image: it is also to invite the collaboration of the community in acts of remembrance. To the extent that the myths or ideals embodied in a nation’s monuments are the people’s own, they are given substance and weight by such reification and will appear natural and true; hence, an inescapable partnership grows between people and its monuments. . . . It is not to Holocaust monuments as such that we turn for remembrance, but to ourselves within the reflective space they [events, icons, and ourselves] both occupy and open up. In effect, there can be no self-critical monuments, but only critical viewers. (Young 189)

When substance and weight of embodied myths or ideals belong to the acts of remembrance of the viewers or participants, people can make sense of relating to the monuments of historical events regardless of their status as first-hand, second-

hand eyewitness, or non-witness. The cultural value of memory is not judged by the position of the survivor-eyewitness in relation to a historical event, but by the degree to which the viewers of the embodiment of historical memory (such as monuments) can make sense of the texture of memory in their own living contexts of self-reflective acts of remembrance.

Regarding the official site of commemoration and the monument of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, which exists at the East Park in Kobe City, two survivors testify to the reasons why they won't go to the site for the annual commemoration ceremony. Ms. Sachiko Matsumoto, a survivor/*izoku* says that there is no "truth" there:

What on earth does the East Park mean? I know that (victims') names are inscribed (on the stones) in the underground space. It does not matter to me. I do not feel like going to see them. It is out of the question that I would go to the East Park on the commemoration day. I have no idea about what journalists think about what January 17th means.... I was forced to go there.... I do not understand.... Why does it have to be there? It was not the place where my younger sister was killed...It was not the place where her life ended. There is not truth there.... It is not such a monument (that contains the truth). It does not contain individuals' feelings. Maybe those who go there are not *izoku*, I suppose?

Matsumoto once agreed to go to the East Park on the commemoration day at the request of a journalist who insisted in taking pictures of her posing to commemorate her late sister in front of candles, with eyes closed and hands put together in a gesture of praying. Obviously, she has no emotional connection to either the commemoration site or the monument because this ceremony and the monument have nothing to do with her individual memory of how her late sister was killed. The public commemoration site and the monument that are supposed to function to maintain disaster memory of the victims do not bear any truths. Likewise, another survivor/*izoku* Mr. Yoshinori Kamisho testifies that he would never go to the commemoration site because he feels distanced from it.

I have never been there. I do not know much about it... It is called the East Park. It is on the corner of Sannomiya intersection. Although I know its presence, ... They say that (victims') names are inscribed on the wall. Every year, on the commemoration day, people gather in the morning to light candles and commemorate... they do it every year... I suppose some people go there routinely,

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but I do not go there... I imagine some people go there... it appears so distant, looking from my viewpoint. I feel very (distant).

Kamisho recognizes the location and has superficial knowledge of what the monument looks like. Yet, it is very clear from this testimony that he is emotionally detached from the site, the monuments, the visitors/participants and their acts of remembrance embodied by lighting candles and praying. These two survivor/*izoku* testimonies illustrate the extreme opposite of Young's explanation about how "an inescapable partnership grows between people and its monuments" when the myths or ideals of the monuments belong to people so that they can feel the monuments embody something "natural and true" (189). The attempt of constructing a texture of memory of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake through the commemoration site, the monument, and the act of remembrance do not collaborate with these survivor/*izoku*'s emotions, even though the names of their lost loved ones are inscribed on the monument wall. Consequently, it does not make any sense for them to go there. These two survivors' testimonies suggest that collective memorialization of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, even while inscribing the names of victims on the memorial, do not give weight to the survivor/*izoku*'s feelings. Likewise, the monument site does not represent the singularity of each victim or each *izoku*. Thus, what remains at the collective memorial site is an ambiguous void of an object, which is difficult to encapsulate either in meanings or feelings.

