

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

Coming to Terms with War: Traumas, Identities, and the Power of Words

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Tobie Meyer-Fong. *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. 336 pp. \$40 (cloth/ebook).

Aaron William Moore. *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 388 pp. \$45 (cloth/ebook).

It is a fitting and revealing approach to categorize the phenomenon of war as a historical event, an existential experience, and a base for redemptive mythmaking (as envisioned by Paul Cohen in his *History in Three Keys*). In their works, historians Tobie Meyer-Fong and Aaron William Moore focus on experience and mythmaking in the Taiping Civil War and the Pacific Theater in World War II, respectively. This review essay highlights these two authors' treatment of experience, with a brief look at mythmaking.

Both books probe the sensory experience of war and of coming to terms with catastrophic events never before experienced. Meyer-Fong wants to make a “place for individual suffering, loss, religiosity, and emotions” (15). In a brilliantly written passage, Moore, whose analysis is based on wartime diaries of Japanese, Chinese, and American soldiers, notes that “we cannot fully know what it means to be a soldier in the Second World War or totally grasp the experience of trauma throughout these passages.... Forces that wield such power over us, such as trauma, fear, and love, while perhaps ultimately beyond representation, cannot be ignored” (199).

Both authors, then, are among those historians who stress the importance of exploring emotions in interpreting the past (see “AHR Conversation” 2012). In her compelling study of Yu Zhi's *Tears for Jiangnan* and Zhang Guanglie's *Record of 1861* (and the authors themselves),

Meyer-Fong brings alive some of the feelings of those caught up in the Taiping maelstrom, a nightmare in which “what was once was true and known was lost, uncertain, unstable, and incomplete” (207). Zhang’s book reflects this disorientation and “functions as a site in which a grieving son could better remember the person his mother had been” (201). Moore speaks of some soldiers’ omitting “information about atrocities, confessions about sexual experiences, or reflections about the role of gender during war.” He continues with an analogy that cogently conveys the nebulous quality of emotions: “Nevertheless, the silent and dark cavities within these diaries still exercised some influence over what form finally came to light, much like how the immense gravity of a dark star affects visible matter all around it” (199).

For their analyses, Meyer-Fong and Moore use sources that have been either generally dismissed or used only sporadically and anecdotally. Meyer-Fong brings the Taiping adherents to life with her descriptions of facial tattooing, shaggy long hair, and brightly colored clothing (yellows, reds, greens, and blues), which stood in contrast to the blues and grays of the general population—a contrast that, according to one Westerner, the locals found “weirdly horrifying” (96). She mines memoirs, diaries, and anecdotal material never before used, and engages the reader with artistically suggestive chapter titles (“Words,” “Marked Bodies,” “Bones and Flesh,” “Wood and Ink,” and “Loss,” for example). Moore has extracted important insights from a broad range of wartime diaries about the men and their war, though there are, I think, some analytical difficulties (more on this later). Details about battles and soldiers’ reactions to them abound, with distressing descriptions of jungle warfare, of “living in sweat and dirt” (202), and of the prevalence of jungle rot, ringworms, fungus, and rashes.

For both historians, the “spatial” context is local: in Meyer-Fong’s case, it is the prefecture, county, urban center, village, and person; in Moore’s, the individual, his psyche, and the “self-discipline” produced and enhanced by his diary. Moore’s frequent omission of the soldiers’ spatial location only underscores his claim that “there is a fundamental commonality of experience when it comes to war” (216). Yet for each author, the local is not discrete; the state always plays a role. Meyer-Fong points to the “contradictions between individual and local experience and the moralizing imperatives of state-sponsored accounts” of the war (15). In the end, although local commemoration of martyrs in texts “had the effect of rewriting the locale as a center of loyal self-sacrifice” (165), the state offered the imprimatur of eligibility for official honors. The major thrust of Moore’s analysis is apparent in the title of his introduction—“Diary

Writing and the Self”—but the state also encouraged diary writing as a means to promote self-discipline and self-mobilization. As the war continued, Japan and the United States (and perhaps other countries) issued their soldiers blank diaries in which state goals and propaganda were printed and therefore promulgated. The state as personified by military superiors also assumed the right to read soldier-produced diaries.

