Student Writing on the Pacific War

By Yoshiko Nozaki and Hiromitsu Inokuchi

How should teachers deal with the tendency of our students to see the Japanese as the other? A key for approaching the problem can be found by listening to student voices and learning how various uses of language shape students' views on Japan (as well as on themselves).[1] From Fall 1991 to Spring 1993, the authors periodically visited the social studies classrooms of three middle schools in the U.S. Midwest—rural Greenfield School, suburban Berry School, and urban Orange City School. The authors worked with focus groups of seventh-graders (except in the Orange City School, which had mixed-grade classes). None of the students had been taught about Japan in the classroom.[2]

This article examines some of the students' free (and uncorrected) writings on Japan, collected at the earliest stage of the visits, in order to identify the kinds of discourses of which the students were part.[3] While covering a wide range of topics, from trade competition and names of supposedly Japanese products to various cultural items such as food, clothes, and language, the writings clearly reveal a general tendency among the students to see Japanese in terms of the other. That tendency often proved to be stronger when the topic moved to the war between Japan and the United States, which tended to divide people into distinct national groups. However, some approaches to the topic, such as one referring to the victims of war, allow students to cross those imagined national boundaries, and thus suggest the potential for overcoming students' tendency toward othering the Japanese.

ABOUT THE PHOTO
Children color papers to remember those who have been wounded and killed from the use of nuclear weapons. The Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice held the Peace Lantern Float at the Tenney Park shelter, Madison, Wisconsin.
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THE WORKINGS OF OTHERING

Throughout the students' writing, the most prevalent approach to Japan was to state the otherness of Japan and its people, imagined or concrete, by stressing their difference from "us." For instance, some of the student writings referred to the Japanese as follows:[4]

> *Speak **different** than us. Write **different** than us. **Different** schools than us. Eat **different** food, pockei [sic, confectionery], sushi. They read **different** than us.*
>
> (Greenfield, 1992–93)

> *They talk **different.** They eyes are tight. They eat with chopsticks. Most of them know good Kung Fu. **Different** Hair. Hard to learn English.*
>
> (Orange City, 1992–93)

Representing the other is the obverse of representing oneself.[5] Statements like the above carry some truth. For example, Japanese, which most Japanese may speak, is a different language from the one most commonly spoken by the people of the United States—English. However, it is also the case that some people within the United States speak and write different languages and eat different foods.

Clear-cut categories (i.e., "us" and "them") are an essential part of othering. Once a basic binary is established, it becomes easy to add other binaries involving value judgments such as "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong," and "familiar" and "strange." In students' writings, words such as "weird" and "funny" sometimes substitute for the word "different." For example,

> *They make a lot of Japan cars with Toyotas, Mitsubishis gas mileage. They eat **weird** foods. Their homes are **weird**. They have **weird** customs. Water streets.*
>
> (Greenfield, 1992–93)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, these statements suggest certain norms for "us." An invitation to a fixed American identity takes place here even though American identities are actually more fluid, multiple, and complex.

The approach to Pearl Harbor and its features

War as a topic occurred less frequently than some others in the students' writings, but the analysis of this topic remains important because "war" as a metaphor is often used as a lens through which to see other relations (e.g., "trade war" in the economic sphere). Among the various war-related statements, the term "Pearl Harbor" appeared most frequently. Neither the students nor, in many cases, their parents were born at the time of the actual event. In fact, few of their grandparents might have been adults. Nonetheless, they seemed to "remember" the event well.

The phrases that refer to the event Pearl Harbor are fairly simple—usually without any accompanying details of the contexts in which the event took place. For example,

> ***The Japanese people bombed Pearl Harbor***. *Japan is located in Asia. Japan is a island. They speak funny. They think they are smarter than us. The capital is Tokyo. They write funny. They eat raw fish. They know Martial Arts.*
>
> (Greenfield, 1991–92)

Appearing at the beginning of the example, the term Pearl Harbor is polarizing. It immediately sets up the national boundary and leads, as if it were a natural result, to the "them" vs. "us" binary.

