correspondents at large

Hiroshima, Ground Zero

JOHN WHITTIER TREAT

HIROSHIMA, OCTOBER 2008. WHEN I LAST CAME HERE, IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1995, FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE END OF A WAR OUR MEMory factories had worked so hard to keep alive but were now being told to let go of. It was ten years after Ronald Reagan had declared at Bitburg that we had all been victims in that war. It was five years before a millennium punctuation mark would in fact make the twentieth century and its awful histories a base-10 past. And it was exactly that summer when the Smithsonian would put, with great controversy, the restored B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* on display in Washington for all to marvel at. In 1995 I had made my way in the intense heat of a Hiroshima summer (which made me imagine the heat of *that day*, as the Japanese say) to Peace Memorial Park, the beautifully groomed center of the city that all of us, worldwide, thought of as Ground Zero.

New Haven, September 2001. When did I first hear the television talk of Ground Zero? I think it was Peter Jennings, live from New York, speaking of the World Trade Center. I do know for certain what I thought at that moment: No, that's not right, that phrase is already spoken for, you can't have it. Ground Zero is something the United States did then, not something that was happening to the United States now. Leave it alone. Come up with a different catchphrase, for chrissake. Be original. Don't forage through history and award yourself the mantle of two words that should rightly speak to the fact of your own act of terrorism. No, uh-uh, that won't do, stop. You don't use *holocaust* to describe what happened on a Saturday night date, unless you are the Dead Kennedys, in which case you have already disqualified yourself when it comes to naming things. But Jennings and company win this one. In 1995 I published a book about Hiroshima and Nagasaki entitled *Writing Ground Zero*. After 9/11, that would have to be the title of a book about the United States and not Japan.

It really wasn't ground zero anyway: Little Boy blew up two thousand feet in the air over Hiroshima, and those two planes

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1883 Published online by Cambridge University Press

entered the Twin Towers high in the sky, not anywhere near the ground. In 1984 I led a group of graying college alumni on a tour of Japan. Stopping only momentarily in the Hiroshima train station on our way to somewhere pretty, some of the group gathered excitedly at the edge of the outdoor platform, necks straining, mouths pointed toward me and asking urgently, though Americans of their generation should have known better: Where? Where did the bomb hit? What part of this bustling, rebuilt city was it exactly? It was everywhere, I had to reply. The term *ground zero*, even when used in reference to the first occurrence of nuclear war in human history, was wrong. But wrong in 1945 is different from wrong in 2001. The first wrong was factual; the second was ethical.

The names we give our violence are usually rhetorical and therefore suspect. The Civil War was anything but, the War to End All Wars just a warm-up. The Red Baron means frozen pizza now. What we call World War II in English is rendered in Japanese as either "The Great Pacific War" or "The Fifteen-Year War," the former to limit historical knowledge to the empire's ill-starred entanglement with the United States after Pearl Harbor, the latter to remind postwar Japan that the carnage started much earlier, on Chinese soil and with savage Japanese victory after victory. Koreans cannot possibly call the Korean War the Korean War; they have had so many, after all. There it is the June Twenty-Fifth War, if you live in the south, or the Fatherland Liberation War, if you're in the north. The war my generation went to is known in the United States as the Vietnam War; the Vietnamese call it the American War. Operation Iraqi Freedom is not only cumbersome to say, it is a euphemism without a future.

We frequently talk of the ethics of naming but with little consensus over just what we are talking about. Can parents in New Jersey get away with christening their son Hitler? Was it okay for Queer Nation to plaster city walls with posters outing Jodie Foster as a lesbian? As Rey Chow says, the ethics of naming has everything to do with possibilities we foreclose or leave open when we choose our words. For the people of Hiroshima, naming had to do with a specific epistemic chronology. *Pikadon* 'flash-boom,' local parlance for the atomic bomb, represented a victory for those who recalled the flash (*pika-pika*) preceding the boom (*don-don*) and a loss for those who were sure it was the other way around. In either case, their etymology was experiential; our term, *atomic bomb*, is as abstract and unseeable as physics. There is, needless to say, an ethics argued here, too. Our relation to this violence has to proceed either on the basis of what they remember or what we reason. Regardless of Reagan's graveside pieties, we are not all victims.

