The Surviving Senses: life-forms in a contaminated world
after the Fukushima nuclear disaster

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Abstract

This thesis explores efforts to rebuild a sense of everyday life in the ruins of the 2011 ‘triple disaster’ in Japan—a disaster which included an earthquake, a tsunami, and the subsequent meltdown of the nuclear powerplant in Fukushima. Based on thirteen months of fieldwork in the Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures in eastern Japan, the thesis asks how the triple disaster involves not only material damage and casualties but also a crisis of experience concerning possibilities of sensing the world. As my ethnography illustrates, the characteristics of radiation, which are imperceptible and porous, propel the returnees’ lives into one of constant struggle. By participating in everyday life in such a hostile environment where the possibility of ‘genuine experience’ regarding what is safe and dangerous, visible and invisible, real and unreal, is extremely limited, the thesis asks how the triple disaster has become a threshold in which different senses of time and space have emerged and paradoxically open up the possibility for attunement to a world and life otherwise. In so doing, the thesis engages with a flash moment—lighting up a real crisis which is the reminder that “the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule” (Benjamin 2019 [1940]) that breaks up homogeneous and empty time and space. If catastrophe is not a forthcoming event but rather a past that is already ‘behind’ us, what could be the mode of being and living in a world after the end? When disaster breaks down the continuous flows leading forward into what we might call a structure, a society, and, perhaps, reality, what might the fragments and failures from the past tell us? A close focus of the thesis on life in the remnants and ruins of the past disaster shows how life-forms in a contaminated world, which may seem to be irrelevant at first glance, actually constitute the constellation of crisis—a constellation that reveals how the triple disaster ‘actualises’ a real crisis which provides the source and sustenance for new ways of sensing the imperceptible and thus constructing deeper change in the ‘real’ world.
Lay Summary

This thesis explores efforts to rebuild a sense of everyday life in the ruins of the 2011 ‘triple disaster’ in Japan—a disaster which included an earthquake, a tsunami, and the subsequent meltdown of the nuclear powerplant in Fukushima. Based on thirteen months of fieldwork in the Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures in eastern Japan, the thesis asks how the triple disaster involves not only material damage and casualties but also a crisis of experience which concerns the possibilities of even sensing the world in the same way as before the disaster. Due to the characteristics of radiation, which are imperceptible and porous, the people who returned to their previous homes after the decontamination work was completed continue to live with anxiety and uncertainty. By focusing on everyday life in such a hostile environment where the possibility of genuine experience of what is safe and dangerous, visible and invisible, real and unreal, are extremely limited and contested, the thesis asks how the triple disaster has become a threshold in which different senses of time and space have emerged. For the returnees, the contaminated environment did not only present a potential risk and pollutant but also a ground for rebuilding their everyday life. In this regard, the thesis asks how the returnees’ efforts paradoxically open up the possibility for remaining in a damaged but not-yet terminated world through building a life otherwise. The thesis engages with a wide range of theories on crisis and disaster—asking how the Fukushima disaster can be a flash moment that lights up and reveals crisis as something which breaks up the binary between the normal and the exceptional. Taking the Fukushima nuclear disaster as an indicator of our time in which discourses about the end of the world and socio-political and ecological catastrophe saturate the imagination of possible futures, the thesis asks if the disaster is a past that has already happened and what the fragments and failures of the disaster might tell us. In so doing, the thesis discusses how the returnees’ struggles reveal not only the experience of crisis on the edge but also how they might provide source and sustenance for new ways of sensing the imperceptible and living in a contaminated world.
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**Introduction**

Yuko, a woman who returned to Soma after nearly six years of refugee life following the Fukushima nuclear powerplant disaster, was holding a donut in her living room and looking through its hole as she said, “when we decided to return, I told myself, *kokoro o sorani shitayo* (‘empty your mind’).” And she continued, “that’s what I am still doing—trying to empty my mind and not worry too much. There are lots of things that are beyond my control, so I just try to let them go.” It was a sunny day in the spring of 2019, but instead of playing outside in the sun with her nearly four-year-old son named Tomo, they were playing together in the living room. Donuts are Tomo’s favourite snack, and after discovering that there is no Mister Donut in town, which is the biggest donut chain in Japan, I always brought a box of donuts to Yuko’s house with me when I visited.

Continuing to stare through the hole of the donut, Yuko proceeded to say, “my vision has become like this donut. I only see what is happening though this small hole.” I then looked at her through the hole in the donut as well, and she said, “now my mind is not empty; rather, it is breaking down (…) I wanted to stay away from Fukushima for longer with my son, but it caused lots of conflict in my family (…) my mother-in-law and husband told me that I worry too much and that I am too sensitive. We did not have any other choice but to return.” She then told me that I’d hear many stories like this, and not just that *kokoro* (the “mind” or the “heart”) is hurting, but that family, neighbourhood, friends—all connections are breaking down. Yuko explained how the disaster has divided people but that no one wants to talk about it.

What made Yuko and her son stay in the living room and not go outside that day was a concern for radiation. For Yuko, the presence of radiation pervades everything; yet, anxiety of it can never acutely be articulated. Despite all the effort to combat the invisible material, she often felt overwhelmed by it. The radiation is invasive; it penetrates, violates, and thus manipulates the shape of everyday life from what to eat to where to go. Yuko said, “I try to make Tomo stay indoors and do *sōji* (“cleaning”) in order to keep our home as safe as possible, but I am not sure if we are doing well enough.” She has been trying to do her best, but she knows that it’s not possible to completely avoid the risk. As she showed me a brochure, Yuko said, “I heard from the town meeting that it’s everywhere (…) Even in nature, there is radiation. In bananas too. They told me that we need to think differently. Like this: radiation is now a companion for life.”

Can irradiated things in the environment be a companion for life? To some extent, the idea may be understood within the framework of actor-network theory in which social relations have “a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stingy, ropy, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structures, systems” (Latour 1996: 370). According to a brochure that
Yuko showed me, which was made by the Fukushima prefecture, there are two types of radiation: natural radiation and human-made. The chart shows that 2.4 mSv of radiation from soil, buildings, and radon gas from the ground are average amounts that these things emit. It also shows that 5 mSv is an average amount to which aircrew are exposed when flying 800 hours per year. It additionally notes that downtown Guarapari, Brazil receives the highest natural radiation in the world at 10 mSv. And, the numbers in the brochure continued: 0.05 mSv is an average amount from a single chest x-ray, and 1 mSv is the limit to which the general public can be exposed each year without harm whereas 20 mSv is the annual limit for powerplant workers. And then it claims: “250 is the safe limit for Fukushima Daiichi nuclear powerplant workers.” But there was no explanation why powerplant workers can be ‘exceptionally’ exposed to more radiation. The brochure is quite confusing—on some pages, they show images of devastated towns and exploding powerplants with stark warnings. They also show the higher number of cases of thyroid cancer among children in Fukushima. However, with complicated charts and numbers, it was unclear to both of us what it means to live with low doses of radiation following the decontamination work which was completed in 2016. Yuko turned the pages. The brochure claims that the damage is exaggerated by “anti-nuke people, anti-government people, radio-phobia, and the media,” and it proceeds to use terms such as mSv, Bq, I-131 Iodine, Cs-134 Caesium, Cs-137 Caesium, Sr-90 Strontium, and Pu-239 Plutonium to explain what radiation is.

For Yuko, who considers herself neither an anti-nuke nor an anti-government activist, the brochure does not tell her anything that is helpful for protecting herself and Tomo. All she can do now is try to keep her house as clean as possible—yet the question, “can radiation be completely cleaned up?” lingers in her mind. All the information is partial, and nothing is clear—that’s what makes Yuko worry. If radiation is pervasive and has already been a part of the environment, what made Yuko stay away from home for five years? What made her feel terribly enervate in dealing with radiation in some moments, and at other times, compelled her to stay inside frantically scrubbing things? Why does her emotion sway between anxiety and suspicion? What does Yuko see or feel that her husband and mother-in-law do not sense? What is ‘empirically real’ for Yuko but not for others?

While I silently considered questions like these in my head, Tomo began to eat his second donut which looked like a lion. Yet, unlike other donuts, the lion donut was actually an assemblage of two donuts, a ball-shaped one and a ringed one which made up the lion’s mane. The donuts soon became a kind of toy for him as he made the sounds of a roaring lion. “Uuuuuuuhhhhh----ooohhhmmmm.” Instead of playing outside with friends, Tomo seemed to have learned how to create his own playground in the living room—complete with a forest where the lion lives. With the sounds of the lion as well as Yuko’s voice echoing in my head—“my life is breaking down, and our village too,” I was not sure whether to laugh or to cry. Radiation flows in from one way and erodes all life but not the other way around. For Yuko, radiation is an invasive species rather than a life companion. Watching Tomo play while talking
about all the confusion and uncertainty that she has had to deal with since returning, a faint smile appeared on her face. She too was in a strange emotional place in between laughing and crying or perhaps both at the same time.

a. The visceral violence of radiation

This thesis explores efforts to rebuild a sense of everyday life in the ruins of the 2011 ‘triple disaster’ in Japan—a disaster which included an earthquake, a tsunami, and the subsequent meltdown of the nuclear powerplant in Fukushima. Based on thirteen months of fieldwork in the Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures in eastern Japan, the thesis asks how the triple disaster involves not only material damage and casualties but also a ‘crisis of experience’ (Adorno and Benjamin 1999) concerning the possibilities of sensing the world. As my ethnography illustrates, the characteristics of radiation, which are imperceptible and porous, propel the returnees’ lives into one of constant struggle. By participating in the returnees’ everyday life in such a hostile yet beloved environment where the possibility of ‘genuine experience’ of what is safe and dangerous, visible and invisible, real and unreal, is called into question, the thesis asks how the triple disaster has become a threshold in which different senses of time and space have emerged.

The threshold also indicates an assemblage of all the convergent and divergent violent forces of life and the efforts made against those forces rather than referring to a fixed state of material loss. In this regard, the thesis asks not what the triple disaster was/is; rather, it considers how the disaster has been experienced and sensed as well as whether it can even include the continuous unseen forces of violence that remain and regulate the returnees’ everyday lives. Despite the Japanese government’s and TEPCO’s (Tokyo Electric Power Company) emphasis on a safe and manageable level of contamination in the area since the decontamination work was ‘completed’ in 2016, the lives of the returnees in their former hometowns have never been the same since the disaster, and feelings of confusion, insecurity, and anxiety have been exacerbated by the porosity and invisibility of radiation. The feeling of living with invisible violence was articulated well by one of my interlocutors who said, their life is “kosho shimasu” (“malfunctioning”) and hōkai suru (“collapsing”).

This feeling of being violated by visible and invisible forces resonates with what Taussig (1992; 2020) witnessed amid the entanglement of violence, desire, frustration, and affection, where the system, state, and society seemed to be breaking down in Colombia in the last decades of the twentieth century. With the question, “What does it mean, and what does it take to envisage a society as breaking down?” Taussig finds that violence and everyday malfunctioning is visceral and there is sometimes absolutely no way to break from it. He continues to relate, “I am left with the impression of lives as massive, dense, and impenetrable as those nodes of collapsed matter out of which nothing escapes and whose only
measure is what they absorb and conceal” (1992: 12). The violence expressed through these words is not restricted to visible forms; it is rather often invisible. If a sense of being violated becomes normal, and if the violence comes from all around, what can be done to make the visceral violence comprehensible and tactile? How can anthropological understandings of violence and life in a predicament be articulated? How is it possible to narrate moments when crying and laughing merge? How can laughing and crying ‘somehow at the same time’ be not only a reaction to violence but possibly a strategy for survival in a hostile environment?

Focusing on the efforts to rebuild a sense of everyday life within ‘the disordered order’ or ‘ordered disorder’ following the ‘triple disaster,’ I ask what it means to live in a broken down, or still breaking down, world, and how the triple disaster, particularly the nuclear disaster and its invisible contamination, shakes the foundations of what is asserted to be normal and real. Engaging with the effort to maintain the everyday as it was lived before the disaster and to overcome anxieties that constantly haunt every moment in one’s beloved, yet possibly noxious surroundings of home, the thesis explores how the imperceptibility of radiation has brought senses of normalcy into question. If there seems to be only two ways of being in their contaminated hometown, either as ‘concealing or absorbing’ the invisible immanence of radiation, how might anxiety about the irradiated surroundings disrupt the capacity to reveal what is believed to be real, which serves as an anchor for being in a certain time and place? Is it still possible for the returnees to recover a connection to a world that seems to be deformed, transformed, and re-formed? And, how might their participation in ‘a mutant ecology’ (Masco 2004) suggest new modes of living in a damaged world that requires never-ending struggle?

Exploring the adherent and invasive relation between humans and their environment in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Weston calls this endless everyday struggle, “a form of unwanted intimacy with the invisible matter” (2017: 80). Through the analytic category of ‘unwanted intimacy,’ Weston addresses how radioactive isotopes “moved into bodies like an uninvited guest who takes up residence, refuses to leave, and throws the entire household into disarray” and that this invasion has “the potential to slowly and secretly alter bodies in ways that could lead to their untimely destruction” (ibid.). This pattern of violence, which is a slow and yet sure-enough encroachment, puts the lives of many returnees into a predicament. As my ethnography shows, some returnees try to make the radiation visible by detecting radiation, making connections to other environmental disasters from the past, and criticising the policies of TEPCO and the state. On the other hand, others attempt to live as they did before by ignoring the possible existence of radiation. For those who claim resilience and recovery, the concern for radiation is a matter of ‘it’s in your head’ like a ghost rather than a fact based on a certain materiality. The violence of everyday life has become a matter of what is revealed and absorbed through diverse forms of sensorial engagement in the effort to ascertain a world which does not appear clearly anymore; or it could rather be asked if it is really possible to grasp the world as it is seen?
Yet, the focus of the thesis is not only the violence of everyday life in a wider context of crisis, from socio-political malfunctioning to ecological catastrophe but also the struggles to find a way of existence otherwise in post-disaster times. In addition to what Taussig referred to as the failure of the state and the market economy which drove lives to the margin and to the precipice of terror and violence as the norm, I explore how the triple disaster has become a threshold in which different senses of time and space have emerged and paradoxically opened up the possibility for attunement to a world and life otherwise. Unlike many urban dwellers who see the radiation as an unwanted invader, for the returnees that moved back to the Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures, the radioactive materials are cohesively intertwined with the environment that they love, care for, and thus, want to embrace. That is why sensing matters. This suggests a contrast to what Masco (2006) claims regarding the nuclear age as a time of “anesthetisation” in which the growing force of the nuclear complex limits and colonises the everyday sense of life. Since sensing the contaminated world and things are inseparable from maintaining affection toward people who are made of the same material, the experiences of place and time are not something taken-for-granted but differ based on what they desire to see, feel, and touch.

By asking about the imperceptibility of radiation and its challenge to what we call ‘a real,’ the thesis problematises how the notion of a continuous and stable real allows for habitual practice on the surface, and it asks what happens when the lucidity of reality is questioned and becomes a matter of construction. This means that the focus of the thesis is not on the ‘anesthetisation’ of the senses but a dialectic possibility of re-constructing the senses in the age of meltdown. If catastrophe is not a forthcoming event but rather a past that has already happened, what could be the mode of being and living in a continuous crisis? When disaster breaks down the continuous flows leading forward into what we might call a structure, a society, and reality, what might the fragments and failures from the past tell us? How might life-forms in a contaminated world constitute the constellation of crisis?

In response to these questions, the thesis reveals how the triple disaster ‘actualises’ a real crisis which provides the source and sustenance for new ways of sensing the imperceptible and thus constructing deeper change in the ‘real’ world. Walter Benjamin illustrates this moment as a dialectical flash moment—lighting up a real crisis which is the reminder that ‘the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule’ (Benjamin 2019 [1940]). Following this understanding, the thesis asks how the flash moment breaks up homogeneous and empty time and space. In so doing, the thesis connects the triple disaster, which happened in one of the most economically and technologically ‘advanced’ countries in the world, to wider discourses on disaster, crisis, emergency, and the sense of uncertainty and unsettlement within a globally shared condition of life in “the age of meltdown” (Taussig 2020). As a new type of life and real which is not only socially and politically formed but also ecologically mutated, what the disaster indicates is not forthcoming or imminent, but a thing that has already happened—in Benjamin’s words, “that things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (1999: 473). In Taussig’s work,
which is inspired by Benjamin’s and Adorno’s ideas about mimesis (cf. Adorno 1981; Benjamin 1969; also see Taussig 1993), it is a time in which the turbulence of nature and politics mimic each other. At the core of mimesis, the violence is spectral rather than concrete. There is an atmosphere of violence, and when it appears, it takes on a material form such as a number or shape, and it smells like a possessed person. The invisible radiation irradiates all the areas of life. In dealing with power and the effects of the unseen, how can anthropological work shape and articulate this invisible force of life as “a science [that] is predicated on rationally metering invisible, irrational forces” and how might anthropology “desire to credibly matter nonsense” in the lingering scene of nuclear meltdown (Baxstrom and Meyers 2016: 18. Emphasis in original)? Or could it rather be said that all efforts to make sense of nonsense are nonsense? Amid the tremor, if it is not possible to flee from this pervasive meltdown, how might it be possible to understand the returnees’ desires (as well as my own) to master the unseen? And how might it still be possible to remain committed to living otherwise in the midst of abandonment (cf. Povinelli 2011)?

b. The grey zone of the triple disaster

What waited for those who were away from home for five years and then returned with a mixture of anxiety and excitement was a labyrinth of abandoned houses, wild animals, and invasive plants as well as the absence of neighbours who did not return. Since few villagers have come back, the village is now a combination of abandoned houses and recently renovated ones. Abandoned cars and recently planted pots coexist. Some parts of the village, especially the central area, have been surprisingly well-managed by the local authorities in order to encourage the former villagers to return. However, other parts, including the mountains, hills, and riversides remain wastelands, which makes detecting radioactivity as difficult as not getting lost in the labyrinth of the village. Due to concerns for radiation, the abandoned sites have become places where rumours and fears grow, and many returnees expressed their sense of life as abandonment. Some returnees compared their feelings of living in and dealing daily with low doses of radiation to living in a cage or a laboratory (see chapter one) and with an invisible ghost. However, this perception does not immediately catalyse direct activism and/or theoretical consideration. Instead, it is often expressed through a form hesitation, silence, mixtures of fear and hope, and everyday activities such as cleaning and gardening to make the ruined and contaminated town a better and safer place to live. It is a mixed sentiment, as said earlier, between laughing and crying, or perhaps both at the same time.

By engaging with the everyday life of the returnees, my ethnography focuses on “the grey zone” which escapes “too much and too quick understanding or cheap mystifications” as explanations for things and people (Agamben 1999: 13). Agamben shares an aporia in his work on testimony in the concentration camps where there was indeed “a non-coincidence between fact and truth, between verification and
comprehension,” and he reflects on how difficult it is to know ‘the mind of ordinary people’ due to their complexity (ibid.: 12). He continues by calling them “the small group of obscure people” and suggests that “one of the lessons of Auschwitz is that it is infinitely harder to grasp the mind of an ordinary person than to understand the mind of a Spinoza or Dante” (ibid.: 12-13). Yoneyama (1999: 104) shares a similar difficulty in narrating the experiences of hibakusha (A-bombs victims) who were caught in between suppression and exposure. She writes that many survivors live with a powerful blend of strong emotions and ambivalent feelings about their own survival. In exploring testimonial practices within the context of historical and political amnesia, Yoneyama shows how memory and storytelling shape specific historical knowledges and how such representations interpellate and produce historical subjectivity and agency. Yet, the historical subject or narrator in this context is always one that is deferred, not only by the fact that personal memory and experiences simultaneously conform to and contest conventional narratives of the time, but also due to the fact that “the deferred effects of radiation, which can erupt at any moment even after many years, have endowed memories of the atomic annihilation with constancy and repetition” (Yoneyama ibid.: 37).

The difficulty of exploring the zone of the obscure in Fukushima lies, likewise, on a pendulum between the inability to address what is actual and what is potential risk—what can be envisaged is only the effect but not the cause and what to say has often been deferred. When the very existence of the violence that is breaking down everyday life is called into question, the mundai (“problem”) exists and is absent at the same time. Deferred problems blur conventional senses of time and place. The problem comes from the past, exists through the present, and possibly continues into the future, and spatial boundaries become invalid. As my ethnography shows, with a concern for transmission of the pollutant from body to body, generation to generation, and an infinite period of half-lives of nuclear materials, the people in Fukushima see their possible future through the past struggle of Hibakusha as well as the victims of Minamata disease which was caused by mercury poisoning in the Minamata prefecture since the 1950s. Moreover, the Hibakusha see their past through the Fukushima mundai which constantly recalls the forgotten history of their exposed life. In short, the present of the people in Fukushima is the future of Hibakusha and the victims of Minamata, and the past struggle of Hibakusha is, perhaps, the future of Fukushima people in relation to the omnipresence of radiation that goes beyond linear time and spatial boundaries.

Hence, there is no ‘after’ the disaster as far as radiation continues to exist, invade, and hinder the boundary of the body and everyday life. In this regard, the triple disaster could be addressed as what Gordon (2008) calls, a ‘ghostly matter’ where the destructive forces of nature and society overlap and contest each other and recall the forgotten past into the present. The term refers to something that is lost or barely visible; however, the term is not only a metaphor since ghostly matters are deeply embedded in socio-cultural realities and wounds. Whether we want to admit it or not, the nuclear disaster has
become ‘a revenant’ (Derrida 1994) which troubles any effort toward completion. The only way of dealing with a revenant is by living with, talking about, and accommodating the ghost across the boundaries of different times and spaces.

What went wrong and what might the ‘revenant’ demand of us? This is possibly the biggest question that haunts the returnees’ everyday lives. My ethnography shows the affliction of everyday life in the contaminated towns—how the ‘ruin’ of disaster paradoxically propels the returnees’ desires toward the normalcy of life in retrospect as if it existed as taken-for-granted. It also traces how the remnants of past disaster and ongoing concern for the porous risk of radiation hinder the fulfilment of the present and the future. In narrating and remembering the stories of the disaster, many returnees expressed how the past, present, and the future seem to be intertwined and how they are capable of sensing the suffering and pains of others from other environmental disasters—their bodies have gone, yet, their senses of suffering and pain remain. As I illustrate, these shared senses of corporeality constitute a key element in navigating the grey zone of the triple disaster and in realising the chain of senses. In so doing, the returnees question if there has been a taken-for-granted idea of normalcy, everydayness, and the real in the first place.

The exchange of embodied experiences occurs not only among humans but also between humans, non-humans, and the landscape. The ruined landscape and its elements such as wind, soil, and water is key to shaping the returnees’ perceptions of the triple disaster, and the destructive power to which the ruins testify are places where new meanings of life unfold. Instead of taking the ruins as the absence of being and meaning, through the concept of allegory taken from Walter Benjamin and Adorno, the thesis shows how the ruins become a place where the history of humans and nature are intertwined. Benjamin sees allegory as a place where all the political and historical consequences of catastrophes—in which everything seems to be abandoned and aimlessly scattered—are reminders of historical worlds that no longer live on. Adorno develops this idea further by challenging the dichotomous definition of nature as eternal substance and history as constitutively emancipatory. What allegory shows is the riddling and puzzle-like character of history that seems to be appear like nature waiting to be deciphered through sudden and valid historical insights.

The theoretical discussion of allegory as a place where natural and human violence converge, and thus the meaning of them is contested, will be discussed to a greater extent later in this introduction; the point for now is simply that I understand my interlocutors’ everyday lives in the grey zone through the lens of allegory. Many parts of my ethnography are devoted to the returnees’ efforts to be diggers, always finding something more underneath the surface. While exploring the ways in which the invisible risk of radiation takes on a certain materiality through things such as borders, water, wind, and soil as well as perceptible and tactile sensory apparatuses such as their own bodies and Geiger counters, what
many returnees found is that the ruins of the past in fact preserve the past, present, and future which seemed to be broken, yet continues to remain. Through listening to the stories of many villagers who rambled around the area searching for the reason and meaning of life in the absence and the emptiness, the thesis asks what those struggles to turn the soil over reveal about the triple disaster.

c. Disaster, crisis, and catastrophe

The greyness of the triple disaster and its imperceptible and porous risk lead people to a constant question—what does it mean to live in an uncertain and chronic state of crisis and emergency? The terms, crisis and slow and chronic violence, might seem to be contradictory at first glance. If the triple disaster is a matter of sense and the perception of life is in crisis, and/or, a matter of our “own feeling and thought,” what is a disaster and what makes the triple disaster in Japan fall into this category? How can the subtle feelings of breaking down, uncertainty, and anxiety be transformed into the language of a solid category that prevails the invisible and imperceptible experiences of living? Although the term is used quite liberally in popular discourse to describe almost everything from failed social events to natural calamities, there is no clear definition regarding what disaster is, and the term includes a wide range of phenomena, metaphors, concepts, and allusions. Following Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances and linguistic games, Oliver-Smith (1999: 20) discusses how the idea is often discussed with other ‘family’ terms such as crisis, emergency, and catastrophe. According to Oliver-Smith, “disasters form a family, in that what emerges from a consideration of their wider array of phenomena” is “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail” (Wittgenstein 1973: 32e, cited in Oliver-Smith ibid.). Wittgenstein employs the metaphor of spinning thread which involves the continuous overlapping of fibres through the whole strand, and the more overlapping that happens, the stronger the thread will be. However, there is no need to establish definitional criteria to make such a resemblance usable as a specific concept. Oliver-Smith sees that this ‘resemblance’ could be central to defining the complexity of disaster which often includes a number of intersecting events and social, environmental, cultural, political, economic, physical, and technological processes. He argues that disasters are ‘totalising events’ in which “all dimensions of a social structural formation and the totality of its relation with its environment may become involved, affected, and focused. These dimensions express consistency and inconsistency, coherence and contradiction, cooperation and conflict, hegemony and resistance” (ibid.: 20-21).

In between the two extremes that mark Fukushima as a concomitant of natural disasters and as a global catastrophe that encapsulates all the possible problems of our times, what might it mean to (not) call the disaster a crisis? The uses of the term have been comprehensive and as Koselleck points out, “from the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision” (2006: 397). By exploring the conceptual history of the term, crisis, Koselleck shows how it has been a basis for the
claim that one can judge history by means of a diagnosis of time. In this regard, the terms, disaster, crisis, catastrophe, and emergency, could be not only descriptive notions that indicate a certain event but a mode of interpretation of time and space. The connection between disaster and referring to it as crisis, emergency, and catastrophe indicates a socio-political constitution which brings contingent occurrences to a critical moment that signify a prognosis. This depends upon the stabilisation of “a single concept limited to the present with which to capture a new era that may have various temporal beginnings and whose unknown future seems to give free scope to all sorts of wishes, anxieties, fears and hope” (ibid.: 372).

Regarding how the notion of crisis serves as the most common and most pervasive qualifier of the contemporary historical condition and how crisis is constituted as an object of knowledge, Roitman (2013) is one of many contemporary thinkers who considers the term as historical insofar as it pertains to contemporary political and economic junctures. According to her, crisis is mobilised and drifts into narrative constructions to mark out a “moment of truth or as a means to think history itself” (ibid.: 3). By engaging with the etymology of the term ‘crisis’ is derived from the ancient Greek term krinô which means to separate, to choose, to cut, to decide, and to judge, Roitman argues that crisis is a moment that requires a definitive decision, and this can be applied to the social and political matters. For instance, associated with the Hippocratic school (Corpus Hippocratum) as a part of medical grammar, what crisis denotes is the turning point of a disease, or a critical phase in which life or death is at stake, thus, an irrevocable decision and action is called for. At this point, Roitman emphasises, “crisis was not the disease or illness per se; it was the condition that called for decisive judgement between alternatives” (ibid. 15-16).

The contested definition of disaster and its multiplicity of features with ‘blurred edges’ has been discussed in the case of the ‘triple’ disaster in Japan. The official name of the disaster in Japan is Higashi Nihon Daishinsai (“the great eastern Japan earthquake”), which fails to include a mention of the nuclear disaster; it emphasises a ‘natural’ cause of the disaster, and it is the name that is most widely used. Others call it the triple disaster in order to include the tsunami and the nuclear powerplant meltdown. Some refer to it as 3/11 (which is the date of the disaster and a clear comparison to 9/11 in the US). Still others simply call it the Fukushima mundai (“problem”). Despite the shared sense of an abnormal rupture, understandings of exactly what caused this violent suspension vary. Names for the disaster suggest different places on the spectrum between the disaster being understood as the result of geophysical extremes or the malfunctioning of the social order. As Roitman states, the language defining the triple disaster and the way in which the disaster is naturalised shows a latency since “crisis is not a condition to be observed (loss of meaning, alienation, fault knowledge); it is an observation that produces meaning” (ibid.: 82).
In the case of the triple disaster which combines so-called natural causes—the seismic waves and the tsunami—and the socio-technological failure at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear powerplant which involved a hydrogen explosion and nuclear core meltdown, how to ‘diagnose’ it is controversial. The triple disaster is a mimetic process that involves the violence of nature and that of society which emerged simultaneously and amplified each other. This means that by participating in a game of resemblance or the process of making a diagnosis which marks a certain time and space, what has been done is in fact an ‘actualising’ of the invisible. Unlike other natural disasters in the past, the triple disaster, especially concerning the nuclear meltdown, has presented a new challenge for Japanese society and the world. As a combination of the destructive natural forces of the earthquake and the tsunami, and the technological malfunction in the nuclear powerplant, the triple disaster has stimulated a wide range of discussion and debate. And, at the centre of those debates, there are questions that require retrospective contemplation—why did the triple disaster happen and how did it bring about devastating consequences to many peoples’ lives? As an index of our time and place in crisis, how has the urgency of the triple disaster been narrated? There have been innumerable stories and images representing the triple disaster, and all the stories are related to a sense of loss and desire to recover in the time of crisis; however, what was lost and what to recover are quite ambivalent and entail judgement. This is not only because it is impossible to regain something that has been lost but also because what was lost and should be reinstated is often denoted through the realisation of absence or loss. What is lost or broken down and why do some see the triple disaster as a consequence of natural forces whereas others see it as socio-political failure? In the three next sections, I discuss three different discourses which have emerged in response to this question.

d. The triple disaster and the politics of life

The first discourse emphasises that what is breaking down or has been broken down is a society that allows for the unequal distribution of risk and death among the population. Since Japan is the only country that has experienced the devastation of two atomic bombs—one in Hiroshima and the other in Nagasaki—the nuclear meltdown and the triple disaster recalled Japan’s wartime memory as another sign of Japan’s kaku arerugi (“nuclear allergies”; cf., Hook 1984), and the issue has been widely discussed through the legacy of militarism, defeat in the Second World War, and sengo (“post-war”) times. The focus of these approaches is the continuous wartime regime of the Cold War period (cf. Aldrich 2012; Orr 2001; Okada 2011; Todeschini 1999: 2001; Yoneyama 1999; 2016). Finding a deeper root of entangled identity politics in confronting the internal and external others that has been a knotty problem since Japan emerged as a modern nation, that line of research seeks to situate the nuclear disaster in the context of historical and political turbulence.

Takahashi (2012) explores the socio-historical dimensions of the disaster and suggests what the triple disaster reveals is the unequal structure of society; in his words, post-war Japan is gisei no system (“a
sacrificial system”).\(^1\) As an intellectual who was born in Fukushima yet ‘naturally’ moved to Tokyo for a better education and life, Takahashi critically engages with the triple disaster in relation to other historical junctures, in particular, the massacre in Okinawa during the Second World War and the controversy around the US military camp. In so doing, as the term sacrifice suggests, he asks if the triple disaster is a microcosm of Japan as a sacrificial system, forcing the people to the margins to dedicate their life to the abstract idea of nation and yet destined to be forgotten as *hikokumin*, which literally means “non-nation” but refers to unpatriotic people or those who are not properly national. Similar to the idea of ‘homo sacer’ in the work of Agamben (1995), which is a person who may be killed by anybody but not allowed to be sacrificed, Takahashi claims that the triple disaster was not an unexpected event. Rather, it was the consequence of an entire system which originated from Japan’s wartime regime, its defeat, and its subsequent economic growth under the nuclear umbrella from the US. He understands the Fukushima disaster within a wider structure of ‘internal colonisation,’ showing how the margins are designated to be places of sacrifice, and/or, where people are killed for the gain of the centre. The Fukushima nuclear disaster reflects a structure that constantly divides the population into who is determined to suffer and who is to die (cf. Agamben 1995; 1998; Foucault 2008[1979]).

The unequal distribution of power and economic subordination is, of course, not specific to Japan. Like a fractal piece, Japan has always been part of a bigger structure of global politics and economics, and the discourse framing the disaster within the unequal structure of society can be found in much anthropological literature. Along with Anne Allison’s work (2012; 2013) which focuses on the social precariat in the post-war period of Japan who have experienced an evisceration of social connections and a sense of socio-economic security because social and economic vulnerability and uncertainty have become a globally shared condition of life on the margins, anthropological research on disasters have revealed how the ‘disastrous’ forms of everyday life are not the exception but the norm. For example, Barrois (2017, also see Oliver-Smith & Hoffman 1999) summarises how anthropological definitions of disaster since the 1970s and 80s began to expand to include technological and socio-political malfunctions. In challenging the dichotomy embedded in the question concerning what is natural and what is cultural, that anthropological literature recognises that the revelatory nature of disaster is in fact contingent on socio-political structures and the ways in which disaster is problematised—that is, why catastrophes are either mitigated or perpetuated. By focusing on the differentiated distribution of visible and invisible risk and the effects of certain disasters, anthropological work on disaster has contributed to developing the ideas of ‘structural violence’ (Farmer 1996; 2004) and ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011). According to Nixon (ibid.: 2), the different types of violence that emerge from the combination of

\(^1\) Although wider anthropological discussion on ‘sacrifice’ could be further developed, Takahashi’s argument here is limited to the discussion on the socio-economic inequality among the population and regions that create inequal distribution of risk.
environmental crisis and socio-economic vulnerability require an urgent need to rethink what constitutes violence. He defines the notion of ‘slow violence’ as:

A violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales (2011: 2).

Nixon proceeds to offer several examples of slow violence such as the slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes related to climate change, which are relatively invisible and result in a long dying, as well as toxic drift, biomagnification, a thawing cryosphere, and radioactive aftermath. He claims that we need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by those slow and invisible forms of violence. For Nixon, the urgent need is to make the invisible and non-representable visible and representable, and thus, “turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to reuse public sentiment and warrant political intervention” (ibid.: 3).

A similar account that emphasises the urgency of disaster can be found in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy (2014), who called the Fukushima disaster “the equivalence of catastrophes.” Nancy compared it to other socio-political catastrophes such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the killings at Auschwitz. In After Fukushima, Nancy states, “Fukushima is a powerfully exemplary event because it shows the close and brutal connections between a seismic quake, a dense population, and a nuclear installation (under inadequate management). It is also exemplary of a node of complex relationships between public power and private management of the installation, not to mention all the other chains of correlation that extend out from a starting point” (ibid.: 30). Given the characteristics of slow violence which play out across a range of temporal and geographic scales, disasters have become a matter of ‘our time’ and ‘our humanity,’ and the Fukushima disaster has become comparable to other socially, politically, historically, and environmentally equivalent disasters, crises, and catastrophes.

e. Disaster as punishment: the triple disaster and the earthquake in Lisbon

“The triple disaster is tenbatsu (‘divine punishment’ or ‘punishment from heaven’).” When those problematic words were pronounced on 14th March 2011 by Ishihara Shintaro, who was the governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012, it was just three days after the triple disaster had happened. This proclamation captures the second discourse which has emerged about the disaster, and it emphasises that what is breaking down is morality. As a well-known writer and extremely right-wing politician infamous for innumerable hate speeches directed toward social minorities, Shintaro referred to the
disaster as ‘*tenbatsu*.’ According to him, the disaster is *tenbatsu* for the egoism of contemporary Japan. The disaster was a way to “wipe out egoism, which had attached itself like rust to the mentality of Japanese people for a long time.” Although he apologised the next day after receiving tremendous criticism, it was no surprise that many connected the disaster to the idea of morality and sinful behaviour. Starrs et al. (2014) examines ‘religious’ responses to the disaster that make a connection between the cause of the disaster and wrongful human behaviour which is rooted in modern Shinto mythology. According to this belief, nature, or the god who represents natural forces, could be either benevolent or malevolent depending on what humans do in relation to the gods. Following Shinto cosmology, some have explained the disaster in terms of *tenbatsu*—emphasising it as a chance for a necessary ‘national purification (*harae*)’.²

Why do the Japanese need ‘purification?’ Ishihara connected this cosmological question to the issue of Japanese national identity. Despite massive criticism of the divine punishment discourse, Ishihara Shitaro later published a book in 2011 titled, *Shin Darakuron: Gayoku to Tenbatsu* (“New Discourse on Decadence: Greed and Divine Punishment”). The book claimed that egoism and hedonism are two main problems in contemporary Japanese society. The disaster is not a punishment for human sin in a general sense but in a specific one for contemporary Japan which is losing its uniqueness. What the disaster provided was a chance for the whole of society to be rebuilt. Based on his emphasis on *jishuku* (“self-restraint”) in the wake of the triple disaster and a public desire for strong leadership, he was successfully re-elected governor of Tokyo in April 2011, just a month after the triple disaster. His exhortative tone of voice and performative actions, such as drinking water in Tokyo that was understood by many to be contaminated, indicated a national restorative desire—that is, a recovery of national identity. In so doing, the disaster could be ‘nationalised’ to show the “core of Japanese values—whether as bearers of the national torch of Japanese cultural excellence or as the keepers of a sacred flame burned low to embers amidst the gusting winds of modernisation, globalisation, and change” (Hopson 2013). The moral implications attached to divine punishment include criticism of consumerism, an extremely westernised lifestyle, and a loss of the connection to nature that many Japanese people share. The disaster could be a ‘lesson’ to ‘learn’ how to live in a decent and morally right way, mainly, not turning one’s face away from nature and/or, the heavenly order. The power and efficacy of the disaster and the catastrophe became a political and ideological tool. Despite much criticism, Ishihara and other right-wing writers continued to emphasise the bravery and self-restraint of the Japanese people that

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³ I met some fishery workers in Miyagi prefecture relate a similar idea of disaster as purification at an ecological level. They said that the disaster, in particularly, the tsunami, had cleansed the ocean so that oysters could grow better. But the other elements of the disaster, the concern for contaminated water from Fukushima powerplant and the controversy over releasing it into the Pacific Ocean, was not mentioned by them. In fact, many fishery workers in the Fukushima prefecture have criticised and opposed the government’s and TEPCO’s decision to release the water. The triple disaster as a mixture of purification and contamination is an interesting point that needs to be further discussed.
distinguishes them from others—mainly, those saturated in extreme consumerism, greediness, and self-indulgence. Divine punishment for these excesses became a popular narrative about the disaster.

Although Ishihara made a statement specific to Japan, the narrative, describing natural disasters and calamity as a moral and spiritual crisis through the notion of divine punishment for corruption and human sin, has long been a popular way of framing natural disaster. One of the most famous examples can be seen in Kant’s writing about an earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal. On 1st November 1755, a major earthquake struck off the coast of Lisbon, and, together with the floods and fires that the quake triggered, tens of thousands of people were killed and over two-thirds of the city’s buildings were destroyed. Aftershocks continued for several months, and a huge tsunami that followed a few hours after the initial quake caused great destruction and further loss of life. There were unusual hydrographical, geological, and meteorological occurrences in many parts of Europe, and the natural force sparked a variety of interpretative conversations among the population. Moreover, according to Reinhardt and Oldroyd, it is argued that the disaster brought about a power shift in Europe; they write, “Portugal never recovered its former prosperity as a result of the grievous damage that it suffered in 1755, though in fact its power as a colonial nation was by then already in decline, and a good deal of its trade was in the hands of British merchants” (1983: 248).

After the devastation that occurred in Lisbon, which was one of the most flourishing places in Europe at the time, a collective consciousness about the event and intellectual response to the calamity of the earthquake became much discussed. Voltaire was one of the many, for example, in the eighteenth century, whose ‘argument from design’ or ‘teleological argument’ was deployed. According to this argument, the universe is one whole system like a machine that has an intelligent designer, which is God. It was, therefore, hard for Voltaire to come to terms with the seemingly capricious destruction of a major city and many of its inhabitants. In his novel, Candide (1759), Voltaire used the event to criticise Leibniz’s position of optimism which held that our world is the best of all possible worlds. Along with various others, Voltaire was convinced through the geological phenomena of the earthquake that “there is evil in the world, and it is futile to suppose otherwise” (Voltaire 1968, cited in Reinhardt and Oldroyd 1983., 248. Emphasis in original). In 1807, a German writer, Heinrich von Kleist, published a novel based on an historic earthquake in Santiago, Chile, titled, Earthquake in Chile (1975), which was influenced by theodicy debates taking place in Europe at the time. Through the stories of the death of an innocent child and the death of a just person, von Kleist tried to envisage how the violence of nature unfolded in a court of divine justice and how “theodicy raises a question of the relationship between order and chaos, between Providence and accident” (Holm 2012: 57). Through reflecting on disasters in Chile and Portugal, what clearly emerged is an idea that disaster is not only divine punishment for human sin but also a stage that reveals an unjust human order.
Who/what is evil in the world? Humans? Nature? Violence itself? Society? A particular system? Despite all the intellectual effort, the devastating power of natural disaster haunted many people, and like Ishihara and his followers in Japan, many people in early modern Europe continued to claim that it is divine retribution for human behaviour. Many pointed out that the disaster happened on All Saints’ Day and that it annihilated most of the major churches in Lisbon due to sinful humans (Braun and Radner 2005; Oldroyd et al., 2007). Kant was little inclined to relate the occurrences to any kind of moral and religious explanation that accuses sinful behaviour. He regarded his role as that of giving a scientific description and explanation for the natural disaster. Many of his early publications were devoted to what is known as ‘natural science’ today—helping to make a significant change in Western cosmology.

With a close focus on physical geography and an estimation of the amount of living forces within the body of earth, his work was instrumental in establishing the emerging discipline of physical geography. Through these works, Kant (2012[1756]) supposed that the world might be different on the inside than how it is seen on surface, and that there were numerous hidden cavities and passages within the body of the Earth. He also assumed that there was a considerable amount of volatile material inside the earth which could lead to subterranean conflagrations and upheavals of the Earth’s crust, creating formations such as mountains. Although his work was based on second-hand information that was occasionally superfluous and hypothetical, his ideas about nature show his wish to formulate a ‘universal natural history’ that was capable of accounting for natural phenomena without the intervention of God. Reinhardt and Oldroyd note that “the occasion of the Lisbon earthquake provided him with a welcome opportunity to show how his theory could be deployed for explanatory purpose when required” (1982: 253). Kant’s theoretical assumptions about how the geological forces underneath the ground as well as meteorological elements in the air might cause devastating changes for human and non-human life on Earth helped set a foundation for contemporary technical and scientific understandings of natural forces. Instead of the idea of God’s immanent being in the world in the form of natural forces, disaster could be understood on scientific geological terms that do not rely on God as a causal explanation. However, in many cases, ethical meanings and human responsibility that are often attached to natural phenomena have not completely disappeared.

f. Disaster as an invisible enemy

The last discourse emphasises a ‘factual’ description of the disaster. Most articles and media reports start with almost the same narration about the disaster which follows the five W’s and one H (who, when, where, what, why, and how). On Friday 11 March 2011, at 2: 46 p.m., a 9.0-magnitude-earthquake occurred 70 km off Japan’s north-eastern (Tohoku) coast, making it the strongest ever recorded in Japan. The quake launched a massive tsunami that battered and inundated villages along 500 km of coastland. Some areas were wrecked by destruction as far as 5 km inland. The island of Honshū (Japan’s mainland) was shifted 2.4 m to the east by the earthquake, and coastal areas have been subsequently made more vulnerable to flooding. According to Kingston (2012), the official toll of the
disaster was 15,760 dead, 5,927 injured, and 4,282 people missing. Around 580,000 people were initially displaced, and 120,000 buildings were destroyed as well as a further 220,000 houses and buildings damaged. Only twisted piles of waterlogged rubble and debris remained where communities used to exist, and infrastructural damage caused a massive blackout and water cuts. As Naoto Kan, who was prime minister of Japan at the time, said in a declaration of a state of emergency, “in the sixty-five years after the end of World War II, this is the toughest and most difficult crisis for Japan.” He added later, “Japan was invaded by an invisible enemy.”

The invisible enemy was not only the devastating natural forces. The earthquake and tsunami damaged the cooling systems at the Fukushima Daiich Nuclear powerplant which caused nuclear meltdown and hydrogen explosions at the three reactors. People around the powerplant witnessed the hydrogen air chemical explosions and heard the blasts. With the detonation, the government declared a nuclear emergency at 19:03 on the 11th, and the Fukushima prefecture ordered an evacuation of about 2,000 people within a 20 km radius of the plant. Over 50,000 people were evacuated the next day. In the end, due to the fear of radioactive fallout mixed with the weather, wind, rain, and snow, well over 200,000 people became nuclear refugees. Although the first meltdown occurred within five hours of the tsunami and the other within 80 hours (IAEA Report 2015), the information was not announced by TEPCO until the end of May (Kingston 2012). Rumours and anxieties quickly spread as more and more residents ‘voluntarily’ left their homes. With the meltdown of the reactors, which were constructed in the 1960s and 70s, the Fukushima nuclear disaster marks one of the worst nuclear accidents, and it is classified as a ‘level seven’ along with the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Although the three narratives just discussed took place from different perspectives and were directed toward different audiences, the senses of crisis, transformation, and contingency run through them all. The way in which each narrative declares its own ‘emergency’ or ‘crisis’ resonates with wider philosophical debates on the notion of crisis and the proclamation of contingency—all of the narratives pronounced, “we are in the midst of crisis.” When Yuko said the disaster put her life and hometown in crisis, and Ishihara claimed that Japan had fallen into a state of decadence, and the prime minister, Kan Naoto, declared a state of exception and an emergent need for fighting, the notion of crisis was used to characterise a moment in history that marks a new age which requires immediate action. That is why many returnees’ stories are recited with a sense of urgency and other politicians declared the disaster as a national crisis in which Japan had been ‘invaded’ by an invisible enemy—regardless of who or what that enemy was. In this regard, natural disaster and its aftermath are not only matters of natural forces that go beyond human capacity but also about breakages which reveal underlying structures of social life on the ground. However, the point that is emphasised changes over time. Considering that human

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4 https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/naoto-kan-japan-was-invaded-by-an-invisible-enemy/
History has always been intertwined with the ‘violence’ of nature, reading a natural disaster as a spiritual and socio-political crisis is not only restricted to Japan. If this is the case, what brings a specific sense of being violated and attacked by visible and invisible forces to Japanese people? Why has the narrative of the nation in crisis—whether it takes on a tone of scolding, a declaration of a state of emergency, or life crisis—been repeated so many times regardless of the development of technical and scientific understandings of natural forces?

**g. Crisis in crisis: Japan as an emergency-oriented state**

Whereas the earthquake in Lisbon had been regarded as an exception that shook the foundation of society and religious faith, earthquakes are by no means new to Japanese people (as they are located in what is often regarded to be one of the most disaster-prone parts of the globe), and many of my interlocutors showed a confidence in dealing with the quakes. In their words, “we [Japanese] are well prepared for earthquakes.” If the natural disaster is not an exception but is considered normal, or at least not an unforeseen event, why has the triple disaster been narrated as a national crisis and an emergency? What is the crisis of the Japanese people, and what is the invisible enemy if not the natural force? In order to consider these questions, in this section, I look at how the notion of crisis is specific to the history of Japanese identity politics, and why the enemy has typically been regarded as an outsider. Some research which focuses on Japan’s long struggle to (re)define itself through the memories of its modernity and war loss is helpful for understanding the narratives of the triple disaster and the sense of crisis within a deeper historical context—that is, the perpetual crisis in which Japan has been immersed since emerging as a modern state.

James Orr (2001) began his book with an expression that is common in Japan regardless of peoples’ political inclinations—**yuitsu no hinakukoku** (‘the only nation ever to have been atom-bombed’). The saying helps to illuminate how the experience of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki has overlapped with an identity politics that is dominated by a sense of Japanese victimhood. Using the key term, **higaisha ishiki** (‘victim consciousness’), as one of the most prevalent and ideologically charged tropes found in post-war Japan’s troubled relation to its war-time past and memorialisation, Orr explores how history and memory contest the nation’s understanding of selfhood and how the status of victimhood served to conceal Japan’s role as victimiser, and in fact, worked as an amnesiac device. Furthermore, the A-bombs are not a ‘natural’ disaster but have been described as if it was a natural and sudden incident in a political vacuum that erased the nation’s war-time history. The victims are neither a specific population in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nor those who were from Japan’s former colonies and living there at that time in which they were sacrificed, but rather, the exclusive Japanese nation as a whole.
Harootunian (2000) likewise considers contemporary Japan as living in the “long post-war” by exploring how the pervasion has crept into Japanese war-time history and the national psyche through the disavowal of the painful and incriminating war-time past. Engaging with the repetition of historical narratives from Kato Norihiro’s work, which reduces the past to a serious of neat dualities between authentic and inauthentic, native interiority and foreign exteriority, or the Enlightenment project of abstract linear history and the return to mythological cyclical time, Harootunian shows how those double structures foreclose history as a site of intractable contradictions, smoothing over irreversible transformations that have taken place in the course of the nation’s formation as a modern capitalist society. He calls this process the ruse of history which makes Japan destined to live in a space rather than a time oppressed by “an alien force, grounding in the shadows of an imposed colonialism that had thrown the country and its people outside history” (ibid.: 719).

Narratives of the past in Japan have, as Harootunian emphasises, always posited the authority of the inner and the inauthenticity of the outer. From everyday experiences to the writing of history in an ‘indeterminate precinct,’ this characterised Japan along the lines of what Althusser described as a “space without places, a time without duration” (1972: 78). According to Harootunian’s conclusion, that is what places Japan in a perpetual state of crisis, or rather, a ‘crisis in crisis’ that is impossible to transform into historical consciousness. In the historical amnesia or constant recycling of the past to set ‘the space without places, a time without duration,’ nature has been recalled as timeless background. The atomic bombs, wars, and triple disasters have been consistently illustrated as a consequence of natural disaster as if the A-bombs were a natural disaster and the radioactivity fallout is a part of the environment. Therefore, it is possible to ask the question, “can you simply state that people in Fukushima are suffering as if they were suddenly met with some natural disaster?” Many people that I met during fieldwork, outside of Fukushima, would typically respond “yes” to the question. In this regard, the triple disaster does not mark any difference as a real crisis and has been integrated into a similar narrative of the national discourse. The triple disaster and nuclear fallout do not mark *Neuzeit* (“a new time”) in Koselleck’s term (2002; 2006. Also see Roitman 2014; 2016), which emerges through the recognition of crisis as historical consciousness. This could be what Masco (2017) meant by ‘crisis in crisis.’

