

Okinawa Essay Contest 2nd Place

**Contesting Japanese Post-War Memory
in Modern Okinawan Literature**

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Abstract

The exclusive nature of Japanese post-war memory has devastating effects for Japan's victims in World War II, as shown by the victims of the Battle of Okinawa. The battle is considered to be the "single most traumatic event" in Okinawan history, with its impact still visible even today. The controversial event has had a huge influence on many Okinawan cultural movements, particularly literature. The purpose of this paper is to analyze works of Okinawan post-war literature that feature the battle and to understand its political implications in response to Japanese post-war memory. In my analysis of three works of post-war Okinawan literature I identify three themes that portray the Okinawan experience as something separate from the canon of Japanese post-war memory. My analysis ultimately leads me to conclude that these stories speak to a longer history of oppression in Okinawan history that continues to go unacknowledged in contemporary Okinawa.

Introduction.

Scholar Gavan McCormack claims, "Nothing about contemporary Okinawa can be understood without first confronting the events that took place there more than sixty-five years ago."¹ The event he is referring to is none other than the Battle of Okinawa, when American troops landed on the shores of Okinawa at the height of the Pacific War. In popular memory, the battle is remembered as one of the many conflicts between the United States Army and the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II, but this narrow perspective diminishes the significance of the event on its most deeply affected victims—the Okinawan people. The battle claimed more than 120,000 Okinawan lives, estimated to be nearly one third of the total population at the time.² But what remains so horrific about the Battle of Okinawa is that many of the Okinawan casualties were suffered at the hands of the prejudiced Japanese military. This ugly truth points to a much larger issue at hand: Japanese post-war memory.

Japanese post-war memory remains a highly controversial issue in Japanese politics. While the most heavily publicized controversies typically concern tensions with Japan's neighbors Korea and China, the issue of post-war memory also affects Japan's own population. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Okinawa, where the consequences of the Battle of Okinawa continue to affect the lives of the people living there today. This is evident in the traces of American and Japanese authority that still dominate both the physical and political landscape of Okinawa, best demonstrated by the overwhelming presence of American military bases. Okinawa, which only makes up 0.6% percent of Japan's total landmass, hosts over 75% of the

¹ McCormack, Gavan and Satoko Oka Norimatsu. *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.

² McCormack and Norimatsu.

U.S. military bases in Japan.³ And despite the wide and public protest of locals against the construction of these bases, the lack of response or action by the Japanese government further confirms Okinawa's subordinate status to the state.

Similarly, Japanese post-war memory is characterized by the state's refusal to respond to or acknowledge its questionable actions in World War II. Instead, war memory in Japan typically relies on narratives that are characterized by their victimization of the Japanese population and nationalist sentiment in order to foster a sense of national unity, as well as reinforcing the idea that Japan is a peace-loving nation.⁴ The Japanese textbook reform controversy is a useful example of how the creation of a specific post-war narrative has been used to deliberately construct national memory in a way that diminishes or erases Japan's responsibility for certain events, such as the Nanjing Massacre, the comfort women system, and the Battle of Okinawa.⁵ In doing so, Japanese post-war memory has often silenced the stories of its victims to preserve its national image.

In Okinawa, it is precisely this silence that has sustained its long-suffering subordination to the Japanese state. Today's voices of protest against the construction of U.S. bases are merely echoes of the voices that have been silenced time and time again throughout Okinawan history. From the invasion of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1609 to the forced assimilation policies in the Meiji Period which prohibited Okinawans from practicing their indigenous culture or speaking their native language, the history of Okinawa reveals a group of people that have continuously been denied a voice under Japanese authority.⁶ Numerous controversies regarding Japan's

³ Inoue, Masamichi. "“We Are Okinawans But of a Different Kind”: New/Old Social Movements and the U.S. Military in Okinawa.” *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 1 (2004), pp. 85–104.

