

Transnational Rhetorical Perspectives on Public Memory: Unsettling National Museum Narratives of World War II

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Introduction

This teaching resource offers a transnational approach to rhetoric grounded to understand World War II memory.¹ More specifically, we perceive the history of rhetoric to be a mobile process of meaning-making, situated across different languages and cultures. We thus avoid foregrounding the nation-state and unsettle national World War II memory by placing competing narratives in conversation. We have selected digital exhibits located in 6 museums across 4 countries, each engaging the Pacific War—Japanese and U.S. imperialism, as well as anticolonial resistance—from different perspectives. Instructors and students are asked to interrogate national archival rhetorics, to reckon with the partiality of public memory representations when texts are scaled out into transnational contexts.

Our decision to foreground the Pacific War is motivated by efforts to de-westernize and decolonize disciplinary knowledge.² Often, efforts to critique existing structural hegemonies target the longstanding structures of Western imperialism and colonialism. While such scholarship holds value, this resource asks teachers and instructors to engage Japan's history as a non-Western empire. When we simultaneously decenter the nation-state and the West, what previously obfuscated voices can be revealed to have been in conversation all along?

We question normative national imaginaries to engage the transnational discursive process, accounting for conflicting voices and their multiple contextualizations.³ Instructors and students are invited to examine exhibits

¹ We are drawing from Wendy S. Hesford and Eileen E. Schell's definition of "transnational" as seen in "Introduction: Configurations of Transnationality: Locating Feminist Rhetorics." *College English, Special Topic: Transnational Feminist Rhetorics*, 70, no. 5 (May 2008): 463.

² We are drawing from Walter D. Mignolo's ideas of decoloniality, which refers to "open[ing] up the domain of the epistemic and the hermeneutical, explanation and understanding, political and ethical processes delegitimizing the colonial matrix of power and building a world that is nonimperial and noncapitalist" (25). Mignolo, Walter. 2012. "Decolonizing Western Epistemology/Building Decolonial Epistemologies." In *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, edited by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, 1st ed, 19–43. Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia. New York: Fordham University Press.

³ Fielding Montgomery and Megu Itoh. "Understanding Transnational Decontextualization-Recontextualization through Shingeki No Kyojin: The Perils and Possibilities Surrounding

housed within: the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (Japan), the *Yushukan* Museum (Japan), the National World War II Museum (U.S.), the Japanese American National Museum (U.S.), the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (China), and the Changi Chapel and Museum (Singapore). Each museum engages national World War II memory across different perspectives, ranging from victimhood to anticolonial resistance. By reading these narratives in conversation with one another, instructors and students can better reckon with processes of fostering transnational rhetorical histories.

Course Applicability

Undergraduate Courses

Rhetoric of Public Memory
Introduction to Visual Rhetoric
Research Methods in Rhetoric and Writing

Graduate Courses

Contemporary Rhetorical Theory
Transnational/Comparative Rhetorics
Global Rhetorical Histories
Global Social Movements
Histories of Rhetoric and Writing

Key Pedagogical Themes

Visual Rhetoric and Material Culture: This resource emphasizes museum artifacts to examine the textures of memory-making processes, to underscore the multiple mediums and channels through which public memory is cultivated. Combined with a transnational approach, this resource highlights how signs and symbols can be interpreted differently across national and cultural contexts.

Curated Museum Narratives: A comparative lens across these museums reveals competing national narratives and thus underscores how institutions seek to control memory-making processes. This resource not only encourages rhetorical scholars to critically examine museum curations, but to also think about the context: Why did the curators make this choice? What limitation were they bound by? What possibilities did they fulfill?

Constitutive Rhetoric and Memory Formation: Foregrounding rhetoric as a constitutive act that actively forms our understandings of ourselves, our histories, and each other, this complex resource presents to students how different memories form in different contexts for different reasons, pointing out the powerful constitutive abilities of rhetoric.

Omissions and Silences: Close analysis of competing historical narratives ask rhetorical scholars to not only think about what is written on the page, but instead, to consider what is left out. The added dimension of a transnational approach also asks rhetorical scholars to compare what is omitted *here*, and what is silenced *there*.

