

Barefoot Gen and “A-bomb literature” Re-recollecting the nuclear experience

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(trans. Nele Noppe)

Introduction

The Pacific War was as much a society-wide experience as it was experienced on a deeply personal level. The A-bomb experience in particular was central to the war experience, to such a degree that it became a foundational “communal” topic in the postwar rebuilding of society. Sixty years have passed since the fall of the A-bomb, and memory has begun to erode as new generations replace the old. However, recently, an A-bomb manga by an artist from Hiroshima, Kōno Fumiyo’s *Yūnagi no machi, sakura no kuni* (*Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms*, Engl. trans. 2008) became a bestseller and was even adapted into a movie.

The expressions of these war and nuclear experiences, their “representations”, so to speak, have exerted at least some degree of influence on the formation of the postwar political and economic order not only in Japan but in all countries and regions involved. Moreover, they have contributed to the construction of the cultural, ethical, and aesthetic frameworks of the people living there.

As we know, the word “representation” is a combination of two elements: re (again) + presentation. Representation is thus nothing but the reconstruction of a particular occurrence, necessarily with a “delay”. This posteriority applies to any representation, and no retelling of events, whether by witnesses or otherwise, can escape this. Any representation carries a burden, that of the historical and social conditions at the time of its creation and at the time of its reception. We might characterize this burden as specific significations from a very limited standpoint, in other words, interpretative codes. Without these codes not only the representation of the war and the nuclear experience would be impossible, but the whole world of representations we inhabit. Precisely therefore, theoretically speaking, critical readings are possible from

any imaginable standpoint, but this freedom also makes us confront various ethical and political questions.

Simply put, these ethical and political questions boil down to relationalities. Representations of the violent experience of the atomic bomb, precisely because they were post factum, profoundly influenced the formation of the subjectivity of those who created and received them. We should not forget that subjects are formed through the rejection of everything that is considered not part of the subject. Conducting critical readings of representations comes down to examining the surplus of representations, which can be called “others” or the “outside”, and through such examinations, ask ourselves about the nature of our own associations and dissociations.

Furthermore, the gradual fixation of representations of the war and the nuclear experience as well as the terminology used to describe them indicates that certain dominant interpretative codes are strengthened and even privileged. The memory of an experience which is actually fluid, gains a fixed form in order to reduce its instability, and this process eventually leads to society’s recording of a public history. Not surprisingly, the memory of the war and the nuclear experience cannot be sufficiently gained from fixed representations. Any attempt to bring light to tendentially ignored representations cannot help but be an act of resistance against dominant interpretative codes. Nevertheless, I do not mean to imply that newly created individual representations are entirely uninfluenced by these dominant codes.

Drawing attention to representations of the war and the nuclear experience cannot be confined to the evaluation of single works’ expression. That is only one part of our endeavors; to disclose the forces of social resistance contained in any representation may be equally important. How are representations of the war and the nuclear experience constructed through expressive acts, and how do they achieve certain meanings? What conflicts between various interpretative codes can be seen in this process? By examining the views and narrations in such representations, we must before anything else reconsider the conceptual frameworks we use consciously or unconsciously, and learn to imagine the possibility of other recollections.

1. The formation of “A-bomb Literature” as a genre

From the second half of the 1940s until the beginning of the 1950s, all information pertaining to the damage wrought by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings was thoroughly censored by the occupation authorities. However, many A-bomb survivors

as well as artists resisted the efforts of the censors and went public, for example Maruki Iri and Toshi with their series of paintings named *The Hiroshima Panels*, Hara Tamiki and Ōta Yoko with their novels *Summer Flowers* and *The City of Corpses*, and Tōge Sankichi, Kurihara Sadako, and Shōda Shinoe with their poems and *tanka*. The term “A-bomb literature” was already in use at this time, although it began to be recognized as the name of a literary genre only by the latter half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. While I have already discussed this topic in detail elsewhere (Kawaguchi 2008), in this paper, I want to question the construction of A-bomb literature from a different angle by examining the manga *Barefoot Gen*.