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5 The concept of nature has always been a social construct. Regarding the historical trajectory of the concept and its relation to identity politics through Japan’s process of modernisation is a key theme of Thomas’s (2001) work. Thomas shows how nature has replaced the nation’s identity and how the natural order has become transformed and translated in the political imagination through Japan’s modernisation process in its encounter with the West. Satsuka also notes that the concept of nature has appeared in Japan by adapting Western concepts during the Meiji period and through an attempt at translating such a complex notion of nature, this incommensurability remains an unsolved issue resulting in “an irreconcilable tension between the foreign and host worldviews” (2015: 24). The dichotomy between nature and culture and the challenge to it in the ‘West’ will be discussed later in this introduction with a focus on the concept of allegory by Walter Benjamin and Adorno.
indicating that the discourse on crisis has proliferated and has been overused without a well-articulated socio-political vision to balance out the apocalyptic stories of end-times.\(^6\)

Why can’t the Fukushima disaster be marked as a case of critical urgency in Japan? If not, why, instead of recalling socio-political crisis as a ‘blind spot’ (Roitman 2014; 2016), do all disasters tend to become ‘naturalised’ and integrated into the same narrative of Japanese victimhood? As Harootunian and other historians have pointed out, why does Japan’s understanding of itself have to be indeterminate? As long as Japan posits itself as an enclosure, surrounded by foreign exteriority, the internal division and unequal structure of society loses ground to the discourse on the permanency of emergency. The historical context of Japanese modernity asks how the nation as a modern state has been built by identifying itself as a fragile nature/nation. The perpetual state of emergency claimed through the nation’s encounter with others has been intertwined with finding nature as the mark of a political entity.

Through exploring how the history of earthquakes and other natural disasters have influenced the process of constructing Japan as a modern state, Clancey (2006) examines how the establishment of Japan as a modern nation intersects with seismology. According to Clancey, although Japan was destined to a long and complex relationship with natural disaster and earthquakes, he claims that before the Meiji restoration, earthquakes had not been an obsession within any particular department of Japanese thought. The historic relevance of \textit{taishin} (against earthquakes) thus would “extend beyond questions of prudence and safety to the constructions of regimes of truth and meaning, to the mediation of relationship between foreigners and Japanese, foreigners and foreigners, and Japanese and Japanese” (ibid: 39). Taking the example of the Nobi earthquake in 1891, what Clancey finds is the idea that disasters expose previously unimagined vulnerabilities and the need to construct knowledge against the destructive power of nature. For Japanese artisans, earthquakes revealed a chance for self-discovery by comparing their materials and architecture to Western-style infrastructure. Through the ‘translation’ and ‘pidgin’ of foreign knowledge on seismology and the encounter with others, mainly European architects and semiologists, Clancey shows how Japanese architects and scientists started seeing their nation through seismological terms and how these terms intertwined with the imagination of a national identity as fragile.

Although the quakes normally considered in Japanese history, last \textit{Meiji} (between 1868 to 1912) and \textit{Taiso} (between 1912 to 1926), were a period of unusually strong and frequent seismic activity, the new

\(^6\) Masco (2017: S65) writes, “the power of crisis to shock and thus mobilise is diminishing because of narrative salvation, overuse, and a lack of well-articulated positive futurities to balance stories of end-times.” This is what he calls ‘a crisis in crisis’ which erases a positive futurism and indicates a dialectical tension between crisis and utopia, a narrative of collapse and one of possible emancipation.
emergence of social and political power coincided with the emergence of knowledge making. Clancey summarises this process in the following way: “the unexpected natural disaster and the normative machinery of governance intertwine, creating not only a state of emergency but emergency-oriented states” (ibid. 4). The ‘fragile’ identity based on constantly shaking ground was combined with an ‘Oriental’ understanding adopted from European discourse which categorises Japanese as an “intrinsically artistic people, and even mythical and spiritual. But not necessarily logical” (ibid.: 45). For example, Japanese wood frames and straw mat installations on the floor were bijutsu (“art”) rather than kagaku (“science”). Through encountering narratives such as these, Japan found itself in a state of “uncertainty and liquidity in a time and place” (ibid.: 9). The earthquakes allowed Japanese artisans to see their own materials and structures of buildings through the lens of Westerners and seismological terms, and they found Western-style infrastructure to be surprisingly vulnerable whereas Japanese architecture has a unique ability to ride out seismic waves. How to combine ‘the unexpected natural disaster and the normative machinery of governance’ has become a question for artisans, and the historical and political history of earthquakes has emerged as an object of knowledge-making. The double struggle for defining self through distinguishing and assimilation, Clancey concludes that this nativizing discourse and the tension between us and the others, which was caused by a catastrophic undercurrent, has been a continuous ‘mercurial agent’ in Japan’s self-identity and its idea of modernity both materially and symbolically.

The concept of nature and its violent power has become the ‘unconsciousness of Japanese modernity’ (Thomas 2001), and the centre of this topography was thought of as the apex of naturalness—the site of heaven and earth, as well as the seat of political virtue—while peripheral and exterior space was characterized by increasing unnaturalness and disorder. Ivy calls this tension “hybrid realities” which are “contained within dominant discourse on cultural purity and nondifference, and in nostalgic appeals to premodernity: what makes the Japanese so different from everyone else makes them identical to each other; what threatens that self-sameness is often marked temporally as the intrusively modern, spatially as the foreign” (1995: 9). As the term ‘mercurial agent’ implies, Japan has been always caught in between what is defined as the West and non-West, modern and premodern, familiar and strange, and the sense of crisis, being caught in between, has come in the form of the spectral. Yet, the division is not only made as internal and external, but within the nation itself, accordingly, between the urban and rural.

In this regard, Ivy (1995; 2009. Also see Figal 1999) seeks the origin of this binary division within the nation by exploring ‘Japanese modernity’ through ghostly matters—diverse forms of popular culture and folklore in the Meiji Period and names it ‘spectacular modernity.’ According to Ivy, the rural as a symbol of nature and the pre-modern has remained “the counter modern homeland of Japan” against state-sponsored demands for “bunmei kaika (“civilisation and enlightenment”) (2009: 230). Making
reference to stories about Tōno in 1911 by Yanagita Kunio, which is full of haunted happenings, gruesome murders, mysterious disappearances, and the chilling pranks of mountain deities in Tohoku (north-eastern Japan) of which Fukushima is a part. Ivy argues that the stories can be read as a species of ‘hysterical’ symptom formations surrounding the trauma and the abject history of rural poverty (2009: 231-232). In this regard, what being ‘modern’ and ‘modernised’ brought through the Meiji reformation is anxiety—on one hand being left behind in relation to ‘the West,’ and on the other hand, losing its own cultural and national identity—the coexistence of an incompatible dilemma, which are the “traumas of modernisation and traumas of non-modernisation” (ibid.: 232). In this process, what is desired is to be economically advanced, and yet, a culturally distinct nation. The rural areas take on the latter and that might explain how the image of rurality and nature in Japan often sway between two extremes—economically falling behind and aging, and bucolic, as the terms furusato shows, in imaginations of the nation. The division between urban and rural resonates with what Thomas describes as “the topographic political imagination” (2001: 38). Based on this national imaginary which allows us to see the intertwined relationship between natural violence and the state building process, Fukushima, as a place that represents disorder, chaos, and the reminder of an ‘anti-modern ghost,’ should remain invisible, remote, and forgotten.

h. The experience of crisis and the crisis of experience

The discourse above focusing on the structural and moral crisis of the disaster, however, does not fully capture the most challenging element of the triple disaster—the invisible materiality of radiation. Although the triple disaster shares similar characteristics with past natural and social disasters, there are distinctive characteristics that have been illustrated as a ghostly matter—the nuclear matter, and that is one of the key questions that this thesis elaborates. To what extent has the triple disaster, in particular the Fukushima nuclear disaster, challenged what we have called crisis, catastrophe, and emergency?

Masco’s (2006; 2020) focus on the porosity and perpetuity of the nuclear fallout suggests a specific history of violence that is intertwined with the nuclear matters. He does not exclusively mention the distinction between nuclear disaster and other environmental toxicities, but in his entire research, the nuclear matter has been explored through the context of cold war, nuclear nationalism, and the ideological commitment to encompassing the globe with the technologies of command, control, surveillance, and military nuclear power. He calls our time “the age of fallout,” which grasps the catastrophic consequences of human action from the past. According to Masco, the vestige of atomic bombs and nuclear tests from the past have never disappeared, and “fallout is therefore understood primarily retrospectively but lived in a future anterior—a form of history made visible in negative outcomes” (2020: 19). He continues that we live today increasingly in ‘the Age of Fallout’ inheriting from the twentieth century a vast range of problems, from ecologies and national security with science,
technology to finance in an ongoing negative aftermath. For Masco, the Fukushima disaster is a perfect example that “produced literal fallout in the form of cesium-137 contamination but also was the combined result of technoscientific, financial, and regulatory failures” (ibid.). In this regard, as a combination of all possible failure or malfunctioning dealing with natural and social breakdown, what the Fukushima nuclear disaster indicates is an intersection of industrialism, militarism, and capitalism that generates reverberating dangers as well as consolidating a wide range of collective insecurities.

Masco’s definition of the Age of Fallout or the time shaped by nuclear crisis raises a further question regarding sensorial deprivation caused by the nuclear fallout. In his earlier work on the Manhattan project, a technoscientific project on A-bombs, Masco (2006) defines the late twentieth century as “the nuclear age” which connotes the way in which traumatic experiences of rapid technological change have produced reversals of human senses and perceptions; increasingly, the emphasis has become not how to engage the world but how to insulate individuals from it. Engaging with the complex texture of the project, Masco asks what constitutes the idea and practice of national security and how technoscientifically driven work on A-bombs has produced different types of cognitions of life which provoke the ‘nuclear uncanny’ and shake senses of time, nature, politics, and identity. An interesting point Masco raises here is the reconfiguration of sensory experiences by asking, “what does it mean when the ‘state of emergency’ has so explicitly become the rule, when in order to prevent an apocalypse the governmental apparatus has prepared so meticulously to achieve it? What are the cross-cultural effects of living in an age when ‘mutually assured destruction’ is a normalised, all but invisible, fact of life, a technological fix to the proliferation of nuclear weapons that makes the everyday intricately caught up in the negotiation of an imagined, and possibly real, end?” (ibid.: 12). And, along with these questions, he adds one more: if it is impossible to experience a state of emergency because it has become so ‘banal,’ how we can ‘regain’ the senses in order to answer such questions as the ones above? In short, the predicament here is not only the impossibility of representing the invisible or catastrophe, but that of experiencing/sensing the shock of catastrophe.

Citing Walter Benjamin’s theory on human sense and perception in the age of mechanical reproduction and Susan Buck-Morss’ work on it, Masco frames the nuclear age as a time of “anesthetisation” in which the growing force of the nuclear complex limits and colonises the everyday senses of life in such a way that ‘the possibility of extinction’ anesthetises the possibility of experience. This means that when it comes to the destruction of the normalcy of life, what is required is “a greater level of social anaesthesia to normalise its impact on everyday life” (Masco ibid.: 9). For Benjamin, a fundamental reorganisation of the human sensorium has been accomplished under modern industrial life. The focus is not the experience of crisis but the crisis of experience. Following Benjamin’s theory on modernity and technologically mediated violence, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) emphasises the same point that
Masco put concerning the insulation and protection of the sensorium from shock and violence. According to Buck-Morss, Benjamin sees that:

Being cheated out of experience has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshalled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics. In this situation of ‘crisis in perception,’ is no longer a question of educating the cruder ear to hear music, but of giving back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring ‘perceptibility’ (ibid.: 18. Emphasis in original).

When the capacity of sensing the shock is called into question, the matter here is not how to narrate or represent the violence that Nixon (2011) emphasises, rather, it is the very nature of nuclear material which is not perceptible in the first place. How can we represent something that is totally invisible to the human senses, and how have the tactile experiences of the outside world evolved in response to the spread of nuclear material? If, as Masco said, the annihilation of sensory engagement has become simply banal, what would be a form of everyday life after the nuclear disaster? How has the confusion of sensory perception and knowledge about the material world been disrupted and has reoriented peoples’ senses of time and space? Is there still the last thing before the last—the ability to sense the world in turbulence?

In focusing on the confusion that the returnees experienced in their hometown of Fukushima, my research emphasises the question of the capacity to experience, or in Walter Benjamin’s term, ‘the crisis of experience.’ As many returnees expressed to me, “everything looks the same but at the same time, totally different.” What they lost is the capacity to confirm their own experiences—they probably ‘know’ the radiation is there, but it is not seen, smelled, tasted, or touched. If all the sensorial organs are incapable of ascertaining what really exists, how do we ‘know’ the unseen? Writing in May 1940, Walter Benjamin sent a letter to his friend, Adorno, from his exile in Paris, expressing his anguish at “the methodical destruction of experience” (1999; cited in Jay 2005: 312). Although the perilous state of genuine experience was one of the most explored indicators of modernity, as it has been exemplified through capitalist exploitation with a Marxist emphasis on alienation, Benjamin’s idea of a crisis of experience found its focus elsewhere. He writes:

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7 Benjamin uses the term ‘synesthesia’ in connection with the theory of correspondences in his essay on Baudelaire. Buck-Morss adds a further explanation of it: “He may have been aware that the term is used in physiology, to describe a sensation in one part of the body when another part is stimulated; and in psychology, to describe when a sense stimulus (e.g., colour) evokes another sense (e.g., smell). My use of ‘synaesthetic’ is close to these: it identifies the mimetic synchrony between outer stimulus (perception) and inner stimulus (body sensations, including sense-memories) as the crucial element of aesthetic cognition” (1992: 19: see the footnote no. 53).
In fact the roots of my ‘theory of experience’ can be traced back to a childhood memory. My parents would go on walks with us, as a matter of course, wherever we spent the summer months. There would always be two or three of us children together. But it is my brother I am thinking here. After we had visited one or other of the obligatory places around Freudenstadt, Wengen or Schreberhau, my brother used to say, ‘Now we can say we’ve been there.’ This remark imprinted itself unforgettable on my mind (Benjamin 1999: 326).

This letter contains many elements of Benjamin’s theory of experience, which Adorno would adapt and modify later in Minima Moralia: Reflection on damaged life (1951) among other works. Martin Jay (2005) states how this short paragraph includes all the motifs of the theory of experience—the importance of trivial details, cherishing moments of pleasure, a fascination with the auratic resonance of place names, and an appreciation of the collector’s mentality. With the entanglement of memory and experience imprinting themselves as ‘unforgettable,’ and the corporeal relation to the outside world that started in his own childhood rather than from philosophical inquiry, Benjamin infused desire with messianic intensity which was absent in this time of rupture—the First and Second World War, exile, and the threat of fascist victory—in other words, a time of crisis. According to Jay, Benjamin’s rumination on the crisis of experience alternates “between utopian hope and elegiac despair, combining theological impulse with materialist analysis” (ibid.:314). Benjamin later extended his concept of history to go beyond his own personal memory of childhood.

How can we sense in order to understand the world that appears to be imperceptible? As Masco considers in the age of nuclear fallout as well as Benjamin in his era of crisis, this thesis asks a similar question regarding the possibility of sensing the world after the end of the world. And yet, fortunately, as a dialectical thinker, Benjamin tried to find an anti-thesis against the crisis, a trick to take back the possibility of experience—which I aim to unpack. The triple disaster that I address indicates a type of crisis that invalidates the returnees’ existing knowledge and memory of hometown, and it places them in a hostile environment where the possibility of ‘genuine’ experience is extremely limited. In this regard, I ask how the crisis of experience enables the returnees to reawaken the given condition of life as a real crisis. In discussing how life in ‘the age of fallout’ contests returnees’ senses of space and time, I engage with key concepts that Walter Benjamin used to describe the core of modern experiences such as threshold experiences, crisis, corporeality, and surrealism which are helpful for rethinking the terms of everyday life and perceptions after the disaster. As some of my interlocutors expressed, their ruined hometowns in Fukushima are perceived as yume no sekai (“a dream-like world”). Their sense of uncertainty is exactly opposite to Benjamin’s brother’s affirmation, “now we can say we’ve been there.” As a real place where memories and sentiments dwell, and yet, an unrealistic space which indicates all the possibilities of the catastrophic imagination, I suggest that what Fukushima illustrates is ‘a dialectic
standstill’ in between the past and future, constantly testing our sense of what is real and at the same time, questioning if there is still time after the end.

i. The dialectics of standstill: an allegorist or the angel of history

“The village looks like an archaeological site.” One of returnees told me this while introducing the village to me and saying how it felt like they were living the past in the present or in a timeless time. Everything that remained there was a sign of the past and many returnees expressed the feeling of being caught in-between. With the remnants of the past disaster, the entire village seemed like ‘ante-diluvian fossils.’ If so, what does it mean to live in the ruins after natural and social eruption? To what extent can the absence of life and the presence of the invisible be experienced?

At this point, I would like to refer to the dialectical concept of allegory as developed by Benjamin (1998[1928]; also see 2019[1940]) who sees the ruins of history as a place where nature appears in a pre-historical landscape. Benjamin explores baroque dramas through the concept of allegory, and according to his understanding, what the drama stage (which is a place where time is spatialised) shows is the political and historical consequences of catastrophes in which all lives have been subject to death, violence, and pain. In the scene of ruined landscapes and a feeling of melancholia, all the failures and losses become a historical experience, the experience of transience. What the ruin poses is the very question of significance as its meaning is not assured—the ruins are remainders of historical worlds that no longer live on; any meaning they might convey is of necessity fragmentary. He writes:

The allegorical physiognomy of the natural history, which is put on the state in the Trauerspiel [tragic drama], is present in reality in the forms of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay (Benjamin 1998[1928]: 166. Emphasis in original).

Later, he moves beyond the theatre stage of Baroque tragic drama to modernity and the socio-political landscape of the early twentieth century where history’s natural aspects appear in the ruins and nature’s decline has taken on historical form. What he found was, in the trauerspiel, any meaning that is conveyed is fragmentary, and mourning over what no longer lives seems to challenge the definition of nature and history—history is naturalised in its transience and nature is historised in the potential for significance and or its absence. Surrounded by debris and the remnants of the past, however, what is not assured is not only the significance of meaning but the finitude of the catastrophe. Ruins appear in an eternally suspended time of past catastrophe. This is opposed to one of the most common conceptions

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8 Cowan nicely paraphrases Benjamin’s concept of allegory, “allegory arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being: a sense of its transitoriness, an intimation of morality, or a conviction, as in Dickinson, that ‘this world is not a conclusion’” (1981: 110).
of time, which is based on the idea of time as flow—as a famous quote by Plato (Heraclitus 2003: 27) illustrates: “Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing strays, and comparing existence to the flow of a river, he says that one could not step twice into the same river.” This idea of chronology is later further developed by Heidegger (1995), who thought that subjectification occurs through the realisation of its inevitable termination. His idea of being-in-time is predicated on the awareness of the finitude of being, and death is the needle’s eye of life towards which all beings much be oriented in order to know themselves as themselves.

Yet, in living with the continuing aftershock of the past disaster, the returnees configure their sense of time neither as a flow nor as finitude, but as a spectre that lingers with them in the present. All the invasive plants, abandoned animals, unfixed borders trying to mark the level of contamination, sliding soil bags, overflowing waters, and the radioactivity that has a much longer lifespan than any other forms of life on earth—this is what might be seen through the gaze of Benjamin’s allegorist where history is seen as a stage and the wounds remain open and visible. An allegorist desires to find meaning in the ruins, and the mourning that results is encapsulated in the image from Melancholia below. In a world in which everything seems to be falling apart and destined to death, the only shining parts are the sunlight and the eyes of the angel. For this reason, in places where everything appears as abandoned and aimlessly scattered, ruins become an allegorical object, a “form in which [hu]man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biological history of the individual” (Benjamin ibid.: 166).

[Albrecht Dürer, Melancholia I (1514)]

Adorno is one thinker who took allegory as an historical component and developed the concept further. In his essay, The Idea of Natural-History (2006[1932]), Adorno suggested a concept of natural history that attempts to show how human history is also always natural history and that non-human nature is
inextricably intertwined with human history. Instead of referring to empirical systematic inquiry into the earth’s organisms and environments, the concept of natural history is meant to critically disrupt the strict dualism between nature as “what has always been” and history as the advent of the “qualitatively new.” In challenging the dichotomous definition of nature as eternal substance, which bears the mythical principles of necessity, repetition, and fate that are ineluctable and impervious to human intervention, and history as constitutively emancipatory where suffering from the past and present is trivialised and justified in the name of progress, Adorno assigns philosophy with the following task: “to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being” and “to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply on itself as nature” (ibid.: 260. Emphasis in original). This intertwined relationship between history and nature reveals the dynamic and potentially catastrophic interaction between the two. The tension between nature and the human as a perpetual struggle was key for his work in the book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno and his co-author, Horkheimer, claim that human history is not traced through the development of concepts like freedom and justice, but rather, it is found in the struggle that “all our ideas, prohibitions, religions, and political creeds” are tied to conditions that serve either to increase or decrease “the natural survival prospects of human species on the earth or within the universe”9 (1972: 202-203).

Why has this blurred boundary between nature and history been important for these dialectical thinkers? Following the concept of nature and history in Adorno’s work, Pensky (2004) claims that natural history is a key to understanding Adorno’s legacy as well as contemporary theory. According to Pensky, the concept opens a new realm to understand the memory of historical transience and suffering, and, despite the elusiveness of the conception, natural history “performs rather than simply denotes” (ibid.: 228). It demands a non-systematic understanding of history and philosophy that would embrace historical and textual fragments and problematise “a homogenous and virtually irresistible history of domination, and corollary sense of capitulation at the vision of world history as continuous catastrophe” (ibid.).

Adorno’s works on Benjamin’s notion of the historical essence of allegory is a huge topic. Here, I simply want to focus on the notion of natural history as the crossing point between physical matter and the production of meaning. As the image of melancholia by Dürer illustrates, Benjamin sees the figure of the allegorist beholding nature itself as essentially historical. It is a figure who is surrounded by

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9 Buck-Morss (1977: 49) emphasises the importance of nature in Adorno’s philosophical trajectory and writes, “nature provided the key for exposing the non-identity between the concept of history (as a regular idea) and historical reality, just as history provided the key demystifying nature. Adorno argued, on the one hand, that actual past history was not identical to the concept of history (as rational progress) because of the material nature to which it did violence. At the same time, the ‘natural’ phenomena of the present were not identical to the concept of nature because […] they have been historically produced.”
material objects which contain within their very finitude the corporeal kernel of each and every human effort to construct meaning in history. What is invalid and corporeal is equated with the mortal, which is transient. “History is translated to the spectacle of dead and dying nature, to ruin, collapse, vain hopes, unsuccessful plans, and the repeated depiction of the expiring creature” (Pensky ibid.: 233). For allegorists thinking about the meaning of the world, which appears as ‘second nature,’ the consequences of social action have become petrified and congealed like a mass of codes, practices, and objects; in short, it is a world of “estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers” (Adorno 2006[1932]: 261).

In dealing with a sense of uncertainty in which all the forms of life appear as ciphers, and the landscape entails corrosion, petrification, and freezing up, how do people find meaning in everyday life within this environment? Again, Adorno seems to understand this position of the singular and contingent in terms of the riddling character that such contingent facts and bodies assume from the perspective of natural history. Against totalising narratives of historical trajectory, for Adorno, what the world of corrosion and breaking down indicates is an alternative logic of historiography according to which insights into history proceed through the construction of constellations of discrete elements. These then suddenly and involuntarily yield forth objectively valid insights into the historical process as a whole when such constellations are read in the proper interpretive light.

Adorno insists in the essay, *The Actuality of Philosophy* (1931), that constellations are not to be regarded as providing solutions to problems posed by the assemblage of recovered cultural material. Rather, such solutions are to be regarded as directions toward a political that would seek to dissolve the puzzle-like character of the real. Refusing any crypto-theological speculations that refer to a substantiality beyond the phenomenal, Adorno proposes that critical construction should be linked to praxis. He writes:

> He who interprets by searching beyond the phenomenal world for a world in itself which forms its foundation and support, acts mistakenly like someone who wants to find in the riddle the reflection of a being which lies behind it, a being mirrored in the riddle, in which it is contained. Instead, the function of riddle solving is to illuminate the riddle-Gestalt like lightning, and to sublate it, not to persist the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophical interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time (1977[1931]: 127).

Rather than addressing ‘a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question,’ what I aimed to do in my research is to light it up ‘suddenly and momentarily,’ because this is what the returnees’ narratives and everyday efforts at living in a hostile environment shared with each other. While trying to find a reference point to understand what is happening in their hometowns, the returnees started recognising the invisible thread of the past and their connection to the history of A-bomb victims and other
environmental disasters such as Minamata. Looking at the moment that brings all the suffering into the present, I work to illuminate the dialectic of crisis and utopia, which is embedded when the crisis becomes a real crisis—in Walter Benjamin’s term, ‘a dialectic of standstill’ which preserves a ‘weak messianic’ moment.

Benjamin (1968; 2019 [1940]) considers the dialectic moment that crisis bears to be a “condition that called for decisive judgement between alternatives” (Roitman 2013: 15-16), and he endeavours to crystallize the possibility of hope in the time of crisis. He was fascinated by the possibilities inherent in the idea that ‘tigers leap into the past’ as an invocation of disrupted time. This idea is a key component to Walter Benjamin’s 1940 essay, *Theses on the philosophy of history*. Although he engaged with the concept of time in many of his works as well as the ideas of allegory and spatialised history in the ruins, the idea of time has been most notably addressed in this essay. It was a time of both historical and personal crisis, which, of course, are inseparable. The short essay, which is composed of eighteen paragraphs and two extra notes, was written while he attempted to escape from France to avoid being arrested by the Nazi Gestapo. The essay is the last work that Benjamin completed before fleeing to Spain where he finally committed suicide on 26 September 1940. Against what he called ‘historicism’ that contents itself with “establishing a causal connection between various moments in history,” Benjamin proposes the image of the historian “who takes as his point of departure to stop telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (ibid.: 208).

Benjamin drew on the concept of Jetztzeit (“now-time” or “here and now”) to eschew either positivism or vulgar Marxist concepts of ‘homogeneous and empty time.’ In so doing, he suggested an emphasis on the temporality of time which bears revolutionary connotations. For Benjamin, this moment does not originate from historical restoration, which is conflict-free and inexorable, but rather, ‘flashes’ through moments of interruption, destruction, and recall of the forgotten histories of the oppressed. This idea is especially well-articulated through Benjamin’s interpretation of the figure of *Angelus Novus*. He writes:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin ibid.: 201).
What the angel of history shows us is, according to Benjamin (ibid: 200), ‘the tradition of the oppressed’ who teach us that “the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule” and brings a time for fulfilment instead of an apocalyptic vision of the end of time or a timeless and space-less state of emergency. We find this moment in a materialistic historiography, thinking through “not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest (...) where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives configuration a shock, by which it crystalizes into a monad” (ibid. 207). He later calls this crystalized monad a ‘messianic standstill and constellation’ referring to how specific events from the past work to illuminate larger forces in the present. By asking how imperceptible risk paradoxically provides a potentiality to construct history amidst destruction, this idea of historical materialism as a standstill is what I explore throughout this thesis.

Through exploring the everyday life of the returnees in the ‘broken down’ hometowns and ruins and by participating in their constant effort to re-construct a world otherwise, the thesis asks how the struggle for being alive in the broken world is a moment of ‘lighting up,’ in Benjamin’s terms, the constellation of time in the moment of crisis which captures and illuminates not history as a whole but a single detail that reactivates a revolutionary shock. If catastrophe is not a forthcoming event but rather the past already ‘behind’ us, what could be the mode of being and living in the world after the end? Like the angel of history, many people I met during fieldwork do not avert their eyes from the broken world, and by doing so, they can find the apertures that allow them to remain and perhaps see the moment of lighting up. When the given reality appears as fixed and unchangeable and the numerical manipulations of the level of radiation and the ruined landscape make people feel anxious and uncertain, might there be a trick against the trick that allows people to manipulate what we call the real? When disaster breaks

[Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*]^{10}

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down the continuous flow leading forward into what we might call a structure, society, and, perhaps, reality, what might the fragments and failures from the past now tell us? How do those fragments, which might seem to be irrelevant at first glance, in fact constitute the constellation of crisis? Can the disaster ‘actualise’ a real crisis that provides the source and sustenance for deeper change in the “real” world? How might the angel of melancholia simultaneously be the angel of history? In many ways, this thesis is a response to that question.

j. Methodology

This thesis is based on informal conversations between myself and my interlocutors. However, that does not imply simple allocated roles of me the listener and ‘them’ the storytellers. I understand the role of anthropological fieldwork as a form of encountering the stories of others, and, inasmuch as I was ‘the other’ for my interlocutors, I was also a participant in the process of storytelling, which I continue through the writing of this thesis. Through engaging in this act of listening and storytelling, I show how different narratives of life after the triple disaster took different shapes. The narratives that the villagers in Fukushima and Miyagi Prefectures told me could be considered ‘constellations,’ consisting of the story of the disaster and the story as the record of the disaster. This is what I mean by the way in which different narratives ‘mediate’ our understanding of certain people, places, and events. As the narratives of the disaster that I discussed above show, discourses often conflict with each other, and there is no clear timeline to describe the cause and effect of the triple disaster and the returnees’ perceptions of the risk of radiation. The memory of the disaster and the ongoing anxiety have often been catalysed in unexpected occasions; for example, through everyday activities like walking around the village, letting people teach me how to navigate the safety level of contaminated areas, eating food together and sharing my cultural background and stories, and watching local TV news. Rather than organised meetings and formal interviews, the methodology of my field research is based on ‘being around’ people and ‘waiting’ until we are comfortable enough together to trust one another. To make this possible, I became a part of the story as well through sharing my own feelings and worries with my interlocutors while staying in the (de)contaminated towns.

I would not exactly call the villagers my ‘informants,’ and their stories are not precisely ‘data.’ They often missed ‘factual’ elements of the disaster based on the so-called Five W’s and One H. Their experiences were narrated while I participated in regular everyday practices with my interlocutors such as taking a train to Fukushima from Sendai or from Sendai to Tokyo and other parts of Japan as well as having meals, drinks, and cleaning the beach, villages, and abandoned houses together. These were places where various narratives of belonging, suffering, affection, and endurance were enunciated. Calling them stories, not ‘data,’ I have followed Taussig’s suggestions based on his work in exploring the archive of a blind peasant farmer named Don Thomás who lived in rural Colombia and narrated his
own experience of the political turbulence and violence in the country during the early 20th century. Taussig points out how the swerve and flow of storytelling resonates with the question of what history means and how much anthropological work relies on, in fact, “the art of storytelling other people’s stories” (2006: 62). Following the old Colombian Black man’s stories that testify to life on the margin trembling in ambivalence with its mix of pain and desire, Taussig critically reminds us that anthropology has been a discipline that brings out the story of the others, and yet, “what happens is that those stories are elaborated as scientific observations gleaned not from storytellers but from informants” (ibid.). I think that my interlocutors are more than ‘informants,’ or, rather, as expressed in chapter one, they are researchers for life, and they effectively shared with me the ‘feeling’ of living with the risk of radiation and what should be done in the situation which does not allow for an easy investigation. The narratives, as encapsulated sites of remembrance, interpretation, and aspiration, I show how the stories that people told me can also be sites of ‘transference.’ Taussig uses this Freudian psychoanalytic term to illustrate how the mise-en-scène of the archive consists of bits of record tapes and scattered notes, chips of time brought out glowing from dark files. According to Taussig, stories are repeated:

Here repetition is allowed to play ‘in almost complete freedom’ such that the obsessions driving history ‘are every point accessible to our intervention,’ so long as one recognises, in the words of the angel of history, that ‘history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.’ It was the angel’s fervent hope that against all the odds, the leap into the past would be into ‘the open air of history’ and not in the arena where the ruling class gives its commands (ibid.: 67).

By participating in repeated visits to the abandoned areas around Fukushima with former villagers and returnees, I heard similar stories regarding how what they searched for remained there, but what they found was a pile of debris and a ruined landscape open to the void (cf. chapter six). However, when it came to feelings of frustration, I tried to remember the words from Benjamin that are nicely paraphrased by Taussig: in attempting to leap into the ‘open air of history,’ it is necessary to “construct a closed archival space layered with the debris of the past from which such a leap may occur and it is this space—every bit as much as the space of marginal peasant experience alongside agribusiness—that has to be recognised and drawn into the equation of how it is that we construct the past while being constructed by it” (ibid.: 67).

The site of transference also indicates the space between the past and the present, the people who left the town permanently and the returnees, the interlocutors who are not able to forget the memory of the days, and myself, who never experienced the triple disaster on my own. As illustrated in some parts of this thesis (mainly chapters three and four), due to the global attention to the Fukushima nuclear disaster, some of the villagers became accustomed to being interviewed by researchers—both Japanese and international media journalists and some tourists—and there tended to be a protocol for narrating the
disaster in favour of resilience and recovery. In preparation for the Tokyo Olympics planned for 2020 but postponed due to the global pandemic (see chapter four), it became clear that doing this type of research would be a bit easier but not suitable for the kinds of questions that I ask in this thesis. In this regard, although I arrived in Japan with the status of a visiting research fellow at Tohoku University in Sendai, Miyagi prefecture, I rarely used these academic connections to find ‘proper’ research participants and to organise formal interviews and meetings. Instead, I used my neighbours in Sendai and a few local activists who were ‘nuclear refugees’ themselves and maintained connections with their hometowns to get in touch with the returnees.

However, most of the key interlocutors with whom I engaged came from accidental encounters while wandering around different villages. This happened partially by luck and given the situation that the population of many towns is dwindling, people tended to welcome ‘newcomers’ regardless of the purpose of their visit. For example, in one of the main areas where I stayed during fieldwork, Odaka, Minami soma, in Fukushima, compared to the population before the nuclear disaster, which was 12,842, there was less than one-fourth of the population that had come back to the village by the time of my fieldwork between 2018 and 2019. Moreover, more than half of the population now is over 65. In this context, it was relatively easy to be around people and to talk with them not only about the nuclear disaster but also about other facets of local history, culture, and their life stories. However, the beginning of fieldwork was slow, and it took a while to find interlocutors. During the initial period, I spent most of my time in archives and memorial centres in Sendai and Fukushima run by the local government and NGOs. Some workers from Sendai Mediatechque and the 3/11 Memorial centre in Arai became good advisors for my entire stay in Japan by helping me navigate local activist networks as well as their archives.

The main interlocutors in the thesis are approximately twelve people. I was able to visit their places regularly and participate in daily activities and routines. Yet, many other villagers who I met by chance in places such as bookshops, restaurants, bars, supermarkets, trains, gyms, and even on the streets, contributed to developing the thesis. Although I participated in several formal interviews organised by the local government and NGO workers, those recorded interviews hardly appear in my ethnography. Given the nature of ethnographic work and my research questions, it was most important to make a comfortable setting to share subtle emotions and feelings which are often avoided. Many of my closest interlocutors were female, but that was not necessarily intended. Given my positionality, as female, unmarried, and South Korean, I found it easier to be around other women and to talk with them. I also found that my identity as an Asian woman was often considered more important than the fact that I was there as a researcher from the UK. On many occasions, people treated me as a novice who did not have enough life skills to deal with natural disaster and life in rural Japan. Despite ongoing power dynamics between researcher and research participants, there were many moments when I felt that I was cared for.
and somewhat protected and it was common for my interlocutors to call me a friend. Despite my best efforts to explain what I was doing, I am not quite sure how many of them understood what ‘ethnographic’ research is. Also, as partially illustrated in my thesis (see chapter four), the fukkō (“resilience”) project brought many young former residents back to their hometown—many of them were relatively younger females with no other siblings, and they were motivated to return to take responsibility for ‘caring’ for their parents and their suffering hometown. This raised a question regarding gender dynamics in Japan through the image of a female saviour or sacrificer in times of crisis. All the women engaged in care-work in the town also helped me make connections with the elderly to talk with them. While they visited the elderly who need basic support and some company, my female interlocutors would often allow me to join their visit. They also helped me understand the dialect of Fukushima and Miyagi, which was unfamiliar to me.

One summer day in 2019 particularly stands out from the time of fieldwork and continues to haunt me. I was walking around a town in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture. In the town, there is a village called Kamaya, which stands on the back of a great river, Kitakami. As mentioned earlier with a reference to Ivy’s (1995) work, the area is notoriously famous for ghost stories, goblins, and the bitter cold in the winter. Even today, it remains a remote and marginal place, and since the earthquake and tsunami devastated the entire area, the town is completely cut off from public transportation. After travelling by several local buses, a ride from a former villager, and miles of walking, I arrived at the Okawa elementary school. It was one of many trips that I made during the fieldwork to see the ruins of the triple disaster. The school had been destroyed by the earthquake and the tsunami. There were only vehicles for construction works around, and the entire area was full of dust from heavy industrial equipment. Most tragically, it was the place where many students and teachers lost their lives on 11th March 2011. On the day of the disaster, they were instructed to run out of the school building and wait on the playground which had been designated as a local shelter. However, most of them were then engulfed in the rushing water. Along with the tragic deaths of many children and teachers, what made the place popular following the disaster were the many ghost stories that emerged about encounters with people who had died but did not realise that they were dead. One journalist named Richard Lloyd Parry collected the stories and published a book in 2017 titled, *Ghosts of the Tsunami*. On the afternoon of my visit, while walking around the school and nearby forest, wondering if there might be any ghosts around, a police car approached me. According to the police officers who stopped me, they told me that someone had called them to report a danger. It was not clear what kind of danger there was—whether I was the one in danger, or I was the danger to them. The incident made me and some of my interlocutors speculate later. Some people who had lived in the area before the disaster told me that the person who called might have thought that I was one of the ghosts. This is a question that I continue to think about, and which remains unresolved. Although this thesis aims to explore the ‘ghostly matters’ after the triple
disaster, I continue to wonder if I was a ghost for those living in Fukushima and Miyagi—bringing back memories of the event.

All the names in this thesis are pseudonyms except for a researcher and writer (in chapter three) whose name and work are already available to the public. Even in the cases where my interlocutors tended to understand the nature of ethnographic research, I have decided to use pseudonyms for all of them given the negative stigmatisation that is often associated with Fukushima and its residents after the disaster. Two main areas where I conducted fieldwork are marked in red in the map below:
Ch.1 On Thresholds: the sentimental home and a question of the real

“The real war started after the war ended.”
Yamaoka Michiko, a survivor of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima
(Todeschini 2001: 104)

In this chapter, I explore the returnees’ efforts to rebuild a sense of mundanity in the ‘ruins’ of the nuclear disaster and how visible and invisible borders drawn by the state and TEPCO (Tokyo Electronic Power Company) shape different senses of danger and safety. Through focusing on the ambiguity of borders which not only indicate places that are safe or dangerous but also different levels of sensibility, I develop the idea of “threshold experience” (Benjamin: 1982) as an analytical framework for rethinking the complexity of daily life and the experiences of border-crossing in the disaster-affected areas. Considering anthropological work on liminality and sociocultural and political borders which have focused on the symbols of rituals, performances, and taboos (Turner 1969; Douglas 1966) as well as governmentality and surveillance (Foucault 2003[1976]; 2008 [1979]; Fassin 2001; 2011), I discuss how the everyday experiences of the returnees at multiple thresholds are not limited to the realm of rituals, symbols, and state control; rather, they are related to sensorial attachment and corporeal senses that often complicate existing borders and boundaries. This means that borders and boundaries do not only exist as an external force that is imposed by the state and TEPCO depending on the overall distance from the Fukushima nuclear powerplant and the degree of completed decontamination work which regulates aspects of life; rather, the borders have been internalised as a matter of one’s own thoughts and senses. I show how the borders have become a condition of life that shapes all aspects of everyday life and pervades the returnees’ sentiments and ideas of being at home. The perception of internal and external risk and danger are constituted through those borders and boundaries, and, at the same time, they have been challenged through different interpretations regarding what the risk of radiation might bring to life and what substances they convey.

As much anthropological research focusing on borders and boundaries as material regulations related to governmentality and sovereignty shows, the mobility of a population is often subjected to designated borders by the administration and the state, and the research reveals how those divisions produce specific types of knowledge and practice which shape the population. Fassin (2001; 2011), for example, calls this process the ‘biopolitics of otherness’ which is inspired by Foucault’s concept of biopolitics that constantly produces what is considered to be external and internal. The complex actions and reactions of drawing and crossing borders distinctively limits life to certain realms and reduces the population to an object. Foucault observes that biopolitics “brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculation and made knowledge power an agent of transformation of human life” (1979: 143).
Yet the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ borders that are drawn by the level of radiation in Fukushima raises a slightly different question which cannot be fully grasped by the biopolitics of life. Rather, the entire area seems to be a ‘zone of indistinction’ (Agamben 1995) where threads of borders intersect, and in this zone, life and death, and safety and risk, are always arbitrary. The borders and biopolitics that divide life are expressed through internalised feelings of uncertainty and fear, and, as my ethnography reveals, some returnees even expressed the feeling of confusion regarding what we call the real. Yet, through participating in several border crossings in the village, I ask if life in the ‘zone of indistinction’ is not the only condition of life; rather, might it trigger many returnees’ desires to navigate the contaminated world in order to recover some sense of normalcy? What is the line between what is considered to be dangerous and safe? How might the real and unreal make some people cross borders sporadically or periodically in order to recover their sense of mundanity and of being at home? Since the government and TEPCO declared that the decontamination work was completed in 2016, there has been no ‘officially’ recognised risk of radiation in Odaka, Minami soma. However, due to various political and economic interests, the standard safety level of radiation has continually changed over the years from 1 to 20 mSv per year and even 100 mSv for the nuclear powerplant workers (Jobin 2011; 2012; Ogawa 2014. about the controversies on the safe allowance of radiation for different populations, in particular, for children, see Kosako’s letter of resignation as a government special advisor on radiation safety in Asia-Pacific Journal Feature 2012). Moreover, many returnees claim that it is not possible to contain the radiation within the specific areas through certain borders and materials such as radiation measurement devices, plastic bags, and water tanks.

Morimoto (2022: 71) calls this “a multi-scalar ecopolitics of contamination and containment” which has been changing the returnees’ everyday experiences of being at home. The porosity of radiation indicates the impossibility of containing the nuclear fallout and the risk of radiation, and it challenges many returnees’ perceptions of the normal and abnormal as well as the real and unreal or surreal. Morimoto relates this confusion to the term, en, which speaks to a Japanese ontological perception of the human and non-human world. In attempting to challenge existing ‘scientific and bureaucratic borders’ which are designed to contain the potential risk of radiation within specific places and materials, Morimoto and some other researchers have emphasised the ontological relatedness of human and non-humans in Japanese socio-cultural and spiritual contexts with the term, en (Morimoto 2015; 2022. Also see Jenson et al. 2013; 2016). By raising ontological questions associated with the term, en, which involves “a network of hidden threads and traces, throwing people, things, animals, places, events, and the like on a possible (and perhaps fated) collision course, like rolling dice” (Nozawa 2015: 392), this research criticises the state’s policies which are based on technoscience and narrow understandings of local ecology, and it shows how the disaster has damaged the larger web of being. According to Morimoto (ibid.), the technoscientific approach fails to recognise the salience of local knowledge and the sense of en which indicates connectedness to the land, ancestors, nonhuman others, and the
environment. In citing a wild boar hunter’s words in Odaka district, Minamisoma, Morimoto shows that what many ‘insiders’ are really concerned about is “contrary to what outsiders fixate on about Fukushima (…) the practical obstacle of living here is the wildlife. Not radiation!” (ibid.: 69).

However, this chapter does not simply argue that ‘local knowledge and lived-experiences’ are opposite to the technoscientific understanding nor does it presume that the ‘local people’ have always been traversing the dichotomous relations between humans and the environment. Instead, by focusing on threshold experiences, what this chapter suggests is that life exists both within and beyond the borders. Contrary to taking the dichotomy between local knowledge and technoscience and presuming definite connectedness and disconnectedness, I show how people are concerned about radiation and at the same time manage to build their lives despite the concerns. These two aspects do not eliminate one another; ambivalent actions such as crossing/erasing the borders and creating their own safe boundaries coexist.

In order to make sense of the incomprehensible world around them, the villagers effectively use different modes of sense and sometimes combine them, which are distinguished through the Japanese terms, *chikaku* (“intellectual sense”) and *kankaku* (“emotional and corporeal sense”). This means that despite recognising relatedness in the mode of *en*, some of the villagers still use ‘technoscientific’ measurements like Geiger machines or a radiation map to navigate the village which is simultaneously a sentimental home and a pollutant. One of my interlocutors described her hometown, Fukushima, as ‘*yume no sekai*’ (a dream-like world blurring the sense of time and space, safety and danger. The returnees’ life in a “mutant ecology” (Masco 2006) gives rise to questions of new human existence in ‘ontological need’ (Adorno, cited in Mazzarella 2017: 17)—that is, how to connect life to the remnants of the disaster and how to recover their sense of time and space in a world that has shifted.

In relation to ‘the zone of indistinction,’ what I propose with the term, threshold experience, is an anthropological genealogy of liminal/corporeal experiences that pay attention to in-between spaces and experiences that cannot fully be comprehended through given boundaries. By examining everyday experiences in between incompatible extremes such as fear in the devastated ruins and everyday aesthetic practices in their beloved homes, I explore how everyday aesthetic practice creates contradictory movements to enter and exit the thresholds and how the villagers experience the multiplicity of realities that goes beyond existing borders and boundaries drawn by the state and scientists. In so doing, I ask how those experiences could be extended to a different sense of the real and to a mode of being which is open to a possibility of the political which connects all the beings in abandonment and at the edge.

Thinking through the displacement and re-settlement caused by the triple disaster and its ongoing aftermath, what I show in this chapter is an entanglement of destruction and construction. By sharing local efforts to reset the sense of everyday life through aesthetic miniatures in Odaka, Minamisoma, I
ask what the meaning is of being in a world that has been broken, and at the same time, participating in the process of composing and re-creating that world. In other words, how do the returnees live simultaneously both within and without the borders, the thresholds of entrance and exit, which require different modes of being? To what extent do they construct the environment and to what extent does the environment construct them? How does a new reality after the disaster come into everyday life and/or departs from them? What does life look like when the exceptional has become the normal, and what is the meaning of everydayness in a place where it is the least possible?

a. A journey to the nuclear villages

Earthquake! It was 5 a.m. one day in early March 2019 when I was awakened by a tremor in my room. My bed was slowly shaking, and I heard a subtle sound which everything around me had made. Was it the sound of the dislocation of the world? Books on shelves were falling down and the door was grating. While everything was being dislocated, I was trying to ‘locate’ myself in the room. In addition to a disaster alarm from the government which appeared on my mobile a few seconds before tremor began, Kiko, one of my interlocutors who I was supposed to meet that day, sent me a text, “Are you okay? Please stay safe!” Kiko told me that sometimes she is more afraid of the sound of the alarm from everybody’s mobiles than the actual earthquakes themselves. Every time smaller or larger earthquakes happened, she and some other interlocutors would often make a joke that the quake only surprises Gaijin (foreigners/outsiders). “We [Japanese] have no fear of earthquakes (…) we know how to deal with the tremors.” In addition to the Japanese distinction between uchi and soto (“inside and outside”, cf. Bachnik 1994; Sugimoto 2014), experiences and perceptions of natural disaster were often used to illustrate the ‘differences’ between me and them. They see me as a visitor, a foreigner, and an outsider who did not know how to deal with an unexpected tremor that early morning in March.

Despite confidence in dealing with the quakes, the aftershocks of the triple disaster from 2011 seem to still shake their life. Although it has been eight years since the disaster and three years since the return process began, most villagers are still trying to find a place to settle down. “Once life was wrecked, it will never be the same as it was before.” It was a common narrative of the ‘nuclear refugees’ or ‘nuclear gypsies’ (Horie 1979; Jobin 2011; 2012; 2017; Katayama 2020) who had to flee from their homes after the nuclear meltdown in 2011. When Kiko decided to return to Minamisoma, she believed she could recover the broken life because she knows how to deal with tremors in life. However, Kiko said, “It was… something very different. It wasn’t just an earthquake. If it was, everything could have been a lot easier (…) Not just scary but very lonely (…) feeling completely disconnected from others and the world. And I feel that everybody had forgotten Fukushima.” From the night of the nuclear disaster to now, everything seems uncertain. On that day eight years ago, she didn’t know what to do, so she simply waited until the next morning and sealed all the windows and doors from the inside. “It was a cold night
in early March and there was some snow mingled with the rain.” Her body in a blanket sometimes shivered by aftershocks while the dogs in the village barked all night. She continued, “it’s not only the earthquake that made me shudder (but also) there was something more that night.”

The situation was full of uncertainty for everyone in the days following the nuclear disaster. McNeill shares the words from Noriyuki Ōgi, a head of broadcasting during the triple disaster, about the nuclear crisis: “Overwhelmingly the problem was lack of information. Even TEPCO and the government didn’t know the whole picture. We didn’t have enough time to evaluate their reports and so we didn’t know how far we should go in telling the danger of the situation. We were relying on TEPCO and the government and because they were not sure, we were not sure” (2013: 136-137). And Noriyuki continued, “On the afternoon of 12 March, the police only reported that the sound of an explosion had been heard. TEPCO, NISA (the Nuclear Industrial Safety Agency), and the government said nothing. Looking at the screen, our reporter noticed what was happening and said, ’Just in case, anyone who is outside please go inside and stay out of the rain.’ Even though we didn’t have any proof, we went further than we needed to” (ibid.).

Unlike other natural disasters Kiko had experienced, the triple disaster, which consisted of the earthquake, tsunami, and the nuclear meltdown, seemed to continue sending endless aftershocks. “I didn’t know about the explosion (…) everybody believed that the situation was under control (…) what has been really disturbing to me for many years now is that (…) I was rained and snowed on after the disaster.” Kiko still feels anxious that the rain and snow exposed her to nuclear fallout. A couple of nights after the explosion and the nuclear meltdown, the evacuation was finally ordered between the 12th and 15th of March 2011. Since then, Kiko has moved around to find safer places and has crossed several lines in the process to avoid the invisible diffusion of radiation. The small village of Odaka has been divided by several borders, and the afterlife of the disaster does not indicate any particular moment of tremor but instead its shadows and its reverberations for almost ten years.