Unsettling Binary Approaches: At its core, this resource seeks calls on rhetorical scholars to abandon binary approaches to understanding public memory. Too often, we are urged to label “good” and “evil” or the “hero” and the “villain.” However, taking a transnational approach to World War II memory reveals the complexities and nuances that surround the memory-making processes of each nation, challenging the tidiness of a binary approach.

Essential Terminology

Transnational: A critical rhetorical approach that considers the mobility of people, cultures, and things across borders, centering power dynamics. Furthermore, a transnational approach decenters the nation-state as the default category for analysis and considers complex, networked understandings of power. (e.g. The seemingly synonymous term “global” does not foreground a critical approach.)

Public Memory: Often understood as the recollections among members of a given community. Public memory differs from official national narratives and is instead informal, diverse, and can be observed in informal practices.

Archive: A collection of historical documents or records which provide information about a place, institution, or group of people. The curated materials in an archive tell a certain story, tied to questions about agency and power.

Global Memoryscape: The intersection of memory and globalization as theorized by Phillips and Reyes in *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*. Memory is alive and mobile, not limited by national perspectives. Within a global memoryscape, we can

understand memories of certain events through multiple perspectives and contexts in varied geographical locations.

Comparative Rhetoric: Examines communicative practices across time and space, often in non-canonical and marginalized contexts. Promotes ways of doing, knowing, and being that transcends borders, binaries, and preconceived biases.

Primary Sources

The Hiroshima Municipal Motomachi Senior High School Art Club: Paintings of the Atomic Bomb, Hiroshima, Japan

Every year, students of Motomachi High School in Hiroshima city complete paintings based on the accounts of *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors). Students work with the elderly *hibakusha* to capture their memories of the atomic bomb on canvas, receiving feedback and revising their piece as needed. Because there were no photos/videos taken during the atomic bomb, these testimonies (oral histories) and artwork are valuable contributors to war memory. The paintings are kept by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and have been used as presentation aids when *hibakusha* speak publicly about their experiences. [This Google Document](#) contains selected artworks, *hibakusha* narratives, and artist reflections translated by Itoh.

Yushukan Museum, Tokyo, Japan

The museum is located on the grounds of Yasukuni Shrine, known for commemorating those who died in service of Japan (critiqued for enshrining war criminals). The shrine has long been embroiled in controversies for enshrining the spirits of those who died in war, particularly for enshrining Class A war criminals. An examination of the [English pamphlet \(PDF\)](#) and [Last Wills](#) (a number of “wills” that Japanese soldiers left before dying in war are digitized and displayed every month), illuminate how religious and cultural values are embedded in state-constructed narratives of national public memory.

National WWII Museum, New Orleans, USA

This is the official WWII museum of the United States with expansive collections including more than 250,000 artifacts and over 9,000 personal accounts. The museum notes that the goal is partly for people to “understand and feel America’s strengths and values.” As

this is a Smithsonian affiliated museum, this resource provides a dominant national representation of war memory from the U.S. perspective. The home page is designed to be informational, and the exhibits page will also provide opportunities for students to analyze the overarching narrative structures employed by the U.S. to communicate about the war and their role in it. We suggest beginning by asking students to analyze the overarching message and design of the [Home page](#) and [Exhibits](#). The exhibit titled "Forces of Freedom at Home and Abroad: 1945–Present" in particular will present a fascinating exploration of how the idea of American freedom is rhetorically crafted. Additionally: Instructors may also find it helpful to supplement the exploration of this U.S. museum with recent political events and budget cuts to American museums, such as the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) and [Japanese American National Museum](#).

[Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Beijing, China](#)

This museum. The museum is located where the war against Japanese aggression broke out and has been used by the state and Beijing Municipality for activities to "commemorate the outbreak and victory of the war against the Japanese aggression." Instructors may choose to prime this discussion with brief readings on the [First](#) and [Second](#) Sino-Japanese Wars of the 19-20th centuries to provide context on China-Japan relations leading up to WWII. Recommended exhibits are the [address from the president of the museum](#) and the official [Introduction of the Museum](#). As the website mainly focuses on text-based artifacts from a curatorial standpoint, students will be encouraged to interpret the war from this specific vantage point. In order to avoid discussions from straying into simplistic arguments framing China against the U.S. in a good/bad binary, we encourage instructors to help students think about the role of national museums in national identity building, drawing similarities between this and US national museums. Further helpful context about the memorial for instructors as needed: Mitter, Rana. "Behind the scenes at the museum: nationalism, history and memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987–1997." *The China Quarterly* 161 (2000): 279-293.

