Statement on Project Title Change

Our previous title was “Peace through Reconciliation: Bridging the Intergenerational Divide on Teshima.” We changed this title because it doesn’t represent the role we played in bridging the divides on the island, mischaracterizing what our project did and achieved in practice.

Summary

We engaged with and held conversations with Teshima islanders in South Japan about the meaning of community and community-based action, situated in the context of their action against illegal industrial waste dumping and their changing lives under the germination and cultivation of the Setouchi Art Triennale. We built an interactive oral history archive themed on building bridges between communities and encountering a place as ‘outsiders’, using the conversations we recorded on Teshima.

Project Description

From a ‘garbage island’ to a destination in an art festival, Teshima and its changing community of residents have been engaged in a nuanced dialogue about their evolving way of life, direct action, and the role that community action plays in our contemporary understanding of issues of climate change, sustainability, and consumerism. Both of us project leaders have learnt in our undergraduate studies the central role the intersectional web plays in any systemic problems. We found Teshima’s ongoing history to inspire an intersectional framework in approaching problems of sustainable practice in a globalized world, from which bridges can be drawn to start a cross cultural dialogue with communities around the world.

From our first engagement with the island during College of the Atlantic’s Human Ecology Lab Island Odyssey (HELIO) we realized that community history is oral tradition that lives in the members of the community. This history is only externalized when there is an encounter with an ‘other’ or an outsider, or a situation that hails from the outside. Otherwise, the practice of history lives in how the older generations cultivate the connection for their younger generations to their roots.

Unlike large scale disasters such as wars or migratory events, a small community’s collective memory and how it is propagated and survives is through how it continues to live, as opposed to how death is memorialized. It is not shaped by a history of power but rather a history of unity. Teshima’s successful struggle to turn around the catastrophic fate of their island’s ecosystem, relegated to it by the corporations that chose to dump hundreds of thousands of tons of toxic industrial waste on their shores, is an incredibly unique and hopeful story in which a community unites to ensure that their community history doesn’t become overshadowed by environmental destruction.

The Setouchi Triennale is framed, primarily by the Bennese Corporation and the festival’s main benefactor, as a revitalization project bringing a new identity and industry to small rural islands with dwindling population; in Teshima’s case, creating a new image different from ‘garbage island’. Since many who visit the island from outside remember or know little of its incredible environmental struggle this objective was achieved only to an extent. The new economic activity on the island has shifted the lines that demarcate community boundaries – who is a local or who is an outsider. Is the revitalization brought in the form of an art festival really revitalization of the community? If so, then how? Who decides the form this revitalization takes, and the life it will take on in the future? These are the questions that guided our oral history interviews.

Many differences in ideology have strengthened within the island community as time passes between the waste dumping incident and the present day. These demarcations become important when considering whose voices are heard and given the most weight in the decisions that continue to affect the ecosystem of Teshima and ultimately the lives of its residents. The memories of those who directly experienced the waste dumping are especially important to shed light on the island’s future, but not in isolation. We learnt...
that they must be listened to in tandem with the present day, and furthermore be listened to across the lines of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, as it serves as a more authentic discussion on the lines of peace within the community.

The intersectional nature of Teshima’s predicament, and it being a community story at its heart, is why we chose to shape our initiative around Teshima using oral history methods. We rigorously researched oral history practices, both academic and traditional, and created a method that fits the nature of our initiative. The preparatory period of our project ended up lasting a couple of years due to pandemic-related travel setbacks. During this time, we reached out to oral history scholars and practitioners to get insight on our work across India, the U.S and Japan.

Understanding that we are not the only ones interviewing islanders in the Teshima was a critical point. It allowed us to understand our subject position in the interactions we were going to have and what kind of dialogue we wanted to contribute to. We understood that we weren’t really shaping anything. We learnt that we had to expand our definition of who would be an interviewee, and understanding the context of our project itself played a huge role in gaining that lesson. We connected with the ‘Teshima Girls’, a group of university students under the tutelage of Koichi Kimoto from Kwansei Gakuin University, who had themselves done extensive work with Teshima through fieldwork and Kimoto Sensei’s own deep engagement with the region. One of the students from this group became an interviewee in our fieldwork.

Kimoto Sensei played a pivotal role in our research on oral history methods. He mentored us by providing important considerations on how fieldwork should be planned and conducted specific to the context we were engaged in. We did readings around the themes that arose as we planned the project in both English and Japanese. Between the proposal phase and our fieldwork phase, our preparatory process led us to change our project methodology as we realized the unpredictable nature of not just the pandemic, but the constantly changing nature of community sentiments and the work continuously being done by others in different forms in and around the community.