On the morning of the earthquake that I experienced, I had planned to see Kiko to visit the areas around the Fukushima nuclear powerplant including the area that remained a hard-to-return zone. Kiko and some other villagers helped me get permission from the local authority with the restriction that we would only pass some of the areas by car without stopping. In the early morning, I took a train, Joban line, from Sendai to Odaka, Minamisoma, Fukushima Prefecture. The Joban line runs approximately parallel to the Pacific Ocean, passing Miyagi, Fukushima, Chiba, Ibaraki, and finally ends at Nippori, in Arakawa, Tokyo. It was completed in 1905 and was used to transfer war supplies. In the past, the Joban coal mine in Iwaki, Fukushima was flourishing, and it was full of mine workers. However, since the decline of the coal industry in the 1960s, the area has experienced an economic depression. A Japanese film, Hula Girls (2006), based on a real story in Iwaki, shows how people in Fukushima faced
unemployment due to the change in energy resources. The train, which had transferred rice and other resources to the capital during war time and transferred coal and nuclear powerplant workers in the post-war era, closed in the wake of the 2011 disaster. The train, which recently reopened, is now almost empty. In the empty train, I remembered the bitter words of Shousuke, a carpenter in Odaka, who said, “Tohoku (north-eastern Japan) has long been exploited by the central government: rice, other agricultural products, young people for the war and economic growth, and now the entire area is ruined.” On the train ride, I saw long stretches of typical landscapes out the window—a mixture of houses and rice fields, and by the time the mountains and deeper green coloured forests unfolded, I arrived at Odaka, which had been transformed into one of the ‘nuclear power mura (“villages”).’ The famous slogan ‘genshiroku wa akarui mirai no enerugi’ (“nuclear energy is the bright future energy”) on the gate to Futaba, a town near the powerplant, once advertised the promise and hope of the area.

[The slogan was completely removed in 2016].

The term ‘nuclear power mura,’ which is also called the ‘nuclear power pentagon’ (Kazashi 2012), refers to a collusive relationship between the nuclear powerplant industry, government bureaucracy, politicians, scientists, and the mainstream media. It has appeared in public discussions with an emphasis on safety and the peaceful use of atomic energy. It is also why many villagers were able to live so closely to the powerplant. In summer, they used to swim on the coast next to the plant and there was a fishing nursery that reused the heat from the cooling water of the nuclear powerplant. “What we heard before, and even after the Fukushima nuclear disaster was only like (…) everything is okay (…) they were all ‘specialists of the nuclear,’ so how can we not trust them?” Shousuke remembers those days. The village was charged with hope and high expectations that the powerplant might be like the heroic character of a nuclear-powered robot from a popular cartoon, Tetsuwan Atomu (“The mighty Atom,”

11 https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210320/p2a/00m/0na/006000c
English title is Astro Boy) which came out in 1951. Like the little boy, a half human and half robot, who has enormous bravery and energy, the plant was expected to bring ‘power’ that will ‘save’ the village.

However, like many other stories, reality deviated from the cartoon story. Wakamasu Jotarō, a poet who lives in Minamisoma, Fukushima, has been writing about the story of war and post-war Japan, colonisation of Asia, A-bomb victims, and the flourishing economy paid by inner colonisation and nuclear energy, and he tells a chronicle of the nuclear villages. According to his poems, the area called Hamadoori, which includes Futaba and Okuma and where the Fukushima Daichi nuclear powerplant is located, lagged behind during the hyper economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Most men in the town had to leave for Tokyo and other places to find jobs. Attracted by economic remuneration, the Fukushima prefecture agreed to sell the land to TEPCO in November 1960, and the construction of the nuclear powerplant started in December 1966. And, finally, the area was transformed into a nuclear village in June 1968. In his poems, the voice of Shousuke echoes, “We let the wolf in the town (...) Nobody knew what the nuclear powerplant was,” (...) how much risk it will bring to the villages.” The merit had been exaggerated while the risk was neglected. Shousuke compared the powerplant to the story of the boy who cried wolf.

Wakamatsu (2012: 174-177, my translation) likewise expressed irony in his poem about how the dream of prosperity was projected on the powerplant.

The powerplant will bring

More jobs
The village should become more lively

12 https://tezukaosamu.net/en/anime/30.html
The advantage over anything is
The large amount of grants and taxes
Let’s build a home for the elderly with hot springs
How is it?
Three birds with one stone
No, four birds with one stone
(…)
It’s the best
There is no such thing as the joy of the elderly
(…)
When the alarm rings
Just go to the company for the mass hot water manufacturing and disposal
Attach an instrument called an alarm meter to your neck
There is nothing to worry about
Only thing to do is clean up with a dustpan and a mop.

But of course, the dustpan and the mop were not enough to save the place from nuclear meltdown. The entire area has been designated as non-inhabitable for at least five years or more. One of the towns, Odaka, which means small hill, is located just 15km away from the Fukushima nuclear powerplant. The town is part of a larger area called soma, which means horse. The area is famous for horses and for a three-day samurai horse riding festival in July. Since the nuclear disaster in 2011, the small towns in Fukushima, which face the Pacific and are surrounded on other sides by forests, have been divided by several official and unofficial borders. The village of Odaka was under an evacuation order due to the high level of contamination for five years—from March 2011 to 2016. The evacuation order was lifted in June 2016 when the decontamination work by the government was completed. However, despite the government’s emphasis on the safe level of radiation, only 20 former villagers immediately came back in 2016 and less than one-fourth of the population had come back to the village by the time of my fieldwork between 2018 and 2019. Currently, in February of 2022, there are about 6,792 people in Odaka, whereas its population was 12,842 before the disaster.\(^\text{13}\) Around half of the population is over 65.

b. The politics of the invisible

The main reason some have returned, and others have not, is not likely due to the ‘invisibility of radiation.’ As the local wild boar hunter said above, radiation is imperceptible which allows people to ignore potential risks. The villagers’ different levels of sensibility often intersect with age, gender, and

\(^{13}\) https://www.city.minamisoma.lg.jp/portal/admin/minamisomashinitsuite/7181.html
occupation. Kuchinskaya (2012; 2014), who has been working in Chernobyl, asks a similar question regarding the (in)visibility of radiation and what makes it appear in public knowledge. Her interlocutors also show different levels of sensibility and how some risk is never articulated and so becomes nonexistent. According to one of her interlocutors, only foreigners are passionate about Chernobyl problems, but “not the local people” (Kuchinskaya 2014: 19). This is probably because, as Aleksievich writes about the inability of describing the experience of being exposed to radiation in Belarus, “something occurred for which we do not yet have a conceptualisation, or analogies, or experience, something to which our vision and hearing, even our vocabulary, is not adapted. Our entire inner instrument is tuned to see, hear or touch. But none of that is possible” (2005: 20). As many who live around Chernobyl and Fukushima share, the impossibility of sensory perception of radiation has been a deceptive factor regarding what the risk is, its influence on the body, and how it might be sensed. In short, the contaminated environment and materials look exactly like uncontaminated ones, and thus, it has sometimes been reduced to a matter of belief as one of the residents near Chernobyl expresses below:

“It’s a new world. Everything is different. Is that the radiation’s fault, or what? What’s it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? What colour is it? Some people say it has no colour and no smell. Like earth. But if colourless, then it’s like God. God is everywhere, but you can’t see him. They scare us!” (Alexievich 2005: 51)

Kuchinskaya (2014: 21) points out one of the reasons that makes the radiation invisible is “the general suppression of civic society under the Soviet regime,” and given the situation, the public attention and knowledge of the hazard is structured by socio-political matters. In this regard, Petryna (2004; 2013) suggests the term, ‘biological citizenship’ focusing on the socio-political contexts in which scientific knowledge is made. By exploring how scientific knowledge is inextricably connected to the state building process and marketisation under the Soviet Regime, Petryna asks how certain types of risk and illness become forms of ‘common sense’ and how images of risk and suffering of the victims are becoming “increasingly objectified in their legal, economic, and political dimensions” (ibid. 2004: 251). In short, the term biological citizenship encapsulates the processes of the institutionalisation of the bodies, illness, legal and ethical struggles after the Chernobyl disaster. What has produced ‘new biological uncertainties’ is not only radiation exposure but also political management.

Some might claim that the experiences of being exposed and displaced in Fukushima might differ from the ones in Chernobyl. Although there is a shared imperceptibility of radiation and ‘coherent perspectives’ (Fowlkes and Miller 1987) between Chernobyl and Fukushima, TEPCO and the Japanese government claimed that, unlike the Chernobyl case, the entire situation is under control in Japan and that sufficient economic compensation has been made. TEPCO paid more than 9.7 trillion yen (approximately 92 billion dollars) to the victims of the nuclear disaster, and it is the largest damage pay-
out ever made to such victims in any industrial disaster (Miyazaki 2021).14 And, they also emphasise that the decommissioning process for the reactors has been quite successful.15 In addition to the financial support, ongoing anti-nuclear movements by several people such as artists and environmental activists (Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2016) and non-government organisations around Japan (Slater 2015; Toivonen 2015), have helped the villagers’ struggles and fukko (“resilience”) projects. Some of the NGO workers and government employees that I met during fieldwork told me that “there is not such a political issue regarding the Fukushima nuclear disaster because we tried to offer all the support for the villagers to create a better future and hope (…), and most of all, we all [Japanese] work equally together as one to get through the hardship.”

However, in addition to the ‘invisible damage’ caused by the disaster such as loss of connection to home and communities and emotional and mental stresses related to the evacuation, the focus on material and financial support has not completely solved all the politics of the invisibility. Beside the issue of the unequal distribution of reimbursement given the amount of property owned and salary lost, there are remaining borders related to the invisibility of radiation which are often not recognised by legal, medical, and scientific categories that continue to divide the villagers. The process of return was not as smooth as the government and TEPCO had hoped. In relation to the controversy regarding the effectiveness of the decontamination work, what has been waiting for the returnees was a place of chaos rather than the everydayness of home which they had been longing for. Unlike the hopeful images from TEPCO and the government website comparing the devastated landscape at the time of the disaster to the current one, the village which has been emptied for five years remains unfrequented. The first group of returnees were the elderly who had been exhausted by refugee life. And some villagers who were not able to afford life in bigger cities with the compensation money followed them. When the government and TEPCO lifted the evacuation order in 2016, it was no longer allowed for anyone to claim the subsidies who are ‘voluntary evacuees.’

With mixed feelings of fear and excitement, what has been waiting for them was a place that seemed to be a labyrinth of forgotten things, abandoned houses, and abruptly appearing animals and invasive plants. There are many entrances to the maze, and the village is not completely filled. A few villagers have come back, but most others have not. The village is thus a mixture of abandoned houses and recently renovated ones. Abandoned cars and recently planted pots coexist. Some parts of the village, mainly central areas, are surprisingly well-managed by local authorities to encourage the former villagers’ return. Other parts, however, including mountains, hills, and riversides etc., remain wastelands, which makes detecting radioactivity as difficult as not getting lost. Despite all the

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14 https://thebulletin.org/2021/03/a-fukushima-lesson-victim-compensation-schemes-need-updating/
15 https://www.tepco.co.jp/fukushima_hq/
differences, the fear of radiation seemed to roam in the village like ‘God’ in Chernobyl, and it constantly haunts the returnees. Moreover, the spectral in the village is not only radiation; the sense of time and space sometimes collapses. “The entire area looked like it was frozen for five years, and we had to throw away everything that might be contaminated,” Kiko said. She remembers how the old homes transformed into brand-new ones, and the fluorescent lights that streamed through some of windows shed light on the long darkness in the village on the day of her return.

c. ‘Everydayness’ of the village

Even on the second day of return, most people realised that life in the village can never be the same as before the disaster and the definition of everydayness has changed. Everyday life has somehow become a wandering or even an investigation. Kokone, who is an owner of a local Ryokan (Inn) called Fubaya, expressed her five years of struggling for a return to the mundane life/home as ‘kenkyu (research).’ “We tried to be experts of radiation,” Kokone bitterly said. Kokone and her spouse, Takeru, did not return until June 2016 after the evacuation order was lifted. However, while their neighbourhood was still off-limits, they had made repeated short visits to maintain their Ryokan and planted flowers outside the nearby railway station in case of return. Also, they have regularly monitored the level of radiation around the village. “We wanted to finish the life of refuge and return to our Nikijō seikatsu (everyday),” Takeru added.

“Kenkyu for Nikijō seikatsu (research for everyday life).” That is the most desired wish for them since the five years of the abrupt evacuation, and it is what they are still struggling for. Kokone told me that she made a trip to Chernobyl, Ukraine two times in 2013 and 2017. When some groups that consisted of anti-nuclear activists suggested the trip for the first time to her, she hesitated. She didn’t know much about Chernobyl, but the more she makes a visit to her previous home and considers a return, she felt that there is need to ‘know’ about radiation and ‘how to deal with it.’ It was almost like a ‘research trip.’ Kokone continued, “I wanted to learn how to live in the contaminated area and how to clean it.” She visited the villages around Chernobyl and met children in the elementary school to see how those people maintain daily life despite the devastated nuclear disaster. The only conversation she could have was a simple greeting, but she said that seeing the children and farmers was enough for her. “They smiled (…) They gave me a hope, a hope that it’s not the end.” She learned from some local farmers near Chernobyl that rapeseed plants absorb less radiation, and they have been good for changing the mood of the town. “Because the bright yellow colour is a symbol of hope.” That’s why Kokone and other early returners have been working hard to cultivate flowers in the abandoned farmland. “But the flowers were not able to replace the people who had not returned home.” She missed the thriving atmosphere that the former villagers used to share. It was taken-for-granted for them since the Ryokan was the oldest local inn in the town and has been a central place for villagers’ meetings and events for four generations. The photos
Kokone put on the wall of the kitchen are letters from children from the village saying how much Kokone’s food is delicious. However, the disaster and its following consequences have changed everything, and mundaneness is something that people have to seek to maintain. To recover the sense of everydayness, Kokone and Takeru decorated the walls in their house with many ‘familiar’ photos of the past: that of their ancestors, family, friends, and other villagers. It is as if they are still around. They made boundaries around their gardens and continued to cook breakfast whether or not there is a guest. Kokone and Takeru emphasise how significant everyday chores are for them. Otherwise, their yaruki (“volition”) goes down.

Despite all the effort, their ‘new’ everyday life is often interrupted by the perplexing present. Kokone summarises her first couple of months: living with irradiated surroundings is something like an obstacle race. With a concern for remaining radiation, it was recommended to test all the vegetables and rice etc. before cooking them. Buying food became a test. Walking on the street seemed like stumbling along. Farming was not possible. Do not enter signs were everywhere. People never explore forests and mountains anymore since the decontamination work was not complete. Everyone talked about radiation, but nobody could see what it is. They wanted to be ‘experts’ of radiation, but it was not quite possible, and the villagers have become divided. When they watched local news after dinner as usual, they would often hear an angry voice from their neighbours and friends criticising an evacuation order or reclamation of contaminated soil.

The disaster was not just a past event, but rather, became a chronic feature of daily life. Thus, the problem was not only how to return to their everyday life but also the meaning of everydayness itself is not the same. Kokone soon realised that it is not possible to go anywhere without a Geiger machine and life has become a test. What remains after the disaster in the village is a pervasive fear of radiation, and thus, “The village is now like Jikkenshitsu (“a laboratory”)!” While I was watching local television news during breakfast, one of the villagers, Koichi, criticised the government policy that proposed to reuse the contaminated soil for construction work. “We are animals in a laboratory!” Kokone and Takeru stared at the screen without words. Their friend Koichi, who was typically a peaceful local farmer, expressed anger in a way that was quite unfamiliar for Kokone and Takeru. People changed along with the landscape. That’s certainly not the everydayness they had sought for. All the mundane activities have been disturbed by the concern for radiation and that has become the norm in the village. The meaning of everyday life has been reversed. As Debord’s famously addressed, if the everyday is ‘the measure of all things’ (1962), everyday life, which is synonymous with the habitual, the ordinary, and the mundane does not work here, and/or, the habitual and ordinary sense of everydayness has stopped. As Kokone and Takeru illustrate, they had to learn how to adjust to the exceptional which has become the norm.
Given the situation, what is the everydayness that people talk about in the village? Is it mundane, or is the village the exceptional/liminal as suggested by the term ‘laboratory?’ Does the term, everydayness, include both? How do people navigate the risk-scape through their ‘habitual’ senses and perceptions? If following the definition of everyday which has been regarded as an indisputable, non-negotiable reality, and the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavour, Odaka seems to be a place of the extra-ordinary with several boundaries that compose it. Felski (2000) proposes that everyday life expresses a specific sense of time and is distinguished by an absence of boundaries and is based on a taken-for-granted grounding—a sense of time and space in which humans and non-humans navigate their habitual perceptions. “Everyday life is also a secular and democratic concept. Secular because it conveys the sense of a world leached of transcendence; the everyday is everyday because it is no longer connected to the miraculous, the magical, or the sacred (…) Everyday life is typically distinguished from the exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed. The distinctiveness of the everyday lies in its lack of distinction and differentiation; it is the air one breathes, the taken-for-granted backdrop, the common sensical basis of all human activities” (Felski ibid.: 79-80).

Odaka seems to a place where the very term ‘everyday’ as the ‘common sensical basis of all human activities’ is challenged. People are going to the supermarket to buy food. There are recently opened restaurants, a café, and a bookshop. But farmers can’t farm. Most people lost their jobs. Kokone and Takeru open their Ryokan without expecting a guest. All rice fields are abandoned. People sometimes talk about ghosts from the abandoned taxis which have been parked for many years. “Everyday life seems to be everywhere, yet nowhere” (Felski 2000: 78). If Odaka is a place where everyday life is not possible, what does that mean for ordinary life in the one of most extraordinary of places? Or, as Veena Das asks through the idea of the ordinary in terms of Wittgenstein’s linguistic and philosophical investigation, “where would we look for the ordinary—does the ordinary always have the appearance of the ordinary?” (2007: 71).

d. In between: Yume no Sekai (“A dream world”)

If life has become like being in a ‘cage’ and everydayness is nowhere in town, what many villagers share is the strategic making of boundaries and borders as their own. It was the first thing that Kiko tried to ‘teach’ me on my first day in Odaka. Her teaching was not about how to ‘avoid’ all the possible presences of radiation but how to, despite the concerns, not be overwhelmed by them. She told me that what she has learned over the past 10 years is that it’s also equally important to enjoy Odaka by stepping back from the worries and making a disconnection from the ‘harsh reality.’ She has been trying to find things in a day that remind her of a better time and life and then she could be released. “At some point, I realised that I can’t stay sealed inside only with anxiety and fear. That’s not a life.” She was quite assertive.
Kiko was standing in front of the station wearing a brownish beige coat and red jumper. I tried to remember what I had heard from my interlocutor, Mai, who introduced Kiko to me. According to her, Kiko is a woman in her mid-to-late forties and has some experience working for NGOs. She had lived in Tokyo, and when she was in 20s, for some reason, moved to Fukushima in 2008 where she originally came from. “Maybe she wanted to have a peaceful life running a guest house like an airbnb thing,” Mai guessed. Kiko was quite different from others I met around Tokyo. The stories that I had heard from the first two months of fieldwork around Tokyo were about the ‘medical’ concerns about radiation and discourses on ‘being a good mother,’ the so-called “radiation brain moms” protecting their kids and family from the existing risk (Kimura, A. 2016; 2019; also see Morita et al., 2013; Plantin 2015; Polleri 2016; 2017). With a ‘radiation brain’ that was saturated by rumours and anxiety over food security after the nuclear meltdown, the mothers had been struggling to be a ‘good mother.’ They worked actively against the use of agricultural stuff from the Fukushima Prefecture for school meals, shared a radiation map and hot spots of contamination, and arranged workshops to learn how to use a Geiger machine to detect radiation. As Kimura highlights, the mothers claim themselves to be ‘citizen scientists,’ a discourse that takes its shape around the complicated relationship between science, food security, gender, and politics in post-Fukushima Japan. When I shared my research plan to meet the returnees in Fukushima, these mothers expressed a feeling of concern with subtle nuances of denunciation. According to them, the decision to return is not ‘rational,’ and some used very strong language that retuning to the contaminated town with children is ‘irresponsible’ and ‘ignorant.’ If the media shows an image of returnees in Fukushima, there are typically terrible replies under the page saying how they are ‘insane.’ Kiko might be regarded as one of these.

Apart from all the concerns and complex discourses, and unlike those who desperately try to avoid any possibility of exposure, Kiko was waiting for me outside under the spring sunshine that was getting brighter. This is the town which is one of the most contaminated—but for Kiko, it was normal. She even did not ask me why I wanted to visit the restricted area. She treated me like a friend who wanted to look around the area. In a van that was a little too big for just two of us, Kiko prepared a map of Fukushima and some other documents that we needed to show in order to cross the borders. “Many gates and borders still exist but let’s enjoy our journey. I have lots of beautiful places to share with you.” As if it was a normal trip, Kiko started driving. Whereas Kiko kept a smile on her face and played the radio to listen to music, the more we moved closer to the powerplant, the more it became clear that we were moving closer to the core of the disaster. After following some labyrinthine roads and showing our document for permission to enter the area to the gatekeepers at the entrance to the town of Futaba, unfamiliar scenery unfolded before my eyes.

The gatekeepers—they were two men probably in their 20s wearing a helmet and a mask with a dark blue uniform. Although they had to glance over the permission letter, it was clear that they were more
interested in the notebook and camera in my hand, and they ridiculously posed for a photo by making a V with their fingers. It seemed that they thought I was a journalist. “Do they know how it might be ‘dangerous’ working in this area?” I asked Kiko since I realised that they don’t wear any protective clothing despite spending all day outside—“Yeah, they are standing there all day (…) probably hired by TEPCO (…) as a part-time job. Maybe (they) have never been to Fukushima before.” We didn’t know how much they knew about the disaster in 2011 given their age. While leering at the gatekeepers, Kiko began to accelerate and we entered the world of, according to Kiko’s witty words, time-travel.

There were deserted streets, abandoned houses, old shops. Piles of faded newspapers from the day of the disaster were hanging out from opened windows and doors. Blouses and shirts still hanging in a laundry shop indicated traces of human life. “Everything seems exactly what I imagined ‘the nuclear ghost town’ to be—a stereotyped image of nuclear disaster,” I thought to myself. As if she was able to hear what I was thinking, Kiko said, “Just around the corner, there is my favourite tree that used to blossom the best flowers in town (…) The tree makes me go back to the past before the disaster. I can still smell the scent of the flowers (…) I often stop there to think of good things and walk around—that is, the flowers, seasons, people that will come back someday or probably have never even left.” The cherry blossom tree around the corner was a milestone for her bringing the world and faded textbooks from kindergarten which reminded her of the sound of children laughing. She spent her childhood in the town. It was a time of flourishing—an economic bubble was rapidly inflating, and swirling flower petals seemed to celebrate the bright future that the powerplant might bring to the town. I tried to imagine Kiko’s childhood in this hopeful nuclear village. About forty years later, now we see the elementary school that she graduated from is part of the restricted area. Kiko continued, “my grandmother used to wait for me to go back home together (…) Every time when I cross these borders, I feel as if I am drifting on the line between reality and dream (…) It was absurd that there was no one in the village after the accident, but cherry blossoms and trees were flourishing. (It was) really beautiful. It did not look like a scene of catastrophe but rather, a dream-world.”

_Yume no Sekai (“A dream-world”)_ mediated by certain places and objects. Kiko frequently said those words and that’s the reason she crosses the borders almost every day despite the risk. She wants to see her former village, flourishing with flowers and trees as she even enjoys confronting some wild animals. For Kiko, those abandoned ruins and objects have the capacity to provoke memories of the dim and remote past that was not defined by the days of disaster. “Some people might say that Fukushima is dying. I thought so. So, I didn’t visit here for a while since the evacuation (…) I was really scared of being back. But once I visited and saw what my village looks like, I felt that it is revitalising itself even without humans,” she commented. Although it is only allowed to visit her former house for a limited time, about five hours a day, according to the amount of radiation they might be exposed to during the visit, she enjoyed walking in the empty village. “I began to see my house and town differently (…)
They are a part of my life and thus myself. Visiting the area brings back all the time that I thought was gone (…) They are still here. And, without humans, it was completely different (…) Even I can say that it is nicer,” Kiko said.

How is it possible to remember a past which has been broken and how might the contaminated landscape and objects help to bring the memories back in new forms? Kiko often told me how her memory of the days immediately after the disaster is sparse, and how many things she does not remember well due to the shock; it was a time of a siege. But now, what she sees is the eerie empty town which allows her to remember the past and fulfil the present—unbroken and filled with people and energy. Then she pointed out a pile of children’s books which had a ‘Hello Kitty’ image on the cover. “There was a nursery.” Like Proust’s Madeline cookies, the objects that bring his entire childhood to the present, do the ruins and abandoned objects do the same for Kiko? At the same time, after the return home, what the abandoned places and things remind her of was not only a frustrating past that has been broken but also the question concerning whether or not things could have been different, very different. As Kiko always emphasised, “there once had been a time when everything in the village was totally different from now.” Instead of reflecting on and repeating oscillating memories of the days of the disaster, she seemed to decide to enjoy other memories that such an object could bring to her.

e. The images in the strict sense of the world

When Walter Benjamin (1973) addressed the crisis of experiences and the inability of remembering in the age of a shell-shocked world, he was taken by the question regarding how certain objects help to recover our ability to experience the real as real and to remember. As Proust desperately wrote during a time in which many took the past as if it had never existed, “And so it is with our own past (…) It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove fertile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. As for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die” (1983: 61). Benjamin loved the enormity of Proust’s eight-volume testimonial work. It was a time in which most people were increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world by way of experience and the capacity to remember was under siege. But is this about a chance to encounter the right object at the right time? Proust remarked how ‘involuntary memory’ is triggered only by a specific object, material—which he illustrated in his book on the memory of childhood in 1900s Berlin. However, Benjamin goes further. There is no ‘right’ object to trigger the ‘involuntary memory’ as Proust proposed; rather, it depends on whether or not we pick up the thing by our own accord. There is a threshold everywhere. Everything, including street signs, old photographs, a smell, or taste of certain things can be catalysts to remember. The voluntary effort that intends to recover “the strict sense of the world,” such as small rituals and
everydayness marked in calendars have equal importance to memorisation. Benjamin writes:

> Where there is experience in the strict sense of the world, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust’s work) kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lost their mutual exclusiveness (ibid.: 113).

While abroad in exile and reflecting on the threshold of how voluntary and involuntary memories are intertwined, Walter Benjamin decided to write about his childhood in Berlin. The year 1932 was paradoxically a time in which he realised that he would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of his birth. However, unlike the serendipitous ‘recovery’ of the past that Proust grasps through a piece of a Madeline cookie, Benjamin compares his remembrance work to intentional effort (ibid.: 37). He writes that what “a vaccine does over a healthy body” has a “limit on its effect though insight into the irretrievability – not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past.” He continues:

> (...) I have made an effort to get hold of the images in which the experience of the big city is participated in a child of middle class. I believe it possible that a fate expressly theirs is held in reservoir for such images (...) the images of my metropolitan childhood perhaps are capable, at their core, of performing later historical experience. I hope they will at least suggest how thoroughly the person spoken here would later dispense with the security allotted his childhood (Benjamin ibid.: 38. Emphasis in original).

Although Benjamin makes a spatial distinction between the urban and the rural, and he sees how the tradition of storytelling and the continuity of life are relatively preserved in the country, the ability to experience, remember, and tell the chronicle story has been threatened by modernity in urban settings. I understand that what Kiko and other interlocutors seem to share is likely a similar crisis of experience and memory ‘in the strict sense of world’ that has been challenged by the disaster—how thoroughly the villagers “later dispense with the security” that allotted the past regardless of where they are in the town. The ‘crisis of experiences and the inability of remembering in the age of a shell-shocked world’ is not limited to urban settings anymore; rather it has become a norm everywhere. The experiences of crossing the threshold that Benjamin emphasises in its ambiguity between past and present, utopian dream and nightmare, has become Kiko’s everyday life.

Later, Benjamin further developed the idea of threshold, not based on his own experience of childhood in the threshold between the 19th and 20th century, but as a socio-historical experience of ‘modernity’ embedded in the age of a homogeneous essence in which time and space has collapsed. In his unfinished
work, *Arcade Project*, which consists of a tremendous pile of citations and notes, Benjamin (1982) uses the term ‘threshold experience’ to capture the modern condition of human life in the age of crisis. By seeing himself as a ‘flâneur (a wanderer),’ he proposes to conceive of space and time as complex, constructed, and impure hybrids with crucial overlaps. The flâneur is, according to Benjamin, a dreamer laying their head on a threshold between daydream and the nightmare of the 19th and 20th centuries. The flâneur wanders between a forgotten past and an unknown future collecting remnants of history until they wake up in astonishment by another upcoming catastrophe. With presentiments of violence, war, and crisis which defined Benjamin’s time in the early 20th century, wandering is a walking between the familiar and the strange, close to the status of the uncanny, where there is not a familiar home anymore but still a place where memory can be settled.

Referring to *images* in the strict sense of the world, Benjamin attests to a way of thinking through images which is relevant for an epistemological access to history. Images are simultaneously connected to cognition and insight that might stimulate corporeal action. The terms, for example, dialectical image, thought image, and memory image etc., refer to specific socio-political contexts. Benjamin emphasises, “It’s not what is past casts its light on what is present (…) Rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (1999: 462). A sense of insecurity related to the relationship between time, space, and sensorial entanglements in the inhospitable surroundings has been transformed, and the everyday experiences of crossing the border makes Kiko’s life dwell on the threshold. Her sense of security and the memory of the past changes several times within a single day. Most villagers who can share memories of the town with Kiko have disappeared, and her memory of the past can now only be confirmed through objects. When there were only a few people who returned to the village, she realised there is nobody and nothing she can rely on. “It did not take so long to realise how life here is ambiguous and contrived since the borders changed again and again (…) Everything was like a riddle.” When Kiko said this, I remembered Takeru’s words that expressed his frustration with detecting safety, “I feel that I am suffocated by numbers.” Kiko sometimes felt the same. For the first months or even years, she tried to understand ‘what is happening.’ But the irony here is that the more you think about the risk and collect ‘scientific’ facts or evidence, the less you can be sure what the risk is. “Life here is very lonely (…) you can only rely on yourself and things that remain here.”

In this strange dream-world, nothing seems clear so there is a need to create one’s own reality. Sometimes it is a peaceful dream and other times a nightmare. Kiko does not forget all the possible risks in the area. She brought a Geiger machine with us and installed a mobile app to show the level of radiation in the area. Driving the van along a narrow side-street, Kiko suddenly warned me, “Do not open the window now. The wind might blow from the east.” She feels wind. She sees that light rain just started. Watching the direction of the wind while crossing the border and showing the ID documents
which permit our entry to the evacuation zones, she seemed back to the real, but the real is more unrealistic than a dream. “Is this not so strange?” she laughed. “They [the guards] control us but they can’t control the wind from the powerplant. “Wind, rain, and snow weren’t the most decisive factors in drawing the border lines the first time. I soon realised that borders based on radiation level are not enough since caesium and other radioactive fallout have been spreading through the air and water. That’s the reason why some inner areas farther from the nuclear powerplant remain hard-to-return zones.”

“Like wind, we cross the borders.” Kiko made a joke while driving. It wasn’t easy for me—the border exists between myself and Kiko and other villagers as well. Kiko’s dream-like world was sometimes a nightmare for me. My body was there, so I felt like being stuck somehow, and yet, I knew that it was only temporary for fieldwork. I could leave if needed. We did not take the same risk. Since the moment I heard from Kokone, the Ryokan (Inn) owner, that radiation transudes everything that has a porous body, every time I stayed in the village, I was seized with the feeling that myself and the surrounding was becoming fluid. One night, I had a nightmare that the four wooden walls of my room and even the tatami, a mat with woven soft (Igusa) straw, emitted radiation, so I stayed away from the village for a couple of weeks. For those who spend every day there, however, changing their mode of being was a (relatively) easier option than always thinking about radiation. While I was taken by the memories of my first days in the village, Kiko said, “Let’s forget this.” Then she turned off the Geiger counter. “With this [machine], we can’t take any steps forward.” That’s what I learned from Kiko that day. Radioactivity detectors were installed everywhere—on the roads, a playground, a station, shops, and restaurants—but many people in the village don’t even cast a glance at them, and she told me, “Look at the trees, sky, flowers. Nothing seems to be really dangerous here.” For Kiko and some others, ignorance seems better than compulsive knowing. I was told, “do not only use ‘chikaku’ (‘intellectual sense’) and the numbers on a Geiger counter or radiation maps, but instead, think through ‘kankaku’ (‘feeling and corporeal sense’) of your body and feelings.” Her teaching continued until we stopped at the last destination of the trip—the closest spot to the nuclear powerplant. Standing with Kiko, who might have seen the wall at least four hundred times, I was wondering if she saw the same ‘real’ that I was seeing and what might those images bring to us.
f. A Cream Soda Day: creating a world that is safe

“Do you want to join our monthly meeting?” When Miho, one of the villagers, sent me an invitation message, it was early summer, a couple of months after I had made the trip with Kiko. I started meeting other villagers and Miho is one of them. Miho was born and lived near Nagoya in southern Japan. Since she got married to Kenji, whose hometown is Minamisoma and works for the local government, she moved far to the town. Miho said there will be an important event in the village that everyone has been looking forward to. When I arrived at Miho’s house with a notebook and a camera, about five to six women were in her house for a ‘cream soda day.’ Most people in the meeting were women in their late 20s and 30s, and, except for Miho, were with kids. Some men and the elderly, including Kokone and Takeru, also joined later. Considering that there are not many children who live in the town, it seemed as if almost all joined for the meeting. For 4-5 hours, they spent the time making cream sodas, which is a typical summer drink with rainbow colours, a scoop of ice cream on top, and candied cherries.

“Kimi ga kureta shiroi kimochi/ midoriiro no sooda ni toketa/ kitto natsu ga atsu sugiru kara/ watashi wa zenbu nomihosu yo” (“The pure emotion that you gave me is melted in green soda. Surely summer is too hot so I would drink up all the soda).” Playing a famous song titled Summer Cream Soda, the women and their kids started making their own cream soda. For the meeting, Miho even brought a cream soda recipe book; its cover is a cup of sky-blue coloured soda. She explained, “it’s simple. First, put plenty of ice in a glass and pour in carbonated water. Then, pour shaved ice syrup and mix them gently with a straw. Top with ice cream and decorate with candied cherry, fruits, or herbs.” However, despite the simple introduction to making soda, I soon realised how serious everybody was about the activity; it was like a scientific experiment in a laboratory. There were beakers and electronic scales as if alchemists or chemists were working. Everyone showed enthusiasm for creating a small world in a glass. “What are they doing in the midst of a contaminated town?” I thought to myself looking at my ‘empty’ notebook.
Everyone including children were engrossed in the colour and shape of their own cream soda and the room was soon full of colours. “After the summer rain, the rainbow appears,” the song continued. They smiled and were enraptured by sweetness. By making and drinking cream soda, their bodies seemed to be displaying colours. Everyone became a rainbow. Drinking cream soda meant becoming something else. We are still in the midst of the disaster, but it doesn’t really matter for now. A house became a sanctuary, and I finally understood why Miho told me that it’s a very important meeting. “Isn’t it pretty?” One woman sitting next to me showed some pictures on her mobile phone of some variations of cream soda she had made at home. “Iro (“colour”), kōri (“ice”), and hikari no hansa (“light reflection on ice”) are important. The recipe book taught us how to create chisana sekai (“a small world”) and shiki no keshiki (“a scene of the four seasons”).” Creating a small world in a glass reflects all life and seasons; that’s why she loved the cream soda day. Like a snow globe, people enjoyed their small creations and despite its precariousness, soft and melty, mothers taught their kids how to enjoy the beauty of temporality.

They drink the seasons; eating and drinking became a form for the transformation of being. By drinking a beautifully decorated cream soda or being surrounded by colours, people created a different mode of being. That’s what I heard every time I joined cooking sessions. “You are not so much different from what you are eating, seeing, and living together. You are made of those.” We ‘mimic’ the world around us and in so doing create worlds betwixt and between. Such a flowing boundary between self and world, subject and object, are well-illustrated in a short paragraph that Benjamin (2006) wrote looking back on his childhood. According to him, the mimetic faculty is everywhere permeated by imitative modes of behaviour. Its realm is by no means limited to what one person mimics in another. As we can see below, a child, for instance, “plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train” (Benjamin 1999: 720):

In our garden there was an abandoned, ramshackle summerhouse. I loved it for its stained-glass windows. Whenever I wondered about inside it, passing from one coloured pane to the next, I was transformed; I took on the colours of the landscape that – now flaming and now dusty, now smouldering and now sumptuous – lay before me in the window. It was like that happened with my watercolours, when things would take me to their bosom as
soon as I overcame them in a moist cloud. Something similar occurred with soap bubbles. I travelled in them throughout the room and mingled in the play of colours of the cupola, until it burst. While considering the sky, a piece of jewellery, or a book, I would lose myself in colours. (Benjamin 2006: 110-111).

According to Benjamin, by becoming something else, as children demonstrate, a borderless mode of being is a strategy of the self which is surrounded by the hostile or dominant. The outside world is bigger and stronger than oneself, but by picking its most beautiful part and mimicking it, you can overcome fear of it. If you are surrounded by radiation, you will be ‘irradiated,’ but if you still can create something beautiful, you will be able to rise against the risk. Like a Russian Matryoshka doll, a world inside worlds, there are countless different worlds. What the mothers teach is ‘how to transform a mode of being’ instead of being frightened by the world outside. One girl told me that I should not stir the drink because it will cause chaos. The important rule here is to keep it “yosasou (“good-looking”)” until the end and to remember that the beautiful world is inside you. By drinking the beautiful miniature of the world in the glass, then you will be able to ‘possess’ the world inside of yourself. Whereas the ‘radiation brain mothers’ make better radiation detectors in their workshops, the mothers and villagers in Odaka try to teach their children how to make a safe world indoors. Despite the emphasis on the ‘safe’ level of radiation in the town, there are no mothers who let their kids play outside. Instead, they told their children how to create blue waves in the glass, and as if jumping into the water, to drink them. While seeing and drinking the world that they just created, everybody was ‘transformed.’ They dwell in a world which is different from the playground outside that has been recently renewed but remains empty alongside radiation measurement equipment.

g. Making the real in an unrealistic world

Sensing and making a world around you beautiful seems to be at the core of many activities. From Kokone’s garden and a day-trip to Kiko’s dream-world to a day for cream soda, everyday activity in the village has its focus on a recovery of the aesthetic sense. However, like a dream or fragile glass, the beauty brings only a short break from the ‘harsh reality,’ and then it is gone. How could those practices
be aesthetic and what do those short moments do to the body, as Benjamin suggests, what ‘a vaccine does over a healthy body?’ Like the cream soda illustrates, the aesthetic world is fragile; it soon melts. While examining what it means to live with ruins (Tsing 2005; 2012; 2015), I am pushed to see the ruin beyond the existing clear borders between safety and danger—theorizing life in the rubble of uncertainty and the unsettling environment. Embracing the anxiety and uncertainty, people create a real which might be valid only for short moments and requires endless efforts to construct.

An emphasis on the aesthetics of everydayness in Japan is not a new find. As a nation on ‘the other face of moon’ (Lévi-Strauss 2013), Japanese aesthetics and sensorial engagement has often been celebrated. Lévi-Strauss, for example, observes how late 19th century English and French scholars ‘domesticated’ the ‘strangeness’ of Japan and how the nation has remained as a ‘strange other’ having a different ‘pattern of culture’ (Benedict 2006 [1934]). This ‘Japanese-ness’ is not confined to the ‘outsiders’ but also a key for defining Japanese themselves against ‘the others’—that is, ‘Westerners’ (cf., chapter three). The aesthetic and ethical inclination combined with a nuanced socio-political inactiveness have long been celebrated through media as well as key terms of anthropological research after the nuclear disaster such as jishuku (“self-restraint”), gaman (“endurance” or “patience”), and wabi-sabi (“the acceptance of transience and imperfection”) (cf. Abe 2016; Clarke 2020; Fowler 2014; Handa 2013 Gould et al.: 2019).

However, with the key term, ‘threshold experience,’ what has been shown in this chapter is how to locate the (im)possibility of everyday life and the effort to create a beautiful (and thus) safe world in the context of crisis as a socio-political matter. I discussed how the current crisis recalls the past that could have been different and how certain activities can be—not an acceptance of the real—but a creation of a real. As Benjamin illustrated with his memory on childhood, what I considered here is how certain crises in the moment recall the past as ‘unfinished,’ and in so doing, how the present works to ‘complete’ the past. As McCracken (2002) emphasises, despite Benjamin’s innovation of Hegel’s ideas, the methodology that Benjamin elaborates is a materialist one that sees the “old work” (ibid.: 156) as a dialectical relationship between the past and present. In Marx’s formulation of past and present, the task for us is not to draw a sharp mental line between past and future but “to complete the thought of the past” (ibid.: 155; emphasis in original). The dialectical moment of awakening is a threshold moment between being asleep and awake, the past and present. What makes it possible to be awake is, as Benjamin explores through old-fashioned back streets, passages, and abandoned sites, the material that makes your body ‘shudder,’ like Kiko told me remembering the day of the disaster. Most villagers ‘know’ about the possible risk in the town but do not want the borders to determine their everyday life. When Kiko ‘crosses’ the borders which were confirmed by authorities to visit her childhood and the children ‘drink’ the world that is beautiful and safe amid the possible risk of exposure, what is happening between their bodies and the world around them? What is the real in this unrealistic world?
“This is like a festival for us (…) I hope our kids remember their childhood in the town as good (…) we do what we can here.” When a father in the meeting said this while pouring tonic water into a glass, I realised what we were making is not a cup of soda but a real and beautiful world.

h. Conclusion

On the night of the day trip I made with Kiko, we had dinner at the only restaurant open until late in the village. Kiko, who was cheerful all day and celebrated the beauty of the town, had several glasses of sake and started telling me the story of the village. “Do you think it is okay to let people live in this never-ending loneliness and anxiety?” Seeing Kiko’s face in profile, I remembered a question from one researcher that I met before moving to Fukushima. Kiko tried to show the beauty of Minami soma, but I soon realised that our trip had been destined to failure. There was nothing, or, it could be said that I was not able to see the same beauty of the town that Kiko found. But, at the same time, I wondered if that is what Kiko wanted to share. She will cross the borders again tomorrow, and if not, sometime soon, but there is no guarantee that the past can be complete. “Life here is very lonely and I can only rely on myself.” Echoing what Kiko used to say, I remembered how many spoons and chopsticks she has at home and how happy she was to have her own peaceful ‘guest house’ in her hometown. I also remembered how many slippers were waiting for guests at the door of Kokone and Takeru’s inn. Frustrated dreams were waiting for us at every corner of the town. Kiko was one of a few wanderers in the village who was not completely scared of the (possible) existence of radiation and tried to explore the town through her own body—a village which has ‘do not enter’ signs everywhere. “Do people still live near the powerplant?” Many people that I met in Tokyo asked me this question with dismay and now I can say, “yes, there are people.”

Despite all the concerns and anxieties around the effect of radiation exposure in the area, however, what I have articulated in this chapter is the effort to construct life amidst all the destruction. In making an effort to recover the sense of everydayness, the villagers have been struggling between two extremes, a sentimental hometown and devastated ruins that might bring harm sometime in the future if not now. Thinking through the displacement and re-settlement caused by the triple disaster and its ongoing aftermath, I asked what it means to be in a world that has been broken, and yet, at the same time, participate in the process of composing and re-creating the world. In so doing, I have explored the possibility for a new politics of life which Walter Benjamin intended through his idea of threshold experiences. Benjamin hoped to see how the present takes a chance to ‘complete’ the past in revisiting the past through the forgotten voices of things and people. In a place where absence overwhelms presence, instead of taking the life of the returnees in the town as irrational and even insane, I considered what their effort to make life and their own reality possible might tell us—many of us, who might live in another type of real, wanting to believe all the risk is under control and/or, could be contained in
certain places and bodies. Finally, despite all the effort that villagers demonstrate, I am still taken by the question: is to let people live in such endless effort that which is needed in order to create a real against another real which only brings anxiety and uncertainty?
Ch.2 An Empty Grave: when the ocean looks at you

In this chapter, based on my fieldwork in a coastal village called Arahama in the Miyagi prefecture, I discuss what people in the village lost after the triple disaster and how they have created new relations with their devastated hometown. The village was completely devastated by the earthquake and the subsequent tsunami which created the most ‘visible’ damage and loss from the triple disaster. After the entire village was swept away, the area was designated as non-residential—which means that except for a few households that rejected to follow the government’s plan for making the area into a buffering zone, most former villagers were unable to return to the area. The experience of the triple disaster in this coastal village is therefore distinct from the one of the people in Minami Soma that I illustrated in chapter one. Unlike the case of radiation, the government’s project in the area operated through hyper-visibility and materiality such as constructing seawalls, bridges, and official memorials—a process which often conflicted with the former villagers’ way of dealing and living with their environment. Focusing on a constant effort by the former villagers to make regular visits to search for the missing and to revitalise their ruined hometown, this chapter discusses how local understandings of the triple disaster have been intrinsically intertwined with life experiences of the environment and the landscape. In particular, I consider the porosity of water and how peoples’ intimate yet potentially hostile relationship with the ocean challenges binary distinctions between life and death, safety and risk, and the living and the dead.

The ambiguous relationship between the ocean and the villagers is not limited to the living but includes the (un)dead as well. By engaging with the former villagers’ efforts to remain in their previous hometown and their perceptions of the landscape which bear traces of the missing dead from the past, this chapter explores how the fluidity of water and the problem of the missing caused by the earthquake and tsunami provokes ideas surrounding the ambiguity of death and the ocean as a mass grave. In searching for and memorialising 2,544 missing people underwater in eastern Japan (including 17 in Arahama and about 1,237 in the Miyagi prefecture), the porosity and fluidity of the ocean problematises dichotomies between water and land, life and death, material and immaterial, which demonstrates another threshold experience, “the reciprocal interplay between two kinds of systems, social and ecological” (Ingold 2000: 4). By examining the daily life of the villagers in the ruined village and their relation to commemoration and disaster intervention by the state, I show how people try to interact with existing materialities such as seawalls and memorials, and thus, open the possibility for an ambiguous death of the missing. This dynamic paradoxically provides threshold experiences, in-between spaces of mourning for the nameless and the bodiless. In so doing, the chapter concludes by suggesting that the absence of the body indicates a possibility for a different type of memorial, that is, the memorialisation of the weathered and eroding landscape.
a. The black water

“We don’t need to talk about how the disaster has been hard. Death is everywhere here. We all experienced the loss (...) and now we all are living with the dead.” When Eita said this, we were standing on a recently constructed seawall in Arahama in early 2019. Arahama, which literally means rough coast, is a small village located on the east coast of Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, about 80 km from the place that I described in chapter one—Odaka, in the Fukushima prefecture. The area was completely swept away by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011, and it remains in ruins. By ruins, I mean that there are no houses, farmland, electricity, and people; there are only some pieces of concrete cornerstones and broken walls which show that there once was a village that Eita dreams of every night. “It is hard to say what it was like.” Many people including Eita expressed their difficulty in finding words to describe the black water on ‘that’ day. It was one of many disasters they have experienced, yet there is something ‘unspeakable’ about this one. Is it because of the number of dead and missing? Or, the massive scale of damage? As we were standing on the seawall watching the shape of the blue waves rise and fall, Eita said he does not know why it happened and that the feeling is impossible to describe. Then, looking out over the water, he said, “the ocean is perhaps the best thing in my life.”

The triple disaster on 11th March 2011 inflicted devastating damage on the village. At 2:46 pm, a mega-earthquake of 9.0 magnitude occurred off the north-eastern coast of Tohoku. The seismic centre was located 72 km east of the Oshika Peninsula of the Tōhoku region. The earthquake proceeded to trigger a massive tsunami which devastated the life of the village. “I didn’t know about the Fukushima nuclear powerplant since we all were overwhelmed enough by the earthquake and tsunami,” Eita said. Despite concerns for contaminated water from the nuclear power plant and the ongoing controversy about the resumption of a fishery, the villagers in Arahama were already overwhelmed by the earthquake and the tsunami as the most significant parts of the triple disaster. On the day of the tsunami, Eita was in the village and saw the black water surge into the coast and soon swallow everything. He drove his car to the west, away from the surging waves, and managed to survive along with his wife who was in the car with him.

“The speed of the tsunami was unbelievably fast. I have never seen such a huge, black, and spherical wave (...) Some people drove their cars crazy fast but were soon caught by the water,” Eita said. The only building in the village that survived from the tsunami is a four-story building, Arahama shogako (“Arahama elementary school”). A total of 320 villagers evacuated to the rooftop until a rescue helicopter arrived later that night. The principal of the school at that time told me how they were lucky as they didn’t follow the official guidelines for the evacuation. Since they hadn’t had such a colossal tsunami yet, the school gym was the designated place for evacuation. However, the waves looked “somehow different. That’s why I changed my decision and encouraged people to go to the rooftop.”
the principal continued. Paradoxically, what saved people was not the manual but his lifelong experience living near the water. The rooftop was soon surrounded by black water. The school building was submerged up to the second floor, and the entire village became a huge dumping ground. The surviving villagers later spread to many different places, shelters, relatives’ houses, and hospitals. The disaster changed everything that Eita had tried to build up throughout his whole life. He has nothing. It was still cold in early March and sleeting at night. Eita still remembers the cold of that night surrounded by candle lights and sobbing.

“Tsunami coming, get to safety!” Above the breakwater, people who had been watching the horizon line of white waves get ever closer suddenly, as if repelled, ran away shouting. The tsunami swept over the pines, raising clouds of dust as it rolled up boats, smashed into trees, washed away fields, tore through houses, crushed gardens, swallowed up cars, felled gravestones, ripped apart roofs and walls of homes, glass from windows, fuel from boats, petrol from cars, tetrapod, vending machines, futons, tatami, stovetops, desks, chairs, horses, cows, chickens, dogs, cats, men, women, elderly, children (Yu Miri 2019: 166).

Although the day of the tsunami has become a part of the past, an event from eight years ago, the memory of the disaster was, in Numazaki (2012)’s words, and still is, ‘too wide, too big, too complicated to comprehend.’ This overwhelming sense causes most people to continue living in the wake of the past, and the future seems to not yet have arrived. Moving between the black tsunami waves of the past and the contaminated water from the nuclear powerplant in the present, we looked at the ocean from the concrete seawall, a border between water and land, death and life, and, as some ambitiously argue, a threshold for a bright future.