[Changi Chapel and Museum, Singapore](#)

This museum tells the story of prisoners of war and civilians

interned in Changi prison camp in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. The museum narrative is centered on remembrance and reflection. As U.S. students may not be familiar with Singapore's role in the war, this may be a good opportunity to encourage students to trace the many ways in which histories were interlinked during this time period. For context on the Japanese occupation of Singapore during WWII, instructors may refer to this [article](#) from the National Library Board of Singapore. The online [exhibits](#) are brief, so students will be able to look through each page quickly. The exhibit "[The Interned](#)" in particular may be of interest as it shows the transnational flow of people moving in and out of Singapore to other places such as Manchuria, Japan, and Taiwan.

Japanese American National Museum, LA, USA

The [Ireichō](#) exhibit is the first comprehensive listing of over 125,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who are incarcerated in the U.S. during World War II. It is an interactive exhibit which takes place in two parts: (1) stamping the Ireichō and (2) creating a keepsake card. This process underscores the intergenerational and continuous nature of public memory. Furthermore, the Ireichō bears a five-line symbol representing the *gorinto*, a five-tiered Japanese Buddhist pagoda which represents earth, fire, wood, water, and metal. The Ireichō contains all five elements: earth as the soil collected from each incarceration site, fire which turned the soil into clay ceramic pieces embedded in the book's covers, wood in the paper pages, water in the ink of the printed names, and metal in the *kintsugi*-colored gold foil used for the book title. An analysis of the Ireichō thus reveals the materiality of public memory, encouraging connections to theoretical concepts such as affect and assemblage.

Secondary Sources

Choi, Jin R. "The U.S. Empire Remembers Violence Against Asian Women: 'Comfort Women' Monuments and Transnational Global Memoryscapes." *Women's Studies in Communication*, May 9, 2025, 1–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2025.2489609>.

Choi tackles the question of how we can stay attuned to how memory fluctuates as it flows across borders. Taking the global network of "comfort women" monuments as a case study, Choi argues that it is difficult to select a singular narrative to articulate a global event that

affected people in different places in different ways. Rather, tying together a critical transnational lens with Philips and Reyes' term "global memoryscape," we employ a transnational global memoryscape to understand the political and social nuances of each location's memory.

Hashimoto, Akiko. *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan*. New York City: Oxford University press, 2015.

Hashimoto's book offers an overview of contested Japanese cultural memory related to World War II, arguing that there is no single national story, but rather, three categories of trauma narratives which are all etched in national sentiment: (1) narratives that emphasize stories of fallen national heroes; (2) narratives promoting empathy and identifications with tragic victims of defeat; (3) narratives recognizing Japan's perpetrator acts of imperialism, invasion, and exploitation.

**Houdek, Matthew. "The Rhetorical Force of 'Global Archival Memory': (Re)Situating Archives along the Global Memoryscape." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 9, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 204-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1195006>.**

Houdek critically examines the idea of a global memoryscape and a global archive. Students will be encouraged to think through what global memory might mean for nation-bound contexts, how such concepts could be used as rhetorical weapons for both justice and harm.

**Itoh, Megu. "Slithering toward Social Change: Mobile Reverberations of Anticolonial Dissent across Time and Space." *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 26, no. 2 (July 13, 2023): 165-76.
<https://doi.org/10.5325/jhistrhetoric.26.2.0165>.**

Itoh advances the idea of "rhetoric transnationally *in motu*," to engaging colonial power and anticolonial dissent in ways that decenter the nationstate as a locus of analysis. Instead, Itoh recognizes reverberations or echoes of cultural trauma across borders and their capacity to foster transnational coalitional moments.

Mason, Michele, and Helen J. S. Lee, eds. *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Mason and Lee seek to deepen knowledge of Japanese colonialism(s), providing a selection of translated Japanese primary sources and analytical essays that illuminate the specificities of Japan's many and varied colonial projects. Furthermore, their "Introduction" chapter offers a review of Japanese colonial history.

