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*"Hibakusha Identity"*

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The Japanese word *hibakusha* has no exact equivalent word in English. It refers to people who have experienced an atomic blast. In the history of the world thus far, the only *hibakusha* are the people who were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. Many of the *hibakusha* who survived felt compelled to write their memoirs of the bombings and how they have fared since. Their work stands in a genre of non-fiction that is singular in theme and description. They write attempting to describe the “indescribable hell” that shocked the world as humanity envisioned its self-created means of destruction. As such, their efforts are landmark and should have less trouble finding an audience. As John Treat points out, “...the Japanese experience of, and the varied responses to, their own catastrophes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki have not, by and large, been disseminated outside of their own language and geography.”<sup>1</sup>

The sources used in this essay are all from Hiroshima: the personal accounts of four authors who were in Hiroshima, and selections from hundreds of survivors who were surveyed in 1989. The four authors are the main sources, as their personal histories and characters are known, but the anonymous witnesses provide a stark bluntness in their brief accounts that is at times more eloquent than the trained writers. Only Hiroshima survivors will be studied in this essay due to the limited scope of resources I could read in ten weeks.

In reading the works of the *hibakusha*, there are four areas in which distinctive changing themes can be observed; physical identity, individual identity, group identity, and how the *hibakusha* respond to the nation's identity of militarism. This essay is divided into four parts and will examine those changes and offer conjectures as to how

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<sup>1</sup> Treat, John Whittier. Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb. University of Chicago Press: 1995. P.4

these changes occurred. It is my argument that the *hibakusha* have collectively altered identities in all four of the aforementioned categories. The next section will briefly describe what I mean by “identity” and why it became the theme of this essay. Each of the following sections corresponds to one of the four themes of identity.

## **Identity**

As the sole witnesses to atomic warfare, the *hibakusha* offer an extraordinary insight into human character. Most *hibakusha* express a desire for peace, and hold to the slogan of the Hiroshima Peace Museum of “never again.” However, the insight in their memoirs is not limited to anti-military themes, but extends to grappling with the fundamental question of human existence as humanity faces probable extinction through warfare. While reading *hibakusha* literature, it quickly became evident that experiencing an atomic bomb had altered their perception of themselves and society. Initially I only noticed the collectively changed perspectives of war and government, but after closer reading I discovered there were numerous threads of consistency among the *hibakusha* writers. To show these consistencies, I have chosen to examine what I am calling “*hibakusha* identity” through the facets of physical, individual, group, and national identity. In the following, each section will examine the post-blast sentiments of the writers in these areas.

## **Physical Identity**

The destruction caused by the atomic blast extended beyond those two days in August, but the immediately obvious alterations were the physical destruction of

buildings and people. For many *hibakusha*, it is the physical alterations of humans that left the most indelible marks on their memories. The physical identity was commented on as either a lament for loss of beauty (almost always feminine beauty) or, especially for children, the terror experienced at viewing once familiar faces now unrecognizable.

Initially, human disfiguration stemmed from burn and blast injuries at the bombsite. Thermal burns (flash burns) from the searing surface temperature of the fireball (7,700°C or 13,892°F) occurred first followed by secondary thermal burns from the ensuing fires. Depending on the severity of the burns, from lightest to most extreme, the skin would appear as red and swollen, spotted white, all white, blistered white, and at worst carbonization—a charred black. The skin was often so damaged by the initial flash burn that the following physical blast wind of the bomb would blow the skin off and leave it peeled and dangling.<sup>2</sup>

The radiation injuries became more apparent later after the bombings, but the initial symptoms were nausea, vomiting, extreme thirst, fever, and diarrhea. Also due to the radiation, the burn wounds would not heal properly and keloids, a rubbery protruding scar tissue, formed over surfaces. Between the second and fifth week after exposure, many people who had thought they would survive suddenly lost their hair, suffered blood hemorrhaging causing spots on the skin, bled from the gums and nose, and had dark and tarry stool movements (54.8% of survivors who suffered this second stage of radiation sickness died).<sup>3</sup>

These are the physical symptoms that *hibakusha* were seeing for the first time in

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<sup>2</sup> Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings. Trans. Eisei Ishikawa and David L. Swain. Ed. The Committee for the Compilation of Material on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Basic Books Inc: NY, 1981. p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Effects of the Atomic Bombings p. 127-131.

human history. One of the most physically descriptive writers I read was Ōta Yōko. Ōta was born in Kushima in 1903. Her father was a wealthy landowner there, but lost his family's wealth due to what Ōta calls "extravagant living." Her mother left her father ten years after marrying him, and from that point on, Ōta's childhood was an assortment of living with various relatives. Her mother gave her younger sister in adoption to family members.

When Ōta was thirteen, she went to Hiroshima. There she attended school through high school, and worked as an elementary school teacher for a year. She was fired after a year, "the verdict seems to have been that she was a nice person but not a good teacher."<sup>4</sup> She fell in love with a newspaperman in 1925 and married him, and was surprised when a woman and three children showed up and turned out to be his family. She had a son by him, but she allowed him to be adopted. After that experience, she moved to Tokyo in 1926. She was married twice more, once from 1936-37 in Tokyo, and once after the war from 1947-48.