Like other villagers, Eita, a man in his early 80s, has been working as a farmer and sometimes a sailor for the past sixty years, and for a time, he worked in a deep-sea fishing vessel. It was hard to imagine a ‘rough’ sailor’s life from his gentle voice and small body, but his nejiri hachimaki (“a headband” mainly used by manual labours) reminded me of his lifetime on the ocean. He is an expert of corals and seashells and liked showing his collection to me. As his occupation suggests, he was also a world traveller by ships. In a deep-sea vessel, he worked with other sailors from different countries, and despite socio-political and racial tensions that sometimes divided them, he learned how to work together with different people on the ships. “Life on the ocean is not easy, so cooperation was essential.” Eita knows that the ocean is what brought people together and gave them plenty of fish, yet he also knows that the ocean is deadly at the same time. He once recalled with me an experience on Samou Island. “We exchanged fish for bananas using our body language,” he laughed. “Like what you are doing now. Anthropologists work like that, don’t they? Exploring unknown worlds and people.” Eita came from Fukanuma beach in Arahama, and he worked far out in the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean. When he was a young boy,
the ocean was a playground for him. It later became his workplace. “How lucky I was!” He was very proud of being a man of the ocean.

Since the triple disaster, there are neither forests of pine trees where Eita and his friends used to pick mushrooms called *kinoko*, which literally means, the kids of trees, nor sandy beaches where he collected *Kani* (“crabs”). Instead, what we see now is only heavy equipment that is used to construct the sea walls, which many villagers, including Eita, compare to a cage. Many former villagers that I met during fieldwork expressed scepticism and uncertainty about what happened to their village and why. Since the disaster, the government has been working on a ‘prevention’ project based on a ‘scientific prediction model’ (Kimura, S 2016), which prohibits construction in flatter areas near the coast. The project is working to raise lands, and most significantly, it is building seawalls. The walls are about a total of 400 km in length and up to 12m in height in some parts, and they have been under heavy construction along the coastal areas of eastern Japan.

The whole process is, as Eita expresses, changing the life and landscape from fluidity to solidity. The village is full of dust from trucks delivering construction materials as the seawalls and new highway roads are being constructed. Many parts of the sandy beaches where Eita used to see the traces of water constantly change the shape of the beach are now covered by concrete. One sloping road along the beach that was eroded by weathering is now gone. It has been replaced by a huge concrete overpass. In the past, he could see the ocean from his house, but now, he must climb up and down dozens of steps to get a view. “Those will be strong enough to endure any type of disaster in the future,” one expert said assertively to Eita when he came to the village for an on-the-spot inspection. Eita then asked, “When will another disaster happen?” The professor in city planning and engineering answered, “Well, probably in a thousand years.” In order to prepare for the next massive disaster which would happen at some unknown time in the next thousand years, the entire area has come under the control of the State in the name of risk management and prevention—the concrete seawalls, the breakwater, the overpasses under construction, the heavy equipment, the mostly male construction workers, and the blueprints for the future from the politicians and disaster experts. The ocean and the waves that Eita has always been both attracted to and scared of, have become a matter of national security.

In examining the landscape as potential risk that might cause another ‘disastrous’ effect, the landscape of Arahama has become alienated. Regardless of what the former villagers want, the crucial aim for the project is how to deal with various hazards from the ‘outside’ and how to protect our ‘vulnerable’ nation. “That is why less and less former villagers come to visit. It is so disappointing since we see that the village has completely changed. Some just want to keep the memory of the village from the past instead of seeing the current one (…) the landscape is what brought people in Arahama together, and now it’s gone,” Eita deplored. Feeling a curious gaze on my back from some of the construction workers, I was
reminded why many female former villagers advised me not to walk alone late at night. The process of ‘recovery’ or ‘preparation’ in the wake of the triple disaster, and the “masculinisation of national preparedness in the public sphere” (Koikari 2019: 144) has replaced local life experiences of the landscape and perceptions of the village. Nami, a woman in her late 20s, who loved seeing the moon over Arahama beach, does not come to the beach anymore. With the catchphrase, ‘We are preparing for the next disaster,’ this nationalistic discourse and “scientific capture of rationally flowing time” (Helmreich 2015: 113) has changed perceptions of the ocean where Eita spent his whole life. Unlike the sand which showed the footprints of Eita and his friends catching small crabs, there are no traces of people on these brand-new concrete seawalls. How can the seawalls and other construction projects grasp the fluxional time of changeable water and the oscillations of ocean time that have shaped the landscape and human interaction with it in Arahama?

b. Kannon with thousands of eyes and ears

![Image of Arahama before and after the disaster]

[An aerial-scape view of Arahama before and after the disaster]

Nine years after the disaster, what remains and continues in the village after the black waves swallowed everything? Ruins, wind, the ocean, and some of the former villagers who try to cross the seawall to see and communicate with the ocean are some of the things that remain. Eita and a few of other villagers opened Umibe no toshokan (“a seaside library”) in 2016 in the place where his former house was located. About a 10-minute walk away from the library, there is also a small recently constructed community centre. The seaside library, which is made of two combined containers and surrounded by driftwood, seashells, fishing gear, and nets that lost their purpose, became a temporary ‘shelter’ for many people visiting Arahama even though there is no electricity and water. Fishing and farming are no longer possible in the village since the whole area has been designated as non-inhabitable. In Eita’s hands, which once held blue fishing nets and farming tools, there is now a Cannon camera. He likes taking photos of the devastated village. When I saw him in early 2019 on Arahama beach, he was taking photos of the shore, surging waves, and traces of life. He is neither a farmer nor a fisherman anymore, but,
whether it’s hot or cold, he wears *nejiri hachimaki* (“a headband”) which is a symbol of physical labour since it keeps the sweat off. “I didn’t think about how everything could disappear so quickly. That’s why I started taking photos. I want to show that Arahama is, despite the disaster, still beautiful. That what remains here is not only death (…) but also life.” During the time of my fieldwork, Eita and a few other former villagers organised a Fukanuma beach cleaning activity once a month among other events in the effort to keep their ruined hometown alive.

Situated in the place where hundreds of people died or disappeared, there is also a new villager called *Kannon-sama*, which is a Buddhist statue with its back to the ocean and face looking toward the ruined village. There are no houses, no lights, no roads. There was only a strong wind that blew from the sea, an approaching rainstorm, and *Kannon-sama*—a stone monument carved with the names of the dead and the missing. *Kannon* means ‘to look at, to look down or over, and to listen.’ This is a Lord who sees the world with compassion. The *Kannon* has a thousand eyes and ears, which symbolises the ability to see and listen to the suffering of all others, and thus, share their sorrow, pain, and struggles to survive. Although there is a rumour that many *Kannon* statues were not accepted as official memorials in other coastal villages which were devastated by the tsunami because the *Kannon* is a symbol of an exclusively specific religion, the villagers in Fukanuma placed the statue on private land and made it into a memorial.

![Image of Kannon statue near the seawall in Arahama](image)

The importance of *Kannon-sama* is more than a witness to the loss and suffering of the village. Rather, *Kannon* itself has become one of the villagers. The *Kannon* senses and dwells in the pain and suffering as much as the villagers do and that is why the statue was essential for them. According to LaFleur, Bodhisattvas, to which the *Kannon-sama* may be likened, “were down-to-earth practitioners of compassion and, especially when appearing incognito, were assumed to be ready and able to render help of various kinds.” However, the ability of the *Kannon* does not result from its transcendence but rather from its imperfections along the complicated path towards the highest form of existence. Citing
the words of Yuasa Yasuo, LaFleur explains how the figure of Kannon is distinct from the Christian understanding of Jesus—that is, it is still pursuing the search for ‘truth’ and ‘undergoing ascetic discipline’ to that end. According to Yuasa, imperfection is crucial to religious sentiments and understandings of life and death among Japanese people. For example, Yuasa offers a historical example about the ‘failure’ of Kūkai’ from the eighth century who was unable to establish a national cult devoted to the Great Sun Buddha. Yuasa writes:

Kūkai established the Great Sun Buddha as the Highest form of Absolute Being and went on to expound a mystical union as the way of religiously experiencing a unity with that Absolute. Here the thing to note, however, is that subsequent generations of the Japanese people simply did not accept his theory. In the history of Buddhism in Japan people tended to be indifferent to the Great Sun Buddha, an abstract and conceptual Buddha but extremely difficult to approach through ordinary human emotions and sentiments. The Japanese much preferred a bodhisattva type, a being that, like us, is still incomplete and imperfect. And if it is going to have the appellation “Buddha” it will be a Buddha which shows the characteristics associated with the bodhisattva. That is the type that the Japanese like. Typical cases of the Japanese preference are Kannon, Amida, and Jizō (1958: 104, cited in LaFleur ibid.: 46-47).

Through suffering, even gods are still caught in the realm of imperfection, which is characterised by “a fundamental fluidity” of the religious mind (ibid.: 49). In contrast to the god as saviour which is “equal to the Highest of the High,” for many Japanese people such perfection is “a disqualifier; a being so defined and described could not meet what people expected and wanted in a figure who could save—namely, approachability and a touch of imperfection” (ibid.: 47-49). Being rooted in the place where pain and suffering flow, the Kannon-sama is involved in the everyday life of the villagers—a life which has been broken and paradoxically opens up a path to a higher realm of existence. The foot of the Kannon-sama has become an important meeting place for the villagers to gather.

c. The missing

I met Eita and some other villagers again on 11th March 2019 in the heavy rain. The day was the eighth anniversary of the great earthquake, and in a silent tribute to the dead and the missing, we were standing in front of Kannon-sama for quite a long time. Instead of attending the official ceremony that would be held in the city hall, many of the former villagers were gathering at the foot of the statue who/that was overlooking them as usual. Nobody spoke, and they rarely moved their bodies. Folding their hands, people prayed in silence. What did Kannon-sama listen to in this silence? Although there has been a massive amount of mourning expressed by politicians and other citizens from all around Japan as shown in the media, what the bereaved did on this particular day was a bit different—they began to walk around the village after gathering at the statue. Some left a bunch of flowers on the bridge, and others left them at specific spots on the street. Also, those who lost their family members or beloved ones by the black
water tried to throw the flowers into the ocean. It soon became apparent that they were attempting to locate the last spot where the dead and missing were seen. Even for the villagers who luckily survived, the loss of homes and their hometown weighed heavily on them. “Imagine here was a road, a post office, a store (…) there was Eita’s house and Yoshino’s farm,” Taisei lamented while pointing out the ruins where all the traces of life seem to have petrified. And, more than anything, the most significant loss was the people who had been engulfed in the black waves and never returned— the missing who were not yet confirmed dead, and thus, impossible to mourn.

“I don’t want to pray at the official memorial. These streets, the rocks, and the ocean are their grave (…) The tsunami wave pulled my daughter into the ocean, but I believe that the ocean still embraces her body,” Taisei said. He is one of the bereaved who regularly visits the coast to pray; his daughter, Hana, was six-years-old at the time. As he told me about that day, he was standing on the concrete wall for a while with a small bouquet looking at the waves which were turning grey. Where was he looking? Where is Hana on these restless grey waves which are hard to distinguish one from the other? Since that time, I met Taisei again and again. Every time I saw him, he was looking at the ocean, which changes its shape and colour ceaselessly, and he was always searching for a particular spot on the water—most likely, Hana. If it is possible to wait for her to return, does this mean that she is still alive?

For Taisei, the question remains whether or not his daughter’s existence continues in the absence of her body, forever postponing the end of hope that is life. Is she still alive due to the absence of a dead body—a body which would otherwise confirm death? In the village, beside the living and the dead, there is a third category, the missing, which indicates a way of being that is neither living nor dead, or perhaps, both at the same time. When Taisei sets the flowers into the ocean and lets them flow out into the depths, it appears as if he sees the ocean as a grave. However, when he sits on the beach and says that he is still waiting for her to return, she seems to be somehow alive underwater. How much time would be required to confirm someone’s eternal absence? Death flows, as well as the ocean. The ambiguity of water is significant here since it is able to embrace rather than break down. How does the obscure fluidity of water and that of death converge in the village to create a different type of daily life concerning the third category, in-between death and life? Is there a qualitative difference between the dead buried underwater and the dead in the ground?

In the book, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Harrison (2005) explores the importance of the dead and burial in terms of the process of ‘Western civilisation’ and how the bodies of the dead have been integrated into the world of living. Through burial of the dead, the land is humanised, and the dead remain among the living. Harrison (2005: 15) finds that the connection between the dead and the living is based on an earthly covenant from the biblical book of Genesis, “as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” The ocean is, in this regard, not able
to be a grave because it is not a specified place and there is no material substrate of human dwelling. Due to its unfixed characteristics, the ocean remains inscrutable and chaotic, and it poses an endless struggle for humans. Images of an ocean which is surging and swallowing, and thus cannot be contained, can be seen in a great variety of visual and literary representations—what is it that scares us about water yet seduces us as well? An interesting example can be found in Joseph Conrad’s book, *The Mirror of the Sea*, which illustrates the fragmented, chaotic, disastrous, and flowing characteristics of the ocean:

Something startling, mysterious, hastily confused was taking place. I watched it with incredulous and fascinated awe, as one watches the confused, swift movements of some deed of violence done in the dark. As if at a given signal, the run of the smooth undulations seemed checked suddenly around the brig. By a strange optical illusion, the whole sea appeared to rise upon her in one overwhelming heave of its silky surface wherein one spot a smother of foam broke out ferociously. And then the effort subsided. It was all over, and the smooth swell ran on as before from the horizon in uninterrupted cadence of motion, passing under us with a slight friendly toss of the boat. Far away, where the brig had been, an angry white stain undulating on the surface of steely-grey waters, shot with gleams of green, diminished swiftly without a hiss, like a patch of pure snow melting in the sun. And the great stillness after this initiation into the sea’s implacable hate seemed full of dread thoughts and shadows of disaster (Conrad 1988: 257-258).

Perceptions of water circulate through yet more complex and endless variations in Arahama. The water took Taisei’s daughter but still embraces her. It has been symbolised not only as death, violence, and chaos, but also, as life, circulation, and resuscitation—it seems that the water does both. This ambivalent nature of water has provoked anthropological attention to the multiplicity and complexity of water concerning what it might reveal at a variety of semiotic, historical, and political levels. Water is a ‘theoretical machine’ (Helmreich 2011), which illuminates the fluidity of distinctions between nature and culture (Hastrup & Hastrup 2015). Water is simultaneously a molecular compound, toxic runoff, infrastructure, resource, and much more. Beyond being manifest in certain forms such pipes, dams, and bodies of water like seas and bays, water is shaped by everyday future-making practices in scientific and congressional discourses (Ballester 2019a; 2019b; Helmreich 2009a; 2009b; 2007; also see Strang 2005). As seen in the effort to find traces of water as possibilities for life on other planets, water is infused with life. Due to its power of fluidity and porosity, water mediates human struggles between the processes of containment and discharge. Life that came from the water is then beaten by it, and life in Arahama, which once flourished by the ocean, has been pulled back into the black water.

How is it possible to grasp the multiplicity and complexity of water, such a fluid material, in relation to the question of the missing? Is the ocean a place or space? Eita often told me how soft the sand is in Arahama, and he showed me how quickly the sand runs through his fingers. It’s not fixed. Can we say the same thing about the water in Arahama? When Taisei said, “The ocean still embraces my daughter’s
body (...) and that of others,” what is the ocean that he mentions? The Pacific Ocean? The sea around Arahama? Is the black water of the tsunami the same as the beautiful sea of Arahama? Where is the boundary of the water that might give some distinctive sense of space? When Eita talked about his experience of the ocean as a sailor, the ocean meant the Pacific. But when people talk about the missing bodies underwater and their hope to find the bodies, it seems to me that they imagine some boundaries—the missing are still under the water of Arahama, and they will come back. The ocean is ambiguous just like the state of the missing bodies. How far and how deep is the ocean? People know and do not know. As Ballestero (2019b: 406) states, “water participates in the definition and destabilisation of the boundaries between materiality and abstraction.” Life after the disaster in Arahama bounced around from wave to wave—waves which constantly shifted from white to dark blue, and other times, frightful black. Despite Eita and Taisei’s hope to find beauty in the ocean that took so many lives, other former villagers who do not want to visit their former hometown have been too overwhelmed by the memory of the black water. “I still cannot even look at the ocean,” one neighbour in Sendai told me who lived in the coastal area before the disaster. As noted by Allison, excess and inseparability have intensified a sense of precarity and have led some people to a feeling of “life stayed sodden in mud” (2013: 183).

d. The ocean grave and liquid life

“Life stayed sodden in mud,” but what was pulled into the mud was not only the living but the dead. Takahashi H. (2016) points out how trauma, which is a subject of kokoro no kea (“care of heart/spirit/mind”), has been caused not only by the fact that people have seen countless drowned dead bodies of anonymous strangers, but also because there are more bodies underwater which are waiting to be properly cremated. Takahashi finds a connection between ideas surrounding Japanese cremation and feelings of fear, guilt, and even an experience of ghostly possession in Tōhoku. In the Tohoku region, cremation is usually performed before a funeral. It symbolises purification of the dead so that they are able to rest in peace rather than linger in this world. However, due to a shortage of fuel and electricity and the massive number of the dead or missing, a ‘proper’ funeral was unable to be performed and some bodies were temporarily buried with simple rituals in informal settings. Thus, according to the dichotomy between decay and purification in Japanese cremation, the missing bodies remain in the realm of the sodden, precarious, and not ‘properly’ dead. The inappropriateness of treating the dead body could also be the case with missing bodies underwater. In opposition to the Japanese cremation

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16 In Miyagi prefecture where Arahama is located, 99.9% of the dead were cremated in 2009. In 2011, however, the year of the disaster, the number of the buried increased to 833 out of the 27,858. See: http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SGI/estat/NewList.do?tid=000001031469
tradition based on the concepts of earth and fire—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and evaporation, the missing bodies underwater remain cold and wet in sodden mud. For this, they are said to be suffering and wandering around. But in conversation with Eita and Taisei in Arahama, this assumption was often called into question. According to their account, what if burial is not just about how to properly bury a body but rather concerns the way that the dead and the living relate to certain materialities such as water, soil, and heat? The land and seascape, as a combination of these elements, has become a grave where many, even the anonymous dead, dwell among the living.

Through participating in daily practices and rituals for the missing/undead, I found that the boundary between pollution and purification is not obvious. Certainly, the absence of the body creates an ambiguous state of the dead; some treat the missing as the dead and these people have left the village whereas other people still organise symbolic rituals, send divers into the water in search of the bodies, or pray for the return of the missing. Without bodies, are they dead or still alive? However, the question isn’t always manifested as the negation of life in traumatised experiences, possession, and melancholy that Takahashi described above. People do not simply suffer from the lack of proper cremation or the fear of decay; their feeling toward the dead is inseparable from their life experiences with the landscape and the environment. Lafleur (1992) points out that unlike the fearful connotation of the term ‘liquidate’ in the English language, the phrase of ekijō-ka (“liquefaction”) is philosophically and ethically more appropriate. Hiroshi (1984, cited in Lafleur 1992: 24) stresses that the Japanese tend to have a very positive, and relatively fear-free attitude vis-à-vis water, rivers, and oceans and this might connote things maternal linked to the watery and comfortable origin of being in the womb.

Did Taisei’s daughter, Hana, possibly return to where she originally came from? Life and death as well as pollution and purification are on a spectrum in this circle of life rather than being linear. If they still call the ruined Arahama their beloved and beautiful home, then they can still call the ‘liquefying’ body under the water their family member, friend, or neighbour? What I found was that people narrate their loss in various ways and the suffering comes from not only the fact that their beloved ones are missing and not properly cremated but also from the fact that all suffering and loss has too quickly moved into the realm of the faraway past, clichéd memorials, and even fallen into oblivion. “It’s always hard to say what it was like.” When Eita told me about his perplexity in expressing what was/is happening, he indicated some indistinguishable zone which flows through not-yet-confirmed death and life. It is not only about the dead but also about his life—wanting to come back to his old hometown. The government designated the whole village as a non-residential area; his return became impossible just like that of the missing.

Explanations make it possible to ‘know’ the number of dead, the amount of loss, economic damage, risk prevention, technical, bureaucratic, and legal circumstances, but, as I have illustrated in the first
chapter, when people express their feeling, “we are suffocated by numbers, recovery plans, memorials,” there are still many questions that remain. The village is a mixture of the living dead and the dead living (also see Agamben 1995; 1998 Norris 2000). Whether it is ruined or not, found or missing, people who visit their former hometown every day/week/month and try to find a trace of their life want to talk about their lives as alive; their beloved homes are there, and the missing under the water are waiting to return.

On a Sunday morning in early May 2019, with Eita, Taisei, and some other villagers, I was walking along the Arahama coast searching for some ukigi (“driftwood”). Collecting driftwood is one of Eita’s interests; he often decorates his place with the pieces that he finds. He told me a short Buddhist story: There is an invisible turtle under the ocean who tries to get on a piece of driftwood and in order to do that, the turtle comes to the surface every hundred years. With the wood, the turtle will reach the shore. The driftwood brings life to the village. Taisei added, “People in Arahama believe that the god will come from the outside (…) From the ocean.” Like the turtle, do they believe that the missing will get on a piece of driftwood and return to the village? We dragged some driftwood near the seawall to sit there. The wood left traces on the sand, and we watched how fast the traces disappeared. The waves were not so high, but Eita said it’s always different from how it looks. He saved several surfers and swimmers. “Trying to grab water. When the waves move back and forth, it’s time to come back to the shore. The ocean will seize you otherwise.” Eita and Taisei gave me a tip—there is always a shadow of death over life to an ambitious swimmer and would-be diver.

Life and death, human and nature, have always drawn on each other, and life in the coastal village is nothing more than trying to keep a perilous equilibrium between them. Death is everywhere and the violence of nature has always been a part of village life. In the early morning when Eita used to set sail for catching akagai (“clams”) and shirasu (“whitebait”), he had to tighten his headband, on which a short prayer for a safe return was embroidered. There is no need to talk about it, but, like the waves breaking on the shore, rumours of death were scattered in the air before and after the disaster. It was in 1997 when one of his neighbours, Sato, never came back from the sea. Seventeen people from the village are still underwater following the 2011 disaster. How many more might still be in the water? The black water withered all life in the village. Pine trees in the coastal area changed due to the salinity of the tsunami water and mushrooms are not growing anymore from the recently transplanted pine trees. However, that doesn’t mean the ocean ‘killed’ them. Rather, Eita and other fishery workers in the oyster farms thought ‘the ocean too was dead.’ Mushrooms, foxes, seashells, flatfish, oysters, even diving beetles in the swamps, were swept away by the black water.

However, water also serves as a source of life and there is a logic in it too. For humans, the triple disaster was a devastating experience of loss, but for the ocean, it is a tiny part of much deeper time. As LaFleur (1992) shows through the liquidity of life, particularly, the connection between abortion and water
within Buddhism in Japan, water can be, by symbolic extension, a route that the dead can use to return—a good chance for renewed life. LaFleur extends the logic, “resurrection, rebirth, reincarnation—the waters can be expected to facilitate whatever is desired” (ibid.: 22). Eita often told me how water is ambiguous and that despite the devastation, such a change of shokusei (“vegetation”) is only ningen no tsugō (“human concerns”). It is impossible for humans to really know what is good and bad, life and death, for the ocean and the earth. Deaths flow into life and the water circulates between them. There are many unknown forces that have shaped and continue to shape the ocean. The salty tsunami water destroyed everything, but “demo, iro iron a hana ga kireini saite to itte miru to (“nevertheless, various flowers were blooming beautifully”), even kitsune (“a fox”) came back to the village, and bigger oysters began to grow from the ‘dead’ water. Yoshino, a farmer and a lifelong friend of Eita who lost his farming journals that he had been writing over the course of his life, told me “watashi mo karada no naka ni keiken ga shimikono de ikimas (“my experience and memories are stored in my body”). He also told me that the missing seeds of a type of rice called hatsukine mochi will eventually grow somewhere. I could not directly ask whether Taisei believes that his daughter will come back someday on a piece of driftwood, or, whether he believes the presence or absence of the body doesn’t really matter, but I could feel that is why they collect driftwood and walk around the village and Arahama beach. As long as the water is flowing, life will return. That makes the ocean a place where both the living and the dead dwell. The village and the ocean are their memorial and their prayer as well as their home.

[e. Contested tradition: between pollution and purification]

Unlike well-known perceptions of cremation in Japan, and the dichotomy between polluted and purified bodies of the dead, why do people in the village not see the missing as decaying bodies? Although the custom of cremation in Japan is widely shared through the dichotomous logic of pollution and purification, as well as the fear and horror of pollution by death, decomposition, and illness, the practice of dealing with dead bodies has fluctuated throughout history. Picone (2007, also see Kawano 2010)
shows how the way in which the dead are buried is related to social status, and for most commoners, the widely used way of burial is to abandon the corpse far away from inhabited areas. Up to the 13th century, due to the fact that cremation requires hours and hours of slow combustion of the dead, abandoning the corpse was a common form of burial.

A major change then occurred in the Edo period (1600-1867) due to the rise of a new political power and the Confucian idea of filial piety. The first shogun instituted compulsory registration of the entire population at a neighbouring temple, which transformed the work of the temples into record keepers of births and deaths as well as superintendents of the graveyard. The Chinese perception of filial piety became influential in the 17th century. According to it, the dead bodies of parents and ancestors should be treated as if they are still living. “Corpses were said to be ‘sleeping’ in their coffin” (Picone ibid: 134). As noted by Harrison earlier in this chapter, the relation between the dead and the living works to establish the order of the world—the dead are humanised and remain among the living as a part of the social order. In the process of the domestication of burial practices as fundamental for the state and kinship administration, objections to cremation followed nationalistic understandings of cremation which associated it with ‘foreign’ religion. This continued until the Meiji restoration in 1868 which brought a massive transformation in burial practice.

The regulation of death in the process of modernisation during the Meiji (1868-1912) reformation is well-described in Bernstein’s work in great detail. The following is a brief summary of it. Bernstein (2000; 2006) explores the history of Japanese cremation and the cultural perceptions of the dichotomy between pollution and purification and finds that cremation is a relatively recent phenomenon that is inseparable from the process of modern state-building in the Meiji era. In a controversial process of ‘modernising’ the country, cremation was regarded as unfilial and barbaric, and even as one of the “evil customs of the past” (ibid.: 298). Although cremation was not dominant at that time (about half of the dead were cremated), Meiji bureaucrats targeted and criticised anything Buddhist as incompatible with bunmei (“civilisation”), and the practice was abolished as part of the nation’s effort to ‘enlighten’ the masses. The ban named the “anti-Buddhist storm” (Ketelaar 1990: 78, cited in Bernstein 2000: 304) catalysed debates among Buddhist priests and other people who were in favour of cremation. Intense debates between the Buddhists and neo-Confucionists took place concerning questions about where the dead should be located and what proper burial is. Above all, the debates were about how to establish social order among the living and how to understand the relation between humans and nature. For some, it was argued that the dead belong to the human world even after death, so they should not be abandoned in fields, or nature, for ‘foxes and badgers’ to eat. Although the Meiji government later lifted the ban, the disputes continued, and different types of burial were used until a second controversy.
In the late Meiji era, the debates began again as seen in the headlines of newspapers with a very different issue on the surface—that is, public health and hygiene. One department officer brought up the issue of air pollution in relation to the cremation temples. The officer stated, “when bodies are burned, the smoke spreads out in all directions and the severe stench injures people’s health” (ibid.: 307). However, instead of a comprehensive ban on cremation, the officer suggested that new crematories be built outside the city. Unlike the debates just discussed which divided the population, this time period tended to go in favour of cremation. This was possible due to the combination of two elements: urbanisation and subsequent changes in kinship relations. Within a new discourse on public health and hygiene that had recently become more commonly accepted, the public and various governors started seeing that cremation was not a health hazard. It even saved space in cramped urban settings, and it also facilitated ancestor worship. In the rapid urbanisation and concentration of the population, cremation was not only the most effective way of dealing with mass death, but it was also a way to bring the dead, who had been away, home. Cremation was therefore promoted as “a way to unify not only individual families but the entire nation” (Bernstein ibid.: 314). As the dead became a subject of population management, which coincided with changing perceptions of cremation in Europe and the United States as a “modern and hygienic means of disposal” (Bernstein ibid.: 321), cremation practices that originated from Buddhist doctrine became integrated into the wider structure of urban planning and modern means of disposal of the dead in Japan. Moreover, since graveyards in the city were so cramped, many people had no other choice but to cremate; the Great Kanto earthquake in 1926, which caused massive causalities in Tokyo area, further aggravated the shortage of space. Finally, cremation, once an ‘evil custom of the past,’ became the most ‘civilised’ form of burial.

After the earthquake to rebuild Tokyo, a series of laws and regulations on burial extended state control at the cost of temples (See Picone 2007; Nakamaki 1986). In the process, cremation was confirmed as the most ‘enlightened’ and ‘civilised’ way to dispose the dead. The body of the dead became a subject of sovereignty that needed to be properly managed and disposed of in order to defend society (cf. Foucault: 2003[1976]), and the importance of cremation became even more significant in times of disaster and epidemic. The body of the dead in the simplified dichotomy between ‘barbarian’ and ‘civilisation’ and between public health and pollution dismissed not only the Buddhist philosophy of cremation embedded in terms of the transcendence of life and death and the liberation of the Tamashii (“spirit”) from the materiality of the body but also the four different ways to dispose of a corpse in the Buddhist context that is widely accepted: earth burial, water burial, cremation, and exposure in the wild in order to be Jōbutsu (“become a Buddha”).

How to properly dispose of the dead and where to locate them in the social order have been huge questions throughout the history of Japan (and elsewhere of course). Returning to my field, the effort to find the missing is based on the idea of a ‘wet ghost’ who was not properly buried. However, the
ambiguous status of the missing, as neither dead nor living, seemed to allow the villagers in Arahama to continue to remain in the area where they attempted to make the dead into the living, and the issue of the landscape as a subject of sovereignty continues. The government project that draws a sharp binary between the dead and the living, as well as the past and the future, for disaster prevention, brings up debates about where the dead belong. Yet, this time, it is mostly about the living since they have been forcibly evacuated from their former hometown. In short, both the missing and the living in Arahama have no place to return and dwell. It was not even allowed for the former villagers to spend a night in their homes since it was designated as a non-inhabitable place. All the names of the dead and the missing are called out in official ceremonies regardless of the villagers’ desires to revitalise their ruined and yet still living hometown. Given the situation, how can the living and the missing find a place in this world? Might that place be at the foot of the Kannon statue or in the ceremonial space? With these questions in mind, in the next section, I discuss how these tensions are reflected in the figure of kaerinahitō, a kimono doll which is dedicated to the missing.

f. Kaeribinahito: when the missing become the emperor

“Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins,” Walter Benjamin (2019 [1968]: 3) warns in Theses on the philosophy of history. Whether I can call it an enemy or not, there is a constant tension among those who want to seize the dead through a certain type of materiality and constrain it within established symbols and meanings. Since the time that I talked about the memorials and the missing bodies with Eita and Taisei, I was haunted by questions regarding the ambiguous dead and the ocean as a grave. Amid this, in mid-March 2019, a few days after our conversation, I considered the idea of an empty grave when I found a small exhibition about the missing bodies in a small corner of a 3/11 memorial centre. There were about 50 kimono dolls called Kaeribina, which means ‘return dolls,’ exhibited in the centre at Arai Station, the closest subway station to Arahama. To visit Arahama, I had to change from a train to a bus. For the devastated village, there was only one bus every hour from morning to early evening, so I sometimes used to spend time in the memorial centre waiting for the bus. The exhibition began with a question, which attracted my attention, ‘Do you know there are still 2,544
people who have not returned home after the great earthquake and tsunami in eastern Japan? I had already known some administrators working in the centre and asked how they made the kimono dolls. They explained the dolls were made by a group of old ladies called Kaeribina hito ("return dolls people") who lived around the coastal areas. Since the tsunami and earthquake had devastated their homes and villages, they spread out to different places such as temporary shelters and relatives’ houses in the process of building new homes.

Okaerinasai, which means welcome back, is one of the most popular greetings in Japan. It forms a pair with Tadaima, which literally means ‘right now.’ However, in this specific context with okaeri, it is a condensed version of ‘tadima kaerimashita’ which translates as ‘I came home right now.’ ‘Okaeri’ and its polite version, ‘okaerinasai,’ mean ‘welcome home’ or ‘welcome back.’ These phrases express the feeling of returning home safely and, by responding to Tadaima, Okaerinasai gives a sense that the return has been awaited and confirms that ‘you have finally returned, welcome back.’ It was clear that the Kimono dolls were made as prayers for a safe return. A couple of days after discovering the dolls, I was able to meet some of the group members in the 3/11 memorial centre who made them.

Tsuda, a woman in her late 60s, and a few other ladies looked very excited about the meeting. There were administrators from the memorial centre present, one other researcher from the U.S. who was doing research on the history of natural disaster in Japan, and myself. Tsuda brought some photos to show how they started making the dolls and wanted to take pictures of us together. This is the story of how they started making the dolls: since the disaster, many people had to stay in temporary houses and were spending everyday thinking of loss, pain, and the unanswerable questions of why and how. The villagers had to spread to many different places and there were no more connections or a sense of belonging. Listening to the radio and some music was the only possible pleasure for many (at this point, Tsuda sang a song about her hometown). Some women in the temporary houses heard about one woman’s work in Hakone where there is a famous onsen (“hot spring”) in the west side of Tokyo. The woman working in a local inn named Shimomura got to know about the missing, and she remembered the Kaeribina (“return dolls”) that she sometimes made as a gift for her guests in the past. She then visited the Tohoku area several times with the dolls for the missing. There is a tradition of giving a set of kimono dolls to a woman who turns sixty which is based on a legend that the doll resets life and makes a new one. With a phonetic similarity between kaeri (“rebirth”) and okaeri (“return”), a few women in the temporary houses in Tohoku also started making the dolls. It has now extended to the bigger group that collected old kimono fabrics from second-hand shops and made thousands of hina dolls.

Making the kimono dolls for the missing brought unexpected recognition to the women in the temporary houses. The combination of the local women’s craftworks and ‘traditional’ kimono dolls for the missing
has drawn attention from the media and government officials, and the ladies were covered on the front page of a local newspaper. The dolls even travelled abroad. Two ladies, Matsusaki and Saito, proudly showed me a photo of their exhibition in the U.S. They are not in isolation anymore. Ironically, the missing people educe the ladies from their temporary houses, a private and isolated world—the missing bodies have become a public matter. The missing persons have, as the Kaeribina dolls show, been awaited not only by their family members and friends, but also by the nation. Why do the missing matter for the nation? A question to which I will shortly return.

g. The sample

A couple of days later, I met the ladies in a different place to join a doll-making workshop. As the group got bigger, they rented a space in Sendai-Shi Furushi Puraza (“Sendai city welfare plaza”), and another researcher from the U.S. and I met four ladies from the group there. One workshop continued for about two hours, and we paid 2,500 yen (about 20 pounds) for materials like kimono fabrics, needles, and scissors which were necessary for the sewing process. They told me that they have much teaching experience. To begin, Tsuda showed me some _mihon_ (“samples”) and said that I can choose whichever of the beautiful colours I wanted. “After all,” she said, “you are a better sewer since you are a woman!” With this praise that made me uncomfortable, we started sewing. The ladies considered sewing an important skill to show _joshi-yoku_, which literally means ‘female power.’ However, it is discriminative language which emphasises a stereotyped gender role and femininity. Following my first stitch, the praise directed toward me indicated that I am prepared to be a good wife. The process of sewing was not so simple: there were many rules to making the dolls—twelve layered collars, hiding traces of the stitches, various colour combinations, and beautiful shapes. As I sewed, I felt like my fingers had become paralysed. Like an inspector, Tsusa kept her eyes peeled on how I was doing. I had a hard time with the sewing and every time that I wavered with the next step, she took my doll and corrected it to make the dolls perfectly well-formed and pretty. I squinted at my colleague to see how he was doing, and we were both flustered by the unexpectedly strict rules and the lead of the ladies.

![A sample of a Kaeribina doll](image-url)
“What am I doing?” Holding a tiny needle, I silently asked myself this question as Tsuda explained the last step in the process: “putting a shaku (“a flat ritual baton or sceptre”) on the chest and kanmuri (“a black hat”) on the head like used by tenno (“the emperor”). “You know tennon? It should be like that,” Tsuda said. Soon I realised what I was making, that is, a doll wearing sokutai, which is a complex attire worn only by courtiers, aristocrats, and the emperor in the Japanese imperial court. Who are they? I looked around; there were several ‘beautiful’ kimono dolls, well-cut kimono pieces, and finely skilled old ladies. Tsuda later told me that once I get used it, it will be easier to make a nicely shaped doll while thinking about the missing. It looked like the dolls outnumbered the dead, but I wasn’t sure. Did they only make 2,544 dolls, or even more in the shape of tenno? What do the dolls actually represent? The missing? Or the emperor?

In late April 2019, a week ahead of the tenno’s succession to the throne, which is strictly primogeniture, the Oosaki Hachiman shrine was full of people waiting for worship. The shrine was just five minutes away from where I stayed at the time; it was my morning and evening walking place since it was surrounded by trees and quiet. It was the first time that I saw the shrine so busy and what people there do. They wait in a queue, ring a bell at the door of the main shrine, clap two times, and pray for good luck. For five or six months, I asked the same question to many people, “why do you clap two times?” Nobody knew. “If there is no meaning, why do you do that?” With a bashful smile, people would often say that it’s a custom. They don’t know why they do it; they just do it. When I ask who is tenno, people would respond in a similar way: “I don’t know. He is something good and familiar.” Even some teenagers told me that tenno is something like a character in a computer game—unrealistic, strange, and living in a very different world, and they were sure the emperor is much better than dishonest politicians. Tsuda later told me about the emperor’s visit to the Tohoku region after the triple disaster and how his gesture offered sincere solace to the people who lost their family members and homes. When Tsuda recounted the moment when the tenno held one of the victim’s hands, she became very emotional. The emperor is considered by many to be a god, but he is also a human who has a body and feelings.
The emperor is above all a ruler. Article 1 in Japanese constitutional law defines *tenno* as a symbol of the state and the unity of the Japanese people. The *tenno* rules secular space and time; he is officially a living god beyond the secular order of the world which does not need any proof of his existence. He has no identity, no documents, no name, and no personality. With this anonymity, the *tenno* takes on the identity of all and becomes an incarnation of the nation. This image of the emperor is a result of a specific cultural and political context. Fujitani (1998) explores the history of monarchy in Japan and finds that during the Tokugawa period it was not the case that ordinary people had a strong sense of national identity or a clear image of the emperor as a symbol of the nation. Rather, the emperor was imagined as an unrealistic deity descending on a cloud. In general, popular images of the emperor before the Meiji era tended to be rooted in folk religion rather than in political and nationalistic discourses. For the leaders of the Meiji regime, the potential power of the emperor could be a powerful symbol of the nation; yet it remained “non-existent, vague, or fused with folk beliefs” (ibid.: 9) The figure of the emperor was used to consolidate a scattered sense of national identity into a singly modern one. The everyday world that can filled with “an extraordinary profusion of non-verbal official signs and the dominant meanings, customs, and practices associated with them” Fujitani (ibid.: 11) calls “mnemonic sites.” These are material vehicles used to construct the memory of an emperor-centred past which serve as symbolic markers for commemorations of the present and possibilities for the future.

Considering these mnemonic vehicles, why does it matter that the “emperor’s duality” has two bodies—“one that represented the mundane and mutable prosperity of the national community and another that represented its transcendence and perpetuity?” (Fujitani ibid.: 159). Examining the historical trajectory of monarchy in modern Japan and its cultural presentation through material performances, Fujitani argues that the emperor is not an opposition to the modern state but essential to building a symbolic and ritual centre—the emperor integrates the territory under his visible and invisible presence. Thus, for the Meiji political elites, it was important to construct a popular image of the emperor—a man directly involved in governmental and military affairs—with a human face. In so doing, the splendid monarchy created a sense of nearness and intimacy between the ruler and the ruled. According to Fujitani, the most spectacular state ceremony is a form of public imperial pageantry—a ritual in which the emperor travels around the countryside watching and being watched by the people becoming Japanese. This spectacle is exactly what impressed Tsuda after the triple disaster. Like the trip in the year 1868 when the emperor travelled from Kyoto to Osaka and later to Tokyo, the emperor made a trip to Tohoku in 2011 to see the aftermath of the disaster as well as to be seen by ‘his people.’

The glorification of the deceased emperor’s return to an ever-present past is a living tradition. With the *tenno’s* succession to the throne in 2019, the unit for measuring time changed from *Heisei* to *Reiwa*. The time unit endorsed by the throne is used for everyday life and all official documents. In the same way that the name of the old era, *Heisei*, symbolised the end of the Second World War, the new name
of the imperial era, Reiwa, which literally means ‘beautiful harmony’ (in an official translation), symbolises that the era of the triple disaster has finally become part of the past and is gone. It’s now time to enter a new order in beautiful harmony.

How is it possible to create beautiful harmony in a broken world after the disaster? Why and how do the missing become a figure of tennō? Koikari reads the social and political impacts of 3/11 in terms of militarism, masculinity, and national salvation by focusing on kokudo kyōjinka (“national resilience”). According to her, “encompassing the field of disaster reduction (gensai), disaster prevention (bōsai), and crisis management (kiki kanri), national resilience also transcends these existing frameworks by demanding a sweeping transformation of the nation” (2019: 145-146). National resilience involves a cultural machinery of exceptional versatility, which proliferates via public discourses, memorials, events, exhibitions, and government policy documents. In calling for the revitalisation of Japan, unlike other politicised controversies around the worship of war criminals at the Yaskuni shrine, or sexual slavery called ‘comfort women’ (cf. Kingston 2016; Mullins and Nakano 2016), a claim for national resilience is “a yet-to-be marked domain of contestation where the public concern with safety and security frequently overrides and obscures political intentions and implications” (Koikari ibid.: 146). In this context, despite its depoliticised façade, gender and masculinity constitute a potent site of cultural production as the micro-level of individual stories are integrated into metaphors, symbols, and discourses at “the macro level of historical dynamics (…) nation- and empire- building” (Dasgupta 2013: 9, also see Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002).

Such a cultural and moral transformation of natural disaster is traced throughout Japanese history. Schencking (2008) shows how disaster triggered cultural production in the aftermath of the great Kantō earthquake in 1923 which devastated Tokyo and its surroundings. According to Schencking, the disaster led to an emergence of a ‘cultural catastrophe’ whereby a series of discourses and practices circulated
to redefine the meaning of Japan. For many politicians, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, the disaster was a chance not only to advance a project for rebuilding Tokyo as a modern, imperial capital, but also to implement a much greater and more complex program of national reconstruction (Schencking ibid.: 295-296). This is also what Borland emphasises—the disaster included a “transformation of Japanese spirit” (2006: 887). It also made the discourse of ‘divine punishment’ possible by framing the 1923 earthquake as an inevitable punishment meted out by a higher order. The higher order is, as Borland shows through a series of educational reforms, a proper understanding of “loyalty to the emperor, filial piety, benevolence, personal sacrifice, courage, and obedience” (ibid.: 894).

The body of tenno as inviolable can be found in many forms of popular culture in post-war Japan. Igarashi (2000) highlights the ambiguous role of the emperor in the post-war era through analysing a scene in the film, Godzilla (1954), when the monster destroys downtown Tokyo but stops a short distance from the Imperial Palace. Despite the words from the music director of the film, Ifukube Akira, who said, “Godzilla was like the souls of the Japanese soldiers, who died in the Pacific Ocean during the war” (Igarashi ibid.: 116), Godzilla destroys the prosperous area of Tokyo and leaves the residence of the emperor unscathed. A film critic Kawamoto, cited in Igarashi (ibid.: 117), comments on the ending of the film: “Those who died in the war are still under the spell of Japan’s emperor system. Godzilla cannot destroy the Imperial Palace in the end. Those who criticise Godzilla’s inability as a sign of incomplete critical thinking in Godzilla do not know the ‘dark’ spellbinding force of the emperor system.” Along with this criticism, Igarashi (ibid.) concludes that the emperor became “the unnamed historical condition that necessitates the dual embodiment of the monster” since there was a need to maintain the emperor for both the American and the Japanese governments in order to resolve the war and its loss through the symbol of historical continuity.

Several decades later, the surviving body of the emperor met again the ruins of disaster. In addition to the cultural and national discourse attached to the natural disaster and wartime memory, in the wake of the triple disaster in 2011, social and economic precarity played a key role (Allison 2012; 2013). As we have seen, the ladies making kimono dolls live in temporary houses since their houses and villages were completely destroyed. As Tsuda said, “Making the dolls brought meaning to life when we were depressed and frustrated (…) By making dolls, we could have a sense of belonging, and we are still part of a bigger community.” Their village has been destroyed as well as their life. Life after the disaster was full of impermanence and uncertainty, and they wanted some materiality to hold onto in order to have a sense of stability and continuity. The disaster exacerbated all the existing problems such as social isolation and gender/economic/social inequality. After the disaster, people were forced to move to temporary houses, and most of them, who were elderly in rural areas, were not able to visit their former village due to health and public transport issues, which resulted in being and feeling isolated. Many wanted to build new houses but could not afford it. Even though some temporary houses are named
Nozomi ("hope" or "wish"), it is not even possible to grow anything there. All the temporary houses looked the same—thin walls, small concrete yards, tiny balconies.

Everything was new since they lost all by the tsunami. No family photos to put on the wall, no old clothes, and nothing with deep roots. Surrounded by grey walls, Tsuda made the colourful kimono silk dolls. “Only the radio was my friend. I heard about Kaeribina dolls from the local radio,” Tsuda added. For those who struggled with feelings of abandonment, dressing the twelve layered silk collars on the imaginative body of the missing seemed to reflect the way that they want to be treated. Yet, it did not happen. In the midst of the media’s full attention to the discourse of kokudo kyōjinka (“national resilience”) and an emphasis on ‘Japanese spiritual virtues’ such as self-sacrifice, mutual help, neighbourly ties, rural communalism, and affinity with nature, the only thing that Tsuda could manage is sewing the dolls with hopeful wishes. What is the imagery that Tsuda’s stitches? With the invocation of an ambiguous ‘Japanese-ness’, “national resilience becomes a malleable discursive terrain in which talks of Japanese spirit, masculinity, and imperial legacy all overlap” (Koikari 2019: 156). The women making the dolls not only take on a salient role in coping with the emergencies of life crisis, but also evoke traditional femininity by sewing the old regime. The ladies, who had to stay in their temporary houses and remain disconnected from the whole society, found their places by performing stereotyped gender roles and reproducing the higher order—the order of piety toward tenno.

h. Conclusion: an empty grave

“Do you know the sand changes its face?” Early morning in mid-July, Michiko told me how the sand in Arahama changes its face every day. We were sitting on the beach; our feet were covered by soft sand, and she pointed out patterns left by the wind and from the waves last night. “The ocean has its own feeling (…) I am listening to it.” Michiko, a friend of Eita and a stage designer, came from Tokyo. She visited Arahama for the first time eight years ago and fell in love with the sand. “Many said, after the tsunami, the sea was dead (…) It’s ruined, but I thought it’s the most beautiful beach I have ever
seen.” She came to the ruined village to prepare noh, a Japanese dance drama with traditional masks and costumes. A few people in the village wanted to see their home not just as a ruin, but as a stage, so Michiko designed the sandy beach in this way. “It’s extremely windy and cold. The performer kept lots of hot packs in his pockets and said his lips were frozen. That’s why Arahama is Arahama; it’s very name means rough,” she laughed. Since then, she got a small house near Arai station which is just 10 minutes away from the beach by car and, except for some necessary work around Tokyo, she has come to the beach every morning. The wind and water blowing and flowing through the night changes the shape of the sand; every morning at sunrise, Michiko sees what remains in the ruins. Michiko, and others, sometimes find crosses, flowers, and driftwood on the beach, or footprints from last night, and they sometimes think that there might have been someone who was waiting for the missing. With the strong winds and wild waves in Arahama, nothing lasts forever. The crosses and flowers will disappear the next morning, and the sand will change its face once again.

There appeared to be nothing particularly special that they were doing on the beach or at the seaside library. Every time that I visited the library, people were often talking about a sea gull catching a catfish and flying around, or sometimes people took a nap, or read a book. Except for having to walk ten minutes to use a bathroom in a nearby community centre, the library was comfortable enough to spend all day there. We drank and cooked sometimes. When we made tempura, a deep-fried vegetable and seafood, Eita used to say, “Listen to the sound of the frying, and then it will be more delicious.” A rapeseed plant flower and chrysanthemum from the backyard were the best for the frying. The sound was sometimes like the sound of rain or the sound of waves; thus, eating tempura was something like eating the landscape. When we swallowed the landscape, delicious sounds, ‘sakutto, sakutto’ were heard.

Humans and the landscape are inseparable. If the villagers can remain in the area, “everything will return someday” as long as the ocean and the sand is there. “The landscape brought me up” and “fed me.” When we walked together in the village, Eita said this, and explained why he is struggling to come back to this non-inhabitable area. He pointed, “Here was my house. There was Taisei’s house, and a small fishing shop.” Eita sees the village as if everything is still there. The absence proves the presence; there was an exchange of gazes between the villagers and the environment. There is a sense that Eita and a few other villagers were not able to leave. After everything had been destroyed, remembering the traces of what existed there, it all appeared for Eita too bright and clear. I was told that it was not the case that he was watching the landscape, but that the landscape was watching him. He often said, “I feel like the ocean looks at us. [The ocean] looks at the village.” In the ruin, there is nothing empty but always something. That’s why I heard so many times that the kūki (which literally means “air” but more like “atmosphere”) of the village is full of air and water and that the bodies of the missing evaporated into the air and were liquefied into water. In other words, the missing became part of the environment.
Thus, his only advice for a stranger, myself, who was searching for the missing, was “reading kūki (kūki o yomu),” the full presence of absence.

Taussig (2006) begins the first chapter of Walter Benjamin’s Grave: a profane illumination, with a story of Hannah Arendt’s attempt and failure in searching for Benjamin’s grave in Port Bou on the border of Spain and France. Arendt found nothing. “Nothing that is, other than one of the most beautiful places she had ever seen” (Taussig ibid.: 3). For Benjamin, who committed suicide in the last minute of his exile, there is no grave with his name on it, and, possibly worse, there has been built a ‘fake grave’ for the visitors who desire to see the last trace of him. But the grave is empty. In considering the question, “Why do graves matter for the living?” Taussig asks, “When we get right down to it, why trust that any grave contains what it’s supposed to? (…) Maybe none of the graves have the right body, or any at all?” (ibid.: 4). Another interesting idea here is what Cannetti called ‘the invisible crowd of the dead,’ that is, a system of reburial in which the bones of the individual re-join the masses after generations of being dead. Taussig reads this idea of the empty grave in relation to Benjamin’s passion for allegory, both philosophical and aesthetic, in that we find meaning in the world “not only from smoothly functioning symbols, as if reading signs on a dictionary, but also from an awkwardness of fit between signs and what they refer to, most especially when those signs cluster around death” (ibid.: 25).

