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From difficult past to imagined future: Projective reversal and the transformation of ground zero

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, the term "ground zero" is now inextricably linked with New York City. Originally, however, it referred to the site directly beneath a detonated atomic bomb. The phrase was first used in government documents to identify the epicenters of destruction in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where U.S. forces dropped nuclear weapons in 1945. How did a term whose origins are bound up with acts of American violence come to signify American victimhood? Examining U.S. political and media discourse from 1945–2001, this paper identifies a long history of *projective reversal*: faced with the prospect of a "difficult past," American politicians and media outlets often grappled with the realities of a nuclear age by switching the roles of victim and perpetrator, imagining the United States as a *future* victim of a nuclear attack. After 9/11, the "ground zero" nomenclature naturalized an understanding of lower Manhattan as akin to a post-atomic landscape and, in turn, helped to animate a new series of nuclear projections leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In tracing the transformation of ground zero, this paper also forges a more robust link between the extensive literature on collective memory and recent efforts to elaborate a sociology of the future, examining how pasts and futures interpenetrate to shape political action in the present.

"Projections change the world into the replica of one's unknown face."—Carl Jung (1983:92)

1. Introduction

On August 22, 2011, *Time* magazine ran a photo essay titled "Revisiting Japan's Ground Zero." The photographs featured scenes from Fukushima prefecture in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster that left 22,000 dead and displaced nearly 125,000 more (Witty, 2011). The images juxtaposed desolation and hope: bright fireworks illuminating the night sky to honor lives lost; desolate streets and coastline covered with debris; police in facemasks guarding an entrance to the exclusion zone; an empty intensive care unit, closed because it lacked adequate staff; a priest watering sunflowers that he donates to help decontaminate radioactive soil, as bright rays beam down from the sky above.[1] Ten years after the devastation of September 11, 2001, the phrase "Japan's Ground Zero" was ostensibly intended to evoke empathy among American readers, establishing an analogy between Fukushima and the site in lower Manhattan where the Twin Towers once stood.

Yet August 2011 was not the first occasion when *Time* had written of a "ground zero" in Japan. On October 24, 1955, an article titled "Young Ladies of Japan" reported on a program at Manhattan's Mt. Sinai Hospital, sponsored by a private philanthropic organization. The program's 25 participants received extensive plastic surgery—up to three or four operations—while residing with

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[1] The images are available online at http://time.com/3780099/revisiting-japans-ground-zero/ (accessed May 25, 2016).

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Quaker families in New York. And all 25 women "had one thing in common: ten years ago they were on the streets of Hiroshima within a mile of ground zero on the day the first atom bomb was dropped" (*Time*, 1955:53).

Indeed, the term "ground zero"—now so intricately linked in the American cultural imagination with lower Manhattan that this usage is frequently rendered as a proper noun, "Ground Zero"—originally referred to a very different landscape of destruction: namely, the site directly beneath a detonated atomic bomb. The term first appeared in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, sponsored by the Truman administration to assess the impact of strategic bombing campaigns in both Europe and the Pacific. A special section on the atomic bombings was released in June 1946. "For convenience," the report explained, "the term 'ground zero' will be used to designate the point on the ground directly beneath the point of detonation, or 'air zero'" (U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, 1946:5). Media outlets quickly adopted the term: a July 1946 *New York Times* article summarizing the survey's findings reported that "[t]he intense heat of the blast started fires as far as 3500 feet from 'ground zero'" while also noting that "[w]ell-built shelters in both Nagasaki and Hiroshima 'stood up well'; people in them, even when near ground zero, survived" (Baldwin, 1946:70). The label derived from language used in the Trinity test near Alamogordo, New Mexico, in July 1945, in which "the code name given to the spot chosen for the atomic bomb test" was "Zero" (Laurence, 1946:4). Historically speaking, then, the phrase "Japan's Ground Zero" is no analogy: well before the World Trade Center was designated "ground zero" in 2001, the term referred to the epicenters of destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