She published her first major works in 1940, which were described by Hasegawa Kei as literature extolling the virtues of work in the service of the nation.<sup>5</sup> She was for the war in China; she lamented not being able to join the army as a woman. Ōta returned to Hiroshima in January of 1945, because from constant strafing Tokyo had become virtually uninhabitable. She moved in with her half-sister Ichie and was sleeping when the blast struck. The two pieces she wrote that I will look at closely in this section are *City of Corpses* and *Fireflies*.

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<sup>4</sup> Minear, Richard H. *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*. Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Minear, *Three Witnesses*, p. 120

### *City of Corpses*

*City of Corpses* is Ōta's narrative of what she experienced in Hiroshima. She writes a flashback narrative in thirteen parts. Her opening is from November 1945 and then she jumps back to August 6 and continues forward from there. Her narrative is more emotional than the other *hibakusha* writers examined in this essay. Initially she describes her shock and inability to accept what has occurred directly after the explosion. She laments that everyone is covered in blood and their faces are distorted and swollen from burns. Once they reach a nearby town, she describes her sister and her laughing at each other's faces in hysterical relief. Ōta was not permanently physically maimed from the bombing. Her sister Ichie suffered keloid scars on her mouth where she had been cut, which Ōta describes in *Fireflies*.

*City of Corpses* follows Ōta from her house in ruins to the river where she spends two hellish days watching the agony of those literally rotting alive in the wake of the Enola Gay. People with wounds could not get medical treatment quickly, and as a result Ōta describes the maggots that have infested many people's wounds, the skinless people shivering as they can no longer regulate their body temperatures, and the lines of slowly treading *hibakusha* with their arms held in front of them, skin dangling from their fingers like inside out gloves—the pain was too great to let their stripped arms hang at their sides. Ōta's narrative is painfully detailed of the disaster around her.

In the beginning of *City of Corpses*, Ōta writes about her fear of radiation illness:

The days come, the days go, and chaos and nightmares seem to wall me in. Even the full light of clear, perfectly limpid autumn days brings no relief from profound stupefaction and sorrow: I seem to be submerged in the deepest twilight. On all sides people whose condition is no different from mine die everyday...Any number of times each day I tug at my hair and count the strands

that pull out...I examine the skin of my arms and legs dozens of times, squinting with the effort.<sup>6</sup> It was this fear that spurred her to write her memoir so quickly. Her experience as a *hibakusha* left her and many others perplexed from the betrayal of a seemingly healthy body suddenly dying. In this way, the ability to derive information from the perception of a person's appearance was altered. And also in the cases when the victims were physically changed so much, that other people no longer were able to mentally process them as humans, as I will show later in this section.

### *Fireflies*

In *Fireflies*, Ōta returns to Hiroshima seven years after the war. She describes how little has been rebuilt and complains about the slugs everywhere in her sister's living conditions. She has returned to Hiroshima to document the *Hibakusha* and to complete her memoirs. Through a man named Kikawa, who was frequently in the media for his injuries, she is introduced to a young girl named Mitsuko. Mitsuko was severely burned and has a moving effect on Ōta. At the end of the narrative, Ōta expresses her feelings about the restless souls of Hiroshima:

It seemed to me that it was not only the fireflies that were the ghosts of the dead soldiers. I came to feel the same about the slugs that slithered around the shack from evening till late at night...I said to them, 'You must have been soldiers. You come here every night because you have something you want to say. Can't you ever rest in peace?'<sup>7</sup>

In *Fireflies*, Ōta reacts to the permanent physical alterations from the bombing. She describes Mitsuko, who had been disfigured from the atomic blast:

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<sup>6</sup> Ōta, Yōko. "City of Corpses" Trans. Richard H. Minear. *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Ōta, Yōko. "Fireflies" *The Crazy Iris: And Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath*. Ed. Kenzaburō Ōe. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1985. p. 111.

It was not a girl but a monstrosity. Her deformed face and hands stood out even more grotesquely because she had on her best clothes, a pure white blouse and a skirt with a flower pattern in crisp white. It seemed as though she was deliberately thrusting herself at me. Her face was expressionless and she didn't even greet me. I broke down weeping, slumped on the wooden board, shuddering but unable to stop my tears. 'It's all right. I've learned to accept it,' Mitsuko said, and lifted me up in her arms. I was going to say, 'Don't accept it!' but the words wouldn't come out.<sup>8</sup>

Ōta's sentiment is one of pity and resentment for the girl's disfigurement. Perhaps unknowingly, she takes her description to the extent that she creates a distance between her own humanity and Mitsuko's. She likens the burned hands to crab claws, and only later after speaking with Mitsuko does she attribute emotion to her.

Like Ōta's sympathy for Mitsuko, one of the most striking physical identity elements of *hibakusha* literature is sympathy for women who have lost their hair, or have been burned on their faces. The loss of physical beauty is lamented and at times terror is expressed at the changed countenances of the *hibakusha* women. Hara Tamiki writes about his encounter with two women in Hiroshima in the following:

...on the stone steps less than a yard away crouched two women. Their faces were swollen to about half again normal size, deformed and ugly, leaving only their burned and tangled hair as a sign that they were women. At first sight, rather than pity, I felt my hair stand on end.<sup>9</sup>

Hara Tamiki is one of the most well known *hibakusha* authors, and his three-part memoir *Summer Flowers* is read in school by most Japanese students.<sup>10</sup> Hara Tamiki was born in Hiroshima in 1905 to a military supplier. He was named "Tamiki," which means, "the people rejoice" to commemorate Japan's victory over Russia that same year.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, his own experiences would make him so anti-military that he would take his