As Eita reminded me, in the village, everything clusters around death, an empty death. The absence of bodies—that is what makes Eita and Taisei revisit the village again and again. As Arendt and my interlocutor, Michiko, find, there is a natural beauty of the landscape combined with an absence. And in the place of a full of absence, materials, memorialisation, and mourning take different forms; meanwhile, they remain in the mundanity of everyday life, “soredemo ikiteiku (“nevertheless keep on living”). What an empty ocean grave evokes (as Taussig and his journey to Benjamin’s grave reminds us) is our destiny—even if you were buried immediately with a name and a body, you will eventually end up nameless and bodiless. There are still 2,544 bodies underwater that can’t be called by their names, or even more, which can’t be represented by twelve layered silk kimono clothes; they still ask, “What are you searching for?”. Arahama, as Taussig’s understanding of allegory suggests, is a space and place that is a mix of beauty, death, and the nameless, which paradoxically becomes a living memorial, opening up questions about the ambiguous dead.

What of them remain here? The following is a response which I addressed in this chapter through the ambiguous flow of water which connected all the forgotten dead from the past. What the former villagers in Arahama reveal is a way of living not by ‘remembering’ the dead but by ‘exchanging gazes’ with them. That is how the ocean connects people in-between life and death. A writer named Yu Miri asks a similar question through the voice of an (un)dead man who came from Tohokū to Tokyo in order to find day labour but ended his life homeless and nameless in the park near Ueno Station. The man’s
story reveals a deeper shadow of Japan’s bubble economy in post-war time. Although his entire life was ‘disastrous’ even long before the triple disaster, the death of the nameless man was never mourned as much as his life was never flourishing. The voice of this undead man who cannot rest in the emperor’s sleeves reminds us of what is left behind:

I used to think life was like a book; you turn the first page, and there is the next, and as you go on turning page after page, eventually you reach the last one. But life is nothing like a story in a book. There may be words, and the pages may be numbered, but there is no plot. There is no end. Left behind. Like a sculpted tree on the vacant land where a rotted house has been torn down. Like the water in a vase after wilted flowers have been removed. Left behind. But then what of me remains here? (Yu Miri, ibid.: 3).
Ch. 3 Tacit Conversation: the sound of the absence

This chapter explores the thresholds between presence and absence as well as silence and voice by examining the acoustic experiences of people living with invisible and quotidian risks of radiation. Through participating in everyday sensorial experiences which have been affected by radioactive contamination, I ask how the Fukushima nuclear disaster and its aftermath have shaped a different form of perception—that is, not as an invariant way of perceiving but as a socially and historically contingent one. Walter Benjamin considers this contingency of sense and perception to be intertwined with inevitable social, political, and technological change; he writes, “just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their perception” (1935: 255). Among many striking points that Benjamin’s essay on change in art and human perception in the age of mechanical reproduction made, and which continues to inspire significant attention to the new sensorial environment catalysed by modern technology, what I consider in this chapter regarding the ‘Fukushima matter’ is the following: when the shock of the triple disaster became mundane through the omnipresent spread of radiation, how did this affect human sense and perception in detecting the risk of radiation? Furthermore, I consider how the specific nature of radiation, that is, as invisible and immaterial to the human senses, paradoxically opens a new possibility for synesthetic exploration into the world beyond the domain and domination of visual perception.

Detecting the imperceptible risk of contamination—a capacity to recognise what is dangerous through the sensory organs—has been challenged, and it can be argued that radiation ‘anesthetises’ the human ability to bring the outside world into our recognition. Yet, instead of taking anaesthesia (cf. Masco 2006) or inattention (cf. Larkin 2014) as the only possible mode of sensorial perception in post-disaster times, this chapter focuses on the returnees’ strategies that sway between attention and inattention, and hyper-sensibility and intended taciturnity, in order to maintain daily life and their connection to others as well as to the environment and the things that remain. This means that what is sensed and how it could be articulated has become an ‘apparatus’ (Agamben 2009; also see Foucault 1980). A more detailed discussion of apparatus will come later in this chapter, but for now, the following is a brief summary of what Agamben means by apparatus.

Further developing Foucault’s idea of dispositive/apparatus, Agamben defines apparatus as a set of strategies and relations of forces that make certain types of knowledge and practices possible. The apparatus forms a material discursive practice which contains or enables that which exists and can be said. Expanding the meaning of apparatus to contemporary tools, media, and various gadgets, Agamben asks how a meaningful statement or action can be made with our hands in which there is a constant battle taking place that works to connect, disconnect, and re-connect ourselves to the world. In so doing,
Agamben seeks the possibility of using anti-apparatus against all the forces that govern and drive us to a particular way of sensing and living as well as overcoming the fundamental division between what is considered to be sacred and profane. Despite the governing power of structures that constrain the human ability toward the unseen, the unspeakable, and the undetectable, what Agamben sees is rather a ‘battle,’ a dialectical power of apparatus and anti-apparatus.

By exploring what is sensed or insensate in the risk-scape of nuclear contamination in Fukushima, I ask how the experience of disaster and its ongoing fear is materialised and/or drifted in sensorial forms and how the crisis of sensing the possible risk can evidence a social and historical shift in our sensorial capacity. Can the sensorial experiences that have been challenged by the imperceptible existence of radiation be an anti-apparatus? How might the new environment that problematises taken-for-granted perceptions and senses suggest a new way of engaging with the world that once had been broken and disconnected and thus remained unspeakable?

As long as radiation and its contaminative effects in the area are imperceptible, the decontamination work that the government and TEPCO claim as complete is imperceptible as well. For many returnees, both the presence and absence of radiation are not perceived through their sensorial experiences; thus, human lives in the disaster-affected areas are often wrecked by unseen and imperceptible risk ‘in one’s thoughts, imagination, and illusory sense.’ However, the fear of radiation and worries about physical and emotional health, which are often considered to be nonsense, permeate everyday sensorial experiences, including non-verbal communication, and they regulate everyday life in the village. Taking perception which is unarticulated and yet quite dominant, I investigate how life in a state of chronic fear and anxiety is embedded in tacit conversation and is muted, and/or, sometimes, it is magnified in acoustic experience as an attestation to the invisible or unspeakable violence of the disaster. In so doing, I ask, at what point does the agency of the speaking subject appear and what kind of materiality can be taken to express the unseen force of radiation? When it becomes clear that apparatus, “machines that make one see or think” (Deleuze 1992: 160), determine the way in which people perceive the world, how can we be assured of what we have seen and experienced?

Taking an emphasis on sensorial experiences, including non-verbal language, I show how ambiguous and uncertain ways of communication through silence, sound (not voice), air, and the wind, (which often indicate disconnection), have become catalysts for making connections and conversations. In so doing, this chapter asks: what if tacit conversation is the only possible way to talk about the disaster which is impossible to grasp but constantly haunts daily life? How does this condition of making a clear articulation impossible challenge the very definition of testimony, subjectivity, and the materiality of language? While seeking to use diverse forms of apparatus that make connections between the material and the immaterial, the seen and the unseen, I ask: to what extent is it possible that sound, silence, and
murmuring are communicable forms of language or testimony that create a voice for the unseen which is, in Agamben’s term, ‘ungovernable?’

a. Opening the windows

“It took more than three months for most returnees to merely open the windows in their houses, so can you imagine how much time they will need to open their mouths [to speak out]?” When Misaki said this, we were sitting on a bench nearby a recently opened Family Mart, a convenience store in Odaka, eating a melting ice cream bar. It was a sunny and warm early summer day in June 2019, and the temperature was nearly 25 degrees Celsius. The flowers and plane trees in the village had turned their leaves from light to dark green. It was, however, hard to see anyone around us despite the nice weather and well-managed gardens and streets. In such an eerie stillness of the village, only two women’s voices could be heard.

Opening windows is something risky due to the level of radiation and the direction of the wind. Despite an emphasis on the safety of the level of radiation by the government, all windows in Odaka remained closed, and, as Misaki used a paronomasia, closed windows seemed to be an analogy for my fieldwork, above all, a struggle between closed mouths. I remembered the words from one of my friends, an architect. I was complaining about the concealment of a Japanese house where I stayed in Tokyo and compared the house to a monad. He explained that the shōji (“window” or “sliding door”) in a Japanese house is not made to open inside to outside. Rather, the outside permeates to the inside through the air, sunshine, wind, and gaze and that’s why, unlike other East Asian countries, the lattices are installed inside of the windows to be seen within the house. It is probably then understandable why people stubbornly closed windows on this sunny day—they do not want to allow anything from the outside to enter.

Misaki, a woman in her early to mid-40s, lives in Kashima, two stations before Odaka; Kashima is 25km away from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear powerplant. Since the town is slightly outside the 20km evacuation zone, her parents’ house (now she is living with them) avoided the evacuation order. Misaki had left her hometown after graduation from high school, and, according to her, “the only thing that I wished at that time was to leave my hometown.” She lit her cigarette. “Why?” When I asked, she laughed and continued, “I hated this small rural town, and nothing was exciting. Everyone knows everyone, and many said that I am a weird woman.” I laughed too at remembering our first meeting in the bookshop in Minami soma last winter and how Misaki was indeed a bit ‘weird.’ She was wearing a raccoon-shaped grey wool hat in the photography section of the shop, and once she heard my conversation with the bookshop owner, she immediately joined our conversation. Misaki continued, “I wanted to do something different. I wasn’t interested in becoming a good wife who makes miso soup
for her husband every morning (…) I wanted to see different people and the world.” And she added laughing, “I know you are a weird woman too!”

The disaster motivated her to return to her old home. She remembered the day when she desperately tried to connect with her parents from Osaka. For her parents, who have a small fabric business in Kashima, she is their only child. Misaki, like many other younger villagers in the Fukushima area who have returned home after the disaster, felt that she has to do something to help her suffering hometown and parents to re-flourish. However, the home is somewhat strange to her and vice versa. She is an unusual person in the village in some ways; it seems that she does not care about patency. Every morning she smoked on her balcony looking at her neighbourhood and enjoyed spending time outside. She was a novice driver who had just obtained a license and yet, unlike other people in the village who always shut the windows of their houses and cars, she always opens the windows and often holds an ice cream bar while driving.

When I became a friend of Misaki, I was looking for an interlocutor in the village who could tell me about the disaster and its aftermath. However, in contrast to my early expectation of the people in the disaster affected town that I imagined from ‘the chorus of voices’ that Alexievich (2005) heard from Chernobyl, I was not able to find anyone who wanted to talk about the nuclear disaster. Talking about the disaster and the radiation issue seemed to be sealed up, and many people in the village did not even give a glance at the Geiger or radiation counters which are in almost every part of the village. In dealing with ‘the collective silence,’ I was reminded of early advice from some Japanese and non-Japanese anthropologists and researchers who I had met in Tokyo and Sendai before I started my field research in Miyagi and Fukushima. They told me that my thirteen months of stay in Japan would not be enough to listen to what I wanted to know because people will not talk to me about the issue. “How long then of fieldwork would be enough?” I asked, and they said, “probably never long enough.”

Never. I often tripped on the several thresholds in the village. The most challenging threshold was, however, not a suspicion, doubt, or bias that I had to confront as a ‘malfunctioned stranger’ in the field, but an absence. That was an absence of place, people, and narratives. As Misaki said, no one opens their doors or even windows. Every place that I visited was abandoned and ruined, and no one wanted to talk about it. The closed windows and doors were analogous to their closed mouths. Even Misaki, who defines herself as a ‘different and weird woman’ who enjoys honest conversation with gai(goku)-jin (“a foreigner” or “an outsider”) like me, even she stopped talking about the disaster. Every time we would walk or drive to the village and would see the abandoned houses and the full bags of contaminated soil, she would try to change the topic or make a joke. “Ghosts are there! Let’s move on.” The joke seemed like a cork to block the conversation. Or, other times, she tried to change the language from Japanese to English as if we were talking about something secret.
Despite the little English that she was able to speak, when our conversation turned to my research topics such as the map of radiation, contaminated soil bags, and the abandoned school and church, or my recent meeting with anti-nuclear activists in Koriyama, Fukushima, she used to respond to me in English saying, “Here is okay (…) Unlike there [inner parts of Fukushima], here is safe, so we don’t have to speak out as they do.” After watching together the documentary, *Fukushima no onnanodachi* (“women in Fukushima”), she said, “That’s too much.” Sometimes, she looked up from her mobile dictionary trying to find a proper word, but soon stopped by saying “I don’t know what to say.” When I said, “you can speak to me in Japanese!” she replied, “yeah, I know but I think it’s too complicated to talk now.” There was no direct way to arrive at the issue, and it seemed we were going around in circles. The disaster continues in diverse ways in the village: the empty and abandoned houses, the radiation counters, the contaminated soil bags, the reduction of visitors and tourists. However, *genbatsu* (“nuclear power”) has never been a topic of conversation. The disaster and its aftermath have become what Taussig (1992) refers to as a ‘public secret’ which everyone knows about but does not dare to speak of publicly. “Talking about ghosts recalls the ghosts,” Misaki often joked.

Yet, the silence was not the only matter for me as a researcher but a widely shared concern among both sides of those who problematise and/or follow the government and TEPCO’s policy. The Fukushima matter haunted people and yet had never been articulated. Can the euphemism and a claim for not mentioning mitigate the everyday concerns surrounding the aftermath of the nuclear disaster? What if remaining silent seems a rejection of any entanglement with the disaster, nevertheless, it paradoxically shows the impossibility of unconcern? Jackson considers this paradox of silence, which in fact reveals, when he writes, “unable to stop thinking about a traumatic event, a person may refuse to speak of it, as if silence will make the event go away- a view contained in the English saying, Least said, soonest mended” (2004: 49). At the same time, Misaki knows the power of enunciation; that’s why many villagers call the disaster not the ‘nuclear’ disaster, but the great ‘earthquake.’ In a similar way, the contaminated soil bags have simply become ‘trash bags.’ The unsolved signs of the disaster have become naturalised, and Misaki sometimes said that there is *kuki*, which literally means air but closer to the atmosphere or even social pressure (cf. chapter two), which makes people speak or not speak. Silence becomes a threshold that makes me hesitate, stop, and ask: if a year of fieldwork is not long enough, how long will I have to wait until everything becomes speakable again? If there is no such ‘field’ or people, is it still possible to do something like ‘fieldwork?’ What is *kuki*, which is not something observable but apparently sensed and allows people to speak or to stay in silence?

In this respect, Gill (2014) illustrates his own experience in the street campaign for anti-nuclear power in Oxford. Directed toward him while he was shouting “No more Hiroshima, no more Fukushima,” one Japanese woman argued that chanting the name of Fukushima against nuclear things insults the people in Fukushima. This is because, she said, unlike Hiroshima, which happened sixty-five years ago,
“Fukushima is happening now.” This indicates a paradoxical question concerning when Fukushima will become the past? If the radioactive fallout will remain for centuries, when can we call the name of Fukushima? Who has a right to speak? If we cannot talk about the present that people encounter, negotiate, and adjust to, how can ‘the Fukushima issue’ be located in anthropology’s empirical horizon? Despite the woman’s argument, if we can only talk about the past; there has never been ‘a proper’ time to speak. Regarding this claim to silence during one’s lifetime, Matsusaka Yasukata, a survivor of the atomic bombs, observes:

People in Hiroshima prefer to remain silent until they face death. They want to have their own life and death. They do not like to display their misery for use as “data” at the moment against atomic bombs or other political struggles. Nor do they like to be regarded as beggars, even though they were in fact victimised by the atomic bomb (…) Almost all thinkers and writers have said that it is not good for the A-atomic bomb victims to remain in silence; they encourage us to speak out. I detest those who fail to appreciate our feeling about silence. We cannot celebrate August 6; we can only let it pass away with the dead (Ōe 1996: 19).

The claim for ‘not speaking’ about the disaster and being in silence is striking for those who organise resistance to nuclear power. As the term kūki suggests, it has often been regarded as socio-politically and culturally imposed along with the term jishiku (“self-restraint”). As some people have expressed, there is an air or an atmosphere that makes or allows people to speak. However, based on my fieldwork in the disaster-affected areas, I challenge such a dichotomy between language and silence with the term ‘tacit conversation’ by exploring what is shared and communicated through silence. Does silence in this context denote socio-political pressure and the personal inability to express? If silence indicates not simply a failure of speech or an impossibility of being a speaking subject, how is it possible to grasp the connotations of silence? What is the materiality of silence?

b. Tacit communication as apparatus

What does it mean to claim that certain experiences are unspeakable? As some studies about people living in trauma, risk, and anxiety show, silence can be an index of the techniques of governance, socio-cultural pressure, and certain power relations. Veena Das (2007: 54) defines this area as the “zone of silence” which is used to describe the experiences and memories of violence in the everyday. For women still living in the memory of terror in India, such events are folded into ongoing relationships and everyday life, and “a possible vicissitude of such fatal moments is that one could become voiceless—not in the sense that one does not have words- but that these words become frozen, numb, without life” (ibid.: 8). In the case of the Fukushima disaster, likewise, the problems of silence and seemingly apolitical people have often been illustrated as an impossibility for agency and (inter)-subjectivity. The ‘frozen and numb’ words which are crystalised in silence have been read in the context of Japan’s
(stereotypical) culture of reticence and inhibition and/or around victimised terms such as ‘social
decariat’ (Allison 2012; Ogawa 2013; 2014; also see Takahashi T 2012) as well as the widely used
terms, ‘nuclear refugees’ and ‘nuclear gypsies’ (Horie 1979; Jobin 2011; 2012; 2017. Also see
Katayama 2020).

Silence has long been an index of traumatic experience. Like people living in routinised fear and anxiety,
such a chronic state of insecurity might distort one’s own perception of reality and ability to grasp
language, and thus, internalised silence becomes second nature. The anthropology of embodied
memories of violence and the silence of survivors is indebted largely to the legacy of pioneering work
by Das (Das & Nandy 1985; Das et al. 2000, 2007) and Scarry (1988). Detailed observations of the
embodied realities of everyday life over an extended period of time are central to ethnographic work
with survivors, and they have demonstrated the role of anthropology in the translation of extreme
experiences for a global audience. As the theory of trauma has shown, violence causes the collapse of
language and the social since the residual afterlife of dehumanising violence deprives people of the
ability to speak which leads to a ‘new threshold between the human and the non-human’ (Agamben
1998). According to these lines of trauma research, visceral silence is a failure of language and that of
being a human and a speaking subject, and that there must be a language, a form of materiality, that we
can grasp and finally understand.

However, the focus of this chapter is not a mere dichotomy between language and silence—making one
the opposite to the other—but the diverse ways in which experiences of the ‘unspeakable’ take on a
sensorial form. My ethnography shows how the senses, which are associated with a sticky entanglement
of silence and language, meaning and invalidation, and human language and other forms of
communication, often create an abundant discourse on what is seen and expressed about absence. In
other words, in exploring the shared sense of living with the imperceptible risk of radiation that is often
regarded as non-existent, what has been challenged is not only the boundary between the materiality of
speech and the immateriality of silence but also the assumption that ‘words become frozen and numb’
under the experience of violence. Following the point that silence is not simply the lack of presence but
forms its own specific material conditions (Fowles 2010), what I show through the ‘threshold’ between
silence and language is a possible form of ‘tacit’ communication about what happened, what remains,
and what is spoken of through silence. I argue that silence is neither a negation of language nor a simple
index of social-political suppression, but rather, an expression of lived experiences for those who deal
with invisible and imperceptible risk. If radiation has no sound, no smell, and no visible form for the
human senses, how do we know that radiation exists and things are contaminated? What kind of
language can people use to illustrate such immateriality? Perhaps, silence.
At this point, I would like to return to the idea of apparatus to ask how silence can be not an absence of language but an apparatus that allows for making communication about the immaterial possible. Further expanding Foucault’s definition of apparatus in relation to biopolitics and the dynamic workings of power, Agamben (2009) explores the relation between apparatus and subjectification by considering the potential liberation of that which is captured and separated by means of apparatus. According to his definition, apparatus is not a mere accident in which all humans are caught by chance but is constantly produced and reproduced through our relations with language, instruments, objects, odds and ends, and various technologies. A key point he emphasises is that the apparatus regulating our life does not only take on institutionalised or already given forms from positions of power but can be extended to the way that we create and sense a (dis)connection from the world. Agamben writes:

Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confessions, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones— why not— language itself, which is perhaps, the most ancient of apparatuses--- one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realising the consequence that he was about to face (ibid.: 14).

Body and language are key features of apparatus; yet, it should be noted that language is not limited to its verbal and corporeal forms which create certain meanings, but rather includes much wider forms of communication such as silence, murmuring, and gesture. This point is well-addressed in Agamben’s other works (1998; 2000), which explore the ‘communication of communicability’ through the figures of two refugees, Musselman and Hurbinek, living in a camp in which they had been deprived of language. Agamben claims that what allows them to witness is the deprivation of language. Faced with the insuperable disjunction between being and language, instead of being consigned to an infinite repletion of the disjunction, the impossibility of communication opens onto the form of the non-linguistic. Agamben made this observation to a large part through a reading of Primo Levi’s work, *If this is a Man* (1987). He foregrounds the idea by considering a scene that Levi illustrated which involved Hurbinek, a child of Auschwitz, who was three-years-old and most likely had been born in the camp and had never seen a tree. Yet, this small child whose forearm was marked with the tattoo of the camp fought to gain entrance into the world of human through his broken language, a sound, and a word, “mass-klo, matisklo.” Agamben listens to the insuperable meaninglessness of Hurbinek’s words as a witness. He writes:
Language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness (1998: 39).

The impossibility of speaking about that which is rendered absolutely exterior to language as well as the question, what is a ‘proper’ linguistic account for enormous violence, is a huge topic that needs to be further explored. Yet, regarding the focus of this chapter, three points that Agamben makes are the most important here. First, Agamben’s use of language and apparatus should be read in relation to sovereign power and its biopolitics which decide on the value and non-value of life as such. Secondly, despite the biopolitics that produces an inclusive exclusion, he analyses how capitalism and other modern forms of power break or interrupt the human ability to be knowing/sensing beings through limiting apparatuses to specific uses which are separated from “an all-too-human desire for happiness” and the Open. For instance, cameras can be used for surveillance which transforms public places into the interior of an immense prison. Moreover, everyday life is captured by mobile technology, but at the same time, humans seek a chance to bring something unreal (the potential) to the real (the actual) in their everyday life.

The third point that Agamben made is what I am most interested in for the purpose of this chapter concerning why apparatus matters in post-disaster Fukushima—that is, the possibility to overcome the division between what is secular, sacred, or religious and to recover the free use and trade of apparatuses that go beyond how they were designed to direct our senses and bodies in a specific way. Agamben sees capitalism and other modern forms of power to push to the extreme the process of separation in the name of religion. What is required in ‘our hand-to-hand combat’ by holding the apparatus is profanation as “the counter-apparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided” (ibid.:19). If we can use apparatuses to sense a world which is not merely instructed, and we can reconnect beings that are invisible and imperceptible (which Agamben calls the religious), he concludes that we could bring to light “the Ungovernable, which is the beginning and, at the same time, the vanishing point of every politics” (ibid.: 24).

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17 Agamben’s use of the term happiness must be distinguished from what is often said and promoted in the so-called ‘happiness industry.’ The potentiality of happiness has been one of key themes in his political and theological theory. Agamben considers happiness as essential to humankind, but it always remains as a potential which means that happiness is not for one to realise, accomplish, and obtain; rather, it beckons the domain of the un-lived, the improper, and the hidden within life. Agamben sees that the pursuit of happiness is the key to an ethical and political being, and the effort for profanation of the potential leads human beings into the realm of political life (see Agamben 2000; 2007).
c. The empty field

On my first night in Odaka, in early 2019, in a small tatami room in the oldest ryokan (“inn”) in the village, I was not able to fall asleep quickly. It rained in the early evening and soon stopped. In the cold and damp air, what made me unable to sleep, despite the long train trip and fatigue, was neither the worries of my first encounter with the villagers or that of radiation, it was sound; more specifically, the absence of sound. The wooden ryokan had several windows facing the main street of the village and was a five-minute walk away from the station, but, except for the sneaking sound of geda (“slippers”) of Kokone and Takeru, who were the owners of the inn, everything seemed to be in complete silence. Listening to the creaking sound of the wooden floor and stairs and to the small insects crawling around while I laid on a cold tatami straw mat, I remembered a story that I heard in Sendai from ogamiya-san, who is sometimes called a spiritual counsellor, or, on other occasions, a shaman.

There was a woman from Fukushima who visited the ogamiya-san sometimes to ask for help since she had severe insomnia. She told the ogamiya-san that what makes her unable to sleep is the sound from her shoulders of murmuring and whispering animals that she could not recognise or understand, tanuki (“a raccoon”) and inu (“a dog”). The symptom started from the first night of the evacuation when she stayed at home all night without sleep and any lights. She met a counsellor and a psychiatrist, but despite some medical treatment and a diagnosis of PTSD, it did not make her state any better. “There were no humans around her house (…). She lived with a dog, but when she was evacuated, she could not take her dog with her. A week later, she could finally return to her former home, but the dog had already disappeared (…) From that night, she started hearing the sound of animals (…) The animals from the field and the forest (…) Some of them were starving (…) The others were dead by starvation (…) She could feel when the souls of animals come to see her and sit on her shoulders. Before their arrival, there was silence; the silence that allows you the possibility to listen to everything.” I asked the ogamiya-san what she did for the woman, and, the ogamiya-san answered, “there were not many things that I could offer. I gave her o-fuda (“a paper charm”) to keep on her body and under her pillow when she went to sleep.”

The story made me think about silence. The woman was scared of silence, which used to come before the animals arrived, yet she wanted to be in silence (I tried to talk to her directly about it but heard back that she didn’t want to talk about it). In the Japanese language, there are several words which indicate silence, stillness, and quietness: chimmuku and サイレンス (“silence” from the English term), mugon (“speechlessness”), and shijima (“stillness”). All the terms share some sense that there is not either sound or movement despite the different emphases on intentionality, range, including non-humans, and feeling that silence evokes. People in the nearly empty village often talked to me about the eerie silence. Unlike some silence and stillness, which is intentionally structured and designed in ritual, most silence
that people were talking about is the everyday experiences of the absence of humans and non-humans. “No people, no animals, no kids!” Misaki sometimes made a joke that the village would be the best place for me to write my thesis since it’s extremely quiet, and that’s peaceful. “No one will disturb you!”

Many people have been ‘disturbed’ by the silence, but at the same time, the village is full of voices and noise. Even though Misaki and other interlocutors in Fukushima often told me that people are at a loss for words, the village used to have many visitors including anti-nuclear activists, journalists, politicians, and some so-called dark tourists who wanted to be involved in the unprecedented nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. ‘No Nukes! (…) Stop Nuclear Power!’, there were slogans everywhere in the village that were recently installed by activist groups. The communist party installed standing banners at every corner of the town, ‘do not reuse the contaminated soil,’ and other environmental activists encouraged the villagers to speak out. The other side did likewise. The local government and TEPCO wanted to show that the decontamination work had been completed and that the former villagers could finally return to a normal life which is safe and peaceful. Yet, looking at the slogans on the banners and watching news on the TV, some of the villagers expressed the feeling that “everything is too much” and there are no genuine words about the life of the returnees which is neither merely frustrating or promising. Between too many words that brought fūhyō higai (“reputation damage” or “harmful rumour”) or a naïve blueprint for a bright future, the statement from Misaki that “everyone talks about Fukushima, but it is hard to find what to say” continues to resonate. Although Fukushima has gained ‘international [notorious] fame’, and now many people around the world know the name along with the image of the devastated nuclear disaster, the returnees seem to stay with little words, a claim to remain not-speaking and in silence. Some might want the name of their hometown to be forgotten. The silence comes first. What will be next?

**d. Soundscape of the disaster**

Silence and acoustic experience became an important part of my research since that is the reality which many of my interlocutors narrated, yet it remained somewhat elusive. People living in the abandoned village know what silence means since it has them in its grip, but it is hard to understand for anyone else outside and defies specific explanation and objectification. The silence and/or anxiety that I am dealing with here is similarly illustrated by Green (1995) who states how it is hard to describe life in fear regarding her research in Guatemala where violence and fear have penetrated social memory. Everyday experiences and one’s sensibility to chronic violence undermines our ability to interpret, illustrate, and understand the world. As Taussig states, it is a state of “stinging out the nervous system one way toward hysteria, the other way numbing and apparent acceptance” (1992: 11). In the visceral silence, I sometimes had to ask myself, “what is the ‘object’ of my research?” As illustrated in chapter
one, ‘everyday life’ and social interaction are something that people have to struggle to achieve. It became a task for me as well as for the villagers.

Despite changes in theoretical paradigms over the decades, ethnographic fieldwork that allows anthropologists to live with the people we are studying remains a key method of anthropological research and, as Green (1995: 106) states, citing Taussig (1978), the aim of such ‘empirical research’ is to speak out on behalf of the “people who provide us with our livelihood.” We ‘see’ and we ‘write’ about them. One of the most foundational here is Malinowski’s (2004[1922]) fieldwork in the distinctiveness of the way in which he laid out his concern for documenting the ‘everyday social life’ of the islanders. Based on participant observation, as a distinctive methodology, ‘of such ‘everydayness,’ Malinowski was committed to anthropology as a science, and, as a sort of scientific method, ethnography was central to the idea of what was scientific about anthropological work—that is, the collection of information, the description of social and cultural characteristics of the societies, and long-term and in-depth investigation of social life. In short, in order to conduct fieldwork, there should be something ‘observable.’

However, apart from the controversies regarding whether the lives of others can be represented by someone else or whether or not fieldwork aims to collect ‘scientific’ or ‘objective data’ at all, the very idea of materiality that participant observation takes for granted can also be called into question—that is, that there should be something observable, a field, a subject to know, and thus, how silence and absence, which I consider, have been regarded as the negation of those characteristics. Forsey (2010: 562) points out, citing Tyler (1984), how the idea of fieldwork, in particular, based on participant observation, has been rooted in the hegemony of things over other senses, through which seeing becomes knowing and visual perception and knowing come to form a common sense ‘hard framework’ for all thoughts. In other words, with the overemphasised concept of participant observation, the dominance of the visual in Western thought has relegated other senses and experiences of touch, smell, taste, and listening to a secondary status, which is usually filtered through a visio-centric framework (Bull and Back 2003). Fabian (1983) also shares the criticism of the dominance of what he terms ‘visualism,’ the disciplinary proclivity to elevate vision as the ‘noblest sense,’ arguing that the ability to visualise a culture and society becomes synonymous with understanding it. However, as he points out, much of what is actually recorded as data is sonic rather than visual. Or to be fair, it could be said that all the senses are working together in an integrated way. It could be argued that visual and acoustic sense is fundamentally tactile (Benjamin 2003[1935]); we listen to sound through our skin.

With a question regarding how to present and represent the sonorous encultured worlds that people inhabit, some research focusing on sound, listening, the voice, and the ear has been conducted in anthropology and other related disciplines (cf. Erlmann 2004; Feld and Brenneis 2004; Finnegan 2002).
As Clifford et al. (1986: 12) asks, “what of the ethnographic ear?” The combination of sound theory and ethnographies of sound helps to extend the anthropological field to an aural reflection. The soundscape and acoustic experience, Schafer (1994 [1977]) finds, become a publicly circulated entity that is a product of social practice, politics, and ideologies while also being implicated in the shaping of those practices, politics, and ideologies. Like ‘landscape,’ the term, soundscape, contains complicated entanglements of nature and culture, the synaesthesia practice of senses, the present and the past, here and there. With the question regarding how to take sound seriously, the focus is not only on doing an anthropology of sound but also a synesthetic sense, “doing ethnography through sound—listening, editing, and representation” (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 461).

In addition to engaged listening in order to advocate a democracy of the senses, I am interested in exploring the soundscape of a ‘muted’ place. Unlike much research on soundscape and music which focuses on people who live in intensely rich aural environments such as the sounds of water, rainforest, or even urban settings, my research in post-disaster areas rather focuses on the soundlessness of people, place, and things that equally participate in the soundscape. This emphasis opens a new possibility for listening and sensing the disaster—a threshold between what is heard and unheard, and despite all the absence and ruination, what remains there? How do people inhabit and relate to mutant and muted worlds? Back to my fieldwork in Fukushima and Miyagi, how do people listen to radiation that never sounds, to hear a place that is not there, and attend closely to voices unsure of what to say?

e. When the wind blows

When Misaki and other villagers were having a tea meeting in her house, it took place right after we had heard about postcards that were sent to the local radio station. Misaki was trying to make the village re-flourish by organising meetings and events and opening an online account to share photos of Fukushima. For Misaki, the silent village is something hard to endure since it looks desolate and dying. She invited some villagers who had returned or had worked for reactivating the village to share their experiences. In the meeting, Yumiri, a writer, and some other radio hosts told us how many postcards they have received since the disaster. Some wrote about their loss, sadness, and anxiety with a question of uncertainty and how life is going to be hard in the area, but others wrote ‘nothing.’ “I sometimes received empty postcards and wondered why people do that,” a friend of Misaki, named Hisako, told me based on her experiences with the local radio station. The empty postcard has no contents or receiver. It seems to be floating in the air in a way which resembles how Derrida described post cards as “remainders of a destroyed correspondence,” which “destroyed by fire or by that which figuratively takes its place, more certain of leaving nothing out of the reach of what I call the tongue of fire, not even the cinders there are” (1979: 3). The postcards and letters comprise a type of archive which carries a broken-up, and or, impossible correspondence. Derrida continues:
If you had listened to me, you would have burned everything, and nothing would have arrived. I mean on the contrary that something ineffaceable would have arrived, instead of this bottomless misery in which we are dying. But it is unjust to say that you did not listen to me, you listened closely to the other voice (we were already a crowd in that first envelope) which asked you not to burn, to burn in order to save. Nothing has arrived because you wanted to preserve (and therefore to lose), which in effect formed the sense of the order coming from behind my voice, you remember, so many years ago, in my first ‘true’ letter: ‘burn everything’. You had answered me the next day, and this is how your letter ended: ‘The letter ends on the exigency of this supreme pleasure: the desire to be torn by you’ … I am burning. I have the stupid impression of being faithful to you … I am waking up. I remember the ashes. What a chance to burn, yes yes (Derrida ibid.: 23).

The empty postcards and floating words written with broken lines kept arriving without expecting any specific receivers. Along with another work, Archive Fever (1996), Derrida develops an idea that what the postcard/letter and the archive deliver is not only an articulated memory that is preserved yet burnt and destroyed, but what is carried by them is trauma, a feverish compulsion to remember and to articulate. Returning to the empty postcards sent to the radio by many villagers, Hisako asked about this ‘feverish’ desire which was haunted by a feeling that there is something important which has been cut off, and it is impossible to stop dispatching messages into the air. “People don’t talk about their feelings and loss with each other, so why would they to unknown receivers?” With that question of scattered communication, she began to share a story about kase no denwa (“the phone of the wind”). Hisako continued, “People might want something blank.” The kase no denwa is a white telephone booth in Otsuchi, a village which was devastated by the tsunami. Itaru Sasaki, who is a garden designer, set up the booth in his garden on a small hill facing the ocean in Namiita, an area of Otsuchi, Iwate, in order to talk to his cousin who died a year before the tsunami. People come to the telephone booth which is, in fact, connected to nowhere, to talk to their dead or missing family members, friends, and loved ones. “It wasn’t connected, and, I think, that’s why people come to talk. They let the wind do the talking,” Hisako added after she mentioned how the anonymity of speech and the fluidity of the wind are important. However, not everyone visiting the phonebooth is able to speak, and most people, despite driving three to four hours to arrive there, hold the phone sobbing or speaking in a simple and short sentence, “Are you there?”, “Can you hear me?”, “Hello” or “Bye” because kotoba wa jūbundewa nai (“words are not enough”). She guesses, “that’s why people sometimes send an empty post card with only the name of the receiver.” Hisako proceeded, “Still many are not sure of what to say (…) there are many things that they can’t let out yet.”

What is being communicated through the absence of language? What do the disconnected telephone, the empty post cards, and the wind do for communication? The disconnected phone, the blank postcard, and the porous and protean character of the wind are, I suggest, catalysts for communication since communication is mediated not by connection but by disconnection and asynchronicity. Thus, the
relation between direct and indirect communication and the importance of verbal and non-verbal language is reversed. Dyson (2014) takes the questions, “Are you there?” and “Can you hear me?” as metaphors in a technologically mediated conversation in order to explore how human subjectivity is transformed by the texture, the tenor, and the rhythm of these acoustic, linguistic, and communicative events. By trying to confirm the existence of the receiver and what is received, the simultaneity of communication is achieved. This is even more important where those apparatuses connect different coordinates of time and space. As Derrida and Stiegler illustrate, it is not guaranteed that we share the same sense of time and space since “the global and dominant effect of television, the telephone, the fax machine, satellites, the accelerated circulation of images, discourse, etc. is that here-and-now becomes uncertain, without guarantee: anchored-ness, rootedness, the at-home are radically contested” (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 79).

The contested feeling of here-and-now seems paradoxically hopeful for people who lost something in the disaster. Since displacement and loss was so sudden, one villager told me that she cannot remember what happened because all her memory is something like broken lines. “I thought that time flows like a solid line. But it has broken (…) dot, dot, dot (…) life has broken apart.” The return was as sudden as the evacuation. When she came back to Odaka, she found that 148 people had died, more than 300 fatalities in Minami-soma, and the entire area was under decontamination work—removing surface soil, cutting trees, washing roofs, cleaning rain gutters. “Everything seemed to be removed or cleaned (…) including ourselves.”

Anchored-ness, rootedness, and the feeling of being at home are quite absent and the difficulty of life in the village is that everything should be prosthetic. Without reading the Geiger machine, the radiation map, and checking the direction of the wind, people cannot guarantee how much their life and village is secure. Everyday conversation such as “how are you?” or “are you ok?” has disappeared along with the people who never came back. Misaki often told me that she doesn’t know what to say because she does not know what’s going on. The ‘mutant ecology’ and the breakdown of relationality has produced a whole environment of not-knowing and thus “matter and meaning are (…) inextricably fused together” (Barad 2007: 3). Yet, as Knighton writes, “daily life continues, lived by rote amidst accumulating data that must be measured but whose significance is both deferred and opaque, at best (…) years later with an ongoing disaster and a swirling affective environment of stupefaction, confusion, and impotence (…) unable to grasp what it really means” (2013: 8). The sense of home and neighbourhood have changed; only uncertain anticipation and rumours float in the air. Surrounded by uncertainty, people paradoxically rely on the asynchronous, the obsolete, and uncertain media such as postcards, a disconnected telephone booth, and silence. Given the situation, the uncertain communication and ‘unclear’ oto (“sound”) seems to be the key for people to try to connect themselves to the past and to
something unspeakable and incomprehensible. It is possibly the only way to communicate about the disaster which is impossible to grasp yet constantly haunts daily life.

Misaki and Hisako first believed that the village needs more ‘voices.’ That’s why they organised meetings and encouraged people to join and talk. Yet, they felt that they had failed. “At the first meeting, seven or eight people were sitting in silence saying they don’t know what to say (…) Very little about weather, food, recently watched soap operas on TV (…) Less and less people came to talk (…) It seemed totally impossible to talk about our life here or the future of our village.” Then they stopped making the meetings for conversation. Instead, “we did ikebana (“flower arrangements”) and reading books aloud, any books, like magazines, novels, poems, etc. (…) I don’t know if we can say that it’s a form of speech, but people gave voice anyway. We listened (…) Many elders in the village are living alone. Making voice would be quite rare for them (…) People preferred ikebana to talking and reading. In touching the plants and flowers, people were happy as they could have a garden inside (…) We bought flowers and plants from the market (…) We hold each and touch (…) It has been a long time since we could have touched the plants. That might be what people seek,” Hisako said.

Why does touch matter? “To feel safe and be connected (…) connected to something,” Morisawa, a young woman, told me while picking up a eucalyptus branch. A villager and writer named Yumiri later told me about the importance of touch by explaining the term teate (“touching-treatment”), which means embracing the place that is hurt in order to treat it. “We’ve lost the sense of connection and direct touch (…) When people came back, they were not sure what they could touch. Old clothes, photos, pillows, and even the window frames in their old houses; everything was considered contaminated. But I think teate is a beautiful Japanese word to tell us how to embrace loss and grief and continue to live.” When the villagers say that they want something to touch, that means something to embrace, to live with, and to re-build the mundane senses of everyday life. Instead of making a safe distance from all
the contaminated things and landscapes, what they needed was not only something beautiful but the tactility of living.

Foregrounding the tactile sense amongst others is an interesting point to discuss here. Why does touch matter and how can this be related to wider questions regarding the everyday aesthetics in the village? In questioning how the meaning of the term, aesthetics, has shifted through the course of Western philosophy, Buck-Morss (1992) explores how it involves a whole corporeal sensorium rather than limited to beauty. Following the intellectual history of the connection between aesthetics and politics in German thought that stresses the importance of feeling through body, Buck-Morss argues that the original Greek word for aesthetics, Aisthitikos, which is ‘perception by feeling’, is what we find ourselves retuned to. According to Buck-Morss (ibid.: 6), “Aisthitikos is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature.” This seems to be what Terry Eagleton (1990:16) meant when he wrote, “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.” Aesthetic is a form of cognition, which is achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, and smell. Buck-Morss continues:

“The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin—are located at the surface of skin—are located at the surface of body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus with its qualitatively autonomous, nonfungible sensors (the ears cannot smell, the mouth cannot see) is “out front” of the mind, encountering the world pre-linguistically, hence, prior not only to logic but to meaning as well […] But however strictly the senses are trained (as moral sensibility, refinement of “taste,” sensitivity to cultural norms of beauty), all of this is a posteriori” (1992: 6).

The history of how it happened that the term aesthetics underwent a reversal of its meaning, “to cultural forms rather than sensible experience, to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than real” (Buck-Morss ibid.: 7), needs to be further discussed. What I consider here is the paradox of the Fukushima disaster—if the optic sense of radiation is not possible, how might other senses, which have been neglected, be reclaimed and magnified. The distinction between what is illusory and real is challenged when life encounters the immanent spread of radiation. How might the context of a crisis of sensing the world return the contested field of ‘aesthetics’ to its original meaning? I would like to propose that the invisible and imperceptible nature of radiation catalyses the corporeal senses; it magnifies what is sensed through the body. As Raymond Williams put forward through the concept of a structure of feeling, what people want is “what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought being lived” (1977: 131). Reflecting the threshold in-between the desire to get a hold of things very close and to maintain a safe distance from the invasive risk of radiation which forces people into an unwanted sensorial scape, a woman was holding a rose-branch as if it was a rescue line.
f. The sound of radiation

Nagahata was another interlocutor who I met in Arahama during a beach-cleaning activity. Although he had been around since the beginning of my fieldwork, I got to know him relatively late. He was often there talking to and playing with villagers on the beach. Wearing an interesting design and printed t-shirt, he used to play with beachballs and other games, and I thought that he was one of the villagers. Once he was there when I had a drink with the villagers in mid-summer after making dozens of lanterns for the Obon festival. After a couple of glasses of sake, he asked me with a reddish face about my research. In the course of our conversation, I learned that he is a professor at Fukushima University specialising in sound and noise, and he was also a former Fukushima resident for 20 years. Although his former home was located outside of the 30-km radiation zone surrounding the Fukushima No.1 nuclear powerplant, his village received a heavier dose of radiation than some coastal villages far closer to the plant due to the direction of the wind. The village was not under the immediate evacuation order, but he decided to move to Sendai which is nearly 90-km away from Fukushima city due to concerns for his daughter. The disaster was, for him, a moment in which he had to face his position as a researcher and as a resident with a conflicted desire to be both away from and closer to the disaster. It was a dilemma which I sometimes used to be stuck in as well. Gill (2014) shares the same feeling and dilemma as an anthropologist working in Nagadoro, Iitate in Fukushima. With the disaster, the Tohoku region has become a ‘field’ that requires an ‘urgent ethnography’ and ‘hot spots’ for those who want to see the ‘unusual’ scenes as well as a postponed ‘field’ concerning the risk of radiation. For Nagahata, a researcher and resident living with ‘home’ and ‘field’ in a mixture of ‘ordinary’ and ‘urgent’ time, his research topic and people living with anxiety has become his everyday life.

Instead of taking the Shinkansen express train, I took a bus passing through the mountains to Fukushima Station where I had to transfer to local trains. The closer the train approached inner Fukushima, which is mountainous area, the colder the air became. The train was full of students with mobile phones playing games and messaging friends, and, except for its name of Fukushima, there was nothing to remind us of the disaster. Getting off the train at Kanayagaya, I walked to the campus, and I realised that this is Fukushima because no people were outside, and there was a big instrument to measure the amount of radiation on the campus.

Surrounded by books, the miniature of an ear, and equipment for sound recording in his office, Nagahata started to share his experience of the eerie silence after the disaster. The silence mainly came from the absence of human beings. “I have been working on noise.” I laughed and said, “Noise and Japan do not really fit. I thought it’s a muted place even when I was in Tokyo.” “Yes,” he said, “people don’t really speak out in public spaces. But there is lots of noise in Japan like announcements, music, sounds of machines and cars, advertisements on the streets (…) it was a really weird experience of living in a
place like a vacuum. With the nuclear disaster, I also realised how silence provokes the memory of violence and anxiety.” According to him, it was not possible to hear any ‘human voice’ after the disaster since nobody did any outdoor activity due to the fear of radiation, and it has continued for several years. In his recordings which have been installed at several spots around Fukushima such as Kotori no Mori (Forest for Birds), Mt. Sinobu and Shinhama Park—popular picnic and cherry blossom seeing places—there are no human voices, even children’s voices. He called the silence of Fukushima, ‘Radioactive Silence.’18 It’s a world without humans, especially children.

“Silence is something like a stone placed on my chest or shoulder. It’s dull and, when I try to explain it, language is equivocated (…) but I can feel it.” I remembered these words of an evacuated villager. She had sealed up all the interstitial spaces in her windows and doors with tape for a couple of days in order to block any radioactive fallout. “It rained first and soon turned to sleet (…) Cold. I felt everything in the village was frozen.” Human life has been sealed with their sealed windows and doors. The only flying and flowing of things was radioactivity.

After talking in his office, we started walking around the campus, and I heard the sound of construction work in the forested area outside campus. Soon I realised it’s the sound of heavy equipment that people in Odaka often used to complain about. Kokone told me that it is the sound of equipment that is used for ‘cleaning-up,’ that is, digging and scratching the soil, trees, and plants, and the sound really hurts. “My ears were in pain. It was even worse than radiation,” she hated the sound of the machines. As she described, the noise ate into the ear and the body, and, after the noisy clean-up work was done, the village went into silence. Nagahata and I were walking fast around the storage site since it was rainy and windy, and also because we were walking into the wind. The wind blew from the soil bags, and I

18 Some of his works can be found here: http://www.sss.fukushima-u.ac.jp/~nagahata/fsp_311/index-e.html
pulled my hoodie down low over my eyes. Along with the wind and rain, I felt like the noise hit my face too. The reverberation remains.

“The machines are more vociferous than humans,” Nagahata shouted with a laugh. The other side of silence is unwanted noise which is tactile; it hits and hurts the body and remains after all the work was done. What does noise speak of? If it hurts, as Kokone said, what does noise break up? In the book, *Noise: The political economy of music*, Jacque Attali (1977) suggests how music and sonic experience shape political and economic structures by placing music and sonic experiences into the categories of sacrifice, representation, repetition, and composition. Although these four types have mixed elements, an interesting point is that the essential social form of music serves as a substitute or simulacrum of sacrifice and performs the same function. In this process, according to Attali, noise appears as violence. “To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill;” music is a “channelisation of noise,” (ibid.: 26) a way of controlling and vanquishing noise by creating a harmonious order in the realm of sound. In so doing, music legitimises the social order.

“There was music. Music from matsuri summer festival, worship from shrines, and children’s songs,” Nagahata said. His old recording files indicated how the sound of the area was variegated. But now noise continues. There was a promise—decontamination work would be done in fourteen days in residential areas by digging up and removing 5 cm of surface soil, and it would allow people to return. But every time that the wind blew from the ‘uncleaned’ forest and that water flowed from the mountains of soil bags, the nightmare of radiation and the sound of heavy equipment returned. There is no way to completely prevent the porosity of radiation. The noise of heavy equipment has, thus, never stopped, and the presence of noise or dissent can never be completely eliminated.

g. When things speak
It was a day in late March 2019 when I met one of the local farmers, Sasaki, who had returned to the village after a couple of years of evacuation. I was still struggling with the silence issue ever since the beginning of the stay, and Misaki and some other interlocutors (all female) in the village told me that there will be a meeting of some villagers to talk about ‘local life after the disaster.’ The meeting was held in Sasaki’s house, a typical Japanese farmhouse made of dark wood and surrounded by land and Igune (“protective trees”) around the house and farm. At the front door, a daruma (a zen-style bearded man’s wooden face displayed for wealth and good luck) was hanging on the wall. Although he knew some visitors would come, Sasaki was watching TV in his living room. Two female villagers, my interlocutor, Kiko, and myself were then invited to sit around Kotatsu (“a low wooden table” with a heat source underneath covered by a heavy blanket). Sasaki, who is in his late 80s, started talking with a bit of a hoarse voice and strong accent and without turning off the TV. Kiko whispered that he is one of the earliest returnees and today’s meeting is for sharing his experiences of the disaster and its aftermath with some ‘younger’ people and outsiders.

“I came back here to keep our ‘musuko (“son”)’s land,” he spoke in a solemn tone. Meanwhile, I sketched his house and its surroundings while feeling uncomfortable with the word musuko due to its emphasis on patrilineal inheritance. His words became faster and more focused on how life in the evacuation shelter and temporary house was hard. In contrast to the silence that I had experienced so far, he had a clear voice and language to share. That’s the reason he decided to come back. “What is the most difficult problem in the temporary house?” I asked, and he responded, “Food. Since my wife has passed away, the daughter-in-law has always prepared meals for me (…) I did not even know how to use a rice cooker!” The old farmer’s voice quivered slightly with emotion. It was certainly the hardest time in his life since the Second World War when he joined the army, and he continued to talk about his current life. Although he returned home to keep the land, his biological son and daughter-in-law have not come back. Instead, they started a new business using compensation money from the government. They sell floriculture like British roses in Chiba near Tokyo, and the business has become quite successful. Everyone took notes of what he was saying. Kiko and two of the other villagers told me that he is a very experienced interviewee. He does not remember what media had interviewed him but later I could find several interviews he had done in the past with both Japanese and non-Japanese newspapers including NPR in the US and the Guardian in the UK.