Yam, Shui-Yin Sharon. "Towards a Differential Ethics of Belonging in a Transnational Context: Navigating the Hong Kong Movement in the US in 2020 and 2021." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 43, no. 3 (2022): 29–62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2022.0023>.

Yam's piece will challenge students to connect the dots between domestic memories across nations in different, possibly surprising ways, all with a critical cohesive throughline. Pointing to the contrasting ways that, for example, anti-Asian/anti-China hate or the Black Lives Matter movement manifested in different meanings for different audiences in the U.S. and in Hong Kong, this piece pushes students to critically reflect on how even historical and contemporary memories function to generate different significances and identities for different audiences.

Yoneyama, Lisa. "Traveling Memories, Contagious Justice: Americanization of Japanese War Crimes at the End of the Post-Cold War." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 57–93. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2003.0034>.

Yoneyama sharply tackles how the United States has utilized war memories to position itself as the leader of the free world, bringer of global justice, lover of freedom. The piece centers around the idea of the "Americanization of world justice." Students will be prepared to enter classroom discussions with a critical eye towards nationalistic and imperial agendas in the creation of global/war memories.

Discussion Questions

1. How do these museums rhetorically craft ideas about the nation? Or, what is the role of rhetoric in creating the nation?
2. What rhetorical themes do you see emerging from these national rhetorics? Do any conflict with each other? Do some converge? What surprised you about your findings?
3. How do you see the following terms being rhetorically constructed in these various artifacts, differently/similarly? Empire, coloniality, power, freedom, justice, morality, violence, good/bad, savior/victim, enemy/ally
4. What is lost when we remain narrow rhetors, focused solely on our domestic nation-bound rhetorics of memory and national identity?
5. How can we stitch together these national rhetorics into a broader transnational memoryscape? What is the significance of understanding memory transnationally?
6. These are national narratives. What are some elements that you see particularly highlighted or missing from these rhetorical constructions? Think about intersecting vectors of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.
7. How do you see these historical narratives informing your understanding of current geopolitical conflicts? Reflect upon how your logics and understandings of current geopolitical issues are informed by your own domestic national identity and rhetorics.

Supplement: Classroom Activities

Imagine You're a First-Time Visitor...

Suggestion: This can be a good way to acclimate students with the artifacts at the beginning of the session.

Objective: In groups or individually, students will select 2-3 websites to analyze. Students will be asked to engage with artifacts critically and compose a brief understanding of how a first-time virtual visitor might understand the war according to the materials presented on the website. In response to the digital questions, students will be asked to create either a single slide on Google Slides or a section of the digital board on Miro to share their findings with the rest of the class.

Time: 30-40 minutes

Mind Map: Expansion of the Teaching Archive

Objective 1: In groups or individually, students will make a post on an editable public mind map (free suggested tools: Canva, Miro, Google Slides). They can freely connect their post to existing posts, add visuals, etc. Ideally, students can also draw on other students' analyses to deepen their understanding.

Objective 2: In groups or individually, students can locate resources related to World War II memory in their region. They can photograph statues, museum exhibits, and more to add to the existing pedagogical archive. Future instructors and students can build on their work, thus creating a living and ongoing archive of transnational World War II memory.

Crafting Ongoing Transnational Memoryscapes

Suggestion: This can be a good wrap-up activity to connect outwards with current events.

Objective: Select one ongoing current issue or event that affects much of the world (e.g. perhaps a UN or Davos summit, geopolitical conflicts, the climate crisis, etc.). Students will be assigned a different country per group and asked to collect 3-5 news articles or social media posts created by news outlets or organizations from that country covering this worldwide event (ideally national organizations or rhetors that explicitly speak on behalf of the country). Instructors will encourage students to analyze these artifacts through a specific thematized lens (e.g. How is the conflict framed?) The class will come together to share their findings and create a multidimensional transnational memoryscape about this event from multiple national vantage points.

Alternatively: This could be assigned as a separate project that spans 1-2 weeks, resulting in group presentations and ultimately a class-wide activity to draw insights from group presentations together.



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