Representation of Intergenerational Trauma: Narratives of Second Generation Nuclear Survivors
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Summary

Traveling to Japan and the Southwest of the USA, I documented the narratives of the everyday experiences of people affected by nuclear weapons and nuclear tests in order to connect global experiences of intergenerational trauma that reflect the yet untold outcome of war and systematic oppression. I recorded the narratives of people worldwide who have been the victims of “nuclear machines,” where multiple agents are intertwined in the politics of radiation.

Project Description

▪ Intentions and strategies
Since I was a high school student, I have been interested in advocating for people who are suffering from the nuclear industry. Civilian-led tours were held in Nagasaki to demonstrate the damage wrought by the atomic bomb. Born and raised in the city, I had many opportunities to see the devastation that the atomic bomb caused the city and people. Through organizing numerous campaigns and listening to the testimonies of Hibakusha (nuclear survivors), I had strengthened my commitment to creating a world without nuclear weapons. For this project, I chose to do fieldwork across Japan and the Southwest of the USA: semi-structured interviews with second-generation Hibakusha and downwinders (residents affected by radioactive fallouts) of Nevada nuclear testing in Colorado and Utah, as well as participation in an annual commemoration at a Navajo reservation in New Mexico. My strategy entailed focusing on everyday life, tiny details of memory and history, in casual interviews, which enabled me to extract particulars that reflect larger elements of systematic control. For example, governmental policies and choices about using resources such as uranium mines solely to benefit those in positions of power, end up neglecting the vast and long-lasting contamination of sacred land and communal exposure to radioactivity. In hearing these stories, I wanted to analyze how even ordinary people who just wanted to live their lives were being used by forces that include the nuclear industry and colonizing systems of oppression.

▪ Choosing host sites
As for my fieldwork location, I chose Nagasaki and some parts of the Southwest region in the United States. Nagasaki is where I have been involved with activism for nuclear proliferation. In the Southwest region, I contacted numerous individuals, organizations, and support groups for nuclear survivors, including downwinders of nuclear tests and former uranium miners. Once I arrived, the neighborhood network helped to broaden my opportunities, as I talked to different people in the community. By joining the local conversation, I could access shared knowledge about the damage the nuclear industry has brought into this world.

▪ Adjustments made
Originally, I thought of collecting narratives from second-generation nuclear survivors in Japan and the US. However, I needed to adjust my theme based on my ability to connect with people. In the US, I had more opportunities to talk to first-generation survivors who also are active advocates of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), which allows some downwinders to receive compensation from
health issues created by radioactive fallouts of nuclear tests. This indicates the ongoing damages and issues of compensation. Since they were already engaged in active efforts to raise awareness, this made it easier for me to reach out to the survivors. Another significant change I made is in the descriptions of people I interviewed. Originally, I described them as “nuclear victims,” which delivers the sense of reductiveness, or, being a person who were one-directionally impacted. By changing it to “nuclear survivors,” I tried to include the efforts of those people to live, resist, and make a positive change in their lives and the world.

Further opportunities

I am going to work on this project from a more anthropological perspective using the course *Special Topics*, taught at Amherst College, to focus on the different ways of representation of systematic oppression in people’s lived experiences.

Reflection

How do you define peace?

“Trying to understand the pain of others” is the definition of peacebuilding that I have kept in my heart since Sakue Shimohira, one of atomic bomb survivors in Nagasaki, taught this to me after her testimony session. Through my fieldwork in Japan and the USA this summer, I have been able to internalize her words more and develop my own vision of peacemaking as I move forward. The project brought me many moments of difficult feelings. By talking to individuals, and entering areas I am not familiar with, I recognized that I have stepped into the heart of people’s experiences, both physically and metaphorically. As I continued listening to their experiences and walking on the sacred land of Navajo nation, I shared time and place together. Tracing the past made us relive the moments of pain, which led a sense of understanding to grow internally. Hearing the traumatic testimony and finding a way to relate to them required much effort to be open-minded and to have an ability to interpret the words they chose. Through exploring behind-the-scenes of the so-called national security of governments, I felt that the core part of the peacebuilding is to create time and space where people can relive the moments in life together and imagine the joy and struggle that happened before.

Contribution to peace

The important outcome of my project includes the enhancement of solidarity among the people who are working towards justice from the ongoing influence of the nuclear industry. I was able to immerse myself in the communities that suffered from nuclear industry, which permitted me to learn the different processes of the nuclear cycle: uranium mines (Churchrock, NM), laboratories used for inventing and assembling nuclear weapons (Los Alamos, NM), a target of bombings by the US (Nagasaki, Japan), downwinders communities suffered from radioactive fallout (Cedar City, UT), and numerous other individuals who suffered mentally and physically due to the fallout. By bringing myself into those communities, and exchanging stories and experiences with people who cooperated with me through interviews and conversations, I believe my project strengthened solidarity among survivors and their supporters. I could be of some help to them in recognizing that people are working together all over the world to acknowledge these globally-experienced consequences. This positive contact among individuals is a direct outcome of the project. A more indirect outcome is increasing awareness among larger communities. This is because I can share the experiences of the people I interviewed anonymously with a bigger population. The meeting with the archive team at Marriott Library at the University of Utah helped me recognize a variety of ways in which to preserve memories and experiences. Creating shareable materials, for example written archive texts or a podcast, will be a positive and expansive influence on different levels of society, such as in Amherst College, public websites, archives, etc.
Conflicts identified
From the planning process and the beginning of the project, I found it very challenging to connect with people in places I have no prior relation with, as well as finding transportation to their homes, especially in the Southwest, a region I’m largely unfamiliar with. Given the sudden nature of this project, I faced many instances of cancellation or rescheduling of interview appointments. These events did not allow me to plan the fieldwork ahead of time. However, the lack of concrete plans compelled me to be more flexible, which in turn allowed opportunities for spur-of-the-moment interviews.

Changes in my perception, inspiration
Overall, knowing people and bringing myself into the land of those people gave me increased insight into what is happening in the affected regions. Yet the original focus of this project was the intergenerational trauma caused by the nuclear industry. I realized it is not just a legacy passed on individually, but also it is experienced on a communal and societal level. Immersing myself in such communities allowed me to grasp the intra- and inter-community politics entangled with the local history, culture, and geography. In the Navajo reservation in New Mexico, one of the rivers that crosses the reservation area used to be a precious source of water. However, the river was contaminated from the uranium spill incident produced from a uranium mill owned by United Nuclear Corporation in 1979. Among the mill workers and miners, there was an increase in the rate of patients diagnosed with cancer due to their exposure to radioactive materials. With my limited mobility and knowledge, my world has been focusing on the areas affected by nuclear weapons, especially in Japan. Through my fieldwork, I was awakened to the fact that the nuclear industry is standing on the many sacrifices of people’s lives, existential power dynamics, racism, and colonialism. The nuclear issues are not only the topic of international relations or diplomatic negotiation, but also involve deeper discussions rooted from globally experienced systematic oppression. The land I visited and people I talked to have inspired me to take further actions in the intersection of academic field, political negotiation, and care work.

Personal Statement
“The focus of this project is the intergenerational trauma caused by the nuclear industry. I hope, through interviews with the survivors, to bring attention to what often occurs when civilians are subject to the whims of a laissez-faire government.” - Imari Yasuno