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<sup>8</sup> Ōta, *Fireflies*, p. 103

<sup>9</sup> Hara, Tamiki. "Summer Flowers" Trans. Richard H. Minear, *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 85

<sup>11</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 126

own life. In 1951, in despair, he laid himself on railroad tracks near his home. Allegedly he had just heard Truman's threat to use the atomic bomb on Korea, and could not bear the hopelessness of the possibility for another atomic tragedy. "Like the deaths of so many of the first generation of atomic-bomb writers...Hara's [death] seems in retrospect a delayed effect of, and one guaranteed by, the atrocity that few survived bodily and that even fewer survived psychologically intact."<sup>12</sup>

Hara's life before the atomic blast was already troubled. His father died in 1917, followed by his older sister in 1918. Stemming from that childhood, (and somewhat ironically—considering his future) before the war he chose the pen name 'Kiyū,' for a character in the Chinese text *Lieh Tzu* about the angst of a man named *Ch'i* who was convinced the world was near its end."<sup>13</sup> He graduated from Keiō with a degree in literature. He was happily married for six years from 1933, but in 1939 his wife's health began deteriorating and she died of tuberculosis in September of 1944.

On top of these troubles, a year after his wife's death, he was at his brother-in-law's house less than one kilometer from the epicenter of the blast in Hiroshima. Miraculously, he lived and was relatively unharmed. He is recorded to have suffered radiation sickness, but recovered. Shortly before his death, Hara also wrote a cryptic essay that foreshadows his suicide called *The Land of Heart's Desire*.

*Summer Flowers* is the title given to the three-part memoir that tells what Hara experienced in Hiroshima. The first section, also called *Summer Flowers*, begins from the day he placed summer flowers on his wife's grave three days before the blast. The narrative continues in the second part called *Out of the Ruins*. Hara explains that being in

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<sup>12</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 125

<sup>13</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 126

the bathroom is what saved him when the blast came. Hara describes the destruction around him and the state of aid stations, noting the overcrowded and understaffed conditions. Many of the doctors and nurses had been injured in the blast; moreover, they were already stretched for medical supplies before the bombing. Almost all the *hibakusha* writers lament the number of people who could have been saved if aid had been available for them. Only people who could walk to the aid stations—or were lucky enough to be carried by someone not consumed with their own injuries—were able to get aid. The third part *Prelude to Annihilation* describes a family's living conditions before the bomb is dropped. It ends 40 hours before the blast will occur. *Summer Flowers* and *Out of the Ruins* are written in first person narrative, while *Prelude to Annihilation* is written in third person. It describes the rough conditions of Japanese families during the war, and offsets these conditions by foreshadowing the “annihilation” that is coming.

Some of the most vivid physical descriptions come from the non-professional writers I introduced briefly in the beginning. The accounts of these people was taken from a collection called *The Witness of Those Two Days: Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 6 & 9, 1945*. It is a published collection of responses to a survey put out by the Japan Confederation of A-and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (a group formed by *hibakusha* in 1956 to promote political awareness of *hibakusha* issues). In 1989, survey cards were sent to all the survivors still alive and they responded to the question: “Do you have anything unforgettable, terrifying, or regrettable in your memory about your experiences on the day when the atomic bomb was dropped and immediately after? Please describe what happened, what were the circumstances and what you felt, in keeping with the following guidelines:

A: How people were dying. What the victims suffered.

B: What you felt witnessing it.

C: If you could not do anything for those crying for help or water what regrets do you feel?"<sup>14</sup>

Out of the responses, one thousand were randomly selected and published. They are not professional writings, but many of them go beyond the guidelines and provide the added perspective of writing forty years after the bombings. Because the selections were random, the respondents vary from soldiers to schoolchildren and are memoirs that contrast professional writers in their bluntness and at times painful emotional honesty.

Although there are numerous anti-military and anti-government entries, the overwhelming sentiment encountered in these paragraphs is not bitterness, fear, or revenge, but guilt; guilt for surviving when so many others did not, and guilt for what they could not do for fellow victims during the atomic aftermath. In order to study the widest pool of information possible, these entries are included in this study of *hibakusha* identity.

I have chosen two of the responses that appeared in the collection as representative of physical identity as described by the witnesses. However, there were countless entries devoted to the enumeration of physical suffering that occurred. A man who had been eleven at the time of the blast writes,

The only medicine available at that time was mercurochrome [a red colored first aid lotion]. All the burned patients looked like red monsters, crying with pain. It was like looking at the agony of hell.<sup>15</sup>

Being the first people to experience an atomic bombing, there was no descriptive

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<sup>14</sup> The Witness of Those Two Days: Hiroshima & Nagasaki, August 6 & 9 1945 Vol. I. English Translation Group. 1989. p. viii.

<sup>15</sup> Witness, p. 4.

vocabulary available for the *hibakusha* besides concepts of Buddhist hell, ghosts, and monsters.<sup>16 17</sup> Therefore, these are the most encountered comparisons. Another young person, a twelve-year-old girl described her experience as,

I was in the sixth grade...Suddenly one of those lying there called out to me. The skin of his whole body was torn to rags and hanging down and his hair standing on end. As he looked like a ghost, I was afraid and ran away instinctively. But he was my teacher. I can't forget that even now.<sup>18</sup>

Also in the theme of physical identity, there is a trend of equating victims who are no longer physically recognizable as human to being *inhuman*. One *hibakusha* writer who does this consistently is Tōge Sankichi in his collection called *Atomic Poems*. Tōge is the only poet examined in this essay. Without the constraints of grammar and narrative, his writings on the bombs portray nightmarish fragments.