⁴ Dian, Matteo. “Interpreting Japan’s Contested Memory: Conservative and Progressive Traditions.” *International Relations* vol. 29, no. 3 (September 1, 2015), pp. 363–77.

⁵ Selden, Mark and Yoshiko Nozaki. “Japanese Textbook Controversies, Nationalism, and Historical Memory: Intra- and Inter-National Conflicts.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, June 15, 2009.

⁶ Akamine, Mamoru. *The Ryukyu Kingdom : Cornerstone of East Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017.

memory of the Battle of Okinawa, from textbook passages to museum exhibits, attest to the idea that Japanese post-war memory is often guilty of delegitimizing the Okinawan experience of the war. As a result, the battle has influenced many cultural and creative movements in Okinawa, particularly literature.

The memory of the Battle of Okinawa is a frequent theme found in Okinawan post-war literature. With the understanding that Japanese post war memory is built on the idea of representing Japan as a peace-loving nation and overlooking its controversial wartime actions, one might consider that the works of Okinawan post-war literature were constructed with a motive of their own. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the ways in which Okinawan post-war literature is constructed, and to understand its political implications in regards to both the historical past and contemporary state of Okinawa in relation to Japan.

For this analysis, I selected three short stories by Okinawan authors that feature the Battle of Okinawa: *Bones* by Shima Tsuyoshi (1973), *Droplets* by Medoruma Shun (1997), and *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town* by Oshiro Tatsuhiro (2011). Across all three works, common themes emerge that serve to distinguish Okinawa's experience of the Battle of Okinawa from Japanese post-war memory in order to legitimize Okinawa's historical and cultural distance from Japan. These themes are the importance of ancestral worship, the commercial exploitation of Okinawa, and the internalization of the war experience.

The three tables below provide a brief overview of the three stories selected for analysis. Note that in the 'Characters' section, characters are identified as either **O** for Okinawan or **J** for mainland Japanese.

Table 1. Summary of *Bones*

Title	Bones
Author	Shima Tsuyoshi
Year	1973
Plot	The bones of victims who died during the Battle of Okinawa are discovered at a construction site for a brand new hotel in Naha, which complicates building procedures. A local elderly woman fights to defend the resting place of the deceased, while Kamakichi, a construction worker hired to get rid of the bones, finds himself haunted by memories of his late father.
Characters	Kamakichi (O) Construction Boss (J) Assistant Section Chief (J) Elderly Woman (O) Construction Workers (O)

Source: Tsuyoshi, Shima. "Bones (1973)." *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, edited by Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson. Translated by William J. Tyler, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 156–170.

Table 2. Summary of *Droplets*

Title	Droplets
Author	Medoruma Shun
Year	1997
Plot	Tokusho, a survivor of the Battle of Okinawa, wakes up one morning to find himself totally incapacitated. His wife Ushi desperately seeks a cure. Meanwhile, the ghosts of soldiers who perished in the Battle of Okinawa, including his best friend Ishimine, haunt Tokusho at night. Tokusho eventually learns that his predicament is a curse for lying about his experience of the battle.
Characters	Tokusho (O) Ushi (O) Ishimine (O) Soldiers (J)

Source: Shun, Medoruma. "Droplets (1997)." *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, edited by Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 255–285.

Table 3. Summary of *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town*

Title	Riding a Bus in a Castle Town
Author	Tatsuhiro Oshiro
Year	2011
Plot	Kobashigawa returns to his hometown in Okinawa to try to uncover old memories of the Battle of Okinawa after being approached by the niece of a Japanese soldier he fought alongside. He meets with an old friend, Agarie, who also fought with him and is shocked to find that Agarie is suffering from dementia, although he appears to have some memory of the war.
Characters	Kobashigawa Eisuke (O) Agarie Seisho (O) L. Cpl. Suzuki (J) Agarie's Wife (O) Suzuki's Niece (J)

Source: Tatsuhiro, Oshiro, and Hamagawa Hitoshi. "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town." *Manoa*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 151–177.

Analysis.