Bearable Weight

Substance and weight of monuments embodied by myths or ideals of the people's own, not of a nation's, generate collaboration between monuments and people. The "inescapable partnership", as Young calls it, between monuments and ourselves grows from this embodied weight. The weight implies both conceptual and literal materials. The destruction of an earthquake encompasses both material and abstract elements. The loss of material objects that represents one's life history and memory without a doubt damages the frame and substance of an individual's internal world. Survivor/*izoku* Ms. Tomiyo Nakakita testifies that she lost all porcelain and earthenware that she had collected for years before the disaster. Six months prior to the earthquake, she started taking pottery classes. The quake killed the oldest and the only daughter of her three children. For about two months afterwards, she made an effort to behave as calmly and normally as possible in

front of others. After she carried out a farewell service for the late daughter, she says she “fell into a hole”:

I fell into a hole. I could not meet anyone. I could not speak (to anyone). I stayed in an evacuation shelter... . Every morning, I put my hands together to pray for her (late daughter), ... and I heard her voice saying to me that ‘why don’t you start making pottery again?’ ... (at that time) I used to use plates supplied for evacuees from the city government, even if I disliked them (there was no other choice). I wanted to return to the same place with the four of us to live together, so that Yuri’s remains could also come back to this place, ... I thought I will make earthenware so that the four of us could use them when we come back. ... I thought there is meaning to serve food in a plate, hold it, and dine with it. ... There would be Yuri’s photograph. ... (In) the house designed by my husband, (there would be) plates I made, and we dine that is the household.

Instead of purchasing what was lost, she made all of them by herself. She designed her plates using either white or black glaze in order to highlight food served on them to prevent distracting from the original food color. The flower base is approximately sixty centimeters tall so that lilies, which represent her late daughter’s name in Japanese (Yuri literally means lily), can stand straight inside the base. All earthenware has a clear purpose to be used in her present life, and each work embodies an inexplicit relation to her late daughter.

The largest difference between the inscribed monument wall of the 1995 earthquake and Nakakita’s pottery series is that one represents the “reminder” (Young 8) of the past historical event, the other embodies day-to-day connection with the past. Young explains this paradoxical function of national monuments:

. . . the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives. Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them. (Young 5)

The monument wall is supposed to function as a reminder of the specific time and day of the earthquake because people tend to forget such events, so when the memorial day comes they are reminded of what happened. Contrarily, Nakakita’s

pottery mobilizes the continuing present life practices connected with past memory, so the pottery does not bear the function of forgetting the past.

As an obvious contrast to the function of government monuments, Nakakita's earthenware work is neither a memorial object nor a reminder of her daughter's death. These plates and the flower vase provide substance and weight she can bear to grasp and hold. She emphasized: "I added various feelings into the clay while kneading: the indescribable pain, resentment of not being able to see Yuri's growth, and anger ... I put (all of them) into the clay and kneaded it". The life of food is set in the plates and the life of flowers is poured into the vase as she uses them in her present life. However, the weight of these vessels reflects her indescribable pain and resentment.

The parallel photographic images of pottery before and after they are used provide the viewers with a new channel from which they are allowed to know how the survivor/*izoku* creates a source of post-disaster everyday life differently each time. Because of this juxtaposition of before and after the use of pottery, the viewer can recognize that this earthenware are vessels that support the bearable weight of life. The viewers can imagine her actions of holding plates and bowls. These motions of using them and setting them aside for a next use are recurrently a part of her present life. Each time these vases, plates, pots are used, they take a new appearance and meaning for her. Pottery is open to new engagement with new objects that fill these containers. The action of holding a plate, or a vase, or a bowl, is a bodily movement that activates bearable memory.

Closed Form

Young defines the "texture of memory" as the substance and weight embodied in the historical monuments through collaborative acts of remembrance of the event, the monuments, and people. Giuliana Bruno, a scholar of visual arts and media develops the concept of "the fabrics of the visual" (4) to underline the effect of sensation of the surface that creates a public intimacy. Bruno claims that: "The reciprocal *contact* between us and objects or environments indeed occurs on the surface. It is by way of such tangible, 'superficial' contact that we apprehend the art object and the space of art, turning contact into the communicative interface of a public intimacy" (3). For her, the surface of objects or environments does not mean a mere superficial image of objects or environments, or even translucent filter or medium that conveys to viewers some information or sensation. The

surface is the material site of contact where we and objects or environments communicate to build a public intimacy. Therefore, when the surface of objects becomes a tangible interface, it can be sensed as fabrics that make us feel its texture and intimacy. Through the tangible fabrics of the surface, we can communicate with the visual appearance of objects or environments around us, and then collaborate with acts of meaning-making. She further adds that the surface of a visual text can bear a history of affects and emotions:

One can say that a visual text can even *wear* its own history, inscribed as an imprint onto its textual surface. It can also show affects in this way. After all, the motion of an emotion can itself be drafted onto the surface, in the shape of a line or in the haptic thickness of pigment, and it can be tracked down with tracking shots. An affect is actually 'worn' on the surface as it is threaded through time in the form of residual stains, traces, and textures. In visual culture, surface matters, and it has depth. (5)