Tōge was born in 1917 in Hiroshima, to a family of radicals. His father was a manufacturer of bricks until 1927, when there was a banking panic, causing his company to fail. He also resigned his directorship of a second company because of his children's involvement in radical politics. Tōge's mother died of blood poisoning when he was ten. She had been a feminist and opposed Buddhism because of its treatment of women. His father was also active and encouraged his children to be involved in politics. Tōge had four siblings, all of whom were arrested for radical politics at some point in their lives; two joined the Communist Party. The second son contracted tuberculosis in prison and died in 1936 at the age of twenty-two. The oldest brother was particularly colorful, and

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<sup>16</sup> Dower, John W. "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory". Ed. Michael Hogan. *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge 1996). 116-143.

<sup>17</sup> *Treat, Writing*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 70

supposedly would shout “Down with Imperialism!” in darkened theaters.<sup>19</sup>

Tōge was the youngest of these, and his father tried to protect him from the fate that had befallen his other children. He was not encouraged to be a radical. Tōge graduated from Hiroshima Prefecture’s School of Commerce in 1935 and worked at the Hiroshima Gas Company. He was mistakenly diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1938. He was relieved ten years later to find it was a mistaken diagnosis and that he actually had bronchiectasis, an enlarged bronchial tube. Ironically he died in an operation for his condition in 1953, by which time tuberculosis had a cure, but bronchiectasis did not.

Happily for those of us who agree with Tōge’s radical leanings, his father’s efforts to restrain him from politics proved ineffectual. Although he had been non-political until Hiroshima, in the post-war years, he found his brother’s books on socialism and he joined the Communist Party in 1949. He eventually moved in with a widow in 1948, whom he loved. She committed suicide in 1965, twelve years after Tōge’s death<sup>20</sup>.

Perhaps because of his own sense of forthcoming doom when he believed he only had a few years to live, Tōge’s poems are usually morbid. As mentioned earlier, he is bold in his willingness to disconnect post-blast *hibakusha* from their pre-blast humanity. In Tōge’s poem *At the Makeshift Aid Station*, he is writing about the deformities some schoolgirls have suffered. He goes on to ask if their family members would recognize them, and ends his poem, “thinking, thinking—as you lie there among friends who one after the other stop moving—thinking of when you were girls, human beings.”<sup>21</sup> The questions that *hibakusha* writers engage in reveal the horror of their experiences. Tōge

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<sup>19</sup> Minear, *Three Witnesses*, p. 278

<sup>20</sup> Minear, *Three Witnesses*, p. 283.

<sup>21</sup> Tōge, Sankichi. “Atomic Poems” Trans. Richard H. Minear. Hiroshima: Three Witnesses, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. p. 316.

seems to at least be asking if they are still human, so close to death, and so unrecognizable. It is this liminality of humanness that leads the *hibakusha* writers to questions of self-identity, and how one can remain himself/herself so completely altered physically and psychologically.

### Individual Identity

Overwhelmingly, the sentiment expressed in regards to altered individual identity of the *hibakusha* has been isolation. From militants to schoolgirls, the sense that there is no way to “convey the unconveyable”<sup>22</sup> leaves many writers expressing despair and pessimism for humanity’s future. As mentioned earlier, Hara committed suicide in despair feeling humanity was doomed. His final memoir, *Land of Heart’s Desire*, expresses his emptiness:

The world no longer affords a single grubby straw for me to clutch at; that is why the stars in the night sky that hang so unconcernedly canopied over my head, and the forms of the trees standing so aloof from me here below, have gradually drawn closer to where I am, as though eventually to take my place...The solitude seems to have become an integral part of the very air.<sup>23</sup>

Also isolating the *hibakusha* was the censorship of the Occupation. Allegedly, upon being told that she could not publish *City of Corpses*, Ōta told the American officer, “If I can’t publish it in Japan, I’ll make a present of it to America.”<sup>24</sup> One can only imagine the warm reception a work detailing the human suffering caused by the bomb that “saved a million American lives”<sup>25</sup> would receive in America. However, she was allowed to publish a censored version in November 1948 and the full version in May of 1950.

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<sup>22</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 21

<sup>23</sup> Hara, *Land of Heart’s Desire*, p. 56

<sup>24</sup> Minear, *Three Witnesses*, p. 142

<sup>25</sup> Stimson, Henry L., “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 1947).

Dower speaks of the censorship of the *hibakusha* who were not allowed to grieve publicly, share their experiences through the written word, or receive public counsel and support.<sup>26</sup> Also, stemming from their disfigurement and the fear of unknown radiation effects, *hibakusha* were ostracized and rejected by the average Japanese as well.<sup>27</sup> The attitude of postwar Japan was that they had been victims like all Japanese citizens:

In a public atmosphere of ‘corporate penitence by a hundred million souls,’ the A-bomb victims were lumped together with all other war victims and, indeed, with the leaders of Japan’s war effort, on the premise that all Japanese shared equally in war guilt. This resolution implied that even the afflictions of the A-bomb victims were punishment for their part in a sinful war. Hence, no matter how painful, their sufferings were viewed as strictly ‘their own responsibility.’<sup>28</sup>

No aid was given to the *hibakusha* by the Japanese or American government (not substantially widespread aid at least) until the Atomic Bomb Survivors Relief Law enacted in 1994 by the Japanese government. Regardless of the ethics behind these laws, the censorship served to hamper psychological healing. Moreover, the refusal to acknowledge the victims as unique while the rest of society afforded a special social quarantine to the *hibakusha* only furthered their isolation and resentment. This social stigma continues into contemporary times as many myths of *hibakusha* having contagious radiation persist.<sup>29</sup> This resentment will be further examined in the section on national identity. What is perhaps surprising is that the short-term reaction of the *hibakusha* was not resentment but a strong sense of derealization—the feeling that one is not actively experiencing events, but is in a state of detached observation.