The first theme I identified in my analysis refers to the form of ancestral worship practiced by the Ryukyu people native to Okinawa, which includes the practice of fulfilling daily rites in the household and paying respects to ancestral shrines. The importance placed on family and honoring one's ancestors is not only hugely significant to worship but in understanding how Okinawans perceive themselves and the world around them. In these stories, the presence of these traditional beliefs also illustrates one of the unique and personal ways in which Okinawans understand significant events like the Battle of Okinawa and how they process and respond to its difficult consequences.

In the story *Droplets*, Tokusho's wife Ushi relies on ancestral worship and other traditions in her attempts to cure Tokusho's mysterious ailment. After numerous unsuccessful attempts she laments, "How come this gotta happen to us?... After all, she had never failed to participate in the village religious rites and always looked after her family's ancestral altar."⁷ It seems that Ushi believes that her traditions are supposed to protect people from misfortune, which deepens her confusion about Tokusho's bizarre ailment. Ushi's dependence on tradition becomes even more definitive of her Okinawan identity when juxtaposed with her refusal to admit Tokusho to the hospital at the doctor's request:

"That won't do shit,' Ushi muttered under her breath, remembering a rumor that university hospitals use their old patients as guinea pigs... "Huh?" asked the doctor, but Ushi merely laughed and thanked him, deciding once and for all that the only option was to cure Tokusho—by herself."⁸

⁷ Shun, Medoruma. "Droplets (1997)." *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, edited by Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 257.

⁸ Shun, Medoruma, "Droplets (1997)," pp. 259.

The amusing passage above illustrates Ushi's distrust of the hospital, which can be interpreted as a stronger sense of distrust of institutions and modernity that threatens the traditions of Okinawan culture. The rumor that the hospital uses old patients as guinea pigs reflects Ushi's distrust of the hospital by antagonizing the institution. Here it is apparent that Ushi's distrust of modernity coincides with her desire to cling to her traditional beliefs, which are a source of comfort for her in the face of institutions that are associated with modernization, which suggest that the traditions of Okinawa's indigenous culture are not welcome in the contemporary age.

The importance of family is a definitive theme in both *Bones* and *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town*. In *Bones*, Kamakichi, a young construction worker, is haunted by memories of his late father as he excavates the bones in the construction site. It is later revealed that Kamakichi's father died in the Battle of Okinawa as Kamakichi "recalled the photograph placed on the family altar of his father dressed in the uniform for civilians in the Okinawa Defense Corps."⁹ The family altar is another feature of the ancestral worship practiced in Okinawa. In this case, Kamakichi's identity is impacted by the absence rather than presence of his father; Kamakichi remembers the time he was rejected for a job interview at the bank, leading him to claim, "He had resented being a son with a father who had never been more than a fleeting figure—a ghost—in his life."¹⁰ This passage indicates that Kamakichi blames the absence of his father for his inability to get a better job. By doing so, Kamakichi also inadvertently blames the Battle of Okinawa for taking away not only his father but for also changing the outcome of his very own life, which speaks to the endurance of the battle's after-effects.

⁹ Tsuyoshi, Shima. "Bones (1973)." *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, edited by Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson. Translated by William J. Tyler, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 164.

¹⁰ Tsuyoshi, Shima, "Bones (1973)," pp. 168.

The characters in *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town* are also deeply affected by the absence of family due to the battle. The story begins when the niece of the former L. Cpl. Suzuki approaches Kobashigawa. Suzuki's niece "had been taking care of the ancestral grave and wanted to find out Mitsuru's date and place of death."¹¹ Kobashigawa contemplates her request and the importance of knowing the exact date of a person's death; ultimately deciding "it all depends on how closely each person is linked to the deceased."¹² He sympathizes with Suzuki's niece based on his own understanding of family as an important part of a person's identity. The absence of family members in both *Bones* and *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town* speaks to the severity of the Battle of Okinawa's impact on individuals such as Kamakichi and Suzuki's niece. For Kamakichi, the loss of his father has affected the course of his own life in the present-day. Meanwhile, Suzuki's niece and the rest of her family have to suffer the uncertainty of Suzuki's death, which complicates their rites of tradition.