“I don’t think Fukushima is as dangerous as some people say.” Sasaki encouraged people to return and added that he could offer his idle land. But he did not comment on the fact that the land is not allowed to be cultivated due to the radiation issue and that’s why he received a large amount of compensation money. I heard some villagers call him a millionaire. For those who have property in the village, the disaster offered a new chance for business whereas the others without houses or land got very little money in the name of psychological/emotional damage. “Then why have many former villagers not
returned?” When I asked, Sasaki paused and said, “Cowards.” He is a local farmer who is part of a family that has been living in the village for generations, and he expresses affection for the place and people. His farmland, old house, garden, and trees; he cherished everything. The land is his life, and he came back here not to die but to live. With a strong sense of déjà vu, I kept taking notes; it was a moving story from a local farmer who believes that his hometown is his life. I glanced up and looked at him and the TV screen behind him. There were four women listening to his words, including myself, and Kiko was clearly engaged with the conversation through her gestures, nodding, and clapping. There was only one speaker and four listeners. As he tried to explain what happened, the four women tried to be good listeners, which motivated him to keep talking.

When his stories expanded to his entire life, including his younger times and trips (he was very proud of his trip to Australia in his 60s), the front sliding door opened and there was a young woman holding a baby. After exchanging a slight nod, she took steps quickly yet quietly into the kitchen. I was not sure if I could interrupt his speaking, but I wanted to know who that woman was. Sasaki and Kiko told me that she is another returned villager named Yuko. For Sasaki, who does not know how to cook, she was hired for all the ‘inside’ chores. It was an interesting moment for me since I had not seen any children in the village until then, so the young woman, who is probably in her early thirties with a four-and-a-half-year-old boy, intrigued me. But the meeting was not to hear her story, and I was not able to find a chance to talk to her that day.

A couple of days later, I met Yuko in front of a recently opened supermarket. However, it took days more until I was able to talk to her. After several encounters without speaking, she showed me a sign of recognition. The market was the only store that had opened after the evacuation order had lifted, which finally allowed people the opportunity to buy fresh ingredients, seasonal vegetables, and fruit. She was picking up kinoko (“mushrooms”) and hakusai (“Chinese leaves”). “Are you going to make nabe (“Japanese stew”)?” She looked at me and smiled asking, “Do you live here?” “Well, not really but maybe (…)” I offered an ambiguous answer since I wasn’t sure whether or not I ‘lived’ there. We walked to the main street and she scurried back home to cook. I met her again and again around the village and Sasaki’s house, but no one in the village recommended that I to talk to her. This was very much unlike recommendations to listen to Sasaki’s experience of the disaster which had been repeated, listened to, and remembered many times. When I met Yuko again near a playground, she told me that she does not know much about the disaster because she is not from Fukushima. She is from southern Japan and after marriage she moved to Fukushima following her husband who works for a small logging company. After the disaster, Yuko moved to her parents’ home in Kyusu whereas her husband stayed around Fukushima to keep his job. After nearly five years of life as a ‘nuclear refugee,’ they returned to Minami-soma and their son, Tomo, was born. He is one of Fukushima no kodomo (“children of Fukushima”). Different from what was promised, meaning sufficient compensation and completion of
the ‘clean-up’ process, they had a hard time surviving. “No one wanted wood from Fukushima or even (...) Miyagi (...) Everyone was scared,” she spoke brokenly in a monotonous tone of voice.

The sound of speaking and laughing children at play was nowhere to be heard in the village. When Tomo spoke in the baby carriage, I suddenly realised how the voice of kids was missing. Instead, what I saw at Ukedo Elementary School was empty windows, bent frames, and scattered school bags as well as equipment left from nearly ten years ago. Yuko told me how many kids were in the town before the disaster, but town authorities decided to officially close and delist the schools, along with four other elementary schools and a junior high school. There was no possibility for Tomo to have friends and that’s why she considers moving somewhere else again. “Have you been to the town centre in Namie?” When she asked, I understood what she meant. She was talking about the dolls in the community centre, which were collected during the decontamination work. The workers and some villagers found hundreds of dolls, school bags, old family and school photos, and, instead of discarding them, collected them into one place. The children’s story books teach how to be a brave human, how to find a way when you are lost. All the old sage advice was left behind. It was not possible for those things to be returned, but it seemed like they were still waiting for something. “Tomo wanted to touch the dolls,” Yuko said, and “when he touched one bear doll, suddenly, a melody floated out of its belly. O-haio, o-haio (‘good morning, good morning’).” The only one who was speaking in the community centre was the doll. Yuko remembered that moment when the doll sung and people laughed, momentarily forgetting the fear of radioactive contamination.

“Who wants their child to be a nuclear kid?” Clutching Tomo close to her chest, Yuko told me about her worries. “Tomo is too young to understand what’s going on here. But I heard a lot of stories about the bullying of evacuated children (...) I don’t want him to be one of them (...) But what else can we do? Where can we go? (...) When I see other mothers in town, or on a train, we look at each other. Their faces and their kids on their knees (...) I feel as if we are saying ‘I know (...) I know.’ Just hope everything is gone and forgotten.”
h. Conclusion: the world of attunement

How to listen to the silence, noise, and the melody from the abandoned doll? How does the sound of absence reverberate in the empty field? How do those acoustic experiences of displacement, survival, and continuity constitute a tacit conversation to maintain a fragile integrity for the village and the narrative of recovery? In the life between extremity and normality, how do people sense their everyday life with a low dose of radiation, which is, already or not-yet-catastrophic, or rather, a procrastinated catastrophe? Debates within anthropology and other disciplines that focus on the discourses of language, trauma, and violence have effectively raised the question of the ‘unspeakable’ by asking what determines the communicable contours of language. As Adorno observes, speech about Auschwitz is an invalid language that is dissociated from what we call reality; the experience of violence has caused the failure of language and the social (Das 2007: 749). In the midst of violence, words and language become unreal, dream-like, and distorted.

However, as much as we emphasise the inability of speaking out and living with fear and anxiety, what I have shown in this chapter is the possibility of speaking and hearing in the form of tacit conversation. The term, tacit conversation, suggests that it works “not only listening to but also with the feeling of listening in” (Kouvaras 2016: 226 emphases in original). By sharing silence, disconnection, and fragmentary noise, people in the village participate in ‘a communication of communicability’ in Agamben’s words—an apparatus in-between the potential and the actual, connection and disconnection. This is what Nancy (1997: 90) problematises as “a totalitarian ‘truth’- a ‘truth’ that structures space and sense politically;” it suggests a language that goes beyond a fixed meaning and structure. Dyson likewise states, “noisy and poetic speech, like the wind, like air itself, is open to mutation and resists fixation- to a speaker, an object, an ‘a’” (2014: 96). Silence becomes a pathway through which knowledge and the experience of collectivity is shared. Dyson continues, “although nothing has been said, for a silence to descend upon a congenial gathering as a recognition that something unpleasant has occurred, for people to finish each other’s sentences” (ibid.). In this regard, silence can be described as a sense of attunement, which is not an attunement of the soul, conscience, or the self, but rather a mood or atmosphere, an inclination or disposition that is fundamentally communal. “It defines our very existence as existence in the world rather than returning us to an interiorised essence, a self-contained subjectivity” (Armstrong 2009: 118. emphases in original).

“Do you listen to the sound of radiation?” If people in the village were asked, perhaps, they would say, yes. But this does not mean that radiation speaks or has sound. Nevertheless, there is listening, the listening in and through silence, absence, and noise. The issue therefore concerns how to facilitate engagement with something that cannot be observed or heard. My question in this chapter regarding the acoustic experiences of radiation concerns this issue: when people say that they listen to silence, or,
that the noise hurts them, the silence or expression that people use indicates not simply a metaphorical meaning but a materialised, weighted, and corporeal feeling. The feeling is not represented by medical and scientific measurements such as Sievert, derived units of ionizing radiation, radiation maps, borders, or the number of deaths and returners; rather, the feeling is like a stone on your chest as you inhale each breath of air. This feeling is what makes people hesitate to speak yet still sense an omnipotent presence.
In this chapter, I explore the Soma Nomaoi horse festival which is held every summer in Minami Soma, Fukushima to show how the militaristic ritual is performed in the context of two different thresholds in time—that is, two ‘post’ times in Japan: senko (“post-war”) and saigaigo (“post-disaster”). Soma Nomaoi is ‘a wild horse chase by samurai warriors’ in the Soma region. The festival consists of kacchu-keiba (an armed horse race), shikki-soudatsisen (a sacred flag competition) and nomakake (a wild horse chase by people at a shrine). Under the shadow of the memory of defeat in the Second World War and the lingering pain from the disaster in 2011, I argue that the ritual evokes a redemptive desire to be a nationalistic and strong masculine subject through the figure of the samurai warriors and their victory over the horses.

The importance of ritual, performance, and community-based activities in post-disaster times has been a key theme for anthropological research on the relation between the disaster and local cultural activities since the triple disaster in 2011 (cf. Ueda 2013; Gill 2013; McNeil 2013; Takakura 2016. Also see Martinez 2004). Emphasizing the intangibility of ritual, much of that research shows how rituals establish a sense of community and provide a liminal experience which goes beyond linear and scientific understandings of the time and the place of the disaster. However, despite the meanings and symbols attached to these rituals and performances, in this chapter I show how the horse festival is not ‘intangible cultural heritage’ but is rather a ‘tangible’ stage for formulating and displaying bodies which are no longer victims but warriors. I propose that Soma Nomaoi attempts to shift the time of the disaster and the bodies of the victims onto the body of the samurai enmeshed in a ‘timeless past.’ By focusing on the bodies of the samurai warriors and the horses displayed in Soma Nomaoi, this chapter discusses how the ritual attempts to transform a sense of victimhood to one of nationhood and how the gendered bodies become a place of juxtaposition between loss and recovery.

a. Embracing the defeat

“Will you join us this Saturday?” When I got this message from Misaki on the morning of late-June 2019, she seemed to be quite excited about the plan. Misaki and some other villagers were planning to go to Sendai Station to promote tourism for Soma Nomaoi, which is the biggest year-round event in Minami soma. After receiving the message, I made plans to meet Misaki and others at the station on Saturday morning. Once I found them walking around, I could not help laughing because they were dressed as four Samurai warriors glowing with exultant smiles. In the midst of the busy station, which is a junction of more than ten train-lines that includes the Shinkansen express train and several luxurious department stores, there was a small booth for the ‘soma (“horse”) clan.’
“Train leaving on track three (…) trains are leaving for (…).” It was a busy Saturday as usual. Everyone was running to catch the trains. Above the crowd, there was a vaulted area of the station with a stained-glass window depicting Date Masamune wearing samurai armour; he was a daimyō and founder of the modern city of Sendai. With the stained glass of a samurai reflecting sunshine on the ceiling, the station looked rather like a cathedral with the founding saint looking from above. In the mixture of the old and the new, the sacred and the mundane, my four time-travelling interlocutors, the samurai from ‘soma clan,’ were preparing for another battle.

I had heard about Nomaoi several times from the villagers in Minami Soma, Fukushima. For many, summer is a season of festivals: Nomaoi, matsuri, and fireworks. In order to combat the summer heat, which is extremely humid, scorching, and often described as being ‘inside a steamer,’ people in the village had come up with some ideas: drinking cold beer, doing suikawari (watermelon splitting with a stick while blindfolded), and going to see Samurai battle the heat in late July. The glowing faces, bodies, and wide sleeves of yukata were like summer rituals that shaped my memory of being in Japan. In addition to those memories, Misaki told me that this horse festival will be hotter and more exciting than anything I had experienced in Japan so far. Soma Nomaoi used to be held in late June, but for some reason, the three-day festival was changed to the end of July which means it will be hotter. Misaki guesses that the date was changed in order to have more visitors since late July is a summer holiday and vacation in Japan. Living with the heat in Fukushima was like doing battle for humans. When I put ice packs on my burnt legs after a day long walk around the village, Misaki’s mother brought me an emergency medical kit and said, “The heat takes your soul but makes fruit plump and abundant.” Aided by the heat and the sunshine, Fukushima has been called ‘the kingdom of fruits.’ Along with the figure of the samurai, the appetizing and juicy peaches and grapes are another symbol of Fukushima.

Despite the fact that many Japanese local government bodies use the figure of the Samurai as their symbol, (I can still see those samurai-face-shaped rice balls wrapped in seaweed called onigiri everywhere!), Misaki and other villagers used to emphasise that “we are the soma-clan, and we are the original!” She and her fellow samurai started working to attract attention. However, the passengers in the station, walking fast and with purpose, passed in active indifference the four samurai who were trying to distribute their leaflets. They set up a photo booth with a couple of frames where, if anyone would like, could take pictures with the samurai and even wear samurai armour themselves. The photo booth was certainly attractive for some children and foreign tourists. Wearing heavy armour and holding plastic and wooden swords, young boys took poses as if they were going to war or becoming an animation character. At the end of the performance and photo shoot, we gave them a leaflet advertising Soma Nomaoi.
According to the leaflet, Soma Nomaoi started as a military exercise conducted more than one thousand years ago by Taira Masakado, the founder of the Soma Clan. Masakado, who was the governor of the Soma Mikuriya in the Shimousa province, started using horses as a new military weapon. He also used them to train samurai by releasing wild horses for the samurai to pursue and capture in the place of their enemies. After the exercise, the captured horses were dedicated as offerings to Myoken (“Bodhisattva of the North Pole Star”).19 When the soma clan moved to Namekata in the Oshu province in 1323, where Soma and Minami Soma are currently located, the feudal lords of the Soma domain continued the event until the Meiji restoration. The leaflet proudly ends with the following statement written in English:

Soma Nomaoi, an important national intangible folk cultural asset, is one of the major traditional cultural events in Japan which dates back to the Warring State period and has a history of more than 1000 years. The festival is celebrated across all the former Soma domain territories with Minami soma city being the main venue. This three-day festival, held every year at the end of July, is a re-enactment of the pomp and splendour in the Warring State period. With more than 500 mounted horsemen in traditional samurai armour participating, Soma Nomaoi is said to be one of the greatest equestrian festivals in the world.

Handing a leaflet to one tourist in the station, Misaki said, “It will be held in Minami Soma.” She quickly realized, however, that the tourist does not understand Japanese, so she called me over to help translate into English. “Come and explain how to get there!” So, I began, “Take a train from Sendai to Haramomach (…)” The tourist asked back “Where is Haranomach?” As I showed the map, the tourist realised that Haranomachi in Minami Soma is a part of Fukushima, and then, our conversation stopped. All of the samurai in the station worked hard to maintain the ‘old’ tradition in order to show ‘the power of Fukushima’ and ‘the power of Soma Clan.’ On the t-shirt of one villager, there was an image of a samurai on a roaring horse with the words: fūkko (“resilience”) and najōmi (“wish” or “hope”). Despite all of the efforts, the event was not successful as many people showed resistance to the name of Fukushima. With hundreds of leaflets still remaining, we finished the work of advertising. Misaki gave me the leaflets and asked me to leave them all around Tohoku university’s campus where I was affiliated for my field research. Taking off her armour in the hot and humid summer day, Misaki made a joke, “Exhausted. We lost the war (…) Defeated. We look like the remnants.”

The term ‘haiboku’ (“defeat”), however, was not a simple joke here and it was not the first defeat of the samurai in Minami soma. The word reminded me of the scene to which I had been repeatedly exposed. There is a term “the nuclear samurai” that emerged after the nuclear disaster in 2011 to refer to the group of employees who remained on-site after the melting of the cores at the Fukushima nuclear power

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19 The leaflet does not make clear what this “dedicated offering” involved.
plant. They were injured and died. One of them was exposed to a large amount of ionizing radiation when the worker tried to vent vapour from a valve of the containment building. Three others were exposed to radiation over 100 mSv, and two more workers were killed by the tsunami while conducting emergency repairs immediately after the quake. Despite the order to withdraw all of its employees from the plant, there have been hundreds of firemen, SDF (Self Defence Force), and employees of TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) who still at worked in the area. The media and politicians call them “nuclear samurai” and “Fukushima 50” (Katayama 2020) comparing their roles to wartime efforts. Although the level of radiation on the site was very high and the severity of the situation could have grave impacts on their future health, the Prime Minister Naoto Kan (Time 2011; also see Kan 2018) at that time said that “the workers were prepared for death.”

On the other side of the celebration of bravery, endurance, sacrifice, and responsibility for the community and their job, there is a strong feeling of defeat. Despite the effort and sacrifice, they lost. And, even if they were able to survive, the exposed bodies of ‘nuclear samurai’ as well as former villagers were stigmatised as nuclear ‘mutants.’ The Japanese government and TEPCO were not able to prevent the meltdown because of a delayed decision to use seawater to cool down the reactors. They were concerned about the possibility of permanent damage to the costly reactors due to the saltwater which would destroy the reactor fuel rods. In the hours and days that followed 11th March 2011, three reactors experienced full meltdown and people witnessed hydrogen air chemical explosions and heard the blasts. With the detonation, the government declared a nuclear emergency at 19:03 on the 11th, and the Fukushima prefecture ordered an evacuation of about 2,000 people within a 20 km radius of the plant. Over 50,000 people were evacuated the next day. In the end, due to the fear of radioactive fallout mixed with wind, rain, and snow, well over 200,000 people became nuclear refugees (Gill, Steger and Slater 2015; Katayama 2020). “It was like a war.” Some villagers who were forced to leave their homes with minimal belongings often compared the experience to the Second World War. And others who refused to leave felt like they were waiting for a catastrophe. Even though most people in the village belong to the post-war generation, I am curious about why the war metaphor has been so widely used and why it has haunted so many people. If the disaster was something war-like, then ‘they certainly lost the war.’ Moreover, even some people illustrate those who left Fukushima as cowards (cf. chapter three); the disaster seemed to be a litmus test of someone’s bravery. Life after the disaster presents the challenge of how to embrace the defeat and the loss and how to maintain life with an incessantly exposed body. Why is there a strong feeling of defeat? And what are they fighting against and for?

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20 https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102309_2102291,00.html
b. Samurai in the culture of defeat

Can Samurai fight against radiation? Why have the firefighters, the member of jietai (SDF: Self Defence Force), and the employees of TEPCO been compared to ‘old’ samurai despite their ‘modern’ occupational status? Why does the specific moment of ‘crisis’ recall an image of a brave saviour and of self-sacrifice? How does the figure of the Samurai warrior return and evoke the desire to be a nationalistic and masculine subject? Considering these questions, I suggest how the revival of ‘old’ warriors can be read not only in the context of cultural and political revivalism after the triple disaster in 2011 but also in terms of the lingering identity politics that concerns the feeling of kyodatsu (“exhaustion and despair”) and a return of the body in the ruins of senso (“post-war”) Japan.

Who is Samurai? Although the hereditary military nobility and officer caste of the medieval and early modern period was abolished in the 1870s, the samurai still remains an (in)tangible representation of Japanese culture in many ways. From ritual practices and street names to popular culture, bushi (“a warrior”) who wears two long swords (called katana or tachi) and kabuto (“a helmet”), has taken on a slightly different connotation through the ways in which the figure reflects questions of identity, nationalism, and its moral and ethical foundations. In contrast to the image of the samurai as a warrior that was emphasised and widely used during wartime, the first book written in English about the samurai that introduced the figure to the West, Bushido: the soul of Japan (1900) by Inazō Nitobe, emphasises a slightly different point regarding ethics and identity in the process of reformation in Meiji Japan. Nitobe wrote the book in response to the question, ‘If there is chivalry in the West, what can be the resemblance of it in Japan?’ In response to this question, he delved into different religious ideas based on Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, and he set Bushido (“the way of a warrior”) as a foundation for Japanese moral identity. He proposed seven virtues of the samurai: courage, rectitude, benevolence, politeness, sincerity, honour, and loyalty. Instead of pre-Meiji bushido as a warrior system based on valour, Nitobe emphasised its moral and spiritual dimension as a foundation of Japanese ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernisation.’

The combination of the masculine body of the samurai as a warrior and his spirituality as a morally and ethically trained subject became an archetype of Japanese-ness throughout wartime. The Meiji Restoration, which began in 1868, presented the archipelago, the ‘land of the rising sun’ which was ‘isolated’ and ‘closed’ to the West, with various ambivalent predicaments. ‘Modernisation’ replaced the feudal system with a national system that recognised the emperor’s absolute authority. However, in the global context of colonialism and militarism, what followed was not a mere political reform but also the country’s forced material development which triggered various crises such as the rise and fall of Japanese fascism, the invasion of China and Korea, the Pacific War, the defeat in the War after the atomic bombs, and post-war reconstruction and economic prosperity—the so-called ‘apotheosis’ of
materialism (Frentiu 2013). As Murphy (2014) points out, the samurai in modern times has been formulated through relating to ‘others’ in a historical and global context. Although the exaggerated form of self-sacrifice and asceticism of the higher-class samurai had been used as satire by the general public, particularly among the peasant farmers during the Edo era (also known as Tokugawa jidai between 1603 to 1868), the figure was not wildly popular like it is today. However, when Japan faced military threats from ‘outside’ and domestic freedom and civil rights movements intensified in the early 20th century, the figure of the samurai was pulled out of the museums of the Edo era and used to construct a militaristic society as a whole.

The body of the samurai became at the centre of nationalism and fascism during the two World Wars as the ideological configuration of nationhood became embodied through the Japanese soldiers. The body as a rigid container in an attempt to create obedience is well-represented in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture (Benedict 2006[1946]). This is possibly the most famous work that uses the image of the warrior with the aim to understand the radical disparity of the Japanese despite the criticism that Benedict took regarding the ideology of class for the culture of the people. As the book was written to grasp ‘the bizarreness of Japanese behaviour’ during wartime that included inexplicable extremes such as kamikaze (“suicide bombings”) and seppuku or harakiri (“ritual self-disembowelment”), it provided a model of Japanese culture, and thus, grabbed the attention of both Japanese and non-Japanese readers. Lummis (2007) describes the influence of the book on his encounter with Japanese culture in Okinawa in 1960: “I walked around Japan like a miniature Benedict, seeing ‘patterns’ everywhere (…) and [as an American,] also a miniature of MacArthur.” The disciplined body and its obedience have been patterned by other anthropologists through terms such as haji (“shame”) and hara (“stomach”) and has been related to the foundation of Japanese nationhood and personhood (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002).

The body has continued to be a centre of apotheosis in post-war Japan. The figure of the samurai has not only moral and spiritual value but also a body. The corporeality of the samurai as real, honest, and fundamental (Sakaguchi 1990, cited in Igarashi 2000) has become significant in the culture of defeat and contrasts with another symbol of Japanese spirituality: the emperor who is characterised by an absence of the body as I described in Chapter Two. Historian Dower (1999) suggests the term “culture of defeat” in one of the most influential books on Japanese post-war history, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II, in order to grasp the defeat and the US occupation as a lived experience. According to Dower, the term kyodatsu (“exhaustion and despair”) expresses the kind of feeling that most people experienced after the defeat; in the exhaustion and the despair, “the meaning of liberation was (…) not political but psychological (…) the liberation from death” (Dower 1999: 88, emphasis in original). The end of the war brought an ambivalent feeling to many Japanese: on one hand, a rupture from the war and the old regime, but, on the other hand, as ‘the old regime,’ symbolised by
the emperor and the legacy of the war-system and criminality, still remained present in the nation, there arose a question concerning who is responsible for the war and the loss. Hence, the nation was challenged with the problem of how to create a new world in the ruins of the war, or, as Dower (1999) articulates, how to ‘embrace the defeat.’

Despite all of the controversy, the emperor survived the war as neither a nebulous living god or a war criminal. On 27th September 1945, a famous photo was taken of a meeting between US General MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito which created a sensation in the Japanese press. In the photo, the emperor, standing in a stiff posture, wears a western-style tight black tuxedo, which contrasts MacArthur’s bright clothes and a relaxed and confident attitude. With a tightened necktie and straight legs, the Emperor looks like a rather wooden figure. The US General, who calls the ‘living god’ emperor “Sir,” stands casually with the top button of his shirt unbuttoned and his hands resting behind his back which slightly pushes his hips forward. The contrast between the two bodies, the towering and informal MacArthur and the small and formal Emperor, terrified many Japanese whereas many Americans were pleased as the picture seemed to encapsulate the change that the occupation of Japan represented (Dower 1999; Okamoto 2011). The image that allegedly revealed the relationship between the two countries, Japan’s subordinate status to US occupation, has also been read with sexualised connotations; Douglas Lummis called the picture their “wedding photo” (Igarashi 2000: 31; about the gendered unevenness and orientalism embedded in the photo, see Yoneyama 2016: chapter two).

[The photo of General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito on 27th September 1945 in Tokyo was published in Japanese Newspapers two days later. Source: U.S Army Signal Corps]

Imagining the emperor as a corporeal being was somewhat dissonant for many Japanese. One woman, nearly one-hundred-years old who I met during my visit to the Hiroshima peace archive, expressed her feeling at the moment she saw the picture. “[It was a feeling of] being deceived” as far as she remembers;
it was her first time to see an image of the emperor. Before the photo was published, the emperor had rarely been seen in the public. “The emperor was a voice,” she added. The feeling of being deceived and betrayed was shared by many who had been told by the emperor ‘to prepare for the final battle of the mainland’ until the day of surrender (Yoshiaki 2015. Also see Thomas and Eley 2020). The famous scene of Japanese people listening to the voice of the emperor, the so-called gyokuron-hōsō (which literally means “jewel voice broadcast”), with tears in their eyes as he announces the unconditional surrender and end of the war on 15th August 1945, has been illustrated in Ōe’s book, Man’en Gannen no Futtoboru (1967), The Silent Cry in the English translation. As Ōe illustrates.

I was vividly reminded of the day when the occupation forces’ jeep first came into the valley […] The grown-ups of the valley had found it difficult to get used to the feeling of being occupied even after they’d witnessed practical confirmation of the nation’s defeat, and had gone on with their daily tasks, ignoring the foreign troops. But all the while their souls were suffused with shame. The children were different: promptly adopting the jeeps shouting, “hello, hello!” [in English]- a piece of emergency education imparted at school- and were given canned foods and candy 21 (Ōe 2011[1967]).

The voice of the emperor was seen as incarnated in the photo. However, what the photo does not represent is the uncountable bodies of the wartime dead as well as the ruins left from the atomic bombs. This image evoked “a feeling that, in a Japan that had nothing, the emperor alone existed, and the rest was ruins” (Ryōtaro 1950 cited in Igarashi 2000: 47).

Where are the bodies of the warriors that provided a sense of nationhood during the war? In his book, Igarashi shows a portrait of a young Japanese pilot in 1944 in Mugokan (“voiceless museum”) which is faded and barely visible and compares it to the pilot’s existence which has been obliterated in post-war Japan. Igarashi uses the painting to highlight the tension between the image’s disappearance and the insistence on its presence, and he asks, why does this kokutai (“national body”) matter? Igarashi (2000) points to the significance of the body and its materiality in post-war Japanese culture. He defines post-war Japan as the age of the body and shows how the body has become “a site for national rehabilitation, thus overcoming the historical crisis that Japan’s defeat created” (ibid.: 5). In the process of creating the body of one nation, two different bodies, the Japanese body and the foreign body, instantiated by MacArthur and the Emperor and samurai, have been contested and represented in diverse

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21 The scene also reminds me of an anecdote of a book publisher, Ogawa Kikumatsu. When he heard the broadcast, gyokuron-hōsō, he was on the train for a business trip and got an idea. Once he came back to Tokyo, he started considering how to become rich in the changed situation. Based on two conversation books during the wartime, Ogawa and his collaborators published Nichi-Bai Kaïwa Techō (“Japanese-English Conversation Manual”), and the book became one of the most popular books in post-war time Japan. By the end of 1945, 3.5 million copies had been sold. The book began, “Thank you!” (see Dower 1999: 187-188).
ways in order to create a new order that aspires to produce a strong, clean, and triumphal body of the nation.

Combined with the bodies from wartime which were subjugated to nationalistic discourse, what has become clear is how the foreign power and body, in this case, the United States, was a defining factor in Japan’s self-invention. Igarashi called it ‘the age of the body,’ celebrating a heightened sense of the body after the collapse of the wartime regime. The body has re-entered Japan’s social consciousness in a new highly sexualised and aestheticized way and has symbolised its paradoxical liberation from US occupation. Under the influence of existentialism and a culture of decadence, the emphasis has moved to the so-called ‘literature of flesh.’ One possible way to embrace the defeat and to find meaning and beauty was to embrace “the body’s radical possibilities” (Igarashi ibid. 15).

The figure of the samurai highlights the aesthetic ambivalence of the war and death. As Sakaguchi Ango (1957, cited in Dower 1999: 156) writes, there was “candour of the psychological attractiveness of the recent war- of the mesmerising grandeur of massive destruction and the ‘strange beauty’ of people submissive to fate, (‘intended to die like scattered cherry blossom’) - and then, in the same intense prose, repudiate it.” This ‘decadent beauty’ can be found in what he called the “samurai ethic” with its emphasis on flesh and self-discipline in contrast to the delusion of abstract thought and ideas (shisō). The group of intellectuals such as Tamura and Sakaguchi, however, see the body as individual. The abstract national body or nation-state is meaningless; in contrast, what is meaningful is the indisputable real, honest, and fundamental body that is the solitary physical nikutai (flesh) and tai (body). Samurai on the horse could be an image of ‘the body’ in its own “emperor system” (Dower ibid.: 157). Emphasising the solitary body of the samurai that is not a winner, but a beauty, is a way in which Japanese people embrace the defeat.

The combination of the aestheticisation of the body and its pain through the figure of the warrior to vindicate the emperor system is well-illustrated in a scene from a short story written by Mishima Yukio, titled Yūkoku (“Patriotism”) in 1966. Yukio, who is possibly one of the most controversial figures in post-war Japan’s intellectual history, began as a most promising literary writer, and yet, turned to an increasingly vocal right-wing advocate over the course of the 1960s for restoring political power to the emperor and the Japanese military. What is added to his complicated fame is his death on 25 November 1970. After a rousing speech to young cadets and failure to get their support, Mishima committed suicide by seppuku, which had long been an exclusive mode of Samurai dying, in an attempt to resurrect the old Japanese ‘tradition.’ He sought to revive the nation’s samurai spirit, a call to throw off the shackles of US imperialism and return to a ‘traditional Japan’ in this highly performative and choreographed way of dying. The scene from the novel, as told below, seems to be in allusion to what happened four years after the novel was published:
The agony before Reiko’s eyes burned as strong as summer sun, utterly remote from the grief which seemed to be tearing herself apart within. The pain grew steadily in stature, stretching upward. Reiko felt that her husband had already become a man in a separate world, a man whose being had been resolved into pain, a prisoner in a cage of pain where no hand could reach out to him. But Reiko felt no pain at all. Her grief was not pain. As she thought about this, Reiko began to feel as if someone had raised a cruel wall of glass high between herself and her husband (Mishima 2010[1966]: 113-114).

A dramatic and exaggerated gesture in confronting death and pain is not the most well-known image of the samurai, and Mishima saw radical possibilities in the repetition of history; in Igarashi’s words, “he [Mishima] attempted to repeat the past, not as a farce, but as a tragedy in his own death” (ibid.: 181). After the falling of political activism in the 1960s and 70s and with a growing hope that rapid economic growth since had brought, however, the figure of the samurai has taken off its celebration on the dark and decadent death. The transition of the samurai’s body from an archetypal warrior to a new form of healthy and sanitised body in popular culture and sports will be discussed later in this chapter with two examples from the Olympics—asking whether the repetition of history is not a farce but a tragedy and a sole, uncorrupted death.

c. Repetitions of the past

As seen above, after the defeat of nuclear disaster, the samurai returned to public discourse. From war metaphors to the effort to hold Soma Nomaoi in the same way as before the disaster, the figure of the samurai symbolises for many the physical and spiritual strength and endurance of the Fukushima prefecture and of Japan as a whole. If the nuclear disaster can be read in the context of Japan’s long post-war legacy, what does the ‘nuclear samurai’s body articulate in the post-disaster period? How is the trajectory of the samurai’s body, from the moral and ethical spirituality of Japanese civilisation and modernisation to the sexualised and aestheticised body of defeat, constituted through the two ‘post’ times- post-war and post-disaster? After those disastrous experiences, how is the feeling of defeat intimately associated with the desire for a strong, healthy, and aesthetic body?

As anthropology has long illustrated the many ways in which the body is a theatrical stage for social performance and symbolic productions (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Douglas 1966; Van Gennep 1961), the bodies of samurai have been the place where the ‘abstract nation’ is incarnated. However, what I suggest is that body is not only a stage where symbolic order and abstract meanings (so-called ‘intangible culture’) are materialised, but also how the theatre creates a certain type of body. By participating in Soma Nomaoi, the victims themselves become samurais. Avoiding the endless trap of one way or the other way around, such as the absent body of the emperor or the excessive corporeality of the US General, what I illustrate through my ethnography in Soma Nomaoi is how the body sways between
victimhood and nationhood and how those are intertwined with not only post-war but also post-disaster discourse. What is ‘repeatedly’ performed and shared through the bodies of the participants of the festival? And in doing so, what kind of body is imagined and finally formulated as ‘our body’ in the wake of the disaster?

How do the hundreds of samurai create and display their own ‘emperor system’ at Soma Nomaoi? Back to Minami Soma, Fukushima—early morning in late July, I was on my way to the ground of the arena with thousands of people waiting for shikki-soudatsisen (“the sacred flag competition”). Instead of Misaki, who was busy with festival management, Hikari came to the station to pick me up. Hikari is a woman in her mid-twenties who studied hotel business. She had an experience of one year in the US in Ohio and really enjoyed talking about her time there. “I feel as if I have my second family there.” She used to emphasize how great her American host family was. As one of many returnees, she came back to Fukushima after the disaster in order to help care for her parents who had been devastated by the nuclear refugee life and to work in the hospitality business funded by the local government as a means of support. She dreams her ‘second’ family in the US will be able to visit Fukushima someday, and in order for that to happen, she said, “we need more people here.” Wearing a white pinkish summer long dress and a beach-styled hat, she looked a bit excited with some new visitors as she quickly pressed a button on her mobile phone to play some American pop music. She was looking forward to the fireworks that night and prepared to wear a nice yukata and hair ornaments for the occasion. Dreaming of the US and humming a song, Sunday Morning by Maroon 5, she started to drive.

[Despite the message, “please feel free to take a rest here,” I could hardly see any tourists in the village, and the community centre was decorated with two figures of (western white) foreigners wearing soma t-shirts made out of cardboard].

The fukkō (“resilience”) project brought many young former residents back to their hometown. Like Misaki and Hikari, relatively younger females and children with no other siblings tend to take responsibility for ‘caring’ for parents and their suffering hometown. Most people in the area depend on
short and long-term government and NGO-funded projects such as creating a community centre, opening a small business like cafes, restaurants, and craft shops, and renovation of the abandoned houses and areas in the town. The recently opened cafes and restaurants are also a place where local farmers, fishery workers, and carpenters, who have lost their jobs and are not able to work in their fields anymore, spend time in small talk. “This is bubble tea which is really popular in Tokyo.” When Mori, an owner of the cafe bar in Odaka served a brand-new bubble tea to the old farmers and carpenters, they, who have plenty of time now without work in the rice fields, sea, and forests, seemed to ponder their lost life—how fragile it was and perhaps bubbled like that tea. What the workers were doing is a practice of waiting to return until the amount of radiation is cut in half, and again, cut in half of that half. A carpenter named Shousuke who wanted to return to the fields and the forests always told me, “Mirai wa daremo siranai” (“No one knows the future”). He would also say, “Hold on and wait until the level of caesium decreases.” (In the next chapter, I talk more about the practice of waiting and the futurity of geological time in relation to the contaminated soil bags in the area).

Today is not a day of waiting for the uncertain future. Instead, people are going back to the supposedly solid past in order to repeat it. The streets have returned to the old machi (“town”) with hundreds of samurai and horses, all well-fed and groomed, and the old farmers and fishery workers wearing their samurai armour were full of vigour. Temporary traffic controls were in operation in some areas in order to turn time backwards. Soma Nomaoi is held for three days: on the first day, there was a departure ceremony called shitsuujin held at Soma Nakamura jinja (“shrine”) where the guardian bodhisattva of the soma clan resides. A procession left the shrine with the commander’s flag. The sound of a conch shell horn arrived at the soutaishou-omukae (reception of the supreme commander), and an order from the supreme commander was received. Then the yoinori horse race started at hibarigahara field. The second day started with ogyouetsu (an armed samurai procession) from haramachi to hibarigahara field again, which is three kilometres away. Over five hundred horsemen in samurai armour joined the parade and arrived at the arena where kacchu-keiba (an armed horse race) and shinki-soudatsusen (a sacred flag competition) began. On the night of the second day, there was a firework display in the midst of the rice field. On the last day, there was nomakake in Odaka in which four mounted horsemen called okobito drove unsaddled horses into a corral made of bamboo and were offered as a tribute payment to the god of the shrine.

When we arrived at hibarigahara in the scorching heat, the temperature felt like 45-degrees Celsius. Sitting in the amphitheatre, we watched the hundreds of horses and armed samurai entangled in dust. The stadium was full of people wearing small parasols and young people drinking beer, and, in case of potential accidents, there were several ambulances prepared. “Every year, not only samurais but also some members of the audience are taken away by the ambulance,” Hikari warned me while drinking a non-alcoholic beer. She then advised me to put on more sunblock and to drink plenty of water. A sacred
flag called *shinki* was fired into the air, each time from different points in the arena; the horses started running toward the spot where the flag was predicted to fall. The horses and samurai were making a huge storm of dust that looked like grey clouds. In the following *kacchu-keima* (“armed horse race”), the horses ran swiftly before my eyes. The time spent amid the scorching heat crept up on me, and my sight became leaden. Most people sit through it until the end. A siren from an ambulance wailed near the car park, and my shoulders and legs became completely burnt. The race finished. I realized that much of the performance: the horse parade, the competition for the sacred flags, and the horse race seemed to not only test the endurance and the strength of the samurai and horses but also to test that of the spectators. Everyone in the stadium was exhausted from the dusty and risky event and some were even injured. With an exhausted body from the heat and ardour and soaked with perspiration, Misaki and other villagers worried about me. They used to say that my body is somewhat different from theirs because, as a foreign body, I had not become accustomed to all the hardships of life in Fukushima. In contrast, the collectivity of their body is different; as Misaki said, “we are made of Fukushima things; what we eat, what we breath; the food, the water, the air, and even the quake, and the heat made us.”

The remark reminded me of Aristotle’s four elements, as well as what Misaki’s mother said, “The extreme heat in Fukushima makes fruit plump and abundant.” The heat as a symbol of vitality, such as *ki* or *genki* (“vital force”), circulates the energy that flows through the bodies and the surrounding area (cf. Bloch 1984). Soma Nomaoi is, like a sport, a place to display healthy and energetic masculine bodies. Not only as ‘intangible cultural heritage’ but also as a ‘tangible’ stage for displaying the bodies made of ‘Fukushima,’ Soma Nomaoi places the time of the disaster and the bodies of the victims onto the time of the timeless past and the body of the samurai. What is ‘resilient’ here is the sense of a body that is capable of overcoming the lingering fear of radiation and of fighting against being stigmatized as ‘nuclear mutants’ (cf. Gill 2014). The message was communicated: the bodies, ‘our’ bodies, the ones riding the horses, practising the ritual ceremonies, being tanned by the sun and injured, will be able to recover. “Aren’t you scared as we are just 20km away from the exploding power plant?” Hikari suddenly asked while stirring and loosening cold noodles for a late lunch. “Well, what about you?” I asked. And, she replied, “Here are people. It’s not just me alone (…) I was so happy to see that many people were preparing for the opening ceremony at night in the town hall (…) laughing, crying, moving, dancing (…) something was alive there. We need more people here (…) then we think everything will get better.” Being together seemed to make people feel safer and stronger. Sitting on the ground of rice fields, which usually remain empty and lonesome and sharing food and juicy peaches from the marketplace, Hikari and Misaki said that they feel the energy of the place and from the company of others. Spraying mosquito repellent on my arms and legs and watching fireworks above their ‘wounded’ hometown, they repeated how beautiful everything is, and therefore, everything is okay.
d. Two Olympics: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce

In response to Hegel’s remark on world history that ‘all great world historical facts and personages occur, as it were twice,’ Marx (1950[1852]) begins his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with a famous comment, “he has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” He then follows this paragraph with a striking insight on history—how humans make their own history by borrowing disguises and languages from the past, going through their revolutionary roles as if a sleepwalker awakened from the dead, yet unconscious about what they are really doing. And Marx concludes:

The awakening of the dead in those revolutions [1642 and 1789] served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task of imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again (ibid.: 225-226).

Like the return of the samurai character in the wake of nuclear disaster, here is another event occurring twice, the Olympics. Waiting for the fireworks display in the evening, Hikari and I were driving to the J-village where history would occur for the second time, as farce. The J-village is a sports complex in Nahara, which is one of the former evacuation areas located twenty-km south of the Fukushima Daichi Power Plant; the complex was fully re-opened in April 2019. Soon after the disaster, the place had been used as a base for the ‘nuclear samurai’ until 2013; the SDF, firefighters, clean-up workers, and some other nuclear experts stayed to tackle the hydrogen explosions and meltdowns of the reactors as well as the ongoing decommissioning and decontamination work. The government set a plan to use the place as a symbol of the revitalisation of Fukushima with the Olympic flame for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic set to begin its journey from J-village, ‘lighting’ its way across another forty-seven prefectures in Japan. In Sabara, Fukushima another place was planned for the Olympic softball tournament; it was under renovation for the event despite lingering concerns and criticism of the level of radiation since the stadium is surrounded by highly contaminated mountain and forest areas.

When prime minister Shinzo Abe, dressed as a famous character from Nintendo’s Super Mario, popped-up from a round-shaped pillar at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics and invited people to the next Olympics in Tokyo 2020, it was right after the evacuation order had been lifted, and it was a time in which, with much concern and anxiety, some former villagers began to make their way back. A carpenter named Shousuke recounted his vivid memory of that period. Staying in a temporary house in Iiwate with the hope of a return to normal life constantly deferred, he saw Abe on TV that day. An earnest carpenter who loves the trees in the forests of Minami Soma, Shousuke bitterly said to himself, “We have been forgotten.” The disaster, which was still ongoing and haunting him every moment, seemed to be already relegated to the past. The ambitious plan for the Olympics—to show Japan like a
phoenix rising from the ashes despite the ongoing and never-ending struggle to maintain their livelihood in the contaminated homelands—established a blueprint for hope and recovery in the area. The radiation maps with blue and red dots on the walls were replaced by Olympic symbols on posters that emphasized the safety of the food, the soil, and the water of Fukushima. One propagandistic message proclaimed, ‘tabate oenshō’ (“let’s eat [food from Fukushima] to support”). Some villagers remembered how several politicians, including prime ministers, visited Fukushima and showed a performance of eating food and drinking water without worries and concerns as if they were ‘Super Mario’ who could never die.

As Hegel and Marx pointed out, things happen twice; it was not the first time for the Olympics to be held in Japan in the ashes and the ruins. In 1940, Tokyo was scheduled to host the summer Olympics, but it was cancelled due to Japan’s invasion of China in 1937, and then rescheduled for Helsinki. Furthermore, it was also cancelled due to the outbreak of World War II, and it was not until 1964 that Tokyo eventually hosted the summer Olympics. The 1964 Olympics was a moment to show how bodies and bodily images once again are conduits to represent memories of the wartime past. Celebrating economic growth and prosperity after the War, the ‘Olympic fever’ gradually increased. Much of the media reported the Olympics as *seisen* (“a sacred war”) for Japan. With massive construction works and hygiene projects, the whole ceremony seemed to confirm the narrative of recovery that lifted Japan from its wartime destruction and ruin. The Japanese bodies that participated in the 1964 Olympics were not the bodies of defeated warriors but the bodies of athletes. In contrast to the monstrous and destructive ones from the War, these were healthy, aesthetically pleasing bodies that functioned as metonyms for the newly rebuilt strength of the nation. The masculine and robust body was something that needed to be trained, managed, and finally, achieved, and, in so doing, “Japan retained its essential qualities even after the defeat” (Igarashi ibid.: 62).

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22 Regarding Marx’s comments on Hegel, Žižek’s work related to contemporary crisis is an interesting reference here. In the book, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), Žižek considers this historical doctrine with globally shared crises, from 9/11 to the financial meltdown and shows how liberalism dies; first as a political doctrine and second as an economic theory. My engagement with Marx and other critical theory here is quite brief and it could be further discussed in relation to the theme of this thesis, which is a discourse on crisis, particularly, ecological, and sensorial crisis.
Expanding on Hegel and Marx, history seems to repeat itself even more than twice in Japan. After the disaster, there has been another effort to re-create an ‘Olympic fever.’ The official website for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics advertised the torch relay route with an image of a samurai running on horseback as the representative figure of Fukushima. The website details the route of the torch:

The Grand Start of the Torch Relay will take place in the symbol of Fukushima’s reconstruction: J-Village National Training Centre. From there, the torch will make its way across the prefecture, visiting seaside towns and villages that have steadily recovered from the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of 2011 and the disaster of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Some of the sites the torch will pass through on its journey across Fukushima include Hibarigahara — the site of the Soma Nomaoi wild horse chase festival in Minamisoma; Mishima, with its scenic Tadami River and Daiichi Tadamigawa Bridge; the traditional post station of Ouchi-juku in Shimogo; and Tsurugajo Castle, the symbol of the city of Aizuwakamatsu.

As shown in the map, the part marked in red includes the area for the first day of the torch relay. The Olympic torch was scheduled to pass through most of this area, including Minami Soma, a coastal area in eastern Fukushima Prefecture, where I stayed during fieldwork. What the map does not represent, however, is the many places in this region which remain hard-to-return areas. The Olympic plan has become a catalyst for enforcing the early return to these evacuation zones.

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse’s neck and head would be already gone (Kafka, *The wish to be a red Indian*, 2005: 390).

The high-speed photography of the samurai on the horses is reminiscent of the Red Indian in Kafka’s short paragraph illustrating the moment on a scudding horse. A horseman is, like a ’Red Indian,’ a wild, healthy, aesthetically pleasing body in contrast to the images of woebegone victims and ruins. Victimhood has transformed into nationhood; the heroic samurai have survived the ordeal and are running against the wind, soil, and gravity. Soma Nomaoi in 2019, which I was able to attend, was held one year before the scheduled Olympics. Some called it ‘a rehearsal for the Olympics’ as they expected more visitors in 2020. The horses had arrived from all around Japan: from Kyusū in the south to Hokkaido in the north, and professional horsemen were hired for the event. The participation of the younger generations was also ardently encouraged. A documentary on TV that I watched with Misaki and other friends a couple of days before Soma Nomaoi was about a nineteen-year-old girl named Emiya who was ‘wishing to be a samurai’ and was practising horse riding. With the image of the girl standing on a devastated beach wearing samurai armour, the clip titled ‘samurai girl’ started with a scene in which she prayed at a shrine to be a samurai, and the clip finishes with the following caption without even mentioning the radiation issue in the area: “2011 Tohoku earthquake hit this area, and everything was carried away by a huge TSUNAMI. But people there stood up and tried very hard to continue the Nomaoi festival in order to keep their tradition and the samurai spirit” (emphasis in the capital letters is from the original).24

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24 On 20th September 2020 during the midst of the global pandemic of covid-19, the archive of the Fukushima disaster opened in Futaba, Fukushima. It was in fact prepared for the Olympics. The name of the archive is *denshōkan*, which literally means “transmitting,” and it aims to share the experiences of the disaster. However, one of my interlocuters who visited the archive told me that the storytellers from the villages were invited to share their own experiences of the disaster only with the consent that they are not going to criticise any specific groups such as the government and TEPCO. Also, the terms such as nuclear meltdown and core melt down were erased
“It will be great if people are able to see how great Fukushima is during the Olympics.” When a young girl said this after the horse race, unfortunately, nobody knew that the area would soon be confronted with another invisible risk, not radiation but coronavirus.

e. Prosthetic bodies: horses, cameras, and robots

Along with the figure of the samurai, another key participant in the Nomaoi is the horse. As Misaki defined herself as ‘Soma Clan,’ the history of Soma Clan as warriors is intimately related to the horses; the clan has always travelled on horseback. Many people in the area express their affection for horses, and the painting of horses can be seen from many different places such as a Shinto shrine, the bus/train stations, shops, and restaurants. Sometimes, the horses have been a part of a bucolic scenery, but other times, as companions and even enemies of humans. As Soma Nomaoi shows, the horses have been used not only for livestock, cultivation, and transportation but also for militaristic purposes. When I visited Nobu’s house, a retired farmer in Minami Soma who still rears a couple of horses, he compared his feeling of loss caused by the disaster to his experience of the war. Despite a slight feeling of discomfort in talking to a Korean like me, (Korea is a former colony of Japan before the War and is constantly challenging Japan for wartime crimes and colonial domination), he couldn’t help but show his affection toward horses. The farmer, who is nearly one-hundred-years-old, enjoyed talking about his memories of horses. The reason he was drafted into the army during the Second World War was due to the horse. “The mounted soldier was my hero.” To be a heroic man on a horse, he was sent to Manchukuo.25 On the horse, he could feel as if he had four legs and a broader view of things, and for this, “you need to feel yourself and the horse are as one.” While speaking, the old farmer who can no longer ride a horse seemed to be back in the time when he was a warrior; he believes that’s how a boy becomes a man.

However, wishing to be a mounted soldier is an unattainable dream in post-war Japan. Everyone from the prime ministers of the conservative party to the leaders of the communist party has repeatedly declared that “Japan is yuiitsu no hibakukoku (“the only nation ever to have been atom-bombed”) and the only nation in the world to have made a commitment to pacifism and denunciation of war written into its constitution. As the limited nature of Japan’s Jieitai (“Self Defence Force”) restricts Japan’s global military presence, there have been ongoing debates concerning the revision of the national

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25 Manchukuo, officially the state of Manchuria prior to 1934 and the empire of Manchuria after 1934, was a puppet state of the Empire of Japan in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia from 1932 to 1945, the year of surrender of Japan at the end of World War II. The importance of the area which shares its border with China, Korea, and Russia, Japan invaded Manchuria in 1932 and founded a constitutional monarchy under the de facto control of Japan.
constitution, the so-called *Heiwa kenpō* (“peace constitution”), which was framed and implemented after the Japanese defeat in World War II and during the Allied occupation by the United States. Some, so-called revisionists, argue for the revision of Article 9 to allow Japan to participate as an equal member of the world community by its military force. In the absence of this participation, for many, there is “a crisis of masculinity” (Mckissack 2017). The crisis means that the absence of the possibility for war since the defeat has made Japan and Japanese people (or rather, men) stay forever immature, ‘a little boy’ in a perpetual state of childhood.