The serialization of *Barefoot Gen* in the magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump* began in 1973. (A single-episode piece was published the previous year in *Monthly Shōnen Jump* as part of a series of autobiographical shorts by several authors.) 1973 was also the year in which Ibuse Matsuji’s novel *Black Rain* was first included in Japanese textbooks intended for senior high school students (by the publishers Tokyo Shoseki and Chikuma Shobō). In 1975, Hara Tamiki’s *Summer Flowers* (in a textbook by Sanseidō) followed. Inclusion in the high school curriculum of Japanese language is considered a clear indication that a work has achieved a “canonical” position in the field of public education. *Black Rain* may have been included because of the uniformly positive reviews it received upon publication, being generally regarded as the peak of a large number of other works expressing/representing the nuclear experience. 1966, the year that *Black Rain* was published in book format, was also the year in which Nakazawa Keiji created an account of his nuclear experience for the first time in *Struck by “Black Rain”* (even if that was published two years later).

In 1977, Nagaoka Hiroyoshi published his *History of Atomic Bomb Literature*. Nagaoka had been tirelessly gathering literature about the atomic bomb and writing a historical account of such literature from 1966 on. He later described the situation in this period as follows. Firstly, the word “A-bomb literature” was not found in special-issue titles of literary magazines or dictionaries. Secondly, there was one exception: *Iwanami shojiten nihon bungaku: kindai* [The Small Iwanami Dictionary, Japanese Literature: Modern Period] listed authors Ōta Yoko, Hara Tamiki, and Tōge Sankichi under the header “A-bomb and literature”. Thirdly, even there, the word A-bomb literature was not applied as an accepted literary term, but merely described as “what is referred to as ‘A-bomb literature’ in the vernacular”. Fourthly, it appeared that the word A-bomb literature was not accorded a place in either histories of postwar literature or in

literary dictionaries (Nagaoka 1997: 163). The book *History of Atomic Bomb Literature* was an attempt to convince the publishing industry as well as the literary establishment that the writings disdainfully referred to as A-bomb works should be recognized as a true literary genre. Possibly, Nagaoka's historical account did as much for the establishment of the genre of A-bomb literature as *Black Rain*, adding a historiographic dimension to the literary works.

As is evident from for example the appraisal of *Black Rain* as an outstanding expression and crystallization of the nuclear experience, a piece of “national literature, finally appearing, twenty years after the war” (*Asahi Shinbun*, 8.11.1986), the canonization of this novel also helped to picture “Japan” and the “Japanese”, the actual subjects, as atomic bomb victims. Nagaoka praised *Black Rain* in his *History of Atomic Bomb Literature*, but at the same time he was critical of the tendency to treat *Black Rain* as the site of convergence for all individual nuclear experiences. The formation of A-bomb literature as a genre of its own was accompanied by a struggle between various interpretative codes as to how representations of the atomic bomb should be interpreted, and we might say that the genre of A-bomb literature grew through this struggle. The creation of *Barefoot Gen* was not entirely unrelated to the formation of this genre. What issues become visible when we attempt to reposition *Barefoot Gen* within this context? I will approach this question by discussing three topics in *Barefoot Gen*, namely, the Hiroshima Maidens, the Korean A-bomb victims, and the wartime responsibility of the emperor and the imperial system.

2. The Hiroshima Maidens

Yasuko, one of the characters in *Black Rain*, is a typical Hiroshima Maiden who bravely endures her horrible fate. She was received as “a girl who was good through and through” and “a gentle maiden who symbolized the people of the beautiful region of sun-drenched Geibi”, a human being who “never spoke a word of resentment or complaint even as the black rain ate away at her. She passively endured her pain and continued with her simple life” (*Mainichi Shinbun* 1971: 60). Needless to say, the beautified representation of female A-bomb victims facilitated many people's sentimental empathizing. This image of the Hiroshima Maiden was widely popularized through the TV series *Yume Chiyo nikki* (1981, 1982, 1984, screenplay by Hayasaka Akira), in which Yoshinaga Sayuri played the character of Yume Chiyo, who bravely

struggles with leukemia.¹

Many female A-bomb victims appear in *Barefoot Gen*, but here I want to take a closer look at Katsuko and Natsue, two friends of Gen who play an important role in the story. Katsuko and Natsue are both disfigured by some degree of keloid scarring on their faces. Their hideous injuries cause them to be treated as “ghosts” by those around them, and sometimes they return their own feelings of uncontrollable resentment and anger. In their determination to persevere in life in spite of their injuries, Katsuko and Natsue certainly bear a certain resemblance to women such as Yasuko from *Black Rain*. However, it is clear that they do not fit comfortably into the stereotype of the pure, courageous, ephemeral Hiroshima Maiden. Their keloid scars resist attempts at beautification and are a form of visible damage from the nuclear experience that is extremely difficult to gloss over.