The next theme prominently featured in these stories concerns the post-war commercialization of Okinawa by the Japanese mainland. The first type of exploitation is conveyed through the present-day image of Okinawa as a popular vacation destination for mainland Japanese tourists and businesses. However, there is also the exploitation of the tragedy of the Battle of Okinawa in order to reinforce the peaceful commemoration of war sought by Japanese post-war memory. Together, these two types of exploitation demonstrate how the personal motives and agendas of mainland Japan often influence Okinawa at the expense of the local population.

¹¹ Tatsuhiko, Oshiro, and Hamagawa Hitoshi. "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town." *Manoa*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 161.

¹² Tatsuhiko, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 172.

The first type of exploitation is most evident in *Bones*, which centers on the construction of an expensive twenty-story luxury hotel in Naha by a Japanese company. In *Bones*, the only mainland Japanese characters are the construction boss and the assistant section chief, both of which are affiliated with the construction company. The Okinawan characters, on the other hand, consist of the elderly woman and the construction workers hired to excavate the bones. Here, there is a clear class divide between the Japanese company officials and the local Okinawan construction workers who are more or less hired to do the 'dirty work.' The different reactions to the discovery of the bones are also very telling of each character's role in the story. Whereas the old woman and construction workers are disturbed, the construction boss merely complains, "Why in hell didn't you say something about graves before now? Letting heavy-duty equipment sit idle even for one day costs a fortune. We're taking a big loss."¹³ The bones hardly evoke any sympathy from the boss, who expresses more concern over losing money over the lives lost in the battle. The construction boss and his business agenda therefore represent to a larger extent the Japanese vision of Okinawa as a profitable vacation hotspot, which conveniently masks the former desolate image of a war-torn Okinawa.

However, exploitation can take a different form through the dramatization of the Battle of Okinawa, which reinforces the common tragic but pacifist narrative of Japanese post-war memory. This is expressed in *Droplets* when Tokusho learns that he can exaggerate and lie about his experience in the battle in order to get the desired reaction from his audiences, which include local school groups, newspapers, and tour groups from the mainland. Tokusho's audience largely represents groups that are associated with the Japanese state: education, the media, and the general mainland Japanese public. In other words, Tokusho's audiences are likely to be the ones

¹³ Tsuyoshi, Shima, "Bones (1973)," pp. 158.

who were taught the stories of Japanese post-war memory. This is best shown in the schoolchildren's reaction to Tokusho's tragic recounting of the battle, with "the classroom burst[ing] into applause. Tears still streaming down their faces, the students were clapping with all their might."¹⁴ Based on this positive reaction, Tokusho learns to manipulate the tragedy of his experiences in order to evoke the powerful reaction desired, even expected, by Japanese post-war memory. One could go as far to say that Tokusho's reconstruction of his memories parallels the construction of Japanese post-war memory, as both are constructed to evoke a specific response.

Meanwhile, *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town* alludes to both the commercial exploitation of Okinawa and the exploitation of the Battle of Okinawa. The title of the story refers to the bus line that runs through Naha, Okinawa that is known as "The Castle Town Bus Line," with its final stops being the "Prefectural Miyako Hotel & Resorts and Hotel Nikko Naha Grand Castle."¹⁵ The fact that the bus line stops at a series of luxury hotels subtly speaks to the influence of the tourist industry in Okinawa. In addition, the controlled nature of the state's commemoration of the battle is featured when Kobashigawa visits a museum exhibit at his old school:

"Showcased are bravely worded letters, displaying the writers' eagerness to die proudly for their country. [Of] course you won't find the real thoughts of the dead expressed there. All that's left is an eternal question."¹⁶

Displayed in this exhibit are letters that display the "writers' eagerness to die proudly for their country," which is highly suggestive of the nationalist sentiment that characterizes Japanese post-

¹⁴ Shun, Medoruma, "Droplets (1997)," pp. 271.