War shatters the way people “collectively imagine the world and their place in it” (Turton 2005, 258). All is fluid, identity first and foremost. Moore compellingly shows the shifts in the substance and style of diary writing throughout the war as soldiers wrestled with their individual roles and identities vis-à-vis their enemies and sometimes their comrades. They “wrote in order to control their experiences and to attempt to define the truth of past events for themselves” (240). The diary became a vehicle for establishing or reestablishing self-identities amid an almost unfathomably sociomilitaristic battering of the self. “When a soldier developed a coherent voice in a diary, he was in the process of piecing together an entire identity and worldview” (12). But, in the main, national identities remained steady as key aspects of the Pacific Theater military confrontations.

Not so in the Taiping Civil War. Meyer-Fong notes that the lines between the Taiping and those loyal to the Qing regime were permeable; there was tension on “both sides,” and some switched sides or at least were torn regarding their relationship to the conflict. “Many on the battlefield were contingent allies—and many of the writers retrospectively identified with the Qing cause...had little love to lose for the dynasty. They professed loyalty; but they were bitterly critical and obviously disillusioned.” (98). The problem of identity in this civil war was magnified exponentially over that of the national wars studied by Moore. It produced “confusion and contingency of allegiances [rather than a] morality play of absolute identities and loyalties” (98). Consequently, the civil war “engendered a great deal of anxiety about disguise and betrayal” (69). Efforts to honor the dead with architectural and textual materials were, like World War II soldiers’ diaries, attempts “to impose order on disorderly experiences” and “an essential precondition for postwar integration” (135).

One of the most intriguing aspects of both these studies is their analysis of the power of words. Words are the medium of the historian: both historical resources and the research product are generally textual. Early twentieth-century writer and activist, Shen Dingyi wrote, “I know that ultimately for the Chinese people the name is more important than the deed” (Schoppa 1995,

161). He could as well have substituted “word” for “name.” In traditional China, words were the means by which the official bureaucracy was born in the examination system and by which the polity was governed. Words in this culture, as Meyer-Fong stresses, were cherished; even more, they had a special potency and vulnerability, and the Taiping also saw them as talismanic (26–28). The reading of the Sacred Edict was required in villages; indeed, the importance of didactic speech was akin to “a medical supplement,” keeping “dangerous alternatives” out of the picture (33).

Yu Zhi, the writer and local activist, “conceived of community as constituted through and bounded by the spoken word” (30). He wrote one precious volume (*baojuan*), meant to be recited aloud, as an indication of his religiosity. In his most noteworthy textual contribution, an illustrated history of the Taiping occupation entitled *Tears for Jiangnan* (1864), his forty-two illustrations most likely had great impact on the readers. But the “lyrics” and texts” translated for some of the illustrations were packed with words that are emotional, incendiary, horrifying, and bleak; the text, even without the illustrations, conveys the almost unbelievable terror that the Taiping brought and the polarity between the world before and the world during and after their occupation. Yu seems to believe that identities during those times of flux were fixed. In reality, as Meyer-Fong shows, they were essentially confusing and contingent.

Words establish categories that, once named, delimit possibilities, become exclusive, and are difficult to deconstruct. I am not here criticizing either author; I am simply underlining the epistemological problem all historians face, and these works simply bring the issue to the fore. Both writers discuss subjectivity and the subjective self. Surely nothing is more subjective than reading the subjective writing of one person (Yu, in this case) through the subjectivity of the researcher and writer (Meyer-Fong), and our subjectivity as readers of her book. We might do well to remember the cautionary note set forth by British novelist John Fowles: “A word is never the destination, merely a signpost in its general direction; and whatever transient physical, psychological, or moral body that destination finally acquires owes quite as much to the reader as to the writer” (Fowles 1984, 11). To heighten the precariousness of interpretation, Meyer-Fong alerts us to the reality that, in China, “the archives are filled with lies and half-truths” (98). As to the issues of words and naming, Meyer-Fong notes that her decision to identify the Taiping movement as a “civil war” and not a “rebellion” or “revolution” opens up different perspectives and insights that the other two words might not (11). Yu’s own religious matrix of “reward and

retribution” in understanding the Taiping scourge excludes other possibilities. Was his interpretive choice a result of his own religious idiosyncrasy? Or is it more broadly, as Meyer-Fong suggests, an indication of the “intense religiosity of the age” (63)?