Ground Zero are our American words; there's really no way to say them in Japanese. So what if we reassigned them to be *causi belli* signifiers for the war on terror? We've enlisted them in other of our wars already. In 1999 I wrote:

> Andrew Holleran, once a promising novelist but now a traumatized survivor of gay men's fate, has written an essay entitled "Ground Zero." "The bomb seems the best metaphor," Holleran says. "'Oh,' people say when they learn someone left New York in 1983, 'you got out before the bomb fell.' Well, not really, he wants to reply, the bomb fell several years before that. Only we didn't know it."
>
> Holleran's choice of metaphor annoys me, but I am tempted myself to make the same connection. Holleran, like those in Hiroshima and Nagasaki decades ago, has been unwittingly exposed to an invisible killer that has crawled inside him and now just sits there waiting. The clock is ticking. (*Great Mirrors* 22)

Both radiation poisoning and infection with a retrovirus may take their victims by surprise ("Only we didn't know it") long after gamma rays and HIV make themselves at home; so Ground Zero is where wars begin, not end, and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1883 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where they are waged as much by quiet immune systems as by legions of Shock and Awe.

On 13 September 2001, I went to Holleran's Manhattan. My excuse was a longstanding appointment with an uptown gallery owner, but that is not why I wanted to go. Exiting Grand Central and walking along Forty-Second Street while listening to sirens and watching the fire engines that were still racing south, I wanted *this time* to be a proximate witness to atrocity, to be near the latest Ground Zero since I hadn't been around for the first. I smelled the acrid smell of things burning, looked down the long avenues past the police barrier of Fourteenth Street into the heart of a hazy financial district and thought: Hiroshima, far away and long ago. People jumping from Windows on the World, right here and now.

Hiroshima, October 2008. The weather now easing into autumn, a milder Peace Memorial Park and its wide-open spaces are crisscrossed with small groups of strolling Japanese tourists. There are many memorials and cenotaphs, and an important museum, but what one remembers after a visit here is the emptiness of it all and the silence. It would be a mistake to attribute this emptiness and silence to Japan's famed minimalist aesthetics. Rather, they are what nuclear fission exploding over a human settlement leaves behind: a zero on a ground of irradiated earth rendered black glass, smooth and unapproachable.

Our names for things can either heal or inflict more pain. A humanist discourse on Hiroshima and Nagasaki does the former, a realist one the latter. The received classics of A-bomb literature, ours and theirs alike, uniformly speak of human resilience. John Hersey's survivors inspire us with their courage, Ibuse Masuji's with their perseverance. Ground Zero is an idea that works fine here. But there are other stories, always Japanese and seldom read anymore (if they ever were, by more than a few), that would have us dead by the first paragraph or stanza, limbs ripped by wind or torsos melted by fire. "Minna shineba ii n da," penned the late poet and Hiroshima native Shôda Shinoe. "Let everyone die." "Human beings all throughout the world / Let them be burnt black and die" (qtd. in Treat, *Writing* 197). In those works one never finds Ground Zero; there was no time for that. Ground Zero comes later, with the luxury of strategic surveys and the lucky—provisional—survivor's leisure for reflection.

Initial predictions to the contrary, Hiroshima recovered quickly. The city where nothing was supposed to grow for a hundred years is now lush and green, ringed by pine-covered mountains and replete with parks whose fall foliage attracts thousands. The original Ground Zero is only one reason to visit. The oysters are justly famous, the local baseball team not what it once was but still popular with hometown fans. Meanwhile New York's World Trade Center is still a hole in the ground, but that will be remedied as well. Other Ground Zeros will take its place, just as the Twin Towers did Hiroshima's. A new Ground Zero may be found one day in Islamabad, Delhi, or someplace where Pyongyang's or Tehran's missiles can reach. When that happens, older Ground Zeros will be recalibrated and the clock reset. You can count on it.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1883 Published online by Cambridge University Press