Cultural Responses to Atrocity—interview with Alan Tansman

What is the connection that brought you to BYU?
Marc Yamada [assistant professor of Japanese literature, BYU] was one of my students, and he invited me.

When did and how did your interest in this comparison between the Jewish and Japanese experience begin?
My interest in the comparison began seven or eight years ago. I grew up in a Jewish family whose grandparents were in Europe in the 30s, so there was a family connection to the Holocaust. When I started doing Japanese literature, there was no connection to the Holocaust in my work. And then I became interested in WWII, and the reactions of the Japanese to the bombing of Hiroshima, specifically. I found myself,

because of my own biography, thinking about the connections between the two things that happened, and how the people responded to them. That's how it started, partially personal and partially professional; and the two things came together when I started teaching an undergraduate class with a colleague who was in Jewish studies—I did the Japanese side, and my colleague did the Jewish side.

Rather than there being a universal human response to atrocity, do you feel that culture plays a role? Will you identify some specifics in these two cultures?
I think going into it I assumed that there wasn't a universal response, and I'm not really that convinced anymore. That is, I think the responses are sometimes so idiosyncratic that it's hard to say that it is necessarily a cultural difference. It might have to do with individual differences: a person's own mental, emotional fortitude; a person's own sense of religiosity or not; or a person's socioeconomic situation. But something that sticks out might include, for example, in European-American, Jewish-European, Jewish-American culture, there is an emphasis on talking about one's suffering, processing one's suffering through psychoanalysis or therapy. And perhaps the Japanese feel that one matures oneself by being stoical or by reintegrating into the community as a form of healing. These are different ways in which people deal with the psychological aspect of suffering. And then for religious Jews, there's a biblical narrative to work with on suffering, for secular Jews there isn't. For some Japanese there's a certain kind of Buddhist sensibility that has to do with a sense of life, that may come into play, but not all Japanese have that same sensibility to the same degree. And the last thing I would say is that the way in which writers and filmmakers

narrate the past, narrate these experiences, may differ because of different narrative traditions in each culture. Marc knows this well, that often in Japanese literature, pre-modern and modern, there isn't the same kind of structure found in European/American novels with a beginning, climax, and a conclusion. Japanese narratives tend to drift off in different directions. And I have found that when people are trying to cast their experiences into their narrative form they do call on their own culture's narratives, and that affects how they represent their experience. In the end, an individual's response and ways of representing their challenge and their sufferings is complex—so complex that the category of culture doesn't quite cover it.

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No Events