Through their interactions with main character Nakaoka Gen and his friend Ryūta, Katsuko and Natsue begin to dream of opening their own clothing store. This plan is their hope for the future. Actually, the combination of female A-bomb victims and a clothing store is a classic element in the story of the Hiroshima Maidens.

In 1955, the story of some Hiroshima Maidens traveling to the United States to have their keloid scars treated captivated public attention. Media in Japan and in the United States eagerly portrayed the event as a symbol of reconciliation between the two countries. When the Hiroshima Maidens returned to Japan after the conclusion of their treatments, newspapers attempted to paint the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a thing of the past by turns of phrase such as “The Hiroshima Maidens are home, the wounds in their hearts healed” (*Asahi Shinbun*, 1956/06/18), or “Last night, the Hiroshima Maidens returned from America to their homes, so healed in heart and body that their weeping families barely recognized them anymore” (*Chūgoku Shinbun*, 1956/11/07).² Later, in 1959, Minowa Toyoko became famous when she returned from the United States, where she had studied to become a fashion designer after undergoing reconstructive facial surgery. Among all stories of reconciliation, that of this very Hiroshima Maiden who wanted to open a clothing shop in Tokyo was considered the most beautiful and inspiring by her countrymen. Minowa finally opened her store in

1 For more information on Yasuko from *Black Rain*, see the first section of the first chapter of *Genbaku bungaku to iu mondai ryōiki* (Kawaguchi 2008). For more information about *Yume Chiyo Nikki*, see Ishikawa (2008).

2 For more information on the emergence and development of the Hiroshima Maiden image in the 1950s, see Nakano (2002).

1961, not in Tokyo but in Hiroshima, and created her own school of dressmaking.

In children's literature, a genre related to manga, there is the example of Ōno Mitsuko. She borrows the Hiroshima Maiden framework for her book *The Girl From Hiroshima* (1969), but creates a profoundly different narrative. In *The Girl From Hiroshima*, a girl named Tsuji Kiyoko (who is clearly inspired by Minowa) travels to the United States to have her keloid scars treated and later opens a clothing shop in Hiroshima. Her visible scars may be healed, but she continues to suffer from intangible "keloid scars" embedded in her heart. She refuses to marry her lover because he comes from a *burakumin* (social minority group in Japan) area. Unlike Yasuko in *Black Rain*, she is no victim of marriage discrimination, but rather presented as someone who cannot help but hurt other people.³

Of course, Katsuko and Natsue from *Barefoot Gen* are not explicitly ascribed such personality. However, as their their keloid scars which cannot be healed suggest, their dream of opening a clothing store is not realized within the series (Natsue dies; Katsuko eventually leaves for Tokyo with Ryūta, leaving this possibility open). Apparently, *Barefoot Gen* partly co-opted the popular narrative of the Hiroshima Maidens, while weaving a decidedly different discourse into it.

3. Korean A-bomb victims

The fixated image of the Hiroshima Maiden is closely related to the feminization of the memory of the nuclear experience. Traditional gender dichotomies that position males as subjects and females as objects clearly played a significant role in the re-casting of subjects as objects of violence. Returning for a moment to *Black Rain*, we might say that many readers confirmed the subjectivity of "Japan" and the "Japanese" as war victims by empathizing with Hiroshima Maiden Yasuko. Particularly relevant to this process is oblivion in the war experience with respect to the "perpetrator" issue.

The characters in *Barefoot Gen* are set apart from the representation of Japan and the Japanese as war victims. This is most clearly expressed by the character Mr. Pak, a Korean who was forcibly taken to Japan along with his father. The manga shows that after the bombing, Pak's father perishes after being denied food rations because of his Korean nationality. The problem of Korean A-bomb victims was first raised at the 27th World Conference against A&H Bombs, held in 1972, a year before *Barefoot*

³ I learned of the importance of Ōno Mitsuko's *The Girl From Hiroshima* from a presentation by Roberta Tiberi at the 29th conference of the Society for A-Bomb (Genbaku) Literature in November 2009 (Tiberi 2009).