Hara, writing about his survival as an anomaly, reflects, “Amid the catastrophe of

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<sup>26</sup> Dower, *The Bombed*, p. 127

<sup>27</sup> Dower, *The Bombed*, p. 128.

<sup>28</sup> *Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, p. 497.

<sup>29</sup> Matsubara, Hiroshi. “Prejudice Haunts Atomic Bomb Survivors”. *The Japan Times*. May 8, 2001. <http://www.nci.org/0new/hibakusha-jt5701.htm>

the atomic bombing, I was left alive. Since that time, both I and my writing have been violently dislocated by something.”<sup>30</sup> As witnessed from the earlier excerpt from *The Land of Heart's Desire*, it is evident that he was never able to resolve that feeling of dislocation. Ōta as well, viewed her survival as freakish:

Perhaps those who survived were like some kind of insect, were not human. The shame of being alive, I thought, might weaken me. My next thought, that I might be the next to die, caused me to shake with terror. Having to die of injuries received in an air raid but after the war itself had already ended: that really was absurd.<sup>31</sup>

Ōta was not alone in her fear of an “absurd” postwar death in continued American bombings between surrender and official closure. Other *hibakusha* suffered that same irony. But her conviction to keep living (she criticizes Hara’s suicide in her foreword to *Fireflies*) was obviously not shared by all of her fellow *hibakusha*. In reading the accounts from *The Witness of Those Two Days*, the sheer number of *hibakusha* who question the purpose of their survival and, indeed, regret it, is overwhelming. I have culled just a few samples:

Male, 19, soldier-“Could it be right, from a humanitarian viewpoint, that people should end like this? And could it be justified just because it was wartime? When a military doctor said to me, ‘You can live at the most half a year,’ life held no meaning any more and I couldn’t bring myself to look for a job. I even envied the deaths of my soldier friends.”<sup>32</sup>

Male, 19, soldier-“I tried to kill myself by drowning in the cold winter, only to be found floating in the ocean the following morning. Again, I failed to die. But after the attempt I lost my past. Twenty-four years later I found I was not the man I had thought myself to be.”<sup>33</sup>

Male, 31, civilian- “On my way out of the city, I saw an innocent girl who was bombed during her labor service. She couldn’t move or see, but was feebly holding her hands out and begging for

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<sup>30</sup> Treat, *Writing*, p. 135

<sup>31</sup> Ōta, *City of Corpses*, p. 252.

<sup>32</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 127

<sup>33</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 128

water. Even though I didn't want to, I ignored her. Whenever I remember what I did to her, I can't sleep at night. I still feel the pangs of consciousness. If we all had been killed then, we would have been so relieved..."<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, the authors' backgrounds are not revealed, so it is difficult to determine their motives for feeling that way (excluding the last case). But some probable explanations could be survivor guilt, permanent physical ailments, and/or social ostracism.

Ōta describes the feelings of guilt that circulated as she and fellow *hibakusha* sought aid at the aid stations.

What was strange was the relationship that arose between victims and non-victims. From the first, the average person treated the injured, from who he differed only in not being injured, almost as if they had always been dirty beggars. He was arrogant in words and attitude and treated them as inferiors. I could not help being struck both by this psychology and also by the psychology whereby victims as victims became absolutely servile, as if they had always been pathetic creatures, even though only two or three days had passed since they had been burned out of house and home.<sup>35</sup>

Ōta is most likely witnessing a result of the disorientation of the survivors. Most people were looking for family members, and many expressed a feeling of guilt waiting in line for medical treatment when so many others were wounded worse. This could explain their servile behavior as stemming from guilt. The usual way of dealing with a crisis is described as:

In coping with a particular situation, one usually first grasps the situation, then reaches some understanding and judgment of how one fits into that situation, and finally makes some move designed to cope with it. In extreme cases, however, this process is aborted: then one must be led, or find a way, to accept the loss of the most decisive elements in one's life—that is, one's most intimate human relations and the basic means by which one lives. Thus, instead of rational coping, there is only 'shock' and the loss of judgment—or what Lifton calls a 'vacuum state' and

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<sup>34</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 55

<sup>35</sup> Ōta, *City of Corpses*, p. 217

Kubo alls 'blankness' or 'emptiness'.<sup>36</sup>

This 'vacuum state' was keenly experienced by the youth. In *Human Ashes*, Ōda describes his confusion as a fourteen year old. He attempts to follow the above steps, but the atomic attack is so far out of scope, that he can only find the guesses of other victims to cling to. He encounters a woman, wild with grief and worried for her own son, who is raging at the Americans:

'If they do dreadful things like this, God is going to get really angry!'