Most intriguing is her analysis of words and genres in Zhang Guanglie’s *Record of 1861*, which she calls a “peculiar book” (207) and an “eccentric text” (180). “A grieving son” (176), Zhang commemorated his mother in “The Martyr’s Garden” (located near where she was murdered by a Taiping soldier) as well as in the book. Meyer-Fong says that the book “defies generic categorization. It is neither memoir nor biography, and yet it includes elements of both. ... It is explicitly a book about dual processes of commemoration (formal, orderly, state-sanctioned) and memory (chaotic and personal)” (180). It is the latter that is most compelling: Zhang’s Sisyphean memory efforts through adulthood were emotional struggles to remember his mother’s outstanding individual attributes as a moral exemplar and to come to grips with her death when he was eight years old. Zhang’s most interesting technique (which clearly reflects his own unending efforts and which makes his work seem strikingly modern) was to describe her death “no fewer than seven or eight times with varying levels of detail and in differing contexts” (193). Meyer-Fong cogently concludes, “The repeated and emotional accounts of [Zhang’s mother’s] death serve to define her son’s suffering (and thus authenticity of his grief), as well as her worthiness, marking a boundary (and a connection) between Zhang-as-adult and his childhood self” (195). What is interesting is that the processes of commemoration were, in the end, circular and accumulative.

Finally, the words and style of Zhang’s book echo some of the diaries analyzed by Moore. Zhang’s treatment of his mother was more cyclical than strict narrative. Meyer-Fong calls his work “a book of fragments” (179). She describes his juxtaposition of essays with repeated descriptions of his mother’s murder, biographies of other family members killed, accounts of grief-induced sufferings, bequeathed admonitions and deeds to relatives, and state documents that granted them honors. In addition, Meyer-Fong notes, this book’s evocative power “resides in its use of particular and disconnected moments and layering of sensory details: sounds, sights, and tactile sensations” (180).

Moore’s analysis gives narratives pride of place in wartime diaries. He writes that, “in the field of cognitive neuro-science, the ‘compulsion to chronicle’ and narrativize experience is now thought to be a hardwired fact of the human brain and a product of evolutionary process” (296).

However, “scholarship on trauma” shows “that the brain resists the narrativization of life experience” (296). He argues that the first sign of writing about the body, “in trying circumstances, is the breakdown of narrative cohesion”—writing in a “stuttering, staccato voice” and moving to a text marked by “onomatopoeia, ideophonic language, and metaphor” (297). This would seem to reflect the sort of text and style that Meyer-Fong found in Zhang’s work, studded with the trauma and turmoil of suffering. On the surface, this premise of the specific power of trauma on writing and words seems logical.

Where Moore’s study falls somewhat short, in my opinion, is not in its conceptual structure or its insightful, often eye-opening interpretations and points of view, but in the execution and presentation of his analysis. He recognizes the problem: “One of the primary dilemmas of the historian,” he writes, is that “we are not mind readers, time travelers, or even psychologists. All that remains of the terrible war between Japan and the United States are these diaries, so we must decide on how they can and cannot be used to produce historical knowledge” (239). The central question for Moore’s research is: What historical knowledge can the diaries provide? I would argue that Moore, despite his disavowal, seems to assume stances as mind reader and psychologist. One problem of presentation (really a difficult problem of organization) is that Moore relies on snippets of diaries from a variety of soldiers that are scattered throughout the text. It is thus difficult to link together the sections from particular diarists to detect changes of tone and style in their diaries—changes that become key in Moore’s analysis. Including entries for the various diary writers in the index would have facilitated understanding and comparison.

At the outset of my (rather detailed) analysis, it is best to recall Fowles’s cautionary note that any individual interpretation of Moore’s work “owes quite as much to the reader as to the writer” (1984, 11). Several cases in the book—those of two Japanese and three American diary writers—point to the problems of interpretation. First, there is my reading of the analysis of Hamabe Genbei and Yamamoto Kenji, both of whom were involved in the Battle for Shanghai (August–November 1937). Moore describes Hamabe as a “normally terse diarist” (76), who “kept his entries brief” (106). Yet at a time when he watched the men under his command being killed one by one while little territory was being taken—that is, at a time of great tension, frustration, and trauma—“his [Hamabe’s] reserve... split open and text poured onto the diary page” in a rational general description of wartime difficulties. Moore saw this as evidence that

Hamabe “had been pushed beyond [his] usual manner of self-expression, leaving [him] apparently disoriented and confused” (106). The fudge word here is “apparently.” The fact that Hamabe’s diary entry on his very first day of the war (98) is not written in the “terse” style raises questions about Moore’s interpretation, such as: Does the change in writing style here necessarily mean disorientation and confusion? And does the change in writing style necessarily convey to us anything we can conclude specifically about the state of mind of the writer? Hamabe’s last entry (on the day he died in a field army hospital) read: “Clear [weather]. Last night, because it had been handled so poorly, my wound began to bleed. They administered treatment twice. I’m worried. My throat is dry” (111). Moore describes this entry as “garbled, probably through his fear.” How exactly is this entry “garbled”? How can Moore, in any case, “probably” conclude that Hamabe’s style was based on “fear”? Fear of death itself? How can Moore know this?