Gen began serialization. The issue of compensation for Korean A-bomb victims had started appearing in the media in the second half of the 1960s, when the anti-war movement was spurred on by the Vietnam War. This led the Japanese anti-A-bomb movement to change course and become a movement aimed at preventing the Japanese from becoming perpetrators of war once more, rather than a movement for victims. The influence of this shift in historical awareness is visible in the fourteenth painting in Maruki Iri and Toshi's *The Hiroshima Panels* (1972). Entitled "Crows", it depicts a scene in which crows feed on the abandoned bodies of Korean A-bomb victims. It is said that the Marukis painted it after having been introduced by Nagaoka Hiroyoshi to the collection of wartime accounts from Korean A-bomb victims *Chrysanthemums and Nagasaki* (Ishimure 1968).

"Crows" and *Chrysanthemums and Nagasaki* avoid hiding behind society's one-sided take on the issue; they do not adopt the style of blaming the perpetrator from an absolutely safe position. Both works attempt rather to approximate the victims as closely as possible and compassionately share their suffering. This is different from a strict division between victims and perpetrators, based on which one simply identifies with the former. Here, we can rather find traces of a movement to fundamentally re-interrogate the nuclear experience, to face the "perpetrator" within oneself, by continuously revisiting a site of memory where victim and perpetrator are intertwined in a complex and fluid way.⁴

Compared with the depictions in "Crows" and *Chrysanthemums and Nagasaki*, *Barefoot Gen*'s representation of discrimination against Koreans as well as of Japan's colonial rule are close to a style of simple indictment and blame. It is difficult to decide whether to attribute its lack of complexity to the characteristics of the manga medium, or to the author himself and this work in particular. Here, one episode is noteworthy, the one in which Mr. Pak, who tells so passionately about the discrimination of Koreans, amasses a fortune in the postwar black market. Pak says that money was the only thing he could rely on in order to survive in Japan, and the reader is led to imagine that he has engaged in activities more typical of *yakuza* (Japanese gangs). Depicted as victims' representative, the character Mr. Pak suggests, behind its clear surface, a depth of the human condition which cannot simply be split up into good and evil.

Pak's restart after the war was fueled by the self-blame and grief he felt after

⁴ I discuss this topic in more detail in chapter 2, section 4 of my 2008 book, taking Ishimure's *Chrysanthemums and Nagasaki* (1968) as an example. On "Crows", the fourteenth painting of *The Hiroshima Panels*, I found Inaga (2005) particularly informative.

having failed to save his father. Although he is furious at the Japanese for letting his father die, he also blames himself for not having prevented the tragedy and suffers greatly from this feeling of guilt. While his story appears to highlight the different experiences of Korean and Japanese victims, his experiences actually seem to run parallel to those of main character Nakaoka Gen, who could not save his father, sister and brother immediately after the dropping of the bomb (or his baby sister, mother, and many of his friends later on). Many A-bomb victims undoubtedly share this kind of experience. Here, feelings of shame and guilt burdening those who had to sacrifice someone else in order to stay alive, or failed to save a loved one, become visible.

Some readers of *Barefoot Gen* may like to interpret the story of Mr. Pak as an easily understandable tale of righteousness in which the distinction between victims and aggressor is clearly articulated, and I definitely do not mean to suggest that such readings are overly simplistic. However, I think it is just as likely that *Barefoot Gen* fascinates precisely because it helps readers to get some idea of the complicated and sometimes warped emotions that A-bomb victims had to live with, emotions that cannot be presented in an easily understandable way. For many readers, the opportunity to feel even just a tiny sliver of those emotions may be a rare chance to question for themselves the distinction between victim and perpetrator or between good and evil, as well as the realities of war and peace that lead us to re-evaluate those concepts.

4. Critizing the wartime responsibility of the emperor and the imperial system

The wartime responsibility of the emperor and criticism toward the imperial system (*tennōsei*) are two themes that run through the entirety of *Barefoot Gen*, and it is obvious that the political intentions of the author or the respective media (especially those after the *Shōnen Jump* serialization, such as in *Shimin*, *Bunka Hyōron*, and *Kyōiku Hyōron*) become very clear particularly when criticizing the imperial system. From this point of view, it is possible to interpret *Barefoot Gen* as a manga that was used as propaganda for a particular ideology. However, we must also entertain the possibility that the manga itself was received as a work which utilized propaganda and ideology for its own purpose. And the societal background which supported such a reading, deserves attention here.