Given its small population, medical infrastructure on the island is incredibly humble in size. This year the Setouchi Triennale returned, and islanders have been anxious about the potential catastrophic strain it brings to the island’s resources and everyone’s ability to stay safe in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, the arrival of the Triennale means that the islanders become extremely busy during this time. All the facilities on Teshima, such as inns, cafe, restaurants or gift shops are run by one or two islanders at most.

A couple of days before we were scheduled to arrive in Teshima, our mentor Ishii-san warned us of these two prominent issues in trying to hold gatherings and interviews with the island residents. To fit the new situation, we adapted how we did interviews and held gatherings. We made decisions along the way to make sure the recordings were carried out with utmost respect. For example, anxieties were already high about interacting with visitors because of the pandemic and our interviewees seemed much more comfortable talking to us without being filmed. So, we simply removed the option to be filmed. We also adapted the parameters of the interactive archive we had set out to create. An emergent philosophy became a key element in our methodology.

However, it is all thanks to Ishii-san that we managed to interview a wonderful and diverse group of people linked with the island community, the waste dumping issue, and the Setouchi Triennale. Ishii Toru is a local leader and played a vital role during the environmental dispute. To this day he is actively involved in the island’s governance. He attends conferences and facilitates the work done by visiting researchers, and he does this with no incentive but his own dedication to his community, his home.

The work that we were able to begin through the funds granted to us by Projects for Peace will continue past the summer. The website is now an interactive portal that lets ‘outsiders’ to the island learn from the conversations we had with people linked to the island in different capacities. We have used both our backgrounds in Art and Design as well as Human Ecology to curate the interviews we have archived. All
the interviews are in Japanese and we seek to make the archive act like a bridge between insiders and outsiders of a community like Teshima, engaging alongside us with our conservations on community, local autonomy, action and sustainability. Therefore, we continue work on translations of every interview into English, and will integrate this into the design of the website and the archive as a whole.

Alongside the translations, our aim is to refine the model and methodologies of our process prototyped in the community of Teshima. We want to grow the archive across several communities from different cultures. This is to create a process where other students studying Human Ecology can deploy oral history practices and contribute to a growing interactive archive and dialogue on the role community plays in peace and sustainability. As an immediate action, we will be fostering valuable partnerships with educational institutions like College of the Atlantic and Setouchi Global Academy in the U.S and Japan respectively, to start prototyping new versions of our own model created during our Project for Peace.

**Reflection**

Wataru Yamagami, an artist whom we interviewed, said, “Separations exist everywhere. Every community has separations within it. Organic separations will get repaired on its own. However, separations created or deepened by massive external force can hardly get repaired.” There are various separations on Teshima. They are between outsiders and insiders, elders and youth, temporal settlers and permanent settlers, those who benefit from tourism and those who do not. There is a sense that they are in their own bubbles and do not seem to come across to each other. Ishii-san often mentions the forces of capitalism while discussing the nature of the external forces. The COVID-19 situation also has solidified the gaps that exist there.

Peace could be subjective. One may find a situation peaceful while another suffers within it. The definition of peace feels elusive, something that can’t be pinned down. Through this project it seems one image of what peace looks like is treating it as a dialectic, where the topic remains in discussion with others. Teshima feels special because people are open to having conversations. They have their self-governance group, and they have led activism in the past. Today, there may not be as many opportunities to have discussions as there used to be, but people are developing their thoughts and ideas. What they might need moving forward is a prompt around which to gather and discuss. Our project mobilizes and contributes to the work already being done in this area.

For Mako especially, who conducted most of the interviews given her command of the language, one of the big dilemmas and challenges in this project has been to learn from the Islanders without extracting from them. How can she position herself with them knowing she’s not going to be a part of the community in the long term? She always finds that a lot of issues on the island are caused by disturbances from ‘outsiders’, and she is also acutely aware that she is also an outsider for them. Ishii-san repeatedly said, “When the outsiders ask me what they can do for the island, I always answer it is best if they do nothing.” We know that we can never say that what we do is for the island. There is a very real fear that what we do with this project is another form of extraction. However, on our last day on Teshima, Ishii-san told Mako that what we were doing would not be extraction as long as we learn from them and act when similar challenges occur in our communities. This felt like salvation. The peace that we work to achieve is embedded in what we learn with and from this community.

**Personal Statement**

In our project on Teshima, we tried to open channels of storytelling and communication where mutual learning could help foster greater understanding. The stories we heard helped us understand the concept of peace in the context of a changing community identity. We are translating and curating our conversations in an online audio-visual archive that we hope will serve as a prototype for similar projects in other places. Working on this project has been a fundamental learning curve in cultivating a patient practice in oral history, translation, and building bridges. -- Priyamvada Chaudhary and Mako Mihira