

Comment on  
“Living with the bones: War memory and protest  
against the military bases in Contemporary Okinawa”  
by Professor Wakabayashi Chiyo

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Some weeks ago, in New York where I am currently spending my sabbatical semester, I visited for the first time the site of what is generally referred to in the United States as “Ground Zero,” the site of the 9.11 attack. In spite of many opportunities to visit there in the past years, I have never done so. On a steamy hot day, I finally visited and watched the vast area where the Freedom Tower, the principle replacement tower at the World Trade Center, is now being built. Standing on a side street where you have only a glimpse of the site, I was struck by the recovery of the surrounding neighborhood. On the surface, at least, it looked as if nothing had ever happened. At that point, I started thinking about the bones and remains of the victims of the attack. Have the all bones been recovered?

After the visit, I was prompted to search for more information about the Freedom Tower project and found a web-site that describes the number of the victims (2980), and also features a plan of a memorial site called Reflecting Absence.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the “absence” more deeply discussed by Professor Wakabayashi in her paper, the absence to which the memorial will be dedicated seems more tangible with a clear-cut number of victims and the tangible loss of iconic buildings at the WTC.

It is not my intention here at all to underestimate the grief of those who lost their loved ones. What I feel compelled to look into is the reluctance in facing a too simplistic representation of such a complicated event. It was the uncritical glorification of the victims as “heroes,” as if they had fought in war, and the oblivion regarding those whose names would never be inscribed in the monument of this “national tragedy,” such as homeless people whom I had seen seeking shelter in and near the former WTC building. Now, standing there made me reflect on how a memory is created and what will be learned about the contemporary wars provoked by the attack that show in various ways the grave asymmetry of the world. What would we learn if we try to listen to the bones remained there?

The 9.11 experience in the United States is a current example of how a war or war-related public memory can be formulated--as if this is the only way to remember. I believe this form of memory has deep implications for our task at

this seminar whose main theme, “Toward a common memory of our past” inevitably evokes various questions and discussions. One may ask, “What past? What is a common memory?” Professor Wakabayashi’s paper, grounded in solid experiences in and close observation of people’s movements in Okinawa, shows a number of insightful points for such discussions. As the discussant, I intend to address several of these points, hoping to deepen the discussion opened by Professor Wakabayashi’s paper, particularly by her call at the end for creating “a common memory in our future.”

### **I. What is “post-war?” Whose past? Who are silenced?**

To approach the main theme, it is helpful to turn to the discussion on the term “post-war” as interrogated by both Medoruma and Yakabi, the two Okinawan thinkers introduced in the beginning of the paper. “Post-war” is a commonly used, yet rather vaguely defined expression in Japan and the assumption in the usage of the term is that the “war” (a term which also requires more scrutiny) belongs to the past and that peace was achieved in the Japanese society during this “post war” period. The notion around “post-war” may include the point that the militaristic nation of Japan was transformed into a disarmed nation by the new Constitution or into a newly born democracy.

The “post-war” experiences of people of Okinawa, as argued by Medoruma and others, reveal that this is hardly true even to this day.<sup>2</sup> The massive presence of the US military, legitimized by the defeat of Japan by the Allied nations and the practical US occupation of Okinawa, never freed people of Okinawa from the burden and impacts of the wars waged globally by the United States. The spirit of the Japanese Constitution that renounces war and the possession of armed forces was never applied to Okinawa as discoveries about a secret deal between Japan and the United States over the reversion of Okinawa shows.<sup>3</sup>

Here, I am inquiring into the theme of “toward a common memory of our past,” learning from Professor Wakabayashi’s paper on the absence of voices, by posing a further question: Whose past is “our” past? In other words, who constitutes “we?” Even the notion of “post-war” is being poignantly contended. For whom the war was over? Who enjoys the peace and who does not? What makes this difference?

Professor Wakabayashi’s research presents us with concrete examples of those whose voices were silenced in creating a “war memory”: the people killed in the Battle of Okinawa; and the Korean laborers who had been brought to Okinawa, abandoned, and never remembered. My preference for this “absence” of the voices, as put forward by Professor Wakabayashi, is to frame it as “silenced,” for I am interested in exploring the structure or the powers that have silenced them in the hope to transform it.

The Battle of Okinawa, in which a disproportionate number of civilians were killed in combat between Japanese and US forces, is a result of the conscious

military strategy of the Imperial Japanese Military, allowing them time to prepare for the most likely unavoidable US military aggression on Tokyo, where the Emperor lived. Researchers have already concluded that it was the Emperor and his system that was to be protected<sup>4</sup>. It was a form of "colonial" ruling of Okinawa by Japan that placed the Emperor over the lives of people of Okinawa during the Asia-Pacific war.