For an instant I flinched, as though her words had struck me in the chest. Up to that moment I hadn't really thought carefully about what had happened. Certainly the word 'God' had not occurred to me. It just seemed as though everything had become smothered in ashes and terror, that was all. Now if she was prepared to denounce it as the tyranny of human beings who had no fear of God, then her understanding must be much more profound than mine. I didn't know what to make of her words or how to answer them.<sup>37</sup>

Up to this point in the narrative, Ōda has been treating the atomic blast as a natural disaster. And it is now that he becomes aware that humans caused the "ashes and terror."

Ōda was born in Osaka in 1931 and attended the English Literature Department at Waseda University after the war. He was exposed to the bomb in Hiroshima while working as a student recruit in a factory. Being only fourteen during the bombing, his piece *Human Ashes* reveals the utter confusion and frantic search for answers that he and those around him undergo. His piece is short, and describes his work in Hiroshima and his life there before the blast. It ends with Ōda at a relief site a few days later examining the human ashes that remain after the dead had been burned. His style is simplistic, and reveals the feeling of detachment that many of the young *hibakusha* write about later in

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<sup>36</sup> *Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, p. 489

<sup>37</sup> Ōda, Katsuzō. "Human Ashes" *The Crazy Iris: And Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath*. Ed. Kenzaburō Ōe. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1985. p. 78.

life—many of them blaming military conditioning, but also certainly stemming from shock.

Ōda forms his individual response through this adult's response, and as soon as he has an explanation, he immediately refocuses and begins looking for family members. By doing so, he allows the conjecture of the woman to influence his own perception of the event and is now able to identify himself as a victim of a war act. After realizing this, his mind is then free to move on to his next concern, namely, his family. The victims were almost all searching for family members.

### **Group Identity**

There are essentially two types of groups referred to in this section: family groups and the *hibakusha* as a group. Most often, the family was focused on directly after the bombing, with victims frantically seeking parents, siblings, and children. Family members lucky enough to locate each other, put their resources into keeping each other alive. Although there were many stories of family members helping each other, or worse, being unable to help a trapped family member, this account is particularly striking:

Female, 7-“My house collapsed in an instant. Mother and her children were able to get out but my Father and my baby brother were trapped under a big pillar. All around us, except our house, was a sea of fire. Though father cried aloud to mother, saying, ‘Leave me! Just take the children and go away. Hurry!’ she would not listen. She asked other people for help, but nobody stopped, running away in desperate flight. A man came, giving her a saw, and went away. With all her might she sawed the big post and pulled father out. Though we insisted on leaving immediately as the baby must already be dead, she finally dug the baby out, back in her arms and ran.”<sup>38</sup>

Her mother's strength and dedication to rescuing everyone of her family is astounding. Especially when compared to those who lament having to leave their trapped family members behind. It seems she would rather have died than leave any of them. Although,

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<sup>38</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 65.

she did receive some help from the man who gave her the saw. Many *hibakusha* write their regret for having to choose between saving themselves or helping people.

A fifteen-year-old girl and her father were searching for relatives in the city a few days after the bombing and had only one canteen of water for the both of them that day. Because it was all they had, they did not give it to the wounded, “This, my own experience of having sacrificed others only to secure our survival, this brutality, has remained as a bitter memory, torturing me all through my life.”<sup>39</sup> But it is only human nature that family loyalty would supercede the loyalty to fellow *hibakusha*.

Tōge writes a particularly haunting poem about a man searching for his younger sister’s body called *Eyes*. He describes the people in the building as physically unrecognizable but for their eyes,

I who step in this dark in search of the one who only this morning was my younger sister—  
eyes!...sunken-cheeked, slippery with ointment, secretions, blood, burnt ash—a death mask. Oh!  
Oh! An eyeball that moves spills drops of transparent liquid; from torn lips, red-flecked teeth,  
groans out my name.<sup>40</sup>

It is of interest that he refers to her as the one who “this morning was my younger sister.” It expresses a disconnect between the speaker and his family group. He no longer considers her the same person, as he no longer considers himself the same person. Tōge subtly pulls the dislocated identity encountered in the previous excerpt into the family construct.

The group identity of the *hibakusha* stems from having a traumatic experience that no one else can relate to. Ōta wrote about their collective confusion at the time:

If the issue is terror, waves of incendiaries, bombs, naval shelling may well be more terrifying. If one is under attack all day or continuously day and night, the fear may drive one crazy. We were

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<sup>39</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> Tōge, *Atomic Poems*, p. 318.

not afraid of the atomic bomb. We had no time to think about being afraid...We probably won't be afraid until two or three years have passed...It is the resolve to use the atomic bomb that is terrifying.<sup>41</sup>

She also reveals their initial group sense of a living death:

...the shadow of death crossed before our very eyes, returned, passed on. Alongside one's live self stood one's dead self...We even forgot to resent the atomic bomb.<sup>42</sup>

However, the lack of resentment did not last long.

### **National Identity**

Unsurprisingly, there were two sets of reactions towards the reality that the U.S. government had knowingly used the atomic bombs on civilians. One was to blame Japan for not ending the war soon enough, and one was to blame America. Of course there were those who blamed both. In the 'blame Japan' group there were those who regretted their education to die for the nation, those who resented the emperor, and those who resented the military. On the 'blame America' side were those who felt they had been used as an experiment, and those who felt America dropped the bomb in a wasted effort to stop the Soviets from entering the war.