As Bruno argues, the surface of materials carries history, culture, and thus the depth of transactive reflections. Thus, it would be intriguing to think how one's mind is stimulated by the surface, as well as by substance and weight in order to be affected in a certain imaginative way by the closed, unseen space. Japanese American artist and ceramist, Toshiko Takaezu, created a series of works in the 1960s known as "closed forms". The series are bottles or pots with their lids sealed, obviously not supposed to be used in the usual manner. Takaezu left only a pinhole on top of the lids to release the air during firing. Pool J. Smith argues: "The poetry of the outside evokes the mystery of the inside, an aspect of these works that the artist considers vital. Their dark interiors remain a secret space" (16).

Later, Takaezu added a paper-wrapped wad of clay inside the closed forms, so that after firing, the clay remains separate from the inside surface of the pot and creates a clanging sound when someone holds it. Lee Nordress calls this technique a "private affair" (27). Critic Janet Koplos notes: "That very nice term suggests the modesty of the sound and the intimacy of the exchange between the pot and the individual who is not just looking at the vessel but handling it. . . . She is also said to have written poems on the inside of some works, but only breakage would reveal them to the world." (27-8). The hidden clay ball inside the closed forms or the poem inscribed inside the vessel emphasize both privacy and intimacy of the work. The sound created by the clay inside the closed pot underlines "the existence

of the interior" (28) and the motion connects human and the vessel itself. When a viewer holds a closed form in which a wad of clay is hidden, the contact through the surface of the work connects the viewer's body with the substance beyond the surface. Certainly, as Bruno asserts, "the surface holds what we project into it. It is an active site of exchange between subject and object. The surface, like the screen, is an architecture of relations. It is a mobile place of dwelling, a transitional space that activates cultural transits. It is a plane that makes possible forms of connectivity, relatedness, and exchange." (8). Yet, somehow, the meaning of the hidden poem inscribed on the other side of the surface of Takaezu's closed form, which can be seen as tangible only if the pot is broken, makes us consider that not only the texture of the surface of objects or environments, but also unseen, intangible forms beyond and behind such surfaces evoke the memories of others.

Interrelatedness

According to Ernst Van Alphen, memory is structurally different from trauma. He states that "[m]emories are representations of the past" (36). This is crucial to understand because this simple idea can be easily overlooked. Thus, he continues, memories are always memories of something, something is remembered. Structurally, memories have narrative structure, and in that sense, they have a constructive effect because they reconstruct and represent the past. On the other hand, trauma cannot be remembered. In the realm of trauma, "reality and representation are inseparable. There is no distinction: the representation is the event" (36). Van Alphen explains what it means to have "cultural responsibility" towards historical events, particularly, the Holocaust. He claims that it means to establish a connection to the past, which is part of the survivors in the present:

Although the actual events are over and belong to the past, the experience of those events continues: many survivors live still inside them. This history, in other words, is at once in the past and in the present. The cultural responsibility that befalls those living now, therefore, is to establish contact with the 'past' part of the present survivors; to integrate them, with their past, into our present" (93-94).

Van Alphen explains how we relate to the past in the present by analyzing the projection effect of French artist Christian Boltanski's series of installations titled

Ombres (Shadows) (1984), *Bougies* (Candles) (1986), and *L'ange d' alliance* (Angel of accord) (1986). In order to “keep its memory alive” (175), he argues that Boltanski uses the technique of projecting images of models of death on the wall by the flame of candles or the lighting of a projector. This effect does not represent the dead or the death in the past, but presents the correspondence of the two subjects in the present. He argues:

The subjects (figures) are not transformed into objects; rather, an interaction between two subjects occurs. The projection is not a dead object left behind in the past; it responds to its model all the time within the temporal dimension in which the viewer also is: the present Death—the power that organized the Holocaust — and those who were the victims of death are no longer overwhelmingly present in their confrontational absence. In *Shadows* and *Candles*, the figures of death and the dead are present in their immediate correspondence with their living projections. (173-5)

Keeping memory of the past alive in the present, as demonstrated by Boltanski's series of installations effectively helps us take a position in the present to relate to past events, rather than being drawn into secondary traumatization by said past events or, being overwhelmed by indifference or forgetfulness.