Weekly Shōnen Jump stopped the serialization of *Barefoot Gen* in 1974. Already published chapters were gathered into four manga volumes by Chūbunsha Publ. in May 1975, and in August of that year, *Barefoot Gen* was awarded an honorable prize

by the Japan Congress of Journalists. In September, serialization resumed in the magazine *Shimin*. A month later, after returning on October the 31st, 1975 from his first visit to the United States, the Shōwa emperor gave a press conference, where he was also asked about his “wartime responsibility”. He gave the famous reply: “I have not examined this figure of speech from a literary point of view, so I do not understand it very well, and I am unable to answer this question”. As a Cultural Studies scholar who makes a living out of the study of figures of speech, I certainly cannot deny that the phrase “wartime responsibility” is a figure of speech. However, during the same press conference, the Shōwa emperor touched also on the nuclear experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “I believe it was regrettable, but a war was going on, and although it was a great pity for the people of Hiroshima, I believe it was unavoidable”. This attitude may not come as a surprise, since an emperor with a purely symbolic function is urged to avoid any discussion of political issues. However, that does not change the fact that by seemingly condoning the use of the atomic bomb by the United States, the emperor was sidestepping his own political and ethical responsibilities.

Precisely this emperor stated in his war-ending imperial edict on August the 15th, 1945 that “The enemy has killed and injured many innocents through use of a cruel new bomb”, by which “our country was torn to pieces”; that is, he compared the land to a single body that had been torn asunder by the atomic bomb. In other words, the conceptualization of the defeated country as a homogenous body set in here. However, stressing the wounds inflicted on the polity’s body goes little way towards recognizing the pain inflicted on individuals who experienced the A-bomb. Lamenting the tragedy of “innocent people” on the one hand while calling what happened “unavoidable” on the other is rather absurd. The words of the emperor were politically careful, but we still have to ask ourselves how to confront them when thinking about the nuclear experience.

If we examine from this angle the constant criticism of the imperial system in *Barefoot Gen*, we cannot help but understand it as the manifestation of the attempt to forcefully deconstruct the dominant interpretative codes (symbolized by the Shōwa emperor) surrounding the representation of the nuclear experience in postwar Japan. This attempt rested on the tenacity to somehow re-recollect the countless personal experiences which cannot be acknowledged by the grand narrative.

Conclusion

From a transdisciplinary perspective, I have examined the historical and social topology and significance of *Barefoot Gen* as a work that is closely entangled with A-bomb literature, a genre which evolved within one of the fields adjoining manga, from the end of the 1960s through the first half of the 1970s. To a certain extent, I have managed to establish that the manga *Barefoot Gen* represents a form of resistance against the turning of A-bomb literature into a genre and against the A-bomb discourse as present in *Black Rain*, which was canonized at that time. It seems safe to say that *Barefoot Gen* attempted to picture the recollections of things and people which were excluded from the then dominant narrative. This issue may also be important for discussions of the subversive potential that manga as a "subcultural" medium had around 1970.⁵

But in reality, as later developments indicate, the matter is somewhat more complex. *Barefoot Gen*, which during its creation was leaning closely on the formation of the generic awareness of A-bomb literature, cannot have been entirely free from the field of "literature". Shortly after *Black Rain* began to be taught in Japanese classrooms, *Barefoot Gen* was also designated as a "superior literary work" and was added to school libraries and reading lists. Many children may have experienced *Barefoot Gen*, rather than *Black Rain* or *Summer Flowers*, as the main representative work of A-bomb literature. Should *Barefoot Gen* be seen as an indication that manga managed to enter the mainstream without losing its subversive potential as a countercultural medium? Or was *Barefoot Gen* instead swallowed up by and integrated into the dominant narrative about the nuclear experience and the war? Perhaps neither of these positions accurately represents the role played by *Barefoot Gen*. The *Barefoot Gen* boom that began in the late 1990s and continued into the new millennium should encourage more detailed consideration of these questions.⁶

5 This highlights the need for more discussion of *Barefoot Gen* based on its medium-specific mode of expression and the respective reading experience, which involves a peculiar corporeality, a discussion that should be opened toward related contemporaneous modes of expression, and also by those related modes of expression.

6 For a pioneering investigation of these topics, see Fukuma and Yoshimura (2006). In a second addendum to Kawaguchi (2008), I describe the trend to re-interrogate *Barefoot Gen* that has emerged online since the 1990s.

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