This kind of binary representation of "us" and "them" has consequences. For one thing, it tends to construct the people within each of the categories of "us" and "them" as homogeneous and so makes it more difficult to distinguish between the state and the people.[6] In other words, in this construction of identity, the state and its people appear to be a monolithic unit, so that the diverse positions that exist among the people of a given country are overlooked. For another, the war between two nation-states is seen as war between all the people of the two nations. In such a picture, the "enemy" can quickly become nonhuman, making it difficult to imagine the lives of the "enemy" victims of war.

The grammatical subjects of the statements involving the Pearl Harbor approach are both often unspecified pronouns—"we" is used to signify the Americans, and "they" is used to signify the Japanese:

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> *Capitol-Tokyo*[sic]. *High school graduates there smarter than college graduates here.* ***They*** *bombed Pearl Harbor.* ***We*** *destroyed Hiroshema* [sic] *Never allowed people into their country. Island nation.*
>
> (Greenfield, 1991–92)

A well-known war event such as Pearl Harbor seems to define beyond question who we are (and who they are). Appearing in the middle of the example, the phrase "Pearl Harbor" reinforces the national boundary.

Another important feature of this approach to the war is that the U.S. bombing of Japan, especially the dropping of the atomic bomb (which is a different event and so may form a different discourse), is very often represented side-by-side with "Pearl Harbor." The U.S. atomic bombing is represented as if it were the necessary consequence of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. One of the student writings puts it this way:

> *I know about* ***Hiroshima and Osaka were bombed by the U.S. in the 40s, because Japan bombed Pearl Harbor****. Japan introduced Nintendo and they have technology that Americans don't. They're buying mostly every business in America like Disney. They're trying to buy the Seattle Mariners.*
>
> (Orange City, 1991–92)

The frequent side-by-side appearance of "Hiroshima" and "Pearl Harbor" may suggest a wide-spread American master narrative on the Pacific War, a didactic drama beginning with an "evil" Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and ending with a "righteous" U.S. dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, with justice thereby being restored.

The language of friendship

The expansion of the American identity

In general, a language of friendship is used to downplay the opposition created by the war by stressing the postwar "friend-like" relationship between the United States and Japan. (This occurred especially in the writing of students at Berry School.) The most significant feature of this approach is its blurring, and so redrawing, of the boundary line between "us" and "them." "Us" and "them" merge into a single unit to create an identity that expands "us" sufficiently to include "them."

The following example shows this feature:

> *I don't know that much about Japan. I know that Japan had a war with* ***us*** *a long time ago. Back then* ***we*** *were enemies with Japan but now* ***we*** *made up and* ***we*** *are friends. I have heard that people from Japan are nice and sometimes wear lots of jewelry and things but I don't know because I have never been to Japan or read much about Japan. I would like to visit Japan though because it sounds like a really neat place to go. I have heard also that Japan is kind of like China although I am not sure.*
>
> (Berry, 1992–93)

In the second sentence of this example, the meaning of the first "we"—"we were enemies with Japan"—signifies a "we" opposed to "Japan," but the second and third appearances of "we" include Japan (and the Japanese people). Thus, the second and third appearances of "we" represent the two countries not as parts of the binary of "us" (the United States) and "them" (Japan), but as "we" (the two joined together as friends).

In the following example, the paragraph begins with this "we":

> ***We** were not quite friends at one time. Through the years **we** have become friends. **We** trade and buy from the Japanese. There are people encouraging us to buy American though some Japanese things are more efficient. **We** have exchange programs with Japan and I hope to go sometime.* [7] *It would be even fun to have a Japanese girl stay with me sometime. At the time of **us** being enemies, not many people at all were very fond of the Japanese but now many are glad **we** are friends.*
>
> (Greenfield, 1992–3)

The first and second instances of "we" are the expanded "we," but the third "we" is the "we the United States." Note that this nationalist "we" has an economic, material interest, as indicated by the words "trade" and "buy American." The fourth appearance of "we" signifies the school, and this "we" is also interested in "exchange," though the interest is not purely economic. The last instance is again the expanded sense of "we."