Tomio Nakakita created series of pottery in different forms and textures, and for different uses. Her action was evoked by the collaboration with her late daughter through interrelatedness in her present life, so that she could make sense of her life in the aftermath of the disaster. The interrelatedness referred to by the author points to the way in which a disaster survivor/*izoku* appropriately decomposes disaster memory by themselves. Thus, she transforms past traumatic memory into interrelated connection with the deceased, whose image keeps growing in her post-disaster life.

This concept is different from Bradford Vivian's concept of public forgetting. According to Vivian, “forgetting is desirable to, even necessary for, maintaining cultures of memory that serve the needs of the present as much as they conform to the shape of the past...” (9). The difference between the act of public forgetting and act of decomposing memory is that a survivor/*izoku* makes time for herself and takes time by herself in order to access what has been destroyed and lost and what material memory was taken away from her life. It is a totally different process than that of a survivor giving up what has been lost and adjusting her loss to other people's spatio-temporal discourse of recovery in exchange of forgetting what was

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lost. An example of the act of decomposing memory is how Nakakita does not relate to her daughter in the past, but in her present life. Among the many vessels she made, she created urns for her late daughter in which she put her bones and ashes. The small urn preserves the daughter's Adam's apple and the larger urn contains the rest of her remains.

She testifies to the context in which she created these urns:

The reason why I wanted to make the urn was . . . at the crematorium, (they put her bones and ashes) inside the readymade white porcelain urn . . . and then, it was wrapped by a white cloth, and I held it to go home . . . I thought one day . . . I want to knead the clay by myself, hand-build it, form it . . . with the clay I knead, I wanted to cradle her, . . . I wanted to hold her . . .

Kneading clay to be used for hand-building a form is time-consuming. Nakakita says that, while kneading the clay, she did not need to talk to anyone, she kneaded the clay in silence, at her own tempo, and others did not bother to speak to her, so she could knead her feelings into the clay. She chose red clay and blew earth-colored glaze with her own breath instead of pouring the glaze onto the urn. She intentionally used natural color and natural form in response to a totally nonsensical cremation procedure, after which she had to bring back a readymade white porcelain urn. Making the late daughter's urn from scratch is another process during which she is trying to make sense of her late daughter's presence inside her rebuilt house.

Another Nakakita creation process exemplifies the way she strived to create meaning through pottery-making. All her earthenware have the sign, "TO" in Japanese (fig. 4). She says that most viewers mistake its meaning for an abbreviation of her first name, Tomiyo. Only to some select few, she explains the true meaning of the sign TO: the Japanese postpositional particle, "and". She always inscribed TO on the hidden surface of her pottery, as she said in her heart "Yuri *and* Mom." She testifies that:

The plates are used to share food with people who get together. I made (plates) by thinking about fun times, which is the time that is to come in the future, and that is also the past time I made pottery with Yuri, linked with the past memory. I find the time making pottery fulfilling.

Van Alphen explains the way the survivor reintegrates his or her subjectivity and body in the presence of the listener during her act of testimony.

During the testimony the survivor gains access to his or her self, to his or her own *body*. This reintegration of subjectivity and body is the result of the healing process. The survivor is 'reembodied' in several aspects. First, she reclaims the position of witness to the history she has lived through. But second, thanks to the externalization of the traumatic events, she has inserted herself into the historical dimension of the listener. No longer isolated within a past event, she now finds herself in the present dialogical situation with a listener. This being-in-the-present during testimony makes it possible to look back and tell, or testify to, her story — hence, to reclaim the past, but also to relate to other human beings in the present. The interhuman situation of testimony is in that sense not only a precondition for continuing to live, but also, because of the interrelatedness, emblematic for life after testimony. (153)

Van Alphen describes “the interrelatedness” of the act of testimony occurring between a testifier and a listener as a precondition to continue living in the present, which is characteristic of life after testimony (153). Nakakita’s pottery-making practices elicit the interrelatedness between the survivor and the victim, as well as between the survivor and the others who dine with her using the plates she made. The meaning of “and” inscribed as the signature on her pottery—which is the interrelatedness between the two subjects (Nakakita and her daughter Yuri)—points to the way each pot is made and used through both the past and present memory, the latter represented by food and people who are welcomed to dine together. The urns, nevertheless, remain intangible to the viewers, filled as they are with the late daughter’s remains, unseen due to the closed lids. These sealed lids make the viewer sense the weight of unretrievable life. Looking at this unique closed form, the viewer understands that pottery does not represent the absence of a daughter, but the presence of her living memory in the present.

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