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Authors

Yamashita, Samuel Hideo
Bauer, Judith

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Pictures for Our “Honorable American Friends”

Samuel Hideo Yamashita, Pomona College

An American minister’s outrage over a celebration of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan led to a generous gift of school supplies for students at a primary school in Hiroshima City. In gratitude, students at this school sent dozens of drawings and paintings to the minister’s church. This exchange was inspired by the minister’s Unitarian faith and moral decency and realized through the generosity of his parishioners. But the Japanese children’s artwork can be read in several other ways that greatly complicate the story and implicate Cold War narratives of victory and defeat as well as powerful memories of the destruction, death, and suffering caused by the war.

This essay accompanies the “Hiroshima Children’s Drawings” photo essay featured in the March 2013 issue of *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*.¹ At first glance, it is clear that these are children’s drawings and paintings, with their bright colors, awkward one-dimensional compositions, simplicity, and naïveté. The pictures depict children going to and from school on foot or in buses, playing during recess (figure 1), and competing in class day races, as well as children on excursions, hikes, and outings with their parents. One sketch is of a baseball cap, no doubt a treasured possession, and another is a calligraphic inscription that reads “Honorable American friends” (*beikoku no o-tomodachi*) (figure 2). Some are paintings of happy occasions, such as those of the carp-shaped flags flown on Boys’ Day and the one of a girl dressed in a beautiful kimono, perhaps for Girls’ Day. The city scenes are of a bridge spanning a river and of rowboats on a river whose banks are lined with blooming cherry trees. There also is a watercolor of the shell of the former Industrial Promotion Hall, now known

as the Atomic Bomb Dome (figure 3), an iconic symbol of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima City on August 6, 1945. This last painting is the first clue to where the pictures are from.



Figure 1 (above left). “Playground” by Yoshiko Itoo, age 9.

Figure 2 (above right). “America is Our Friend” by Yasuko Nakagawa, age 11.

Figure 3 (below). “A Bomb Memorial Building” by Kooki Abiko, age 11.

These drawings and paintings were produced by the students at Honkawa Elementary School in Hiroshima City in 1948, not long after the parishioners of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, DC, sent the children more than a half ton of pencils, paper, crayons, paint, and marbles.

On November 7, 1946, the Reverend Arthur Powell Davies, the minister of All Souls, read an article in the society column of the *Washington Post* entitled “Salute to Bikini.” It was accompanied by a photograph of Vice Admiral William H. P. Blandy, his wife, and Rear Admiral Frank J. Lowry cutting a cake decorated with a mushroom cloud (figure 3).



Figure 4. Admiral and Mrs. Blandy and Admiral Lowry at an event at the Officers’ Club of the Army War College in Washington, DC, marking the disbanding of the Joint Army-Navy Task Force Number One, the body that organized and oversaw the first postwar atomic tests in the Pacific. *Source: Washington Post*, November 7, 1946.

Davies could not believe that the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was being celebrated, and four days later he delivered a sermon that ended as follows:

I do know that at times, something happens that steeps the soul in bitterness. I do not mean at the peace conferences or at the meetings of the United Nations, though it is often bad enough. I mean in the things that are natural, genuine symptoms of a nation’s moral health. I have with me here in the pulpit this

morning a page from a newspaper—from a very fine newspaper. It contains a picture—as it seems to me, an utterly loathsome picture. If I spoke as I feel I would call it obscene. I do not blame the newspaper for printing this picture, or the photographer for taking it. What fills me with bitterness is the fact that such an event could take place at all. It is a picture of two high naval officers and a very beautiful lady. They are in the act of cutting what is called an atomic bomb cake. And it is indeed a cake shaped in the form of an atomic explosion. The caption says it is made of tiny angel food puffs. I do not know how to tell you what I feel about the picture. I only hope to God it is not printed in Russia, to confirm everything the Soviet Government has been telling the Russian people about how “American degenerates” are able to treat with levity the most cruel, pitiless, revolting instrument of death ever invented by man. . . .