The above examples show clearly that students have an ability to expand their identity to include someone whom they previously perceived as the enemy, as the other. The identity of the "us" constructed in the language of friendship is certainly inclusive. The problem with this identity, however, is that, while the discourse redraws the boundary between "us" and "them," the picture of the world and so the standpoint of the self remain more or less the same as before. The following example (though it does not refer to the war) illustrates the point:

> *I know that we trade a lot with Japan. I also know that **they** make a lot of products like cars, TVs and a lot of electric products. . . . **They** speak different languages, use different money, have different laws, and much other stuff. . . . But **we** both do some of the same things, like **we** both go to school, **we** both drive cars, go to work, and eat . . .*
>
> (Berry, 1992–93)

In the expansion of "we," "those different from us" can easily become "those the same as us." This expansion of "we" merely incorporates "them" into the dominant social structure. In this sense, the identity created by the friendship approach stands as an expanded version of the nationalist identity. Thus, while the language of friendship offers a more positive alternative to the nationalist dichotomy or nation-nation dichotomy, its potential success as a tool for change seems limited.

The view of the atomic bomb victims
Shifting the location of identity

Some students referred to the Japanese victims of the U.S. bombing of Japan, and to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in particular. (The writings that involve this kind of topic appeared more often among the students of Orange City School, where a "Sadako Story" project had taken place several months before the authors' visit.[8]) The language used by the students took on a number of forms: "bombing Japan and all the people who were hurt or killed"; "Many Japanese died of a disease from the Atomic bomb"; and "People are still dying from the rays from the atomic bomb."

In essence, this approach to the war states that Japanese people were killed or are dying because of the U.S. bombing of Japan, especially in connection with the dropping of the atomic bombs and atomic poisoning. The following example expresses this feature most clearly:

> *I know industry cars to be specific is very big there. I know the* [sic]***we the United States dropped an atom*** [sic] ***bomb on Hiroshima, because of that tragedy many people of years to come got a desease*** [sic] ***called lukemia*** [sic]. *I also know that oragami* [sic] *comes from Japan, it is my favorite hobby. I can make things like flowers and frogs. I think Japan is a very fastinatinig* [sic] *place and hope to go there soon.*
>
> (Orange City, 1991–92)

In this writing, the second sentence refers to the "atom bomb." In that sentence, while "we" is equated with "the United States," the victims of the bomb are identified as "people." This contrasts strikingly with the appearance of the event when articulated in the Pearl Harbor discourse, which includes lines like "They bombed Pearl Harbor. We destroyed Hiroshima." Compared to that approach, the standpoint (or social location) in this example allows the victims of the atomic bomb to come into sight or into view. It can be said that the position is that of "people" (as opposed to the state) within and beyond a nation-state. For the students to speak this language means that, to some extent, they have shifted their location of identity to a position from which they can see the experiences of "people" on both sides of the war.

The position from which one sees the experiences of people on both sides can lead to the formation of other views within a nation. In this respect the position represents a break with the dominant identities. The following example shows the beginning of such a break. Although the writing does not refer to the victims of the atomic bomb, the student who wrote this had the experience of reading stories about the atomic bomb:[9]

> *When I think of Japan I think of one industrial nation. . . . I also know that the U.S. and Japan fought against each other in World War II. When I think of WWII I think of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. **I** don't think **we** should've dropped the Atomic Bomb. If **I** had been there **I** would have tried to get **them** to stop. But during WWII no one even knew what I was. I know Japan is an island near Asia.*
>
> (Berry, 1992–93)

In the fourth sentence, "I" is a part of "we" the United States, but in the fifth sentence, "I" opposes "them," the force within that nation that made the decision to drop the bomb. The writer seems to know the dominant articulation of "Pearl Harbor" and "Hiroshima" but clearly dissents from it.

The above examples indicate the students' ability to shift their location of identity, undo the dominant discourses, and articulate new languages. Whether the "I" expressed in the last example has formed a collective identity—"we"—cannot be ascertained, but note that the alternative discourse in which the student participated is a social act. In this sense the

new collective "we" is absent and present simultaneously. The members of this "we" could find their counterparts nationally and internationally and could form a collective identity different from the mere expansion of American identity. In short, shifting the location of identity is perhaps one of the most promising ways to cross the national boundaries constructed by the workings of othering.