¹⁵ Tatsuhiko, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 151.

¹⁶ Tatsuhiko, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 156.

war memory.¹⁷ But Kobashigawa, the narrator, objects to the exhibit in claiming that "you won't find the real thoughts of the dead expressed here."¹⁸ Kobashigawa's thoughts suggest that the exhibit, which more or less seems to be an extension of Japanese post-war memory, does not truthfully portray the experiences of those who perished during the battle.

The final theme found across all three of these texts is perhaps the most important in understanding the significance of the Battle of Okinawa to contemporary Okinawa. This theme refers to the idea that the memory of the battle has been repressed in the minds of the Okinawan people and continues to haunt them. In other words, it suggests that there is no sense of the war ending in Okinawa; despite the efforts of Japanese post-war memory to leave the event in the past and to move forward, these stories illustrate that this is not possible in Okinawa because the battle has never been properly acknowledged or dealt with.

An interesting feature of all of these stories is that they all share the same setting of present-day Okinawa at the time of their publications, but most of the characters directly experienced the Battle of Okinawa. *Bones* was published most recently after the war in 1973. Here, the older construction workers talk about the war almost nonchalantly, and they distinguish between themselves and those who were born after the war. One of the older workers teases Kamakichi for being squeamish around the bones, saying, "I bet you were born after the war."¹⁹ The distinction being made here is surprisingly not one of age, but of whether Kamakichi experienced the war. It shows how the war experience influenced people to the point where they feel separate from people born after the war because of the sense that the latter group cannot understand certain experiences or emotions exclusive to the experience of war.

¹⁷ Tatsuihiro, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 156.

¹⁸ Tatsuihiro, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 156.

¹⁹ Tsuyoshi, Shima, "Bones (1973)," pp. 162.

In *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town*, the images of war permeating the natural landscape in Okinawa also emphasize the idea of an unfinished battle. When Kobashigawa returns to Okinawa after living in Tokyo, he cannot view his homeland without his old memories transforming what he sees. As he looks out on the landscape of his hometown, Kobashigawa describes the "mental image of boy soldiers tumbling from here to the bottom of the valley as they were hunted sixty-two years ago by Americans. But what appears before me are glittering urban houses."²⁰ The image of the glittering urban houses in present-day Okinawa juxtaposed with the brutal imagery of soldiers dying on the battlefield illustrates the persistence of war memory.

However, the persistence of war memory and the inability to forget the past is best demonstrated in all three texts in the form of repressed memory. In *Bones*, Kamakichi represses memories of his late father. He is finally faced with these painful memories when he is confronted by the bones of the war dead, which makes him realize that he cannot forget his father as long as the memory of the dead live on in the bones. In *Riding a Bus in a Castle Town*, repressed memory has taken its toll on Kobashigawa's old friend Agarie Seisho. Agarie, who now suffers from dementia, is unable to remember his own friend yet is able to recall oddly specific details from the battle. One small and seemingly insignificant detail Agarie can recall is the phrase 'lemon powder,' which refers to the lemon powder he stole from American rations. Kobashigawa laments the fact that Agarie's dementia prevents him from openly expressing the memories he has internalized after all these years, which now can only be expressed through simple phrases like 'lemon powder.' Agarie makes Kobashigawa consider his own repressed memory, concluding "not remembering my experiences on the battlefield may be merely a

²⁰ Tatsuhiko, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 152.

selfish way to protect myself from pain."²¹ Perhaps Kobashigawa's repressed memory represents his refusal to acknowledge the pain he experienced, much like the way Japanese post-war memory often ignores the pain of its victims.