At the present time, the *Gamafuyah* activities, Professor Wakabayashi argues, reflect a deep-rooted social problem of poverty in urban Okinawa that is overshadowed by the US military presence, with a higher unemployment rate than other prefectures. During the US occupation, the currency was controlled and the lands were expropriated by the US military, preventing Okinawan people from developing a sound and sustainable economy. It is such irony that the very needed redevelopment plan that silenced the bones was based on the initiative of the liberal Governor Ota. The alternative economic policies have always been a key aspect of government policies in Okinawa in order to decrease the economical dependence on the US military.

*Han-no-hi-no kai* activities suggest, for me, the width and the depth of the colonialism of Japan in Asia and wide-spread militarism in the region, that were more clearly recognized by the connections made among people's movements beyond Okinawa.

In a similar vein, I suggest the following gender perspective as part of efforts to illuminate the power of silencing. Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence (*Kichi Guntai wo Yurusanai Kodosuru Onnatachi no Kai*), a feminist peace movement, has given a critical voice to those who have also been silenced for decades during construction of a memory of war. They are the victims of sexual violence by US soldiers in Okinawa. Among many activities, OWAAMV members have engaged in documenting the cases of sexual crimes by US soldiers in the post-war period that accounts for hundreds of cases of criminal behavior.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the bones of the deceased, it is the survivors who were silenced in cases of sexual violence. They were silenced because they believed, or more precisely were made to believe in a patriarchal society that being a victim of sexual violence is shameful.

Among others is the work of Miyagi Harumi, an Okinawan feminist historian, on "mass suicide" on Zamami Island in which non-combatant civilians, a majority of them elderly, women and children, killed themselves and other family members at the landing of US forces on their island. They feared the widely spread rumor of the brutality of the US soldiers including their willingness to engage in sexual violence against women. They also internalized the Japanese Imperial military values, that it is a profound shame to be captured by the enemy. Miyagi's analysis demonstrates that patriarchy, with the Emperor system as the cultural prototype, caused the "mass suicide" on Zamami Island.<sup>6</sup>

Inspired by Professor Wakabayashi's paper, I have offered my reading of the issues above. Next, I would like to turn my attention to the praxis that is called

for in the paper.

## II. How do we listen to the silenced? How can the silenced be heard?

The importance of learning is repeatedly emphasized in the paper. Yakabi and Gushiken advocate a kind of peace education for the future to help ensure that the suffering of people of Okinawa will not be repeated.

As a student of peace education, I have studied learning for peace or learning for transformation in the tradition of critical pedagogy found in the work of the Brazilian thinker, Paulo Freire. It is clear to me that the process of identifying the power of silencing resonates with the very core of the critical pedagogy of Freire, “naming the world,”<sup>7</sup> praxis for the oppressed to discover the configuration of power. I believe it is a necessary aspect of the kind of learning advocated in the Wakabayashi paper. That being said, I have several questions about this learning. One is, “how do we listen to the silenced?” Professor Wakabayashi describes one, that is the Makabi project as re-learning war memory by actually engaging in digging and touching to help us listen to the silence of the voices of the bones. If possible I hope Professor Wakabayashi can elaborate on other ways to learn, maybe to re-learn in Yakabi’s words, the war memory when they are absent?

A similar yet very different question to pose is “how can the silenced be heard?” I relate this question to decolonization as, if I understand the argument of Professor Wakabayashi correctly, I think the overarching theme of the present war memory in Okinawa remains to be colonialism. Can a learning process decolonize “a common memory in our future?”

What I tried to lay out here is only limited aspects of a much wider spectrum of implications of the research of Professor Wakabayashi. It is my hope during this session to engage in discussions that can enhance her argument for a “common memory in future.”

## Notes

1. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.  
[http://www.renewnyc.com/ThePlan/world\\_trade\\_center\\_towers.asp](http://www.renewnyc.com/ThePlan/world_trade_center_towers.asp) retrieved on July 12, 2010.
2. Takazato Suzuyo. (1996). *Okinawa no Onnatachi: Josei no Jinken to Kichi Guntai*. Tokyo: Akashi shoten., for example.
3. See Nishiyama Takichi. (2007). *Okinawa mitsuyaku: Joho hanzai to nichibei domei*. Tokyo: Iwanami., or Wakaizumi, K. (1994). *Tasaku nakarishi o shinzemu to hossu*. Bungei Tokyo: Shunju.
4. Fujiwara, Akira, ed. (1987), *Okinawasen to Tennnosei*. Tokyo: Rippushobo., Toyoshita Narahiko. (1996). *Ampojoyaku no Seiritsu*. Tokyo: Iwanami., for example.
5. Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence. (2008). “Postwar U.S. Military Crimes Against Women in Okinawa”. Naha, Okinawa.

6. Miyagi Harumi. (2008). *Shinban. Hahano no Nokoshitamono*. Kobunken.
7. Freire, P. (1970/1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: Education for critical consciousness* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1968).