If I had the authority of a priest of the Middle Ages, I would call down the wrath of God upon such an obscenity, such a monstrous betrayal of everything for which the brokenhearted of the world are waiting. But—perhaps fortunately—I have no such authority. And so I only pray that God will give me patience and compassion. That I may be just—and merciful—and humble. And still speak the truth that is in me. (Peebles 2012)

Davies’s condemnation of the atomic bomb celebration and his description of the cake as “loathsome” and “obscene” became a news item appearing in newspapers around the world. For example, in its November 18 issue, *Time* magazine had a story on the incident entitled “Atomic Age: Angel Food,” which closed by saying “These were probably the harshest words ever spoken of a dessert. But a lot of non-Americans (notably Britons) had long regarded the U.S. public’s attitude toward The Bomb as callous to the point of idiocy. Although this interpretation did the U.S. an injustice, it had a certain justification” (“Atomic Age” 1946, 31).

The article inspired columnist Walter Lippman to write to Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal to warn him that articles like the one about the atomic bomb cake might mobilize “the large church-going population with its pacifist longings” against “adequate appropriations” for the military. Forrestal reported that he and Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson shared Lippman’s concerns and urged him to meet with Vice Admiral Felix Johnson, who was in charge of public relations. This hurried exchange of letters reminds us of the importance of the broader Cold War context of the incident (Global Research News 2012).

Another reader of the *Time* article was Dr. Howard Bell, an education specialist in the Civil Information and Education Office of the Allied Occupation government of Japan.² On January 20, 1947, Bell wrote a letter to Davies pointing out that although most of the students at

Honkawa Elementary School in Hiroshima City had been evacuated before the atomic bombing of that city, the first and second graders had not, and four hundred of them “had just got down to work when the blast baked them to sleep” (Peebles 2012). Bell was right: earlier that year, seven hundred children from the Honkawa School had been moved to the countryside as part of the Japanese government’s evacuation of 1.3 million children from the major cities (Hiroshima-ken 1981, 970–974). He went on to describe the children at that school attending classes in the burned-out concrete shell of their school building, which had no windows and no heating. They had to do their lessons with virtually no school supplies, not even pencil stubs; moreover, they were doing their best, Bell added, “to learn democracy.” He reported that he had managed to get a table and benches for them, but not school supplies or athletic equipment. He hoped, he continued, that American children would go through their desks and send any extra pencils and notebooks to the needy children of Honkawa Elementary School (Peebles 2012).

On February 13, 1947, in his sermon at All Souls Church entitled “In Reply to a Letter from Japan,” Davies asked his parishioners to collect school supplies for the students of Honkawa Elementary School. Not long after that, All Souls initiated its “Overseas Relief Project.” Then, shortly before Christmas, after obtaining a special export license and permission from the Allied Occupation authorities in Japan, the church shipped more than half a ton of school supplies to Honkawa Elementary School, another school, and an orphanage (Peebles 2012). Two years later, All Souls sent sports equipment—baseball bats, gloves, ping-pong paddles and balls, and tennis rackets and balls—to another school in Hiroshima (Powell Davies n.d.).

The Japanese children were thrilled with these unexpected gifts. Years later many remembered their excitement and pleasure. “I was so happy. It was a treasure,” said one former Honkawa student. Several spoke of the smell of the eraser-tipped pencils. Sachie Fujii recalled that the students thought, “So this is what America smelled like” (*Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard* n.d.). The children from Honkawa Elementary School “sent gifts of their own artwork—watercolors, crayon drawings, rag dolls, and colored comic song books”; the children at Fukuromachi School in Hiroshima wrote seventy-five letters of appreciation; and the Ninoshima Orphanage sent a letter of thanks. “Every letter was answered by an All Souls child and the gifts were displayed not only at the church but through [*sic*] the country by the U.S.

Government” (Powell Davies n.d.). The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare sent one portfolio of the Honkawa drawings and paintings on a tour of American cities.³ The other portfolio was stored in a vault at All Souls Church and, over the years, has been shown to visitors who asked to see it, including many Japanese and church officials (Powell Davies n.d.).

The Honkawa drawings and paintings can be interpreted in several ways. Davies was greatly offended by the atomic bomb cake and celebration, and his wife remembered that he also “was horrified by the dropping of the bombs” and “very sad it was we who dropped it” (*Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard* n.d.). His feelings were consistent with the long progressive tradition of All Souls Church, which was founded in 1821 and whose founding members included President John Quincy Adams and Vice President John Calhoun. In the nineteenth century, the church’s ministers and parishioners fiercely opposed slavery; in the 1960s, they would protest segregation in the South; and starting in the 1990s, they would perform same-sex marriages. Given their church’s illustrious history, Davies’s parishioners likely also shared his feelings about the atomic bomb celebration and the mushroom cloud cake. In this context, the Honkawa artwork can be read in a *universalistic* (read: Christian) *moral framework*.