In *Droplets*, the root of Tokusho's mysterious curse is eventually traced back to his own repressed war memory, specifically the abandonment of his best friend Ishimine, who died shortly after. It is revealed that after the end of the war, Tokusho deliberately tried to erase his memory of Ishimine out of guilt and shame, which is reflected in the fake stories he tells about the battle. The ghostly visits of the deceased soldiers force Tokusho to confront the truth of his past. Tokusho then realizes "that he was growing old fast, and he feared having to spend the rest of his life in bed, face-to-face with those memories he had repressed for over fifty years. 'Ishimine, forgive me!'"²² Only then is Tokusho finally cured, revealing how he needed to openly acknowledge his buried memories of Ishimine and the battle in order to be redeemed. Previously, it was noted how Tokusho's false stories of the battle paralleled the false narratives of Japanese post-war memory. Here, Tokusho's repressed memory should be seen as a consequence of Japanese post-war memory, as it invalidates any other types of memory that exists. Tokusho is forced to internalize his true memories because they do not meet the standards set by Japanese post-war memory, and he only becomes free when he finally acknowledges the truth.

Conclusion.

In all three stories, these three different themes describe the Okinawan experience of the Battle of Okinawa as something that can only be exclusively understood by the Okinawan people. The representations of the Battle of Okinawa in these stories reveal the painful

²¹ Tatsuhiro, Oshiro, "Riding a Bus in a Castle Town," pp. 170.

²² Shun, Medoruma, "Droplets (1997)," pp. 281.

consequences of Japanese post-war memory, as they depict new narratives of trauma, loss, and injustice that are largely ignored by the mainstream Japanese majority. These stories also espouse values and traditions that are unique to Okinawan culture, maintaining not just a physical but cultural distance between Okinawa and the rest of Japan. Characters like Tokusho, Kobashigawa and Agarie internalize the pain of their experiences, while Kamakichi is hardened by a life without his father. Perhaps this is why the Battle of Okinawa is considered by so many to be the "single most traumatic event in modern Okinawan history."²³ It represents a culmination of many of the injustices that Okinawans have experienced at the hands of the Japanese mainland, and the publication dates of each of these stories demonstrate precisely how long this sentiment has lasted.

It is evident in all of these stories that Okinawa's memory of the battle is ineradicable, and not just in the minds of the characters but the landscape as well, from the bones buried under the soil to a sea of suburban houses built upon battlefields. These images are only one of the many examples of how the Battle of Okinawa is still felt today. The controversial American military bases are yet another example. Formerly viewed as the enemy during the war, there is a great irony in the fact that the U.S. military quickly embedded itself into the Okinawan landscape following Japan's defeat. Once again, Okinawa found itself subordinate to the Japanese state, which handled and negotiated the agreements that allowed for U.S. military rule to oversee the region.²⁴ Now Okinawa was subject to the authority of not one, but two powers, falling prey to

²³ Hein, Laura E. "Introduction: The Territory of Identity and Remembrance in Okinawa." *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 2001): pp 31–36.

²⁴ McCormack, Gavan. "Okinawa – The Client State's Client State," *The State of the Japanese State: Contested Identity, Direction and Role*. Renaissance Books, 2018. pp. 66–100.

Japan's own political agenda with the United States. And though Okinawa reverted back to Japanese rule in 1972, the bases remain under Japan's agreement with the United States.²⁵

The stories of the Battle of Okinawa therefore encompass something much bigger to the Okinawan minority. Numerous headlines over controversies surrounding the building of new bases, historically inaccurate textbooks, and inappropriate war commemoration speak to the fact that Okinawa has been and continues to be misunderstood by the Japanese state. The idea that Okinawa was once a sovereign state or has its own unique culture is scarcely recognized by the narratives of Japanese post-war memory. The purpose of this paper and my analysis is to demonstrate how Okinawan post-war literature can be read and understood as a response to the exclusive nature of Japanese post-war memory by fully embracing the unique experiences of the Battle of Okinawa as their own. In doing so, these stories not only help give a voice to the victims of the Battle of Okinawa, but to those who continue to bear the weight of injustice that has defined Okinawan history since it was first discovered by the Japanese state.

²⁵ McCormack and Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands*.

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