How did a term whose origins are bound up with acts of American violence come to signify American victimhood? After all, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States was the perpetrator. Tracing the uses of ground zero in American political and media discourse, I identify the conduits that channeled this terminology across the decades, making it readily available for commentators seeking to narrativize the events of September 11, 2001. In brief, following the bombings in Japan, U.S. public officials and media outlets rapidly established the cultural foundations for the reversal evident on September 11, by imagining the United States as a *future* victim of a nuclear attack. Such projections, which endured throughout the Cold War, served to naturalize the comparison implicit in uses of ground zero after 9/11—i.e., the understanding of lower Manhattan as akin to a post-atomic landscape. In turn, nuclear imagery played a central role in the narrative that President George W. Bush and his administration constructed in the buildup to the Iraq war. Although the symbolic association between lower Manhattan and scenes of nuclear devastation encapsulated in the ground zero nomenclature did not *cause* the Iraq war in the usual sense of the term, it figured heavily in the administration's efforts to justify and legitimate political action. Moreover, because the term ground zero has long served to establish a link between remembered past (Hiroshima and Nagasaki; September 11) and imagined future (the looming prospect of a nuclear attack on U.S. soil), its history also offers a basis for linking the richly developed sociology of collective memory with recent efforts to elaborate a sociology of the future, by illustrating how pasts and futures operate in conjunction with one another to shape political action in the present.

2. From difficult past to imagined future

In the U.S. context, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had the makings of what memory scholars call a "difficult past." Difficult pasts are historical events that pose substantial challenges for narrativization, and thus commemoration—events that "evoke disagreement and inspire censure" rather than underwriting consensus (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991:384). The decision to deploy nuclear weapons was not simply an ordinary act of warfare. Instead, it ushered in a new era in global politics in a manner that generated controversy even among domestic audiences, threatening the sharp binary distinctions between good and evil characteristic of the "apocalyptic" narratives that legitimate and sustain warfare. Such narratives inspire blood sacrifice by positing "the most intense character polarization that invokes the highest and lowest of human motivations," depicting "a struggle between radical evil and…fundamental good" (Smith, 2010:26–27).

As the public pressure for states to engage with difficult pasts has intensified (Celermajer, 2009; Olick, 2007; Torpey, 2006), scholars of collective memory have developed a rich vocabulary for understanding how commemorations take shape in the absence of moral and political consensus. *Multivocal* commemorations rely on open-ended symbolism that accommodates divergent narratives in the same space (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991); *fragmented* commemorations segregate audiences to engage difficult pasts at distinct times and places (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002); *integrated* commemorations shift between multivocal and fragmented forms (Steidl, 2013). Political apologies (Celermajer, 2009), reparations programs (Torpey, 2006), and truth commissions (Posel, 2008) are all understood as manifestations of a larger "politics of regret," in which states maintain legitimacy by confronting past misdeeds rather than, or at least in addition to, celebrating glorious legacies (Olick, 2007). At the same time, memory scholars have conceptualized silence and denial as collective phenomena (Cohen, 2001; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010; Zerubavel, 2006), and explained when, how, and why silence and/or denial give way to commemoration (Armstrong & Crage, 2006; Whitlinger, 2015).[2]

Given the striking paucity of commemorative acknowledgement in the United States over more than 70 years, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long been understood through the lens of denial (Lifton & Mitchell, 1995). This posture was clearly illustrated in the fate of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum's planned exhibition of the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that U.S. forces used to drop the first atomic weapon on Hiroshima. The exhibit was to coincide with 50th anniversary commemorations of the Allied victory. Originally intended to examine the bombing in considerable detail—for instance, by providing historical context for

[2] It is worth noting that silence, as Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010) argue, can facilitate memory as well as forgetting—e.g., when carefully coordinated "moments of silence" interrupt the ordinary flow of everyday activity to focus attention on a particular past, disciplining both mind and body in the service of remembrance.