Discussion and Implications

In teaching about Japan, we educators must attempt to make visible the effects of othering. As a teaching strategy, this is especially important for lessons involving the discussion of the war between the United States and Japan, because the discourses on the war, by freezing national boundaries, often strengthen the view of the Japanese as the other. It is crucial to get students to become aware of who "we" and "they" are, to notice when these categories are used, and to develop a critical understanding of the language employed in constructing such categories. Students should have the chance to learn that, even within the United States, there are many groups of people who are not included in "us," and to understand the distinction between the state and the people.

Moreover, although discussions of war often present the boundary between "us" and "them" as fixed and stable, a careful and critical handling of what our students say can undo some unwanted effects of othering. First, we need to anticipate that certain types of approaches to the war, with specific characteristics, will occur in our classrooms. These include ones like the Pearl Harbor discourse, in which pronouns such as "we" and "they" are used almost unconsciously; expressions of friendship asserting that "we are now friends," which have some merit but seem to subsume "them" into "us" and thus fall short of overcoming national boundaries and rigid nationalist identities; and expressions inviting students to shift their location of identity, which hold real potential for resisting the fixing of identity and, therefore, for the undoing of othering.

If some of these approaches are missing, we had better introduce them.

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Students need to experience various types of war discourses if they are to understand the Japanese, themselves, and their relationships in ways more complex than that encapsulated in the simple "we" and "they" dichotomy.

Second, we need to look for alternative viewpoints for discussing war. The students in the study somehow "know" simple—and perhaps "common sense"—versions of war stories very well (even though most of the students, when asked about their sources of information, were not able to give clear answers). Supplying alternative viewpoints can make historical accounts of World War II and other wars more complex. The introduction of personal stories of the victims of war, especially the stories of women and children (e.g., *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes*), may make a good start in this direction, since, in general, stories of war are nationalist, male stories.[10]

The goal, however, is to help students develop their overall ability to shift their location of identity. In fact, in this study, when the students spoke about the victims of a civilian population of the "enemy" country, especially in addressing the Japanese victims of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they displayed that ability. This suggests the significance of the particular topic, but including it should not be the end point. To be sure, it is certainly important to teach about the victims of the atomic bombing in the schools, since that approach is largely missing from the U.S. mainstream media, but the danger is that the discourse may also work to fix the identity of the people who speak it. Students need to explore various locations of alternative identities, for such exploration is an important part of their maturing process.

Perhaps a project more ambitious than just reading the "Sadako Story" and folding paper cranes needs to be set forth. Such a project might involve "disentangling" the various facets of "Hiroshima," for example. The term "Hiroshima" bears a variety of meanings, depending on the perspectives taken, and therefore it can lead to various locations from which the world can be seen and felt differently.[11]

For example, "Hiroshima" as used in the environmentalist approaches to the nuclear age may symbolize the destruction of nature (and humanity) by science and technology. In the discourses of antiracism, "Hiroshima" may present one more horrible example of the (white) West conquering the Rest, the other.[12] Similarly, for some women of south and east Asian countries who were enslaved as "comfort women" by the Japanese army, "Hiroshima" certainly marked their liberation—even if it did not mean that the structure of sexual exploitation by military forces, or by other forces, ceased to exist.[13]

Conventional understanding of the war (and the world) can be reexamined in a number of ways. This is not to suggest that the distinction between the self and the other (i.e., othering) will disappear, only that the boundaries of identity for the self and others can be drawn and redrawn in various ways. Each time this occurs, students shift their location of identity and cross the boundaries previously drawn. In this way, we—students and teachers—can avoid the construction of permanent others, and thus minimize the negative consequences of having a sense of self. After all, having an identity has its own benefits. If constructing others is inevitable, we must take responsibility for the practices we perform in the locations we occupy.