The assertions about Yamamoto Kenji are equally questionable. Moore first posits that, “as [the Battle of] Shanghai got ‘hotter,’ servicemen’s diaries became more gruesome and bizarre” (105). Gruesome, understandably, but amid the horrors and brutality of war, what exactly constitutes something “bizarre”? A poet, Yamamoto would have been an expert at words and their expression; we might expect him to write in different styles to reflect his “takes” on situations in which he found himself. His first recorded diary entry is composed of complete sentences with mention of deaths in battle and headless adult bodies: “It is so horrible, I can’t look” (105). Moore calls this the crumbling of Yamamoto’s “heroic resolve,” but expressing revulsion at wartime realities cannot necessarily be equated with what Moore is suggesting. His “historic resolve” is none too clear to begin with. Moore notes that in the next entry, Yamamoto “tried desperately to capture the horror [of the military advance] in stuttering prose.” How do we know that Yamamoto tried “desperately” to do this? To characterize the prose here as “stuttering” seems a bit exaggerated: the entry has some short sentences, but many are in line with the entry mentioned above. Moore still characterizes the prose of the second entry as “increasingly broken and odd” and concludes that Yamamoto “had been pushed beyond [his] usual manner of self-expression, leaving [him] apparently disoriented and confused” (107).

Under the equally brutal conditions of seeing moaning, wounded men covered in blood, however, Moore says that Yamamoto’s entry approaches poetry. If diary entries were somehow openings to the state of mind of their authors, why poetry now instead of the (faux) stuttering

Moore perceives in the earlier entry written among similar contexts? Perhaps to escape from the wartime brutality to some images of beauty? But the entry to which Moore's evaluation seems most inappropriate was one after Yamamoto heard that his friend Kunizaki had been killed in battle: "Kunizaki, how the hell did you die? Death! Was it real? I thought we would go on living together. Death! Was it real?... Thinking about him, I couldn't get any sleep. That night the sky cleared, and the stars were shining." This seems to me a moving poem expressing the paroxysm of grief over the death of a friend, with the last sentence remarking that in the midst of such an unexpected death, the natural world nevertheless continues. However, Moore surprisingly interpreted the entry as follows: "Here Yamamoto appears to have exhausted his ability to use language to give meaning to his experience" (112).

In my opinion, Moore seems to make many problematic assumptions and assertions. Three shorter examples from American diaries illustrate this further. There are two diary entries from D. M. Moore (163–164); both are composed of short sentences or phrases, punctuated with copious dashes. According to Aaron Moore, this suggests that D. M. Moore had "little apparent narrative control over the experience" and that the entries reflected the "total breakdown of language" (163). However, Moore never shows or comments on D. M. Moore's writing style before the war; could this possibly have been simply his own idiosyncratic "normal" writing style? On what basis (and how many examples of this are there?) does the author argue that "Americans found that the language they arrived with was inadequate and began to experiment with their writing" (204)? Or what do we make of the comment about the major narrative diary entry of Arthur Shreve, involved in the Bataan Death March? Moore claims it was Shreve's "style that further reflected the collapse of American military power" (168). How does the style itself reflect this collapse? Moore needs to tell us specifically what he means. Moore describes and explicates a diary entry written by Marine William Heggy, who served on Guadalcanal, thus: "Heggy...wrote with the pleasure of enacting revenge on the Japanese, 'Radio reports claim that Friday's battle [21 August 1942] was history's greatest slaughter.' In this new context, massacres became commonplace for Heggy, changing his views of what the course of a normal life could be" (172). How do we see the "pleasure" with which Moore says he wrote this? There are at least nine entries by or comments about Heggy in the subsequent forty pages of text; and only the last entry reflects a battle scene with many dead—but it is not clear that a massacre was involved. How, then, do we know that "massacres became commonplace for Heggy" (209)? There seem to

be far too many problematic assertions here for me to feel comfortable with some of Moore's interpretations.