A second way to interpret the Honkawa artwork is as part of the *triumphalist geopolitical narrative* created by the victorious Allied powers after the Pacific War. It describes the Allied victory as just and moral and portrays the Japanese people as victims of a ruthless militaristic regime.⁴ This narrative also justifies the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, arguing that the dropping of the atomic bombs forced the Japanese to surrender and thus avoided the huge number of casualties that an invasion of Japan would have produced.⁵ We could call this triumphalist account an “official history” and see it as part of a larger Cold War narrative.⁶

From their side, the Japanese authorities produced narratives that echoed the Allies’ official history. They, too, blamed the war on the militarists who took over the government in the late 1930s, thereby exonerating the Japanese people. According to the Ministry of Education’s first postwar Japanese history textbook, “the Japanese people suffered terribly from the long war. Military leaders suppressed the people, launched a stupid war, and caused this disaster” (Monbushō 1946, 51). These narratives also stressed reconstruction, looked toward the future, and were optimistic in tone. Despite their optimism, however, these were Japanese *narratives of defeat*. In fact, I would argue that the obvious optimism of the Honkawa artwork masks this

narrative. Most of the drawings and paintings show happy children doing what children at that age do—attending school and playing games—with only glimpses of daily life in postwar Hiroshima.

The Honkawa artwork also might be read in a third way, as the narrative of those who refused to forget the horrors that the war visited on ordinary Japanese. This could be called the *suppressed losers' narrative*, and it is represented by the watercolor of the Atomic Bomb Dome (figure 3). Another Honkawa painting represents the losers' narrative as well: a portrait of the young teacher who was told to have the students use the new pencils, crayons, and paints to draw and paint the pictures later sent to All Souls Church (figure 5). According to one of his former students, this teacher was named Kaya, and “he was probably a returning soldier,” who once recited from memory the words of a song entitled “Hills of a Foreign Land” (Ikoku no oka) written by a Japanese soldier detained by the Soviet Union after the war (*Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard* n.d.).⁷ Several years ago she and a documentary filmmaker visited Kaya. Kaya remembered sending the artwork to the United States and mentioned that he kept his military songbook next to his bed so he could sing songs like “Hills of a Foreign Land” to himself as he fell asleep. He died in 2009, shortly after this visit.



Figure 5. “Teacher Kaya Susumu” by Naoyuki Mitsuda, age 9.

It is important that his former student remembered Kaya not only as a teacher but also as a veteran because the Honkawa artwork conceals other suppressed narratives. One is the story of the several million Japanese servicemen, like Kaya, who served during the eight-year war on the Asian mainland or in the Pacific. Another is the story of the many millions of civilians in Japan and its colonies who were mobilized in some way during the war as members of neighborhood associations and community councils and as factory or farm workers. Finally, there is the children's involvement in the war effort. Japanese children were not innocent and passive but instead were active subjects. They were taught the same wartime ideology as servicemen and civilian adults; they were mobilized for war work; they took countless numbers of foraging and conditioning hikes; and they played war games and even underwent military training so they could fight the Allied invasion forces. One ten-year-old girl described her training:

Today was a spiritual training day for the whole school, and we did something different—we did hand-to-hand combat. Iwamaru-*sensei* told us many different stories. Then we piggybacked the person across from us and ran and did other things. The next station was Akuzawa-*sensei*'s hand grenade-throwing class. We used small balls for hand grenades and imagined that the large ball we used for the intergrade meet was the enemy's head and threw the small balls at it. We threw the hand grenades with all our might, but they didn't hit their target. Then we moved to Hachikuwa-*sensei*'s station, where we practiced striking and killing with a wooden sword. We faked to the left and faked to the right. Then after some time we went to Ishida-*sensei*'s station. We took our clothes off and practiced spearing someone. We used our foreheads to butt the chest of the person in front of us, thrust our hands into their armpits, and pushed with our feet firmly planted on the ground. In the end, only one person was still thrusting. Then when that was done, we went to Yoshikado-*sensei*'s station, where we practiced spearing. Yoshikado-*sensei* said, "They're still there. Spear them! Spear them!" and it was really fun. I was tired, but I realized that even one person can kill a lot of the enemy. (Yamashita 2005, 289)

The children accepted and embraced these roles so completely that even after Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, many vowed to avenge their compatriots. "Watch out you terrible Americans and British!" wrote the same ten-year-old girl in her diary on the day after the surrender, "I will be sure to seek revenge" (Yamashita 2005, 307). Another child, just eleven, wrote in her diary on August 19: "At long last Japan has surrendered. Shizuko will be sure to get

revenge” (Toshima-kuritsu kyōdo shiryōkan 1993, 90). These vengeful feelings should not surprise us, given the lengths to which the wartime government went to prepare the children, as well as all Japanese citizens and subjects, for the expected “decisive battle” (*kessen*).

Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama remind us that there are other suppressed narratives that should not be overlooked. After all, Japan was an imperial state with colonies in Asia (Taiwan and Korea) and the Pacific (the formerly German-held islands in the South Pacific), and as a result many hundreds of thousands of Koreans and Taiwanese were recruited to fight in the Japanese military (Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama 2001, 1–29). Even those Japanese Americans who were trapped in Japan after the war started were drafted and served in the Japanese military (Yamashita 2001, 190–193). Nor should we forget that “the majority of people in the Asia-Pacific region were not ‘people of the major warring nations’ that played commanding roles in designing or implementing the course of the war, even though they might have been deeply implicated in the war’s outcome” (Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama 2001, 4).

None of the suppressed narratives is as tragic, however, as those that tell the story of the destruction, misery, pain, and death caused by the war in Asia. As many as 15 million people are believed to have died in Asia and the Pacific during the war, including 2.1 million Japanese, most of whom were servicemen. The remainder were civilians who perished in the firebombing of Japanese cities and towns and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dower 1986, 295–301; Goralski 1981, 421).

Finally, there are what might be called *victims’ narratives*, including those describing the atrocities committed by the Japanese forces that invaded China in the summer and fall of 1937, notably in Chongqing and Nanjing (Honda 1999; Li 2009). After the United States and its allies entered the war on December 7 and 8, 1941, both sides committed atrocities in every theater of the war, mainly where the fighting was the fiercest and the noncombatant populations were the most defenseless (Dower 1986, 35, 68; Tanaka 1997, 167–196). The Japanese massacre of Chinese continued, and by the war’s end between 3,949,000 and 6,235,000 Chinese people had been killed. In addition, Nationalist Chinese forces killed large numbers of Chinese suspected of collaborating with the Japanese, and the Chinese Communist forces killed comparably large numbers of Chinese sympathetic to the Nationalists (Rummel 1993, 7, 115). American

bombardments also killed large numbers of civilians: an estimated 22,000 on Saipan, 100,000 in Manila, and 80,000 to 160,000 on Okinawa (Schrijvers 2002, 248). Both the Japanese and the Allies routinely bombed residential areas in China, Japan, and the former Japanese colonies and occupied areas; and of course, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Even something as seemingly simple and uncomplicated as the artwork of the Honkawa students is thus more complex than it appears at first glance. The drawings and paintings are obviously an expression of the students' gratitude and a response to the generosity of the parishioners of All Souls Church. The reactions of American officials to the atomic bomb cake incident that inspired the exchange of gifts point to the immediate Cold War context, as do the drawings that hide all traces of the war. But the paintings of the Atomic Bomb Domb and *Kaya-sensei* reveal the suppressed narratives of the victors, losers, and victims. When located in these various wartime and postwar contexts, the artwork acquires very different meanings. In sum, the meaning of texts—even children's texts—is not fixed, and the different contextualizations can produce an array of meanings.

Samuel Yamashita is the Henry E. Sheffield Professor of History at Pomona College.

Notes

1. The photo essay is available at <http://crosscurrents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-6>.
2. Bell was a curriculum specialist who, among other things, oversaw the Ministry of Education's writing of the *Primer of Democracy*, which, in classic Cold War terms, affirmed "democracy" and condemned "dictatorship" (Nishi 1982, 252–253).
3. Unfortunately, the portfolio of artwork that went on tour appears to have disappeared (Peebles 2012).
4. See John Dower's discussion of this postwar narrative in his *War without Mercy* (1986, 301–311).
5. President Harry Truman and various government agencies, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the War Department, generated figures for the casualties expected if the Allies invaded Japan, which ranged from 31,000 to 766,986 (Giangreco 1997, 521–582).
6. I am indebted to Lisa Yoneyama's discussion of what she terms "hegemonic" and "subversive" forms of knowledge (1999, 87–144).
7. Lori Watt discusses "Hills of a Foreign Land" in her *When Empire Comes Home* (2010, 146).

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