A rigid nationalist identity, as opposed to a fluid national identity, does more than ignore alternative identities that exist within the country itself. If taken to the extreme of categorizing opponents as "enemies," as being totally different from "us," it also hinders the international understanding surely needed now, when everyday activities of any nation depend upon the practices of people beyond national boundaries. Avoiding the topic of war is apparently not the best way of understanding why a given war or conflict situation arose, nor the best way of preventing future wars and conflicts.

We need to develop curricula that encourage students to shift their identity location(s) and cross the boundary between nations in an imaginary geography—and, by extension, to cross the boundaries between all social groups. In the real world, what we imagine has real effects. ■

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NOTES

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1. The authors follow recent developments of theories in feminist and cultural studies regarding the relationships among knowledge, language, discourse, power, social forces, and the formation of social identities. For more discussion of these terms, see, for example, John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1–19; John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works* (London: Verso, 1993), 3–33; and Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and Its Futures,* edited by Stuart Hall et al. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 273–325.
2. The school names are pseudonyms. The authors usually visited the school together, since the research involved the actual teaching about Japan and video-taping of such sessions. A variety of data was collected by employing several qualitative research methods, such as observation, taking field notes, collecting students' free writings and conducting open-ended interviews. The grade level of the focus groups was chosen because it was appropriate to study students at a point before they studied Japan extensively in their schools to know the community influence on students' identity formation, which was one of the authors' research interests. See Hiromitsu Inokuchi, "U.S. Middle School Students' Discourses on Japan: A Study of Politics of Representation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1997); and Hiromitsu Inokuchi, "U.S. Middle School Students' Discourses of the War with Japan" (a paper presented at the conference on "Imagining a Pacific Community: Representation and Education," University of British Columbia, Canada, April 1995).
3. In each of the writing sessions, the authors (or the teachers) asked the following basic question: "What do you know about Japan? Write something or anything you know about Japan." The students' writings were usually a paragraph in length, fifty words on average.
4. The students' writing samples are presented in their entirety, except where omissions are indicated by ellipses. No attempt is made to correct misspellings and grammatical errors of the students' writing. Obvious misspellings are noted by "[sic]." Emphasis in bold face has been introduced by the authors.
5. Self is a form of knowledge constituted vis-à-vis the other. See Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 279–80, 291–95.
6. For a good discussion of this point, see Laura Hein, "Contemporary Images of Japan: My Students as Texts, My Students as Readers," *Pacific Historical Review* 60, no. 3 (August 1991), 36–83.
7. Although Greenfield School is a rural school, it has a student-exchange program with a Japanese school (also rural).
8. The project involved reading Eleanor Coerr, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (New York: Putnam, 1977) and folding paper cranes. The story is about a young girl suffering from leukemia as a result of the atomic bombing. Interestingly, most of the students who employed the discourse on the victims of the atomic bombs, when asked, were not able to identify their source of knowledge nor to give clear answers about their reasons for writing down certain phrases (this was also the case at the other two schools).
9. The writer did not remember the titles of the stories, though some of her friends said they read, or heard of, "Sadako Story."
10. In fact, there was some evidence that the students had been affected by school (or community) projects along these lines, which have been introduced by progressive educators, including teachers, parents, and community activists in the region. At the Orange City School, such a project took place some time before the first visit of the authors. Some students at Berry School also referred to their experience of reading the "Sadako Story" and other stories about the atomic bomb.
11. The word Hiroshima is an interesting signifier. See Richard Minear, "Hiroshima, HIROSHIMA, 'Hiroshima,' *Hiroshima*," *Education About Asia* vol. 1, no. 1 (February 1996), 32–38.
12. The Pacific War was "racialized," with the islands in the Pacific being referred to as America's "frontier," and the battles against Japanese soldiers called "Indian fighting." Many U.S. soldiers collected battlefield trophies—scalps, skulls, bones, and ears of the Japanese soldiers. See, for example, John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); and Ronald T. Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Little, Brown, 1995).For further discussion of the West and the rest discourse, see Hall, "The West and the Rest."
13. More teaching materials need to be developed to help secondary school students explore the topics and themes suggested here (e.g., environmentalist readings of "Hiroshima").