In relation to the issue of the revision of Article 9 and remilitarisation, Ivy (2008) explores this predicament betwixt and between childhood and manhood with a series of art from Murakami Takashi, who is one of the most successful contemporary artists from Japan. The issue of the crisis of masculinity in the post-war period does not remain in the political and social sector but often traces itself in the everyday mass and Japanese ‘sub-cultural’ domain. Murakami’s work titled ‘a Little Boy,’ for instance, recalls that the name of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was ‘Little Boy,’ and it shows the lingering status of ‘childhood,’ which finds its lineage in the memory of the bombs and the wartime defeat. A historian named Harootunian calls this “Japan’s long post-war” to ask why post-war has been used as a cultural trope from the moment the war ended (2000: 718). He observes how the nation in defeat has become “a mnemonic device for recall” to reinforce the fetishisation of an experience and to construct an endless present which Althusser describes as a “space without places, a time without duration” (1972: 78).

When will the little boy who has been ruined and “castrated” (Murakami’s word, although not his alone) by the ‘American little boy’ become a ‘man’? The fast and strong bodies of the horses, the intertwined space between a militant history and the legacy of the war and its epitomic masculinity, has become another affection, and/or, possible fetish, for many Japanese men. On the night after the firework display, I met Hajimaru in a parking lot; he is a friend of Misaki who came from Yokohama, and I was told “he is crazy about horses. Only horses.” Misaki introduced him with a joking but serious voice; she was right. We stopped our car in the middle of a rice field as I wanted to see more stars and sit under a smoky dark sky where the vestigial traces of the fireworks remained. The man who was completely

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26 Renunciation of war Article 9: [1] Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. [2] In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of the belligerency of the state will not be recognized.
sunburned from chasing the horses all day started telling me when and how his love for horses began. He was a law student in Okayama, and one day one of his friends, who had a part-time job at a racecourse, took him to a horse race in Kumamoto. It was the first time he had seen a horse so close, and he fell in love with the horses immediately. The horses were pretty and strong, and there was something that connected him to the horses when he rubbed them. “I thought that we became one.”

Since then, the student who was in his first year of undergraduate tried to find a job that would make him be around horses, and finally, he became a horse photographer. His main job is as a horse photographer at the racecourse in Yokohama, and whenever he has free time, he moves all around Japan to take photos of horses. “Why not become a horseman?” I asked. He laughed and answered, “Too weak to be a horseman!” Taking photos of the horses is a way that he makes the connection. He sometimes rides horses, but instead, he feels closer to them through the lens. The huge Cannon camera attached to his muscular arm looked like a part of his body; through the lens, he touched the horses and looked into their eyes. “To bring things closer spatially and humanly” (Benjamin 2003[1935]), that’s how he feels what they feel. The photographer continued, “Each horse has its own personality, facial expression, and emotion. It is clearer when I see them through the lens instead of simply riding and touching them.”

The photographer challenged my understanding by saying that ‘indirect’ intimacy through this specific way of seeing could be more intimate than ‘direct’ tactility. He has a thousand photos in his memory card which is full of the parts and wholes of horses; some close-up photos of doe-eyed and tawny mane horses looked like different creatures living underwater or from somewhere else further beyond.

Instead of wishing to be a samurai on a horse, this man who is far away from the wartime dreams to capture the horses holds not a whip but a camera. How is the intimacy with the horses mediated by cameras different from the old farmer’s wish to be a mounted soldier? How does technology and its uses change the way in which the horse lovers relate to their ‘object’? Lury (1998) uses the term “prosthetic culture,” asking how the photographic image may have contributed to a particular configuration of personhood, self-knowledge and truth. How can taking the shot and seeing the image be more than merely representation? How does the ability to frame, freeze, and fix the objects enable refiguring self-understanding and the image of the body? If photography pulls things closer, what happens to the self? Do they transform each other? Taussig, inspired by mimesis theory from Benjamin, certainly sees this mimetic sensuousness embedded in technology (1993: 200). Taussig uses the image of a potter’s hand described by Benjamin in his essay on the storyteller. In that essay, Benjamin illustrates how the storyteller’s presence and life is impressed into the tale just as the imprints of the potters’ hand caresses the yielding clay. In A commentary of Nanook of the North, Flaherty uses the same metaphor to show how the cinematic image is created: “the cinematic image shall caress the yielding eye, the body it contains: ‘Take, for instance, the hands of the potter as he moulds the clay.’” Even further than the imprints, with the telephoto lens that might penetrate the body of the object, Hajimeru can infiltrate
the body of a horse. Like the hand of a surgeon that Walter Benjamin illustrates in another essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in comparison to a magician, the lens opens a route for Hajimeru to enter the deeper body of the horse. Benjamin writes:

> The surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating—Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously (2003 [1935]: 52).

By Hajimeru’s urging, we had to wake up at 5 a.m. the next day since he wanted to take the best spots that he had been eyeing to take shots of the horses. When we arrived at the Odaka Shrine early in the morning, I soon realised that it’s not only him; there were already a bunch of young and middle-aged and older men who were waiting for the moment that the horses run into the shrine. It’s neither their interest to talk to each other or share the images; instead, each man seemed to be in his own world, in which only he and the horses exist. In order to take the best shot at the best moment, the men with the cameras were anxious for the steps and movements of the horses. Once the horses started galloping, a cloud of dust followed them, and all the photographers’ index fingers rapidly clicked the shutter of the cameras. “I was able to have the feeling of being a real horseman,” Hajimeru, who just finished his first shots, said, with thrilling excitement in his voice. Referring to his camera, he asked, “Do you want to see how heavy this is?” While we were waiting for the day’s main ritual, *Nomakake* (“wild horse chase”), Hajimeru, and some other men around wanted to show me and some other female villagers their strength. The huge and expensive cameras have different lens sizes, and every time the women expressed how hard it is to hold the cameras, they proudly took them back, performing a gesture that it’s a piece of cake.

On the morning of the third day, dozens of horses ran into the *jinja no mori* (sacred tree garden around the shrine) of the Odaka Shrine, and then the conch sell horn was blown and the battle drums began to
beat. After the ritual of sprinkling sacred water, piled-up salt (*mori shio*), and white rice onto the ground to purify the place, the mounted riders drove unsaddled horses into a fenced area in front of the Odaka shrine to start *Nomakake*. *Nomakake* is a ritual in which men called *okobito*, wearing all-white outfits including white *hachimaki* (“headbands”), chase and capture wild horses with their hands and then dedicate the horses to the shrine deity. According to the villagers and the leaflets at the event, it’s the only performance in Soma Nomaoi that retains ‘the ancient form’ of the ritual’s name and its contents.

Three agitated horses freed from saddles and bridles started moving quickly around the corral made out of bamboo, and the sound of a drum and horn resonated with the excitement through the crowd. When the horses turned 90 degrees, fizzing around the fence of the corral, eight unarmed men, the *okobito*, entered the corral. The war between the pursuer and the pursued began as the cloud of photographers also began to move following the horses and the *okobito*. Everything was entangled: horses, the *okobito*, the crowd, policemen, an ambulance, and sounds of camera shuttering. It sometimes took quite a long time for the *okobito* to grab and ride the horses. Finally, the captured horses were dedicated to the deity of the Odaka shrine with a gesture of offering.

However, the people who dedicated the captured horses to the deity were not *okobito*, but a samurai group and thus, the final victory was not for the *okobito*. Despite the bravery and the strength of the victorious *okobito* over the horses, a group of samurai took the horses to the main entrance of the shrine, *sando u* (“a way to worship”). “Okobito were the people of a lower class (…) they were hired by the shrine and the samurai class,” Misaki and Hajimeru explained as they found me wondering what was going on. “Then how will the okobito be compensated for their victory?” I asked. “Well, probably presents or money?” Misaki smiled.

Who will be the final winner of this endless war? Hideo Furukawa wrote a novel, *Horses, Horses, in the End of Light Remains Pure*, based on his trip to Fukushima immediately after the nuclear disaster (2012; translated to English in 2016). Using one of the main characters from his previous novel, *The
*Holy Family*, named Inuzuka Gyuichiro, as a storyteller, Furukawa creates an interesting structure in which the fictional character returns to the world of reality. He asks how this toxic reality in the ruin is “radically different from the official, or authorised, version of state history” (Kimoto 2012: 17). Gyuichiro narrates the story of the horses which is very different from what was being told at the stage of Soma Nomaoi. He says that the horses that we see now are neither ‘native’ nor ‘wild,’ and when larger horses were introduced from the Korean peninsula, the ‘native’ horses disappeared. Since the Meiji era, when larger Western horses were imported into Japan, these “Japanese” horses became “hybridised” and eventually were rendered nearly extinct. He continued, “Don’t believe in historical dramas that claim to be realistic. Don’t believe in movies with spectacular battle scenes or dramas with samurai warriors. These are all lies” (ibid.).

As seen throughout this chapter, movies and dramas lied; the emperor lied; the prime minister and politicians lied; all the promises that they had won and would have been won were broken. However, the ‘wish’ to be a samurai was not a lie for those who continue to live in the area and embrace the defeat. A couple of days later, I went to Nobu’s house again with the printed photos from Soma Nomaoi since he was not able to participate in the festival anymore due to his age. He loved that the *Nomakake* was finally back to the Odaka shrine, which was completely evacuated from 2011 to 2016. When he put the photos in his old albums, I found that he had a bunch of newspapers in his scrapbooks. It was all about the disaster and how things were going to return to normal. One article in 2017 caught my sight: it was about a mini robot named *mini-manbo* (“little sunfish”) which was created for cleaning the melted core of the nuclear reactor. After several failed attempts by the older version of the robot, which malfunctioned from the excessive amount of radiation, finally, the *mini-manbo* was successful in avoiding hot spots in the reactor’s core as it took the melted uranium fuel. Instead of the nuclear samurai, the robot brought some sense of hope to the old farmer. “It will save us,” he said. The robot was swimming in the most dangerous part, and Nobu said that humans would die within five seconds there.

The article ends with one robot engineer’s words, “This is a divine mission for us; we still have hope.” Remembering the slogan “nuclear power is a bright future energy” on the main road of Futaba, which remains a “hard-to-return” area, I looked at another promise made. The robot, a new hero for the old man who had to stay in the cold and snow on the night of the disaster, will never die.

The essence of that moment would be drawn out indefinitely; direction in time was swallowed up and lost amid the steadily falling flakes, just as sound was absorbed by the layer of snow. All-pervasive time: Takashi as he ran stark naked was great-grandfather’s brother, and my own; every moment of those hundred years was crowded into this one instant in time (Ôe 1996[1967]: 146).

f. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how the figure of the samurai repeatedly appears in times of crisis and what is represented through the body of the warrior. In attempting to create a stage not only where
symbolic meanings and abstract ideas are materialised but also where a certain type of body that is masculine and enduring is produced, Soma Nomaoi performs the nation’s shifting identity from victims to warriors. Yet, the desire to be a nuclear samurai is unfulfilled since the repetition of the past does not give any sense of security and recovery to the villagers. Instead, like an empty signifier, the armour of the samurai drifts over all the memories of defeat, fear, and anxiety, and takes another corporeality, that is, the prosthetic body of a camera and a robot. As seen in the history of defeat from the war and its constant effort to rise from the ashes of despair, all the dreams and desires projected into the image of the warrior do not bring any ‘victory’ to the people who want to simply return to the normality of life. What could have been done instead of repeating the empty signifier of the samurai?

Back to Marx’s remark on Hegel, he added a comment that “the modern ancient regime is merely the comedian of a world whose real heroes are dead. History is through and passes through many phases when it bears an old figure to the grave. The last phase of a world historical figure is its comedy” (1950[1852]: 252). Like Misaki’s bitter joke after the flyering work, all the samurai who were exhausted in their heavy armour went home after a day of hard work. I watched their sweaty backs and bitter smiles, knowing that the battle wouldn’t end; they would have to prepare for the next day's battle to remain in their hometown. Neither tragedy nor farce, but something in-between, the samurai carefully walked home trying to avoid the contaminated farmland. For those old warriors, Soma Nomaoi was the stage where all the promises that they had won and would have won were broken. What was paradoxically clear after the show was that the entire village had become another stage for them to fight against the constant risk of radiation. After all the shows were over, in the empty stage, this chapter considered the following question: if the ‘wish’ to be a samurai hero was not a lie for those who continue to live in the area, then who set this stage for ordinary people who cannot survive unless they become warriors? Whether or not Soma Nomaoi is tragedy or farce, how many times must history repeat itself in this deceptive way?
Ch.5 Contaminated soil bags and the shape of time

In this chapter, I explore how the futurity of the triple disaster is imagined through an examination of contaminated soil bags and how the idea of time is spatialised as an accumulation of the past and the eternal present rather than as a flow. Due to decontamination work that aimed to remove 5 cm of topsoil from all the residential areas around the Fukushima prefecture, tons of black plastic bags have piled up and have become part of the landscape. As a pollutant and as a landscape, the collected soil has disrupted the human relation to nature and perceptions of hometown. In rural Japan, the links between people and place, the soil and humans, are often articulated with the term ‘furusato’—translated as ‘hometown’ or ‘native place’—which has a strong ideological significance attached to it. Furusato is expressed in sentiments, often praising the meaning and the beauty of nature, the landscape, mountains, rivers, woods, and trees of a particular furusato. The term also encapsulates a national ideology of ‘love of nature’ which is most likely connected to Shinto animism. Robertson (1991) observes that furusato is a signifier of a wide range of cultural productions which effectively imbues it with unifying political meaning and value. In other words, the human relation to nature reflects relations to Others, which shapes the social and political hierarchy in Japan (cf. Thomas 2001).

Yet, Gill (2013) points out that more than 90 percent of Japanese people live in urban areas, and there is a chasm between the furusato as an actual place and as an idealised symbol of native identity. Kirby (2011: 77) also notes in his ethnographic research on waste, pollution, and vermin around the Tokyo area that furusato is “rural nostalgia in the abstract” which often neglects the contradictions between humans and nature. According to that research, people’s actual relationship in rural areas with the soil has been much more ambivalent in terms of care, control, and management. The soil has different meanings—the soil has an abstract meaning such as the origin of life and identity, and in other instances, it indicates a concrete quality that should be under management and control. As seen in Knight’s (1997) work, there has been a tension in rural Japan between local farmers and newcomers regarding furusato as an ideology and practice since the late 1980s and early 1990s. The field research that Knight carried out in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula, Central Japan, shows how the ‘newcomers’ ideology of tsuchi o sensei ni suru koto ga daiji (“what is important is to treat the soil as teacher”) has been influenced by back-to-the-land movements and how this ideology conflicts with everyday labour and practice by local villagers who are trying to maximise their productivity by using diverse technologies such as pesticide.

The disaster in 2011 challenged the furusato ideology as well as local life in the contaminated environment. As I have shown in previous chapters, many villages were completely destroyed by the earthquake and the following tsunami, and many of the villagers were forced to evacuate to escape the radioactive contamination. The link between place and people was abruptly severed, and even after the process of return, people have been living in a totally different environment that is surrounded by
contaminated soil bags. The landscape, sounds, and noises are different from the past and there is an overall feeling of abandonment. The soil that was once a sentimental object for inspiring furusato is now seen as ‘a scientific thing’ that is disconnected from the former lived experiences of the villagers. The soil now needs to be contained and managed until it will hopefully disappear.

When the former villagers returned to their hometowns in Fukushima, what they found was the ‘spoiled soil’ (Gill 2013) and mountains of contaminated soil bags. No other places in Japan wanted to offer land for storing the bags. As I show in this chapter, the soil bags manifest the visible and invisible risks of radiation, and life with the contaminated soil is often compared to life in a collapsing dune. The soil that was once symbolised and praised as ‘furusato’ and an origin of life has now become one of the most troubling materials that implies not only the hardship of the past and the present but also the future of Fukushima. The soil bags that contain radioactive fallout problematise what is natural and human-made, and they raise a question of where the risk of radiation comes from and how to wrap it up and contain it. Unlike the soil as a vital layer that Ashley (1998) calls a ‘critical zone’ of living organisms that regulate life-sustaining resources, the soil bags in Fukushima oscillate between life and non-life. The bags themselves complicate ideas of interiority and exteriority since they are neither an integument nor a content but both. They evoke complex interactions that connect and disconnect people, places, and other elements such as water, air, and peoples’ imagination of the future. The soil “as a new political actor” (Latour 2018: 40) is “a perfect companion to recognise the complex blend of socio-political predicaments and physio-material negotiations of planetary boundary conditions and safe operating spaces, which are not only indicative of the need for new ethical engagements but also suggestive of a new kind of geopolitics” (Salazar et al. 2020: 5).

Given this context, this chapter takes the soil bags as a key element to show how the materiality of the soil questions the thresholds between the visible and the invisible and stimulates different imaginings of post-disaster futurity. First, the soil has solid materiality, and thus, the piles of contaminated soil bags around the Fukushima prefecture have become the most ‘visible’ aspect of the materiality of the nuclear disaster. Instead of remaining as mere background or ground, the mountains of soil bags have come to the forefront and become both a subject and an object and are related to wider issues of everyday practice such as where to walk and what to see and eat. This mundanity on the ground contrasts with widespread and overwhelming images of nuclear disaster such as the mushroom clouds from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and of Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands, during the nuclear weapon tests between 1946 and 1958, which have often been (re)presented by black-and-white aerial imagery of the clouds.

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27 There is a story of Japanese fishermen who were exposed to the radiation on a tuna fishing boat named Daigo Fukuryū Maru (“Lucky Dragon Five”). Daigo Fukuryū Maru is a Japanese tuna fishing boat with 23 crew members which was contaminated by the nuclear fallout from a thermonuclear weapon test by the United States at Bikini Atoll on 1st March 1954. They witnessed the snow-like irradiated debris and ash but had no idea what was going on. Shortly after their return to shore, an acute radiation syndrome had developed, and Kunoyama
I would rather suggest that the afterlife of the nuclear disaster is a matter of the ground that requires the Sisyphean labour of making borders and boundaries against the potential exposure that is embedded in a shifting materiality and a concern for futurity.

Secondly, despite its solid materiality, the soil has evoked different meanings and imaginations through its porosity. This means that making borders and boundaries around the bags is an exercise that is doomed to fail. The soil as the ground is entangled with other organic matter, including humans, and thus, it has been hard to remove all the contaminated soil without completely evacuating all the living things in the area. By switching the attention from the soil bags as a material object to what happens to them, it will be possible to see the world of materials in flux and transformation and how the people sense the invisible through the unfixe
d materiality of the soil bags. Life surrounding the contaminated soil bags involves not only ‘seeing’ them every day but also ‘embracing,’ ‘avoiding,’ and ‘sliding’ with them—tactile experiences that Taussig (1993) calls mimetic experiences. According to Taussig, mimesis leads us to grasp our corporeal engagement with the image “in sticky webs of copy and contact, image and bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image” (ibid.: 17. Emphasis in the original). This means that what we are seeing is inseparable from what we are sensing and doing; thus, it could be said that entanglements with the material world are primary tactile. The soil looks like rain falling down on their bodies. The feeling of being caught in and exposed to something invisible but still sensible is what many of my informants expressed, and in this situation, it forced them to live with a prolonged sense of catastrophe which has no end. Instead of engaging in a narrative about ‘the end of the world,’ by focusing on life struggles surrounded by sliding soil bags, I ask if there will be “last things before the last” (Kracauer 1995 [1969]); the ability to sense the world on a ‘fragile lifeboat’ (Masco 2010) in turbulent water, soil, and wind.

Lastly, regarding the question of how long the contaminated soil bags should be stored in the area, the soil bags have raised and stimulated different imaginations of the futurity of the nuclear disaster. By engaging with the recent discussion of the Anthropocene, I raise a question regarding the futurity of the disaster as a matter of time that seems to have a ‘shape’ rather than a ‘line’ in my ethnographic context. The long-lived radioactive isotopes, for instance, each have a half-life of the following: Cesium-137 has 30 years; Uranium-235 has over seven hundred million years; Strontium-90 has about 30 years, and Plutonium-239 has 24,100 years. This means not only that they will last long into the future but that they will change the shape of life of the place for centuries. In other words, with the materiality of the soil bags, the time of the disaster is spatialised. How is a certain type of future anticipated and articulated

Aikichi, who was the chief radioman of the boat, died on March 23rd 1954 from underlying cirrhosis of the liver which was compounded by a secondary hepatitis infection. Other crew members similarly suffered from radiation-related illnesses. The incident helped inspire the Japanese monster film Godzilla (1954).
through the materiality of the contaminated soil bags? If the radioactive waste lasts longer than a human’s lifespan, what kind of future will remain in the area? What will remain that is known and unknown?

**a. Life in the dunes**

In the early morning of mid-October 2019, after a series of raging rains and strong winds, the sky finally cleared up, and Shousuke, a carpenter, and his mother-in-law, whose name is Naoko, were trying to fix their garden, which had been devastated by typhoon Hagibis. The typhoon, also known as *Reiwa Gennen Higashi-Nihon Taifū* (“Reiwa first Eastern Japan Typhoon”), was recorded as one of the largest typhoons to have hit the region. It caused widespread destruction across eastern Japan, including the Fukushima area. To make matters worse, a week prior, a 5.7 magnitude earthquake occurred off the coast of Chiba prefecture in-between Fukushima and the Tokyo area. The condition of the ground was worsened by the earthquake, and when the typhoon hit, people in Fukushima kept their eyes on the sky and the breaking news. The typhoon brought severe damage to Fukushima with flooding and landslides. Among the many effects of the typhoon, some contaminated soil bags were swept away, and the level of radiation in the village rose.

Shousuke read a message from other villagers who had been monitoring the level of radiation in the area. According to them, the highest concentration of contaminated soil was found on the road to Odaka in Minamisoma where I conducted my field research. A recent testing of soil from the nearby hills showed a reading of 5,060 Bq. Although high, the amount is lower than the 8,000 Bq threshold that was set by the Japanese government as a permissible level for radioactive waste. However, there was still an ongoing possibility that the level would increase since the rainwater and soil continued to flow from the contaminated soil bags as well as the forests. It also was not possible to test all of the soil in the area. The wet and weakened soil continued to slide and soon spread out around the village. Our attention turned to the storage of the contaminated soil bags, which were often called ‘mountains.’ Local news was constantly reporting on the situation that some contaminated soil bags were missing, and it was not even clear how many bags in fact were lost. “Maybe some wanted this (…) they [the government] might want the bags to be ‘naturally’ gone,” Shousuke mumbled to himself, thinking of the troublesome black bags that nobody wanted to keep and would not simply evaporate into the air.

The soil bags have become ‘hot potatoes’ in a very literal sense and raise questions concerning the time and scale of the disaster. The government and TEPCO have carried out the clean-up plan which involved removing 5cm of topsoil in the contaminated areas in order to make the return of the former villagers possible. The radioactive soil has been filtered through giant sieves, and the bags have been piling up around the area. The government planned that the soil would be moved to an interim storage facility
(kari-okiba) and then by 2045 to a permanent site outside of the Fukushima prefecture as part of the deal with the residents in Fukushima who do not want their hometowns turned into a permanent nuclear dumping ground. However, like hot potatoes, no one wants to touch the bags; there is no single location in Japan that has agreed to accommodate the toxic waste, and thus, people in Fukushima see that the soil bags will remain, untouched, for the next several decades. The black sacks, which one of my interlocutors ironically called ‘one of the best contemporary artworks in our times,’ were wrapped in blue and green waterproof cloth and were perfectly placed in neat rows and tidy stacks. When it rains, the sound of the water on the tarpaulin reverberates all through the empty town. Some big storages were about stadium size, and the bags are omnipresent. When we saw several signs kirisuto wa sukuni kuru (“Christ is coming soon”) that someone left in an abandoned town, I wondered if Christ had taken the shape of the black soil bags. The storage facility mainly straddles the towns of Okuma and Futaba, which remain hard-to-return areas. Still, it’s easy to see the mountains and hills of the black soil bags around the entire prefecture, even nearby residential areas. When the weather turns sunny and dry, I could see the massive cloud of dust from the hundreds of trucks making trips to carry the soil. The villagers often compared the process to peeling off the skin of the earth.

The skin of the earth has become exposed, and as much work as the decontamination efforts have accomplished, natural forces like an earthquakes, heavy rains, and strong winds by typhoons continue to damage the soil. Shousuke and his mother-in-law, Naoko, went out to look around the house and found their garden had been damaged by heavy rains that continued for several days. This was not the first ordeal that the soil in the area had gone through. According to Shousuke and Naoko, the soil had been weaker since the disaster, and the reason for that, as they guessed, is the decontamination work. “Once the soil crumbled and fell into mijin (‘fine dust’), it will take a long time to return to how it was before the disaster.” That's also the reason that some returners organised a group named omusubi (“rice ball”) which emphasizes that people should agglomerate like the soil. The displaced people share the same story as the displaced soil.
How did the disaster pulverise life into chunks and fragments, and to what extent do the people and the soil, humans, and nature share the same (hi)story? In the book, *History: the last things before the last*, Kracauer (1995[1969]) asks how human history, in Husserl’s sense of the term, *Lebendwelt* (“lifeworld”), can avoid both Scylla and Charybdis—philosophical ‘abstraction’ and the natural ‘law’ and the ‘regularity’ of science. To answer the question, Kracauer calls for turning the view to “a conglomerate of particular events, developments, and situations of the human past” (ibid.: 45). Even though natural history and human history often intersect and overlap, still, he argues that “unlike scientist’s natural world, historical reality, this mixture of natural events and relatively free decisions, resists a breakdown into repeatable elements which relate to one another in definitely fixable ways. Nor is the whole of it amenable to (longitudinal) laws” (ibid.: 48). Then Kracauer proceeds with a famous statement from Ranke whose aim as a historian is to show ‘how things are actually were’ in relation to the dimension of the representative arts and Daguerre’s invention of photography. For Krakauer, the connection between natural work and lifework, science and art, and subjects and things, raised a similar question regarding contemporary historiography, objectivity, and particularity as possibly remaining open. In asking what really happened and is being represented, “spontaneity and receptivity seem to be in a state of equilibrium, interpretation so perfectly matching the pertinent data that it neither overwhelms them nor leaves an undigested remainder” (ibid.: 57). Like a photo of trees, which really exist, and yet, at the same time, become a memorable image, (Kracauer asks if this can be called ‘allegory’), what Kracauer calls ‘camera-reality’—the sort of reality that the historian, photographer, and even scientists open their lenses or views onto has “all the earmarks of the *Lebenswelt* [which] comprises inanimate objects, faces, crowds, people who intermingle, suffer, and hope; its grand theme is life in its fullness, life as we commonly experience it” (ibid.: 58).

Back to the world of piles of moving soil bags as a part of the everyday lifeworld, there is no single reality to which the soil bags point. The soil bags constantly change shape as well as meaning to the people. Between the power to break up and the desire to reunite like the soil bags do, the daily life of the returners repeats itself each time differently—nature and the human lifeworld mimic each other. At least for now, the garden is the only place that Naoko still sees as manageable. “Ee, shoboi (“shabby”). What a pity!” Naoko looked at the flattened leaves of the flowers, which looked like they were almost buried and were shivering. While Shousuke and I were shovelling out some torn up soil and making the surface flat, and arranging it neatly, Naoko entered the house and brought out a set of chopsticks to pick up small stones and bricks. Then she started using them to make a border around the flowers. Tiny stones were gathered around the stone wall. She spent an hour cleaning up the garden. After wrapping a cotton cloth around the shoulder of a young monk doll, she seemed to be finally relieved. It took a long time for her to finish the work, and eventually, a sense of relief came over her face. She murmured, “It is a work of nature (…) *shizen ni* (“natural”).”
The garden that Naoko arranged stood in sharp contrast to some of her neighbours. Naoko and some other villagers often complained not only about the contaminated soil and water but also about the overgrown plants and trees from abandoned houses and other places since it does not look *onozukara*, which literally means, “what is so of itself” or regarded as “natural.” The plants in these places were very invasive. Some villagers therefore organised a volunteer group for cutting the plants and trees every Saturday morning. However, Shousuke sees the growth of the plants as evidence of life and thinks that a border should not be drawn between life and non-life. “Everything is alive here (…) growing quickly.” Even *suki* trees (“cedar trees”) grow every day. It is his favourite tree, but he doesn’t use it any more due to the concern of radiation. “In the summer, I feel as if I can hear the sound of the trees growing,” he said while smiling. Unlike the widespread image of nuclear disaster, which is full of mutant, deforming, and barren ecology, the village is, in fact, alive and changing its shape every season and every day. Even the invasive plants that scare Naoko and some other villagers are a symbol of life for others, and for that reason, they oppose the borders and removal of topsoil that have been made in the village to ‘protect’ humans. The ideas of containment, protection, and the growing and spreading risk give rise to a further question regarding how the boundary between humans and nature can be drawn. How do people deal with the changing and challenging environment and the presence of life? In conversation with Naoko, I thought that the invasive plants and trees are much more ‘natural’ than the wrapped garden. When it comes to the issue of protection, it has often been controversial: what do they try to protect and from what? To what extent do humans and nature share the same substance.
and journey? Why do people see their ‘uprooted’ life in the wounded soil, and despite the similarities, why is making a boundary so important?

Raymond Williams (1988 [1976]: 184) addressed decades ago that nature might well be the most complicated concept that exists in modern English. According to Williams, the term has three different meanings: the essential quality and character of something; the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; and the material world itself, taken as including or not, human beings (i.e., that which is not ‘culture’). In terms of the Japanese perception of nature, the idea of nature has likewise been one of the most complicated concepts. Addressing the difficulty of defining what ‘nature’ is in the Japanese historical context, Thomas begins the book, Reconfiguring Modernity: concepts of nature in Japanese political ideology, with a question asking what nature is since “despite our instinctive respect for nature's power, we rarely define what we mean by nature” (2001:1). Thomas then asks how nature changes in the matrix within the political possibilities of modernity, and in so doing, nature takes on a larger “politics of vision” (Wolin 1960, cited in Thomas 2001: 4). The politics of vision indicates the fundamental ordering of meaning and power that situates individuals, communities, and their environment and how they relate to each other. By examining the history of the vocabulary referring to nature across discursive categories, Thomas shows how nature is a discontinuous field, and “it remains the same neither across the disciplines nor through time” (ibid.). There has been a continual transformation in vocabulary, emphasis, relations to other concepts, and references to the physical, psychological, and social worlds as it pertains to political thought. This means that beyond the institutionalised understanding of power relations, what it means to be nature and culture, human and non-human, in fact, prescribes the ways in which all specific forms of existence, whether humans or others, are governed (cf. Povinelli 2016). Thomas also emphasises that the understanding of nature is a matter of freedom, and “in our understanding of nature we indicate what we can hope to change in ourselves, our situation, and the course of events” (2001: 2). In this regard, the trajectory of the nation’s sense of nature bespeaks Japan’s collective and individual possibilities.

As some other research also suggests (Nakamura 1976; Lee 1984; Kalland 1995; 2002; Kalland and Pamela 1997; Martinez 2005), the nature and culture boundary in Japan is arbitrary, and it often overlaps with so-called reductionism, which is manifested in several ways. There is no continuous concept of nature, but rather it has always been challenged, managed, and has stimulated certain fears concerning ‘leaking’ and ‘flowing.’ Efforts to represent ‘natural’ forms through ‘artificial’ manipulation of ‘natural’ materials may be seen in miniature forms such as gardening, ikebana (flower arrangement), bonsai (dwarfed tree), and mikiri (cut-the-view technique) which have long reflected a Japanese aesthetics of nature. Colligan-Taylor (1990) explores how Japanese people perceive conventionalised rather than empirical nature and how the awareness of nature has been evinced as the aesthetic fusion of nature, religion, and art. However, the specific way of taming nature coexists with the fear of wild and ghostly
matter (Ivy 1995), which never disappears but constantly haunts. As seen above, when the returners realised that it is not possible to maintain a specific frame of nature and the strategy of aestheticisation (cf. Chapter one), how does this change what they call nature? In dealing with the fear and anxiety of the unsettling surrounding, people in the village used the ‘artificial’ manipulation of ‘natural’ materials to mitigate the threats.

b. Accumulating the future

Since the disaster, life has swayed between containment and displacement, and the disaster has challenged ‘proper’ borders and relations between life and non-life. Back to the contaminated soil bags, there is a question regarding whether they are soil or waste which problematises the boundary between life and non-life. “Why don’t they count the worms and the seeds in the soil?” Responding to an online post that described the bags as waste, Shousuke and other local farmers made a short remonstrance. According to their understanding of soil, the bags will burst someday because they are organic, and it is not possible for humans to be separated from their geological surroundings. Emphasising different forms of existence among indigenous Australians within a settler state, Povinelli (2016) suggests the terms ‘geontological’ power or ‘geontology’ refuse the division between humans and non-humans, and/or, life and non-life. For Povinelli, those types of division are key to maintaining an allegiance to the concept of biopower which hides and reveals other problematics. If power, including sovereign, disciplinary, and biopower, works “insofar as man is a living being” (ibid.:8-9), Povinelli asks, how can we extend the power of the contemporary state that makes life, lets die, and kills, to “the form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife- namely extinction of humans, biological life, and, as it is often put, the planet itself- which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, a time of the geos, of soullessness?” (ibid.). According to Povinelli, there is a distinction between life and non-life that makes a difference; she writes, “the anthropos remains an element in the set if life only insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from “Death/Extinction and Nonlife” (ibid.:9 emphasis in the original). Furthermore, she continues, “It is certainly the case that the statement ‘clearly, x humans are more important than y rocks’ continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse” (ibid.). For Povinelli, the term ‘geontology’ comprises a wider dynamic as a mode of late liberal governance including the basis for forms of existence to stay in place or alter the place which require condensation, manifestation, and endurance.

Rather than describing the operation of biopower or ‘geontopower,’ what Povinelli focuses on is not simply “the conceptual consequence of a new Geological Age of the Human, namely the Anthropocene and climate change,” but rather, the way in which “specific discourses of and affects accumulating around a specific event-form- the big bang, the new, the extraordinary that breaks time and space, creating Here and Now, There and Then- deflect liberal ethics and politics away from forms of harm more grudging and corrosive” (ibid.: 21). Through ethnographic work in Australia among the Karrabing
who are struggling for a politics of recognition and resistance against the mining industry and toxic sovereignty, Povinelli shows how the strategies of her Karrabing colleagues provide for an analysis of geontopower on the ground. The four principals of ‘a sort of dirty manifesto’ are worth considering here in order to establish a connection from Karrabing to Fukushima.

1. Things exist through an effort of mutual attention. This effort is not in the mid but in the activity of endurance.

2. Things are not neither born nor die, though they can turn away from each other and change state.

3. In running away from each other, entities withdraw care for each other. This the earth is not dying. But the earth may be turning away from certain forms of existence. In this way of thinking the Desert is not that in which life does not exist. A Desert is where a series of entities have withdrawn care for the kinds of entities humans are and thus has made humans into another form of existence: bone, mummy, ash, soil.

4. We must de-dramatise human life as we squarely take responsibility for what we are doing. This simultaneous de-dramatisation and responsibilisation may allow for opening new questions. Rather than Life and Nonlife, we will ask what formations we are keeping in existence or extinguishing? (Povinelli ibid.: 28)

Regarding the contaminated soil bags, the last question particularly grabs my attention. By engaging with the idea of geontology and geontopower as the politics of forms working through formation, transformation, and deformation, I ask: how does the form of life and non-life respond to a form of a social and geological happening, namely, the slowly dispersed accumulations of toxicity after the nuclear disaster? What has remained and changed in relations between objects and subjects, agency and passiveness, organic and inorganic, and forms of life and non-life?

The response to the nuclear disaster made by the government and TEPCO contrasts the human actors to other biological, meteorological, and geological actors; all decisions have been made on the surface making the distinction between human and non-humans: firstly, people who have been evacuated. The debris from the disaster was cleaned up. Then topsoil and trees were removed. Once everything was replaced, it was then time to wait for relocation to the ‘right place.’ However, people know that life needs to be rooted in-depth, and the damage is not limited to 5cm from the surface; the fear and anxiety do not stay only on the surface. The internal exposure from food, water, etc. is what the people are most worried about. “Things are staying with us.” Shousuke sees his scar on the surface of wounded soil and his loss of the future in the cut-off tree stumps. And, if there is no root, how can people imagine the future of their life and village? Shousuke, his wife, and his mother-in-law came back to the village, whereas his daughter did not. The daughter, who is in her mid-20s, refused to return because she wanted to find a place to settle down. Those who want to ‘return’ backwards and ‘move’ forward have crossed each other. “They [the government, media, and TEPCO] always talk about fūkko (‘resilience’) again
and again.”

Miho, one of my interlocutors, continued, “(...) Does that mean that something was destroyed and is going back to how it was before?” She seemed to point to issues concerning why everyone only talks about the past and return (*kison*).

“I can't imagine how life is moving on.” In the evening, after we finished cleaning the garden, Shousuke and I were watching the local news about the missing soil bags. If the rain continues, the boundary that Naoko and Shousuke made will disappear. They can imagine that tomorrow will deposit the past in several different places. The mountain of contaminated soil bags was already crumbling. “Where are the bags?” When I asked, Shousuke made a joke, “The bags might have legs!” He thinks that containing soil in a certain place is total nonsense due to the nature of the soil. It moves, flows, and weathers. “I have watched a film which is full of sand (...) It's like that.”

Several decades ago, Abe Kobo focused on the endless human struggle with shifting sands in the 1962 novel *Sunna no Onna* (“Sand Woman,” the English translation’s title is *The Woman in the Dunes*). Shousuke remembered a film version of the book. It’s the story of Niki Jumpei, a schoolteacher from Tokyo, who visits a fishing village to collect insects. After missing the last bus, he meets some villagers, and they lead him to a house in the dunes that can be reached only by rope ladder. The following day, he finds the ladder has gone, and his struggle in the sliding sand begins. Whether reading the novel as existentialist or an allegorical of imprisonment and subjugation (Marroum 2007), the sand takes a key role as both a living organism and an inorganic substance throughout the entire story. It changes its shape each day and draws unique patterns that are temporary and porous. The sand looks alive, and, at the same time, looks like nothing; it hides and kills life.

A particle of crushed rock of such dimension as to be easily moved by a fluid. Because wind and water currents flow over the land, the formation of sand is unavoidable. As long as the wind blew, the rivers flowed, and the seas stirred, and would be born grain and grain from the earth, and like a living being, it would creep everywhere. The sands never rested. Gently but surely, they invaded and destroyed the surface of the earth. (...) The barrenness of sand (...) was due to the ceaseless movement that made it inhospitable to all living things (Kobo 2006 [1964]: 14).

Shousuke flashbucked to the scene of the film from his younger days. His life has never been easy in retrospect, but there were ups and downs along the way. A man who hides his white-greyish hair under

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28 Masco (2017: 73) argues that “precarity and resilience are the twin logics of a neoliberal order that abandons populations in pursuit of profit and then seeks to naturalize those abandonments as the only possible course of action (see Evans and Reid 2014). Put directly, crisis talk without the commitment to revolution becomes counterrevolutionary.”
a baseball cap was not expecting the future of his town to be in dunes. “Many young people took a train to Tokyo.” He remembered once upon a time when everything was flourishing. Growing up around the Fukushima prefecture and having spent the first half of his life in big cities such as Tokyo and Nagoya during the baburu keiki (“bubble economy”) of the late 1980s and early 1990s, he has known how life fluctuates. Jōbanosen (“Jōban line”) between Miyagi and Tokyo were once full of workers going to the Iwaki coal mine and to Tokyo, among other places. He was not sure where he bought a videotape of Sunna no Onna; “It was probably somewhere around Jimbochō(...) I thought the film was so weird.” He began to sense the feeling of Jumpei who was mired. Now, as he feels that life keeps “piling wreckage upon wreckage” (Benjamin 2019; 1968 [1940]), he often thinks about the past with the ‘otherwise’ clause: if he had not returned to his hometown; if he had stayed somewhere else, if not (...) otherwise.

However, the time of flourishing was short and tracing the nuclear powerplant back to its origin extended history further. The Jōban line, full of miners to Jōban coal mine in Iwaki, Fukushima, was the largest coal mine in Japan and flourished throughout the 1940s and 1950s, but it has declined more recently due to the change of energy policies from coal to oil and later to nuclear. The first reactor of the Fukushima nuclear powerplant was constructed in 1967 and commissioned in 1971 by GE (General Electric). Instead of the dusty and dark caves of the coal mine, the area was renewed as kenpatsu mura (“nuclear village”) with the motto ‘safe, cheap and reliable future energy’ (Kingston 2012). The image of the nuclear powerplant represented “the expectation of modernity” (Ferguson 1999) through the corporate and national project for development. The powerplant seemed to bring prosperity to the town, and people thought that the young people would not have to take a train to Tokyo to find a job anymore. Now, Shousuke looks back at the time, full of hope and energy, thinking how some moments bear the future. “What went wrong?” (Roitman 2013; 2016)—he often asks himself in the midst of the crisis. In his temporary house in Iwaki, what Shousuke did to spend most ‘empty’ time was think about the past, the past that predicted his riddling present.

What the nuclear power plant has led the villagers to think of is not futurity but the past. The question, “What was wrong in the past?” is directed toward a past that seemed to be forgotten but has always

29 Kanda-Jimbôchô, also known as Jimbôchô or Jinbôchô, is a district of Chiyoda, Tokyo, which is famous for many used bookstores and book publishers.

30 The film Fura gâru (“hula girls”) in 2006 directed by Sangil Lee who is a Jainich Korean is based on the story of the small coal mine town in Iwaki and how people tried to re-flourish the town with the formation of Joban Hawaiian Centre (also known as Spa Resort Hawaiians). With the closing of the mine, many people in the town became jobless and the film focuses on how a group of girls take on hula dancing to save their town. Since the 2011 disaster, the Spa Resort Hawaiians has become once again a symbol of recovery of Fukushima Prefecture. When I visited the resort in 2015, the place was full of family tourists mainly from Tokyo area as they provide free transportation despite ongoing concerns of radiation in the area.
been underground. The crisis recalls the past as an underlying structure and the future as an intensification of the attunement to an immanent present (Haraway 2016). The time of disaster does not simply flow from the past to the future. Instead, it accumulates and remains underneath. The scene which Shousuke described from the film reminded me of a stratum that I saw in the Hiroshima peace museum, which spatialised time through the debris of the disaster. At the entrance of the museum, there was an exhibition of materials from sites that were devastated by the atomic bomb. While walking around the burned clothes, school bags, and fading shoes, it was a miniature of the stratum that caught my eyes. The stratum was found by Ishimaru Norioki and shows a clear contrast before and after the bombing. The solid Seikatsu chisō (“livelihood strata”) from Edo, Showa, and Meiji period suddenly changed to Hibaku chisō (“exposed strata”), and the layer of the stratum of sedimentation after the atomic bomb consisted of debris which certainly marked the time of the disaster.

The disaster made a division between seikatsu sekai (“everyday life-world”) and saigai no sekai (“disaster world”). What Shousuke sees is how their time will be remembered as the latter. However, at the same time, they believe that something needs to be done in order to change the future of the village: cleaning-up the contaminated soil, making boundaries, and cutting the overgrown trees and plants. “We are waiting for the future even if that's not for us (...) Someday and sometime people might come back here.” Shousuke and other villagers used to say that they live in-between time. The present is kako to Mirai no ma no jikan (“the time between the past and the future”) in which hope and fear, anxiety and dream, are intertwined. He has been frustrated and has thought that he cannot hope for any future in the town; the disaster means the end. However, on the other hand, there is something still alive, potentially better. The catastrophe should be permanently postponed as long as there is a possibility of life. Masco points out that in the dialectic of futurity, “crisis and utopia have structured the modernist Euro-American project of social engineering, constituting a future caught between a narrative of collapse and one of constant improvement” (2017: S65). Is hope what makes people come back to their devastated hometown? The term Nozomi (“hope”) is everywhere in the village and is even used for the name of a temporary housing complex as well as a bus station. While people might need hope, nobody
is, in fact, sure of its existence. If Shousuke is asked whether he has hope, I guess the answer might be “don’t know.” However, there is an ‘open future’ as long as soredemo ikiyoku (“nevertheless keep living”) and izure (“someday”) other villagers who left their hometown would like to return. For Shousuke, the future means something constantly shifting, sliding, and open to uncertainty. If so, what does that mean for the future? Is it waiting for them, or is it in the making?

c. A Lump of Time: the last things before the last

Nuclear disaster and its ongoing aftermath often provoke the imagination of catastrophe. From radiation in Chernobyl, still festering under a concrete dome, to Onkalo, a nuclear fuel repository in Finland whose name literally means “small cave” or “cavity” (Lalenti 2020), the time-span of atomic fallout and fuel often stimulate the long-lasting futurity of crisis that has yet to be actualised. Rather than open and multiple possible futures, the materiality of nuclear things triggers end-of-world narratives which are already made; the nuclear technology that once brought short-term prosperity no longer delivers a bright future. As Chakrabarty (2009) observes, the idea of catastrophic futurity embedded in the narrative of the current planetary crisis menaces our historical sensitivity based on the assumption that the past, present, and the future are connected by a certain continuity of human agency. The narrative of global warming, nuclear war, and toxicity effectively delivers a message that if things continue along the same lines, it will threaten the existence of human beings. The planetary crisis narrative elicits the imagination of human/life extinction. Weismann’s best-selling book, The World Without Us, illustrates this point:

Suppose that the worst happened. Human extinction is a fait accompli (…) Picture a world from which we all suddenly vanished (…) Might we have left some faint, enduring mark on the universe? (…) Is it possible that, instead of having a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us? (Weismann 2008: 3-5).

31 https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20151210/p2a/00m/0na/020000c
As has been seen in the case of Chernobyl, the futurity of nuclear disaster has often been accompanied by the image of the absence of human beings. In places where humanity has been eradicated, ghost towns with tangled growths of wild grass, roaming wild animals, and worn-out things paradoxically show the flourishing of nature in the absence of human existence and control. The visualisation of post-disaster places like Chernobyl or Fukushima follow a similar plot: the extinction of human life in the area and the eerie fluoresce of nuclear materials. However, in the case of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the post-disaster life is quite different from the typical pattern just described. The disaster has not brought the end to human existence in the area, and this means that life in the area is inseparably intertwined with risk, anxiety, and uncertainty. The possible future is that “things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (Benjamin 2001[1982]: 473 N 9a,1). This is the idea that the disastrous present will ceaselessly shape the future rather than imagining possible differences. In other words, the catastrophic futurity imagined is not “the world without us” (Weismann 2008) but rather “us staying with troubles” (cf. Haraway 2016).

The futurity shaped by soil bags challenges the familiar narrative of the so-called Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene was popularised by an atmospheric chemist named Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s to express the concern that the human species has become a geological force that is threatening tremendous upheavals in the Earth (Clark 2014; Clark and Yusoff 2017; Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Weszkalnys 2014). The concept of the Anthropocene has recently expanded beyond geological conditions at the planetary scale to other human impacts on the earth in response to the emergence of climate change science and to Cold War concerns about the circulation of radionuclides as fallout from atmospheric nuclear tests (Masco 2010). The capacity to imagine and perceive the concept of the global (Tsing 2005), such as mass extinction, the depositing of nuclear and chemical waste, and the large-scale geomorphic transformation of the earth’s surface, requires political and scientific work that goes beyond the nature and culture dichotomy. The irony of the Anthropocene is that although it marks human existence as the determinate form of planetary existence, at some point, the biological, geological, and meteorological forms and forces begin to overwhelm human existence. From the Industrial Revolution to the detonation of atomic bombs, the Anthropocene changes the relation between human and non-human/nature and accelerates ‘end-of-the-world’ narratives, “the moments at which historical and natural process coalesce,” which Kracauer calls the “unthinkable negative counterpart of eternity” (1969: 141).

In the case of Fukushima, each of the elements goes beyond human’s lifespan, and the fragility of the life produces the possibility for a different anticipation of possible futurity. There are people who do not cast a glance at the contaminated bags because they hinder the imagination of multiple possible worlds. However, the futurity attached to the contaminated bags are not merely experienced as a “shared
sense of catastrophe” (Chakrabarty 2009: 222). “If they stay up here forever, Fukushima can’t expect a better future.” In a meeting held in the town hall, one villager spoke out in an exceptionally emphatic tone of voice, “The bags must be sent to other parts of Japan!” The disaster has created a national narrative of a ‘suffering Japan,’ but the remnant of the disaster has not been distributed evenly. How long and where will the radioactive material be stored? If the contaminated soil bags or nuclear fuel were stored deep underground, who will find and inherit the legacy of the past disaster? What kind of futurity is attached to the materiality of the disposal, and where do the contaminated soil bags in Fukushima fit in the narrative of the Anthropocene? Whereas the Anthropocene has been anchored in the imagination of impending catastrophe and the extinction of human beings, what Fukushima shows is that catastrophe is not the end-of-time but the time after the end (Agamben 2000). And, importantly, the end of days has not yet reached that end. This paradoxically provides a chance to examine the history of human beings as a species and as a dominant actor refracted in the rule of global capitalism and colonialism. As ‘the things before the last,’ what the soil bags suggest is a life that embraces immanent catastrophe, yet still holds an opening for “transformative becoming” (Benjamin 1992: 570).

Usual practices of visualising time and space have been thrown into deep contradiction and confusion. If the Anthropocene indicates further and deeper space and time beyond human existence, how can anthropology engage with it? How deep is the anthropological view of time? The geological timescale of the Anthropocene has coalesced specific historical moments and local happenings and has connected them to a bigger global picture. The topics that anthropologists have investigated for a long time, such as socio-environmental conflicts around natural resources, territory, environmental justice, and non-Western ontologies, mostly remain at regional and national scales. The Anthropocene, in contrast, calls for more attention to the langue durée and to the global scale (Mathews 2020; Tsing et al. 2019). The prominent role of humans in accelerating geologic, atmospheric, and geomorphological changes needs to be considered in ‘writing culture in the Anthropocene’ (Kirlsey and Helmreich 2010: 548). However, the debates rage about the origin and nomenclature of the Anthropocene. How have chronology and temporality been treated as objects of ethnographic inquiry? (Irvine 2014). How far back in time do we need to go, and at what planetary or cosmic scale? When did the Anthropocene begin? The start of European industrialisation in the eighteenth century? Or, on the 16th of July 1945, the date of the first nuclear weapons test at Alamogordo in New Mexico? among other possible beginnings (Lewis and Maslin 2015; Monastersky 2015; Zalasiewicz et al. 2015).