From reading the viewpoints of the *hibakusha*, it has come to my attention that although the Japanese government encouraged civilians to prepare for a mainland invasion by the Americans, it does not justify them as a military target, nor does it prove that civilians would never have surrendered. It seems that some civilians were highly skeptical. Ōta writes about her discussions with a fellow author in Hiroshima,

The ancient etiquette of the battlefield called for individual combat between mounted knights, each of whom announced his name and fought gloriously. Saeki Ayako<sup>43</sup> would laugh and ask,

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<sup>41</sup> Ōta, *City of Corpses*, p. 253.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> A fellow author and friend of Ōta's who died in the Hiroshima blast

do they intend to fight America from here on in on the basis of that etiquette? ...Saeki Ayako would ask: did people in Japan think the Americans would come walking to war, one at a time, from across the ocean? While talking of such matters, she would tell stories of bamboo spears or of the neighborhood groups that went to the hills to collect pine needles so as to be ready, in case of air raid, to spread smoke screens. She and I restrained ourselves even when we could hardly keep from laughing.<sup>44</sup>

Ōta had a grasp on the likely bombings to expect, she had lived in Tokyo for many bombings, and was not blindly following the words of the military. She resented the military for not surrendering when they knew they were defeated—although as previously mentioned, she supported the war in the beginning. For younger people, who were inculcated with Japan's nationalist spirit, sentiments of regret and resentment were frequent.

Female 17, "Now I am horrified to think how I passed my dehumanized youth, apathetically and impassively denying myself in the nationalism and totalitarianism."<sup>45</sup>

Female, 14, in school, "A lot of people were buried under the crumbled school building. As the fire spread so fast, most of my friends couldn't escape and were burnt to death. Their lives were sacrificed. Even little children fell a sacrifice to the nation."<sup>46</sup>

Many of the *hibakusha* express betrayal by the government, and even the emperor:

Male, 20, soldier, "I hated America because it dropped the A-bomb on my country. However, I hated Emperor Hirohito so much that I wanted to kill him, because he didn't stop the war."<sup>47</sup>

Adding to this feeling of betrayal was the way civilians were treated directly following the blast. Soldiers were tended to first by military doctors<sup>48</sup> and were often ordered to do military work, instead of help the struggling civilians. This young soldier's account describes his experience:

I saw someone who just returned home trying to rescue his family from the rubble that had been their home. I and two other soldiers helped him. Having rescued one, we were trying to find two

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<sup>44</sup> Ōta, *City of Corpses*, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 73.

<sup>47</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 134.

more who the man said were there. Then a military policeman came and told us ‘Get out of here! You are on duty.’ So we had no way but to go away leaving them with pity.<sup>49</sup>

Historian Sadao Asada writes about the emerging beliefs that the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs to intimidate the Soviet Union and as a human experiment.<sup>50</sup> Not only is this view generally accepted by the Japanese public and published in textbooks, but in the book that catalogues the destruction of the bombs put out by the Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki it is stated, not as a theory, but as a fact:

Moreover, the A-bomb attacks were needed not so much against Japan—already on the brink of surrender and no longer capable of mounting an effective counteroffensive—as to establish clearly America’s post-war international position and strategic supremacy in the anticipated cold war setting. One tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that this historically unprecedented devastation of human society stemmed from essentially experimental and political aims.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that this is cited as a reason by *hibakusha* who blame the American government for their experiences:

Female, 18 “War is cruel. People who were burnt by nuclear weapons are the worst victims. I will never forgive those who used such weapons as an experiment, something which ought not have been used on humans, by treating us as guinea pigs.”<sup>52</sup>

Nor is it surprising that political activists like Tōge reiterate this view in their works.

Most notably in *When Will That Day Come?* in which Tōge writes,

They rushed to drop the atomic bomb. They felt they had to destroy Japan on their own before that day. With this dark and ugly motive they rushed to drop the atomic bomb. There was so little time between July 16—the test in New Mexico—and the day of the Soviet entry!<sup>53</sup>

*Hibakusha* largely respond to the Japanese militarism as misguided and to the American destruction as corrupt politics.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Asada, Sadao. “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (Summer 1995). p. 100.

<sup>51</sup> *Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, p. 335.

<sup>52</sup> *Witnesses*, p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> Tōge, *Atomic Poems*, p. 360.

## A Tribute to Peace

Somehow I feel it would be inappropriate to write a piece on *hibakusha* and leave out the one cause for which all their voices are unified. All *hibakusha* are ardent in their demand for peace. Tōge laments the continued stock piling of nuclear weapons in a poem he composed to the children who died at the Seibi Primary School:

You kids who have gone to a far place, where you can't smell apples, where you can't lick lollipops: whoever made you say 'We can do without...until victory is ours'? 'Seibi Primary School Dead.' ...From under the eaves of a roof of cheap shingles your sharp ears hear a radio plagued with static elatedly pouring out news: how many tons of bombs dropped where; how many hundred million dollars added to the funds for building atomic bombs; reinforcements landing in Korea.<sup>54</sup>

In the postwar years, *hibakusha* have been overwhelmingly opposed to the spread of nuclear weapons and working steadily in the peace movement. However, in their efforts to raise awareness of the long-lasting injuries they suffered, they have unfortunately also increased the stigma of Japanese society against them.