To conclude this section on wartime experiences, several more interpretative assertions raise questions in my mind. On American soldiers in the Philippines: "The rapid transition to being a failed colonial power was difficult for them to grasp" (164). How many American soldiers had ever grasped the fact that America was a colonial power in the first place, much less a failed one? Moore seems to be putting thoughts into American heads that surely most of them never had. On diary writers in general: "Many felt compelled to record the massacres in order to make some sense of what was happening around them, even if their conclusions seem disturbed today" (118). On what basis does Moore make this assumption? How do we know they felt "compelled"? How do we know that they recorded these to make sense of what was happening around them? In what way(s) do their conclusions seem "disturbed today"? Finally, "servicemen who were troubled by events tried to find the proper words to describe it [*sic*], but this seemed to have been difficult for them" (118). How does Moore know this? What constitutes the "proper words," which had to have been different for every individual writer? How does Moore know that trying to find these proper words was difficult for servicemen? Can he read their minds? The question becomes, in such assertions: Is Moore the arbiter on appropriate vocabulary and style for specific contexts in war diaries? Paul Cohen, in his *History in Three Keys*, speaks to this point: "The concepts we introduce to make the past intelligible are generally (if not invariably) quite different from those in the heads of people who created the past in the first place and have in consequence an unavoidable distortional effect on the very reality they are designed to explicate" (65).

After and sometimes with the experience came the myth. Commemorations of the dead, which occurred after the Taiping war years, came "not [at] a time of optimistic recovery, tidy rebuilding, and orderly documentation of righteous deaths" (201). For the post-Taiping world, commemoration meant freezing the wartime fluidity of reality and identity and restoring "normalcy." Commemoration, in Meyer-Fong's analysis, meant "textual and architectural monuments honoring the war dead" to "testify to a place's restored place in the political order, and to the complex symbolic web that tentatively (and incompletely) rebound the center to [the provinces]" (152). In Zhang's loving, personal-but-also-official commemoration of his mother, her image "seemed alienated and elevated from the particular person he warmly recalled" (201).

This “removal” of the flesh-and-blood person to another realm was essentially a part of the mythmaking process—a result of impossibly trying to reproduce a facsimile of the order that had existed in the prewar world. Some memoirs, like Taiping captive Li Gui’s *A Record of Pondering Pain*, speak of the difficulty of putting what happened into words, much like Moore’s descriptions of such difficulties for soldiers in the Pacific War. Li says that “those who were fortunate enough not to die also experienced extremes that cannot readily be recorded by anyone. Thus, today, now that the pain has settled and we can reflect on that pain, very few can record it in orderly words” (203).

As part of the mythmaking of diarists, Moore notes that after the war some went about the business of amending their diaries in a form of self-censorship. The reception of their diaries largely depended on the political attitudes of the populace at various times in postwar Japan. This was especially so, in Moore’s estimation, because the “language with which soldiers narrated their experiences during the war...did not fit in a postwar world that wanted to move on” (244). He notes that “many servicemen held onto their wartime selves, clutching their testimonies as bearers of an unassailable truth, and consequently suffered ostracism as the postwar community tried to establish a history of the war that suited its own purposes” (245). This takes Moore back to his controversial contentions about vocabulary and style during the war. He says that “veterans clung tenaciously to the tropes, idiom, and rhetoric of combat” and showed an “unwillingness...to surrender the language of the battlefield” (276); he calls “adherence to wartime writing styles...rigid” (278). Two points: first, if veterans were trying to convey the wartime realities, why should they not use the relevant vocabulary and style for that purpose, and second, since Moore himself has illustrated so many different wartime writing styles, how would “rigidity” apply here?

In these studies focused on words, Meyer-Fong and Moore both raise the word *unspeakable*. For Moore, “unspeakable” were those wartime experiences that were so mind-shattering that they could not be put into words. “How then,” he asks, “should historians, whose work is entirely consumed by language, approach the unspeakable?” (199). For Meyer-Fong, “unspeakable” refers to those brutalities of war that were literally “terrible beyond language,” but she broadens her definition to include those things that “could not be explained through prevailing moral categories” (204)—likely also an implicit tenet in Moore’s arguments. It was the shattering of prewar moral categories in both instances, amid what was essentially total war,

that necessitated the various kinds of mythmaking during and after the war to make it and its subsequent meaning somehow understandable and acceptable.

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