Graphic depictions of *hibakusha* are limited in Japan even now, as some *hibakusha* themselves oppose them. "Some critics also blame antinuclear campaigns by Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims for perpetrating prejudice against *hibakusha*, as the campaigns inevitably punctuate the horrific image of the atomic bombings and its victims' suffering."<sup>55</sup> While limiting the horrific images may lessen Japanese people's nerves towards *hibakusha*, it also has the potential to lessen people's sensitivity to atomic warfare.

Although, I found his piece *Summer Flowers* to be written in a more detached

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<sup>54</sup> Tōge, *Atomic Poems*, p. 336.

<sup>55</sup> Matsubara, "Prejudice," p.2.

style than some of his colleagues, this quote of Hara's reveals his emotional perspective and I believe it sums up the sentiments of many *hibakusha* I read:

*Concerning War:*

Will humankind merely live pitiful lives in the valleys between wars? Can one not sense its meaning unless one's own skin is seared by the murderous rays of an atomic bomb? Will man's opposition to the slaughter of men remain powerless?...I don't know. I know only one thing clearly: those faint voices of the countless injured people, fallen in the tragedy of Hiroshima, their voices all appealing to Heaven—I know what they would say.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to convey the transformed realities experienced by those who survived the atomic blasts. I began with the reactions to physical alterations, which revealed a willing separation of humanity and suffering. It was perhaps easier initially to separate the *hibakusha*'s images of what a human is from those who no longer resembled that image. However, as explained in the section on individual identity, the relocation of their own identity in society often caused significant guilt and loneliness. The *hibakusha* recognized that they would continue to exist even after such incomprehensible suffering, and without the aid of society's sympathy. The *hibakusha* as a group were stunned after the initial blast and later experienced a collective disillusionment with nationalistic militarism in the midst of their personal devastation. And finally, I included their persuasive appeals for peace. The despair that drove Hara and other *hibakusha* to suicide and pessimism is fueled not by their pasts, but by their despair towards the future. In a final note of optimism, it is my hope that as we learn from the compelling memoirs the *hibakusha* have left behind, we will prove that their despair was misplaced.

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<sup>56</sup> Minear, *Three Witnesses*, p. 30 (Hara (trans. Minear) *Sensou ni tsuite, Zenshuu* 2.598).

## Bibliographic Essay

### Introduction:

The topic of research was *hibakusha* identity based on personal accounts and memoirs. Information relating to the social and political climate of Japan in the 1940s & 1950s was taken from academic articles and reference books. The only web site used was The Japan Times newspaper's site.

### Academic Articles:

A useful piece for an overview of American and Japanese reactions to the A-bomb was Asada's piece, "'The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995.'" While commentaries on American reactions are certainly not lacking, it's difficult to find material on the Japanese reaction. Asada presents a rounded model that discusses the "Atomic Diplomacy" thesis that is prevalent in Japan (i.e. America dropped the bomb to intimidate Russia) along with the "human guinea pig" theory; both of which he asserts are taught in Japanese textbooks. For the initial American view on the reasoning behind the bomb, I used Stimson's landmark article that appeared in 1947, "The Decision to Use the Bomb." It's the foundational piece that is often quoted describing the bomb to be the decisive move that won the war.

I used an article written by the historian John Dower to get a perspective on the reasoning behind dropping the A-bomb and material on how *hibakusha* were treated during the occupation. His piece, "The Bombed," was particularly useful in the latter aspect. He details the repression that occurred of *hibakusha* writing and speaking, at times not even being allowed to be seen in public if they had been severely maimed in order to preserve peace towards Americans

### Web Sites

On The Japan Times web site I used an article that expresses the discrimination still suffered by *hibakusha* in Japanese communities. A useful piece for examining why *hibakusha* do not want graphic images of what occurred in film or art. There's a woman in the article whose neighbors throw away the lotus root she gives them thinking it is contaminated with *genbaku*/radiation.

### Reference Books

John Treat wrote an excellent reference piece that details the lives and offers literary reviews of authors who wrote about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I took much of the material on Hara and Ōta's lives from his work. He also includes the changing generations of authors who write about the atomic bomb, from Hara to Ibuse (Black Rain) to Ōe (Hiroshima Notes). The second reference book I used was put out by The Committee for the Compilation of Material on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and as such, is a medical analysis along with some complex scientific analysis of how atomic bombs operate. It reads as a medical analysis and review of what the *hibakusha* suffered and how it affected their lives.

### Personal Accounts and Memoirs

There are a limited number of collections on atomic literature in English, I primarily used two of them as I was looking for first hand accounts only. Hiroshima: Three Witnesses by Minear was heavily referenced in this piece as it included works of three of the authors I included in this essay (Ōta, Hara, and Tōge). Minear also includes very insightful notes on translation and the authors' lives in his writings. He is also the only author who includes Tōge's pieces, which I found to be the most powerful writing I read while during this research.

The second collection I used was The Crazy Iris: And Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath. It's a relatively short book, which only printed translations with no notes and about a paragraph on each of the authors. For further research it also included pieces by non-*hibakusha* writers who wrote about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Fireflies* (Ōta) was in this book as was *Human Ashes* (Ōda).

The last set of personal accounts I used were the responses to a survey put out in 1989 by the Japan Confederation of A-and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (a group formed by *hibakusha* in 1956 to promote political awareness of *hibakusha* issues). These accounts are well rounded from soldiers to children and reveal the variety of people present at the blast and the indiscriminate misery that followed. These brief accounts were the driving force behind why I added the section about peace to the paper.

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