In this regard, Masco (2020) suggests the political and historical attributes that are attached to the imagination of the planetary. According to Masco, being able to think of the planetary is a recent phenomenon that has specific roots; that is, nuclear-age militarism during the Cold War and related forms of twentieth-century knowledge production as well as the proliferation of visualisation technologies. Masco writes, “Proliferating forms of globality—including the specific visualisation of
science, finance, militarism, and the environment—each achieves ultimate scale and are unified at the level of the planetary, which raises an important question about how collective (in)security problems can, and should, be imagined” (ibid.:18). He names this as “the Age of Fallout” to draw attention to the merging forms of violence across the globe while challenging the temporal logics of politics and forms of governance. In short, the Age of Fallout shows “a way of recasting historical categories and periodisation to recognise the future-oriented planetary environmental consequences of historical and ongoing industrial activity” (ibid.).

For those versed in the history of colonialism and capitalism, seeing the world on a planetary scale is inseparable from a specific form of power and knowledge production that is related to modernity. Chakrabarty (2009), for instance, argues that modern social science emerged during the bubble of fossil fuel-powered imperialism from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century and reads the Anthropocene as a story of modernist rupture. Mathews (2020) also suggests that similar historical and theoretical traces of the Anthropocene can be found in earlier work on the anthropology of capitalism, empire, racism, and settler colonialism. In this account, relatively recent activities such as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, are inseparable from the transformation of the ecosystem (Mintz 1985; Wolf 1982). Moreover, the industrialisation process in the West and the increasingly powerful effects of secularisation (Asad 1993), including modern state-craft and scientific knowledge production, drove the ever-increasing scale and intensity of human impacts on ecosystems around the world. In this regard, the Anthropocene is situated within the discourse of modernity that aims to control and exploit nature (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1972]).

The soils bags are a place where the time and space of the disaster have converged in a feeling of *déjà vu*, mainly in the apocalyptic vision of “the circle of capital” (Slater 2011; 2021). There is an overwhelming feeling that the future will not take shape as it was meant to and that the crisis has become a constant, perpetual way of being. The local history from the coal mine to the nuclear powerplant shows how being in crisis is mobilised by state and corporate interests as a form of governance and how they narrowed the collective political horizon. The collective imagination of the future, what Masco (2017: 75) calls, “endless modes of precarity,” is fracturing the hope and affection that the returners wish to maintain. From the Atomic bombs and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster to Minamata disease, Shousuke and other villagers experienced some ‘visitors’ from the past. They received letters and photos from the former villagers around Chernobyl, Hibakusha, and the Minamata victims which expressed their support and solidarity. A lawsuit filed by Morimatsu, who is a former villager of Koriyama, Fukushima, and signed by 240 other former residents in 2013 against TEPCO and the government, is still ongoing. The suffering created a connection between the past and the present and shows that the ‘state of emergency’ in which they live is not the exception but the rule (Benjamin 1940). This status of eternal emergency is reminiscent of the idea of Japan as a “toxic archipelago” (Walker
Considering the history of the victims of industrial disease and environmental pollution, the nuclear disaster in 2011 does not seem to mark any exception, but rather, they have become subversive symbols of Japan’s “everlasting enslavement to nature.” Walker writes, “Because the victims of industrial disease and environmental pollution lived and died in the shadows of the case by such modern edifices as petrochemical refineries, they become more subversive: antimodern ghosts shrieking from the modern industrial landscape. Their cries tell us that true modernity, for all its lofty promise, is a cruel fantasy” (ibid.).

The name Fukushima is called out by other victims as well. Shousuke, who lived in Kyusū for a while, remembers Minamata\(^{32}\) in the 1950s and how the bodies of the victims and their suffering have been politically charged and easily forgotten. “I haven’t even thought about them until I received the letters.” A ninety-five-year-old hibakusha woman sent them a pack of dried seaweed since it contains iodine to combat radiation. A group of Minamata victims were planning to have a media conference on the night when TEPCO and the government said they will release diluted contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean. The victims of Minamata had a press conference to express their concern for the contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear powerplant. Shousuke and other villagers had to realise they are on the same side. One victim on the screen said, “In the case of Minamata, the Chisso company also said that it’s safe enough as the mercury is diluted with water. They [the government and TEPCO] say the same lie now about the contaminated water and the soil from Fukushima!” Listening to the decisive voice evidenced by their own life and body with long-lasting suffering, Shousuke could not believe that the Minamata victims were talking about his life, family, and home. The past had come back and tried to take his life. The past returned, or rather, never disappeared, and for Shousuke, history, like the sliding soil, constantly haunts and spoils life.

History failed them, but why does it matter? As much as the past becomes intrusively present, there is also a desire to move forward. The wish and the complaint are often expressed in the most private spaces. While watching the news together on TV in Kokone’s living room, where we spent many evenings since there is no pub or restaurant in the village at night, some people showed signs that they wanted to go to bed. Before going to bed on cold and rainy days, the bathtub in Kokone’s Ryokan offered a perfect shelter for frozen nerves. A small-sized bathtub, it was tight for three people, and hot.

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\(^{32}\) Minamata disease, also known as Chisso-Minamata disease, is a neurological disease caused by mercury poisoning. The disease was first discovered in the city of Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan, in 1956 which was caused by the release of mercury into industrial wastewater from a chemical factory owned by Chisso Corporation that flowed into Minamata Bay. Despite the fact that the disease had been recognised several decades ago, the legal struggle for compensation continued until 2010. Along with Itai-itai disease, Niigata Minamata disease, and Yokkaichi Asthma, Chisso Minamata disease is regarded as one of the main environmental diseases in Japanese industrial history and, with a legal and political struggle by the victims and their supporters, is exemplary of the great changes in the post-war decades that redefined activism in Japan (cf. George 2001; Keibo 2001; Kuwabara 1965; 1970).
water was incessantly spouting from both sides. We were all submerged. The bathtub in Kokone’s Ryokan was one of the rare places where I was able to talk to the villagers. The former villagers used to visit there sometimes, and instead of staying in their former homes, which had been abandoned for a long time, they spent nights in Kokone’s Ryokan which provided a room and food. Sitting on towels, two women in the bathtub talked about their current life and how the disaster became the past for them. “I can’t only think about the past,” because “I have a life now” (...) “Why does everyone seem to talk about the past?” When one woman who recently graduated high school asked this question, everyone in the bathtub responded in silence. Both narratives, the catastrophic and the optimistic versions of recovery, mean the same for many villagers who are asking the question “Where is the end? (...)” What made them feel better was a field of brassica flowers on the recently decontaminated soil that another villager, Miho, had planted. The beauty covered the ruins—this seems to be the only way to reach a possible future; by covering the past and letting it go further down.

After a long bath and small talk, we drank some cold Kirin beer with snacks that Kokone had prepared. With the beer, I walked to the living room, following the long and dark corridor on the first floor. The snacks and other foodstuffs were set in the corridor: tomatoes and iceberg lettuce for breakfast in the morning, some spring onions and carrots for miso soup, and strawberries and oranges for dessert. And, at the end of the corridor, there were photos and maps. A strange thing on the wall was, however, not the photos and maps, but the way Kokone arranged them. At the bottom of the wall, there were old photos of the village, and then, after the disaster, a letter and a flag from Chernobyl. The flag and the letters were written in Ukrainian and were covered by a poster from the government and TEPCO, emphasising resilience and the safety of the food in the area. And, finally, on the top of the wall, Kokone put the most recent map with blue dots indicating that the area is clean and thus safe. Like a stratum, Kokone piled images upon images on the wall. “Why did you put photos on top of photos?” I asked, and Kokone responded, “Well, maybe not enough space for the photos (...)?” However, there were several empty walls in the Ryokan to put everything on. Kokone did not remove the messages from Chernobyl but hid them with other images like Miho did with the flowers. As they go to the top, the time of the disaster becomes a stratum, a time long ago, in the past, and deep in the ground. If not for concealment, might she have piled up time?

d. Out of place: the seekers and the hiders

On Saturday morning in early summer 2019, I was in a community café in Odaka with Shousuke, Misaki, and a couple other villagers. As usual, they wanted to tell me something good about the village. Misaki, who was excited about her recent project for managing the abandoned houses in the village, showed me a photo album that she just received from another villager and told me about the silk factory near the elementary school. “Fukushima was famous for silk manufacturing (...) look at this photo.” I
recognized the building which has many cleft pieces of concrete and crevices in the walls. The rusted iron gate was guarded by a painting on the wall of two horses and some sunflowers probably in an attempt to hide the traces of time. Mori, the owner of the café, wanted to jump into the conversation and asked why I am staying in Fukushima. Before I could answer the question, she started talking about her experience with one researcher who she also thought might be a tourist. The reason Mori guesses the woman was a *kenkyusha* (“researcher”) was that she was always searching for something. When Mori and some other villagers asked what she was doing, ‘the researcher’ answered in a ‘foreign’ Japanese accent that she is doing some research on the forests and the trees since she loves Japanese animation. “Do you know Miyazaki’s animation *Tonari no Totoro* (“My neighbour Totoro”)? She [the researcher] said that the forest in Fukushima looks very similar to the forest in the film (...) She was always walking around the forest to find hidden spots and taking photos.”

I am not exactly sure what the researcher was doing in the forest. However, it is not so hard to imagine since there is a group of people who fancy themselves as ‘the researchers’ or ‘the seekers,’ possibly including myself. The nuclear disaster changed this small rural village into a ‘hot spot,’ a destination for dark tourism and/or dark research. Since the Netflix series, *Dark Tourist*, which was made by a journalist from New Zealand named David Farrier, was released in 2018, the mayor of the town told me that the number of visitors nearly doubled compared to the previous year. The series includes many ‘dark’ sites around the world where the traces of war, crime, and violence remain. With stereotypical horror film techniques, the documentary has grasped the attention of many people who are attracted to the ‘uncanny.’

I remember my first arrival to the town. Kiko, one of my early interlocutors, asked me whether or not I came to the village influenced by the documentary. The attention and increasing number of visitors is not what most villagers want; in fact, I heard several angry voices and comments about the documentary and the seekers. “They made fun of our life and Fukushima,” and “showed exaggerated fear and misery.” The local authority even considered suing the director. Later, I watched the documentary, and I could see what made the villagers feel uncomfortable. The first half of the documentary consists of following a local bus tour with a Japanese guide to some areas open to the visitors. However, instead of following the narrative of the tour guide, the government, and local organisers who want to confirm the safety of the area, there are scenes that show extremely high levels of radiation on Geiger counters—higher than expected and what is deemed to be safe levels; the documentary does not show where the exact locations are. While they were eating food in a local restaurant, Farrier expressed concerns about the food which he then rejected. Also, Farrier left the group to enter a restricted area to show the eerie scene of abandoned towns in order to satisfy the desires of the ‘dark tourism’ consumers. The documentary then related the story to other parts of Japan. For instance, it showed Aokigabara, a forest in the north-western area of Mt. Fuji, which is locally known as *jukai* (‘sea of trees’); it is regarded as a suicide forest since
it is a common area to commit suicide. The documentary also featured Hashima Island, which was the place of a coal mine during WWII that is notorious for forced labour and now is an industrial wasteland.

Many villagers commented on the documentary: “Yoshino-san, who served food to the tourists in the documentary cried when she watched it (…) She wanted to show that the food was safe enough to eat, but the documentary showed the exact opposite.” “They see what they want” (…) They show what people want to see.” In the documentary, Fukushima seemed a perfect successor to a genealogy of uncanny death and violence narratives. The seekers and researchers, who want to see dark places, deep and forgotten, are something that the villagers simultaneously welcome and unwelcome. Neither being forgotten nor being framed in a certain way is what the villagers want. When they responded to the question, “How is life in the area?”, they said that their words would be published with sensational titles such as ‘Fukushima radioactive mutant,’ or ‘The catastrophe is real.’ That is why many of them rejected to talk to the media, researchers, and gaijin (“outsiders” or “strangers”). Misaki added that she had recently found through an online search that there was an artist who had buried a couple of papers underground in the town of Futaba and later dug them up; the faded and dyed papers were later exhibited with the title, The Colour of Radiation.33 Everybody laughed. The ambitious seeker who believed that he could find the truth of radiation underneath the soil was mocked by the villagers. When I asked Shousuke, “Why do people like stories with a dark ending?” he answered, “because they think it’s not their own.”

After this ‘dark conversation,’ there was a brief silence, and when we were just about to change the topic to the chair that Shousuke recently made using a 3D printer, which he was very proud of, a policeman came into the café. Taking a seat with a cup of café latte, he started talking about the reason for his visit. Someone called the police station to report a suspicious bag. The bag was seen between Odaka and Momouchi, at the crossroads of the town. The person who called was not sure why the bag was there, but certainly, it looked ‘out of place’ (Douglas 1966). The police officer was waiting for a response from the town hall’s environmental management department regarding what to do about the suspicious bag—a bag that had become a suspect. “Why did they call the police in the first place?” I was curious why the bag was treated like a criminal. (…) “Well, the person thought that it could be dangerous.” About thirty minutes later, when the police officer received a phone call and heard that the department of environmental management would remove the bag, Shousuke asked me if I wanted to

33 Misaki doesn’t remember the name of the artist. However, I could see several works using a similar method. One of the famous works was done by Kawakubo Yō, for instance, who visited Fukushima and buried silver halide films in the evacuation zone. Citing the words of Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project in the US, Kawakubo titled his work, “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the skies.” The online version of the work is available at the following website: https://www.yoikawakubo.com/thousand-suns. Also, while talking about the visual representation of the nuclear disaster, I shared some images with the villagers from Nishimura and Havinga’s (2015) work.
see how they work. In a small Suzuki white truck that Shousuke uses for work, we found the ‘criminal scene,’ ‘the devil’ at the crossroads. Like a stolen good that a thief negligently dropped, or a typical trash bag set out for collection, the black bag was the focus of the scene. Feeling removed from Shousuke and other villagers who might not want to take a photo of the bag, and possibly a ‘dark tourist’ myself, I pressed the shutter on my camera as if I was a witness to the crime.

Did the bag contain radioactive material? The officer said they will not know until it is passes through the inspection process. For now, the bag was removed from the crossroads but not from Fukushima. In the Fukushima prefecture, there are 105,000 temporary storage sites for contaminated soil, and the bag, after filtering, would be piled up somewhere in one of the nearby storage sites. Access to the sites is limited, and the hidden things attract the seekers. By taking photos, walking around the villages, picking up plants and leaves, and using Geiger counters, maps, and numbers, many people are trying to find the substantial materiality of radiation and the disaster. All the activities converge on the question, “Where is the radiation?”

Despite my enthusiasm, Shousuke seemed not to be excited about the trash bag. In the truck on my way back to the village, I was looking at the photo of the bag that I had just taken, and Shousuke, in the driver’s seat, asked me what I was looking at, or, probably, looking for. “I stopped trying to understand what the numbers mean,” he said. Shousuke used to check radiation measurements in the town almost every day and even used a portable Geiger counter himself during the first year of return. He does not do that anymore. And he does not check the local news obsessively because “radiation is everywhere. There is no need to search for it.” The problem here is not the invisibility of radiation, but rather, its hyper-visibility and its materiality; radiation imbibes every moment and step of their life. There is no single moment to erase the existence of catastrophe. “We felt suffocated by numbers.” Shousuke, who did not even know what mSv means, expressed a feeling of frustration as he turned up the volume of the radio which was playing light and summery music. Summer will remain here, and the bags will keep sliding. I looked at his old flip-phone. “Is that why you didn’t take a photo [of the bag]? To my murmur, he answered, “I just don’t want to have it in my house.”
Even the images of soil bags and the numbers of radiation levels provoke corporeal reactions. The only possible way to avoid it is to create distances to breathe. The way that people deal with the bags sometimes appears like simple concealment. It was not yet possible to make the bags wholly invisible, but at least people try to minimise the encounter, just moving them from one site to another. Contra the temporary visitors and seekers, for those who returned to the village, the suspicious black bag, betwixt and between, is neither a joyful encounter nor a vibrant and lively matter (cf. Bennett 2010) which inspires imagination. The mutual porosity which the bag brought about, what Ingold (2011) expresses as ‘flows of materials and corporeal life spill out into the world’, only reinforces the condition of life in the constantly sliding dunes of the soil bags. It matters that the ‘out of place’ must be removed, even if the feeling of relief is only temporary.

In this regard, criticising the planetary scale of time and space in the discourse of the Anthropocene, Hecht (2018: 111-112) suggests the term, ‘African Anthropocene,’ which seeks a means to hold the planet and differently scaled places on the planet on the same analytic plane; it is inseparable from “the apotheosis of waste.” This means that the scale and the temporality of the Anthropocene should be considered in relation to much of what is massively increasing, extending, and perpetually discarded. The Anthropocene is not simply a matter of planetary scale but a ‘matter out of place’ that produces new socio-political claims, cultural imaginations, and different practices of everyday life. Geographical inequality should be considerable in this context. Fukushima, not as a symbol of all disasters, but as a specific place, raises questions about the particularity of time and space. Where to locate and re-locate the bags? How long will they be there? The definition of the Anthropocene attached to the question of futurity is tied to a particular time and place, that is, at the moment when the future becomes an unavoidable socio-political problem. This means that there is neither a planetary “we” nor one “thing” that threatens the universal globe. The bag is out of place but still remains in the area as an unpleasant encounter. As Hecht (ibid.: 112) observes how such ‘a joyful connotation’ attached to nuclear waste can all too easily erase “the brutal histories and ontologies that produce new biophysical phenomena,” the mountains of contaminated soils bags, as a place where all the violence of the past, present, and future converge, remain the most unwelcomed resident in the area and yet impossible to deport.

e. Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated the everyday struggle in the village of dealing with the contaminated soil bags and the endless efforts made to draw boundaries around them. This is not only to hide the past and to erase violent traces but also to shape and un-shape the futurity of Fukushima. By making boundaries, ignoring/removing the existence of the bags, and covering the time of the disaster, the villagers aim to
create a possible future after ‘the end of the world.’ As Nigel Clark ironically writes, we might imagine “the Anthropocene, then, as the disaster to end all disasters” (2014: 21). The term does not simply involve what we experience through the upheavals in the Earth’s systems, but what these changes mean for the futurity of the planet. A key point that the contaminated soil bags raise is how “it is important to realise that the truth of the Anthropocene is less about what humanity is doing than the traces that humanity will leave behind” (Szerszynski 2012:169). From such a future-oriented perspective, the traces of humanity will take on a spatialised form. Through the materiality of the soil bags, what this chapter focuses on is what we have seen from the past and what we will leave for the future. Surrounded by the piles of contaminated bags, life in the village moves on vertically as well as horizontally, going deep down into the past and stretching out toward an impossible future. “They [TEPCO and the government] seem to be waiting until we all die and nobody remains here.” When one of the villagers expressed this frustration for the future of Fukushima, it seemed that the mountains of soil bags had become their potential grave, and it was clear that the bodies in the grave would be the people of Fukushima, not all of humanity. Through the spatiality of the contaminated bags, I considered the question, to what extent can the Fukushima m undo (‘problem’) be ‘a matter of humanity’? Despite widely shared global discourses on the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, there are certain bodies and places that take on more vulnerability and burden than other parts of the world and thus remain difficult to imagine a future otherwise.

What the soil bags in Fukushima indicate is not the controversy around the ‘actuality’ of radiation embedded in the environment, but rather the way in which the exposure is materialised as uncertain yet detectable; it is transformed through everyday experiences that allow people to say, feel, and act. Fukushima exists in the “domain of imperceptibility and perceptibility” (Murphy 2006: 10) at the same time. This means that the place is intrinsically linked to the history of how specific materialities and narratives come to exist or not to exist, and it challenges our ability to the shape the future of disaster as a part of the stratum of the past. If the future is something that needs to be accumulated on top of the present, the only possible future for Fukushima seems to be the catastrophe which raises the issue if the future has already unfolded. If so, how can futurity after the end-of-the-world be envisaged? How do desires, anxieties, hopes, wishes, apprehensions, and predictions shape and re-shape the future of Fukushima? How many layers of stratum exist under the present, and how many more will be piled upon the present? “What do humans foresee, what can they foresee? The coming reality, or only possibilities? One possibility or many?” (Koselleck 2002: 133). Might the soil bags just keep piling up until we reach a future which is built on ‘wreckage upon wreckage’ (Benjamin:1968 [1940]: 201)?
Ch.6 The World of Mutation: deformation and Fukushima daisies

“Different, bodies are all somewhat deformed. A perfectly formed body is disturbing, indiscreet body in the world of bodies, unacceptable. It’s a diagram, not a body”

(Jean-Luc Nancy, 2008: 152).

In the previous chapter, I discussed how sliding landscapes that consist of piles of contaminated soil bags shape and re-shape different senses of time and space. What ‘sliding’ indicates here is not only the physical materiality of the bags as nuclear waste, which is almost impossible to contain, but also the continuous anxiety of being overwhelmed by surroundings which were once familiar but have become transformed into something strange. Following the circumstances of life in a chasm between invisible risk and a remarkably changing landscape, in this chapter, I explore the key terms of mutation and deformation in order to ask how sliding and transforming surroundings are internalised into fear of a deformed body.

As hibaku (“exposure”) indicates something both internal and external, exposure does not merely mean being ‘penetrated’ by radiation from the outside, but rather, it connotes adhesive living with disparate materials that ‘dwell’ in bodies and constantly transform them. In the case of the internal exposure which happens through the ingestion of contaminated food and water, for instance, radioactive substances remain in organs and are involved in metabolic change of the body. This cohesive relationship between disparate materials and the body is related to what Geroulanos and Meyers mean when they write, “the sense of dismantled into a field of competing force” (2009: 86). This idea makes it possible to ask how the ‘force’ of deformation and mutation challenges the binary relation between outside and inside as well as surface and depth. From the example of the Fukushima Daisy, which has become a symbol of mutation to the victims’ bodies from past environmental disasters in Minamata and Hiroshima, there have been many efforts made to find irrefutable evidence of risk. In this case, the mutated and deformed shapes of human and non-human bodies have been considered as the most palpable aspects of radiation. However, what I argue through the chapter is that those ‘intruders’ (Nancy 2008) that might change the mechanics and look of the body are not “a cause or source but a vector of force, a vector as force” (Geroulanos and Meyers ibid.: 87. Emphasis in original), which “undo any notion or illusion of an ‘organic, symbolic and imaginary’ continuity of selfhood” (ibid.: 83) and the body.

Instead of taking mutated and deformed bodies and the environment as evidence of radiation, which is seen in ethnographies detailing anxious responses to deformed landscapes and mutated human and non-human bodies, this chapter aims to raise the question of how invisible risk becomes ‘real’ through certain ‘appearings’ and how it impacts what we call the normality of the body and the totality of the
real. Is it possible that invisible or hidden radiation changes the shape of the world? How is depth manifested through appearance? In the endless game that makes the invisible into the visible, what is challenged is the idea of a reality that consists of a deceptive surface and a concealed deeper truth. Moreover, if surface is not the converse of depth, as Taussig considers (1999: x), how can that surface be linked to viscerality—into “the thingness of things connected in chains of being, not chains of meaning?” In the post-disaster time and space that Mazzarella defines as the ecological and ontological crisis, “how are we to reconnect with a world- and with our own and each other’s organic emplacements in that world?” (2017: 15). And, lastly, I ask, by paying attention to the world as made-up, can we create a political body and world which is not only deformed but re-formed?

a. Into the world in transformation

The trip begins at Sendai station every Monday morning. Unlike other commuters who take the train toward the city centre where most offices and shops are located, Satomi always started her journey the other way around. With a small plastic bottle of green tea, a little bit of snack like a couple of onigiri, Satomi, in her late 30s, wearing wide light brown pants and a pair of white walking shoes, was staring at the landscape outside the train, and alternately, at her mobile phone screen. Like many other people in the train, her sight was fixed on the phone as well as outside in order to avoid any unnecessary eye contact with others; her small shoulder bag made of thin fabric that she kept on the seat next to her prevented anyone from sitting down near her. Every time passengers passed the corridor and asked if the seat was available, she indicated that it was not without taking her eyes off the mobile screen. On the other side of the compartment a few seats behind, there was a young man with a huge trolley bag. He was also holding a mobile phone and constantly looking around. Since he got on the train at Natori Station, which is near the airport, I guessed that he is a newly arrived migrant apprentice and that he was on his way to Fukushima where he might have some work. The man did not seem to speak Japanese. He was looking at his phone and at the train ticket to match every station to see whether the approaching station is the one he needed to get off at.

Turning my face around to see where some rattling was coming from, I recognized a woman who I would sometimes see on the train. Unsuitably dressed for the early spring weather that still had a bit of winter chill, the woman staggered through the compartment with one side of her pants rolled up to her thigh. Her leg was decaying like a tree covered with a reddish mould, or, rather, was it flourishing? In comparison to a tree branch, Toni Morrison calls scars on female black slaves’ bodies “tree flowers” or “tiny little cherry blossoms” (1987: 93). The scars have their own life and will most likely grow and change their shape. The woman in the train showed off her bumpy legs and moved between people as if threatening them or begging them for mercy. Some moved away from her as if they saw something unpleasant while others closed their eyes as if they didn’t notice anything. She dragged her legs, with
red scars, into the next car as if being crumpled. Satomi put a caramel candy wrapper into her pocket and started to count how many more stations she needed to go. “Scars emit heat. Like a volcano. And the heat changes the shape of the body,” Satomi murmured. Seeing the scars revealed on the woman’s leg, the candies in sheer paper, and Satomi’s pocket, I made a short note to myself to remember that early morning train ride in March 2019 from Sendai to Haranomachi, Fukushima.

“The ocean is very close to here. My grandmother often told me that there are seasons under the sea. From spring to summer, the flowers bloom and the sea is full of their scent (...) Oysters, sea anemones, and seaweed (...) Like a bamboo forest or layered cliffs, there are scapes and seasons. Hijiki (“hijiki seaweed”) looks like snow or hail, and oyster shells twinkle like the fringes of ice on the eaves.” Satomi continued, “My grandmother said that the ocean was her playground, and then it became a workplace.” On the railway that forms the backbone of the country facing the Pacific Ocean, I was imagining the scene under the sea where Satomi’s grandmother had played, worked, and yet was not able to return due to the nuclear disaster and following evacuation order.

When we hauled in the cuttlefish, they would start spurting their ink. But the octopuses were really cute, and very funny too. Sometimes we would find an octopus, gripping the bottom of the pot with his legs for all he was worth and rolling his big eyes at us, as if to say, ‘just try to make me come out of here!’ (...) I want to go back to the sea (Ishimure 2003: 146).

While I was trying to remember the scene that I read from Ishimure, which gives testimony from a Minamata disease victim who loved and missed the sea despite concerns of mercury poisoning, Satomi’s voice and the sound in my head of waves underwater were soon drowned out by the roar of the old train. Unlike Shinkansen, an express train that penetrates the depths of Tohoku’s inner mountains at nearly 300 km per hour and is full of businesspeople with suits and laptops, the local Joban line runs on the peripheral surfaces of the east coast and stops at every station. Travelling in this style on the older train to visit her mother-in-law once or twice a month, Satomi considers it to be like time travel to a past that she left behind. However, the area now requires stronger and higher backbones. Not so much yet in southern Miyagi and Fukushima, but I could see the white concrete walls, sometimes up to five metres in height, surrounding the fishing villages in Iwate and Northern Miyagi. After the 2011 disaster, the government set a five-year intensive recovery program for reconstruction in six prefectures including the most severely devastated areas of Iwate, Miyagi and the Fukushima prefecture. The main part of the project was the construction of new tsunami walls which took place at 621 sites along the Pacific Coast for a total of 432 km in length (Tomita et al. 2016; Kimura 2016). The project was not complete due to labour shortages at the construction sites, and it is probably the reason why I would see ‘immigrant’ workers get on the train from the airport. Once the walls were completed, the areas would be ‘protected,’ and the view of the ocean would be gone.
“Which season under the sea did she like the most?” When I asked Satomi, she tilted her head slantwise. “Well, I don’t know why I didn’t ask that question. Maybe spring? Or winter? (…) She used to tell me that she would never get tired of the scene under the sea.” Her grandmother passed away three years after the disaster, and, although hypotheses aren’t always correct, Satomi sometimes thinks that if there was no disaster, her grandmother would have lived a bit longer. The last three years of her grandmother’s life were quite hard. While staying in a temporary house, she had to learn how to adjust to the new environment and to other people like a new-born baby. “She didn’t complain about it. But I could see how difficult everything was for her.” Like an octopus, trapped in a pot, her grandmother in the temporary house might have tacitly said, “please let me get out of here (…) I want to go back to the sea.”

I met Satomi through my colleague’s mother who was a retired nurse and had lost her father-in-law in the tsunami. She had been working as a volunteer nurse since the time of the disaster to support people who lived in the temporary houses and sought medical advice. Satomi went to meetings quite often, especially during the first and second years after the disaster, in order to learn how to maintain the safety of life. There was a centre for examining the level of radiation in food in Aoba-ku, Sendai and some people, mainly women, used to bring pieces of cabbage and handfuls of rice or beans to test them for contamination. Despite the high cost of the test, which was about 8,000 yen (approximately 55 pounds) each time, a long queue full of uncertainty and anxiety was always flowing. It was a time of living with ghosts underground which might infiltrate everyday life through the apertures in the floor. Or, like the “radiation brain moms” that Kimura, S (2016) describes, who are mostly urban women extremely concerned about the safety of food (like if school meals for their children are made of agricultural products from Fukushima), Satomi was also caught by the figure of the spectral during that time. Satomi and her partner, Yugo, used to look back at those months after the evacuation and think, “How many nights we spent without sleep!”

Yet, whereas Kimura and other researchers read the issue of radiation in the context of “citizen’s science” that is driven by the desire to be a good/rational mother and citizen in relation to the neoliberal transformation of Japanese society and “postfeminist gender settlement” (McRobbie 2009: 57, cited in Kimura ibid.: 57), the reason that Satomi, and not a mother, brought the food to the test centre was ambivalent. She knew that there is no way to completely avoid the contamination of radiation. For Satomi, who grew up in a farming and fishing family, humans and the environment are inseparable. Humans are composed of the environment and simultaneously help to compose it. In a similar way, the radiation that has been spreading through the environment is suffuse. In Bataille’s words, it’s like “water is in water” (1992: 23). Satomi has been desperate yet is still attached to the places she calls home. “Fukushima is my hometown. I know the area and the people. I thought everything would go well. Or I wanted to believe so. (…) But when I read about naibu hibaku (“internal exposure”), I was seized with
fear. For both people and places, they said something will gradually change from the inside, and then we’ll see later what went wrong. Slowly changing from the inside and then appearing later (…) That’s worse than sudden death.”

Like many others I met during field research, Satomi wanted to show the beauty of Fukushima. She lives in Sendai now, but she remembers the beauty of the sea and of the mountains at different seasons in her hometown. “It’s not too far from Sendai but very different. At least for me, so much different.” In contrast to the flickering waves of light and sound in the city, the train passed rice fields and hills, and Satomi pointed out the blossoming protective trees around the farmhouses called Igune. The shape and colour of the mountains surrounding the villages appeared to be turning to an early spring green. Like the landscape under the sea that her grandmother illustrated, the scenery outside the window has seasons and unfolds in her memory of childhood. However, just as childhood does not last forever, there is a sense that the peaceful scenery will similarly cease to exist. “I can’t tell if I am enjoying this visit to Fukushima. So many things have changed and koso site imasu (they are “broken down or “malfunctioned”), and I don’t really know what to do (…) Many things are still cracked. My mother-in-law told me that I don’t have to come.” For a couple of months after the disaster, every time she was sleeping in her mother-in-law’s house, a rash appeared on her arms and hands. “I felt like something was crawling on my body and my skin was swollen.” Itchy eyes, swollen skin, and, even if nothing was really happening, Satomi felt that something was deformed. “It was said that there is no need to worry about radiation in the town. If everything was okay, then was there something wrong with me? Not with the place?” she asked.

Did the heat of a volcano erupt inside of Satomi? Listening to her voice, I imagined a line of mountain and hill ranges appear on her arms. As Satomi said, the physical elements of the disaster—the heat, the quake, the cold, and the wind—changed the shape of bodies. I remembered from my first day of fieldwork, in December 2018, terms such as nuclear melt down, evaporation, deformation, and mutation. Once the plane landed at Sendai Airport and I put my trolly bag in a coin locker, I walked around an airport that had been submerged under water in 2011 up to the second floor. Although it has been seven years since the disaster, many parts outside of the airport remained in ruins and under massive reconstruction work. After a long walk among flowers entangled in bent wires and mountains of concrete and stone debris, I filled the first page of my field notes full of frustration. I wrote, “[here is] Nobody and nothing. I don’t know where to start.” Sitting in a temporary hotel room that night, I read a story about Austerlitz who had just arrived at the central station in Antwerp, Belgium to start his journey to his lost childhood which was constantly returning to haunt him:

“How the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never
described or passed on. Histories, for instance, like those of the straw mattresses which lay, shadow-like, on the stacked plank beds and which had become thinner and shorter because the chaff in them disintegrated over the years, shrunken- and now, in writing this, I do remember that such an idea occurred to me at the time—as if they were the mortal frames of those who once lay there in that darkness” (Sebald 2011: 30-31).

However, his journey was not a simple effort to recover the factual memory of the past. Rather, as Benjamin wrote in a letter from 1932, memory is “not the instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium” (1999: 576). What Austerlitz found at the end of his journey were ruins where the history of humans and nature was intertwined. As he went deeper, what he experienced was vertigo in a whirlwind of the past. Benjamin compares the one who seeks the past to a digger who “must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter: to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil” (ibid.).

For myself, who started visiting Fukushima after the disaster and is familiar with the scene of ruined and devastated landscapes, the entire area seemed to be covered in debris and dust—a scene that Satomi tried to explain was ‘beautiful’ in the past. We were both somehow like diggers who tried to find something more underneath the surface. That’s why every Monday morning, we took a train together. And yet, it wasn’t possible since the places were just like “straw mattresses which lay, shadow-like, on the stacked plank beds which had become thinner and shorter.” (Sebald ibid.). Rather her hometown was reminiscent of the idea that everything is fragile and in transformation as Oliver-Smith (2017) notes that disaster reveals the ‘conditions of vulnerability.’ “Maybe what changed is not the place itself but me? (…) Not the same but not too different.” Satomi fixed her eyes on the window which showed an empty rice field in early spring with the straw cut off, and she continued, “However, the spring will be arriving here soon. Within a month, the field will turn to green.”

Despite the hope of spring that comes and goes every year as the train goes to inner Fukushima, what we saw was that the beautiful seasons under the water had been erased by the memory of the black tsunami water and that the entire area remained in ruins as if it was destined to be ruined from the start. In contrast to Satomi’s wish, I later heard more stories from many former villagers who rambled around the area in a way that Taussig (2006) might describe as an allegorist—a person who passionately searches for meaning in places and spaces only to discover emptiness and absence. People searched for what is remaining there but what they found was a ruined landscape open to the void. Every story that Satomi shared began with a retrospective tone of voice such as “there used to be more lives.” However, now we are only seeing a landscape that is evocative of loss and destruction. Inspired by Walter Benjamin, Taussig suggests allegory reveals “under the spell of death and terror, a human world was frozen and naturalised in what we call a still life or landscape (Taussig ibid.: 28. Emphasis in original).
b. Fukushima Daisy

Although the frozen and naturalised human world had become an allegorical object, there remain ‘lives’ in motion, and, as Satomi said, the flow of the ‘natural’ elements such as heat, wind, and water change the shape of bodies and the world. My first visit to Fukushima began in early autumn 2015. With a couple of visual/sound artists and a choreographer from Japan and South Korea, I made a trip to Fukushima from Tokyo. Since most of the area remained under an evacuation order, the places we were allowed to visit were restricted. Despite all the limits, one reason that the group of artists was attracted to and fascinated by the area was the so-called Fukushima Daisy.

On 27th May 2015, a Twitter user uploaded a photo of marguerite daisy flowers in Nasushiobara, Tochigi prefecture, which is located just south of the Fukushima prefecture and about 100 km away from the nuclear powerplant. The comments below the photo read: “Fascination of marguerite. Nasushiobara 26th May. On the right side, four flower stalks grew while being connected in the shape of a band and in the middle, they split into two and reconnected. On the left, the four stalks grew as they were connected and made the shape of a ring. 0.5 μSv at 1m from the ground.” Added to this, the user explained that the flowering had been delayed in this spot compared to others and that the level of radiation 10cm above the ground was 1.0 μSv on 10th May. The user added how often this unusual curiosity occurs.

Although there was no ‘clue’ as to why the daisy showed irregular shapes, the post received lots of attention from the public and media in Japan and from overseas due to its location and the terms referring to the level of radiation in the area. The photo of the unusual flowers spread quickly with the title Fukushima Daisy. Similar images like mutated leaves, fish, vegetables, and fruit started to be uploaded by other online users as well. One photo showed an unusually sized radish and another one of
twined tomatoes. Wild boars that roamed the abandoned town resonated with scenes from the anime film, *Mononoke Hime* (“Princess Mononoke”), and deep-sea fish were used as signs of other disasters. From unusual sizes to colours and shapes, everything was used as proof of the existence of radiation in the area.

“Is it possible to see actual mutation at this recognisable level?” When I asked this question to a molecular physiologist who I met during fieldwork, he explained to me that there has been some research on genetic mutations amongst insects and plants in the area. According to him, although the research found that the pale-green-blue butterflies that were larvae at the time of the nuclear disaster showed some level of mutation, and their damaged DNA began to cause increasing abnormality in the eyes, wings, and antennas (see the images below by Hiyama et al. 2012), mutation is not as visible to the naked eye as the daisy suggests. And he added that many people might want to see ‘dramatic’ and ‘obvious’ mutation and deformation, but, if there is a such thing, it would be more subtle and microscopic.

However, despite ‘scientific’ explanations by plant biologists and horticultural experts that it’s not uncommon to see different shapes and colours of plants growing in any garden, most people who saw the images were immediately taken by the terms, *totsuzheni* (“mutation”) and *kikei* (“deformation”).

The language used throughout the trip of searching for the Fukushima daisy constantly haunted us. For instance, frequently raised questions and conversations during the trip included things like, “Aren’t the leaves of the tree too small? (…) The colour of the flower seems too bright! (…) Why don’t the birds come to these sites?” The language always speculated about the existence of radiation and its manifestation. However, despite all the questions and suspicions that the group made in searching for traces of radiation during the journey from Iwaki to Koriyama, Fukushima prefecture in 2015, the
mutation and deformation of flowers and trees were not as clear as the photo indicated. “All plants and flowers are somewhat weird if I stare at them for a long enough time,” a choreographer expressed with a feeling of ambiguity. “Everything looks different,” another also said. If all human and non-human bodies are shaped differently, what is normal and what is mutation and why do people fear the images of the Fukushima Daisy? What is hidden and what is visible in the photo? What happens in the flow and flux of materiality across bodily inscriptions and what transformations stress differences where the ideas of normality could only see similarities?

Five years after the image of the Fukushima Daisy received quite a lot of public attention, what has been solved? Satomi still told me pretty similar stories about deformation. The village doesn’t look like it used to. Something has changed. The taste of fruit, mushrooms, and the shapes of trees and flowers are chigau (“different” or “wrong”). “She [the mother-in-law] sent us a food package two years after the disaster as she did before (…) In sending a package of mushrooms, she told us that sakugara (‘the quality or condition of the crops’) are not especially good.” Her mother-in-law has a long friendship with a farmer in the village of Nihonmatsu in inner Fukushima, and she used to buy mushrooms and other vegetables from him to dry. Those dried vegetables were necessary to get through the long winter. This is something that she has always done, and the lingering concern about contamination after the disaster seems to be not as important as her life-long habits (for different levels of sensibility toward radiation based on gender and generation, see Slater et al. 2014). Satomi remembered the days with mixed feelings. “My mother-in-law used to dry shitake mushrooms on the balcony for weeks. I loved them. The smell was like (…) wood and earth. When I received them later, I picked up one mushroom which was unusually big and took a close look at it (…) thinking what’s wrong with this (…) When it comes to saying whether it’s good or bad and delicious or poisonous, does all that depend on ningen no tsugōu (‘human’s convenience or circumstance or way of thinking’) or something else?”

[Satomi’s Shitake mushrooms and the mushroom cloud in Hiroshima after the atomic bombing in 1945.]

34 The latter image is available at: https://www.atomicarchive.com/media/photographs/hiroshima/mushroom-cloud.html]
Satomi didn’t eat the shitake mushrooms. Instead, she kept them for a long time in a cupboard. The pack of the mushrooms in the kitchen has become like a stone on her chest reminding her of the severance from her hometown. “I felt as if I betrayed Fukushima.” She remembered her childhood and every harvest season when her grandmother put mushrooms, seaweed, and new crops on butsudan, a small niche for the dead at home, and chimed a bell for a short prayer. “The food was not just food but it was what made us,” that’s what she learned. The sound of the bell to notify the arrival of new seasonal food reverberated through air. I remembered that Satomi did the same thing when I visited her house for the first time with some cookies and Korean seaweed. She put them on butsudan and rang the bell to let her dead grandmother know about the arrival of a new Korean friend and food. In the niche, there was a photo of her grandmother, a couple of paper charms, and a handful of salt and rice in a tiny dish. Feeding creates relations. The living feed the dead, and through the feeding, the living in turn will be fed. “That’s what the salt and rice mean (sake is also added in most cases). These are the most valuable things,” Satomi said. I looked at the pack of Korean seaweed, and imagining her grandmother who I had never met, thought how I might now be connected to her through the exchange of food. She has come to feel perfidious every time she passes the Fukushima labelled vegetables and fruit in sekyo, a co-op. A couple of days later, I stopped in front of some fresh peaches from Fukushima which were displayed in a supermarket near my flat, and thinking that I was not going to pick them up, I remembered Satomi’s bitter words, “I betrayed Fukushima.” The sentence reverberates in my mind, and I thought how I might have also let my interlocutors down, including Satomi’s grandmother.

Despite the bitter feelings that preoccupied her, Satomi wasn’t able to throw the anxiety of chigau to the wind. “Not only my mother-in-law but also many others used to say that there has been shokusei no henka (“vegetation change”), and I couldn’t help but think that they might have some influence on my body (…) If not now, then maybe in the future (…) Some people might have said it’s okay to return and live as we did before (…) But I think there is bimyōna (‘subtle’ or ‘delicate’) change.” Since the disaster and radiation have transformed the landscape, she believes that the climatic condition has also changed. Likewise, she elucidated the scars of the woman who we saw on the train as a matter of unbalanced heat inside the body. Satomi often used climatic metaphors. The seasons under the sea had disappeared, and the shape of the wind had changed since the ‘malfunctioned’ nuclear powerplants still emit heat into the air as well as heated water into the ocean. (On Japanese pathogenesis and aetiology based on kaze (“wind”), see Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). In Satomi’s grandmother’s words, the changes of all shokusei (“vegetation”) and inochi (“life-forms”) might be the result of different shapes of kaze, and

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35 Since the nuclear disaster, mushrooms have been used as a symbol of nuclear disaster not only because they look like the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also because the mushrooms grow from the forest wood and absorb the soil contaminated by the disaster. Fukushima is one of the biggest forestry areas in Japan and a supplier of many forest products (cf. Gill 2013).
the *kaze* will change not only the shape of the town and the taste of agricultural products, it will also have an impact on the human body. For Satomi, everything seems to be falling apart. “There are no such things that connect people anymore (...) all is broken (...) if the holes are everywhere, how can we not fall into them?”

As the assumptions underlying the Fukushima Daisy show, like souls, radiation continues to be present through the materiality of bodies and that any difference in appearance means, as the term *chigau* suggests, not that there is a mere superficial difference but that there is something wrong with the difference. As seen in the case of the Fukushima Daisy, appearance proves the existence and/or absence of radiation. An interesting point that people claim here is not only the question of the existence of radiation that is embedded in human and non-human bodies but also the extrapolation that makes the appearance more than the superficial look. In other words, this means that not only is a hidden ‘truth’ or ‘secret’ revealed through materiality but also that deformation and defacement seem to confirm that reality from the other way around.

It is a never-ending game. There are some who try to find the evidence of radiation through certain deformations, abnormal shapes, colours, and even smells while there are others who see the normality of life. With this endless effort, what has been challenged is the idea of reality that consists of a deceptive surface and a concealed deeper truth. The surface is not the converse of depth, and thus, it needs to be asked how that surface can be linked to viscerality, “into the thingness of things connected in chains of being, not chains of meaning” (Taussig 2006: x). In the concatenations of revelation and concealment, what does the unusual shape of the Fukushima daisy ‘actually’ show, and what do the people involved in this endless chain of images see from them? Is there any difference between ‘the real’ and ‘the mere appearing?’ From the daisy flowers to the rashes on Satomi’s body, the bent wires, and exposed concrete walls, what does deformation reveal? Is the hidden secret of radiation exposed on the leaves of the daisy flower, or does the danger and violence underlie our very being and life? If so, why has the Fukushima Daisy only become a catalyst that generates more images, rumours, and uncertainties instead of being the ‘ultimate evidence’ for the existence of radiation and its impact on
the human and non-human body? If the secret has been exposed, what’s next? Maybe, as Taussig suggests, there is “nothing more dissatisfying than the exposed secret, the triumph of exposure giving way to some vague sense of being cheated. There was nothing after all?” (1999: 157, emphasis in original).

c. Immediacy of the body

“In the eyes we see people to the lees”

Benjamin, One-way Street (1978:83)

Despite the controversy surrounding how long-term exposure to low doses of radiation might have an impact on the human body, the deformed materials, from the Fukushima Daisy to the broken walls, overlap with the faces and bodies of the people. As Todeschini shows through the case of Hibakusha (people who have been exposed to radiation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), illness relating to radiation has come to be perceived as “a polluting, defiling substance, and thus became integrated in a larger system of beliefs about purity and pollution” (1999: 68. Also see 2001). The bodies of Hibakusha have been suspected of “transmitting’ the impurity of death through genetic transmission or through ‘contagion’ via bodily contact,” (ibid.) and they have experienced much discrimination in marriage and the workplace.36 In this regard, Todeschini asks how sociocultural metaphors around purity and contagion, normality and the possibility of deformation, can be extended to the ethical and political realm in post-war Japan. The way in which the bodies of A-bomb victims are treated, discriminated, and erased has been associated with other minority issues such as Burakumin who are perceived as ‘impure’ people because of their ‘defiling’ profession, as well as HIV/AIDS and Hanssen disease patients who have been completely segregated from society (cf. George 2001; Ōe 1996[1965]; Yoneyama 1999). The possibility of abnormalities and growth disorder was a widespread rumour as illustrated by one victim’s analogous description of her body as a “shrunken, worm-eaten apple” that has been devoured from the inside by radiation (Todeschini ibid.: 72).

Another type of body that has been extremely marginalised is the Minamata victims who have continuously sent support to the people in Fukushima. On the night that Shousuke and I watched the news on television reporting that Minamata victims had a press conference (cf. chapter five) against the government and TEPCO’s plan for releasing the contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean, the other villagers in the room, who were mostly in their early and mid 20s, were in silence. A couple of days later, Miyuna who had just graduated high school last year told me that she didn’t know what Minamata disease is and that she searched for it online. She was, above all things, overwhelmed by the number of

36 Many similar examples have been reported after the Fukushima nuclear disaster; for instance, the bullying of children who were evacuated from the disaster affected areas. Some of these cases are in court now. Even I heard the experiences of discrimination during the fieldwork that some parking lots and shops in Tokyo had rejected cars from the Tohoku area or with a Tohoku registration number plate right after the nuclear disaster.
images, the images of the twisted bodies of the victims. The disease, caused by mercury poisoning from
the Chisso factory, has many different names due to the confusion surrounding it. To help alleviate the
confusion, that is why it is named after the place where the victims were found, the Minamata Bay.
Although some ‘strange symptoms’ had been discovered years before the disease was ‘officially’
recognised, the disease and its causes had been in question for a long time. The patients often showed
very strange body movements. The story of one of the early patients of the disease, Hamamoto
Tsugimori, began as follows:

The road was bad, and going by the old highway took time, so I walked on the train
tracks almost every day. Trains didn’t come and go as often as they do now. If a
train passed, no more would come for several hours… Then one day, walking off
the crossing where the Detsuki bus stop is now, I tripped on a tie and fell. I thought,
“That’s strange. Why would I trip on this and fall?” Then I fell again at the shore.
Nakatsu caught up to me from behind and said, “Tsugimori, are you feeling funny?”
And it was then I first realised that the numbness and shaking of my hands were
serious (George 2001: 1).

Due to the mysterious symptoms and the weird movements and shapes of the body, the most common
name for the disease was kibyō (“strange disease”). It also called neko odori byō (“dancing cat disease”) and
hai kara byō (“stylish disease”). The first report made by Dr. Hosokawa on 29th August 1956 to the
Ministry of Health and Welfare Department of Preventive Medicine, Public Health Section, Kumamoto
Prefecture accurately describes the inscrutability of the disease:

In the last two years, sporadic outbreaks of an unidentified disease have been
observed in this prefecture. The main symptoms of the disease are spastic-ataxic
paralysis and disturbance of speech. Since April of the current year several patients
with similar symptoms have been found, especially in the Tsukinoura and the Yudō
areas. It is noteworthy that in some families more than one patient was discovered.
Almost all cats in the affected areas were seized with convulsions and died. Below
is a summary of our survey of 30 cases of this disease (…) d) Occupation: mainly
fishing and farming. e) Areas where patients were found: mainly in fishing villages
in the coastal region (Ishimure 2003: 23).

The similarities between Fukushima and Minamata grabbed Miyuna’s attention. The victims were
farmers and fishery workers who had an intimate relation to nature, and the disease was known to be
hereditary. One photo that Miyuna found was taken by an American photographer named Eugene Smith.
The photo shows Tomoko Kamimura, who was a victim of Minamata and died in 1977 at the age of 21.
Another photo titled Tomoko and mother in the bath was taken by Smith in 1971 and has become a
symbol of the life-long struggle of the victims for recognition and compensation from the Chisso
company and the Japanese government.
Tomoko, a victim of Minamata disease, is with her family, supporters, Eugene Smith, and Asahi camera editor. The photo was taken at Tomoko’s home in Minamata on her sixteenth birthday. Photo by Aileen M, Smith on 13rd June 1972.37

However, Miyuna was taken by another photo instead of the most famous one. “I looked at the photo for a while and started to feel very strange (…) Only Tomoko’s face and eyes peered somewhere else. Maybe on the ceiling? Or above? (…) Her wrists were bent (…) Everyone else was smiling and looking at the camera.” Miyuna looked at Tomoko’s face for a long time. Another image she found online was taken by Shisei Kuwabara, a Japanese photographer, who dedicated about 40 years to working with Minamata victims. She showed me a couple of images. “They are gowai (“scary”), but it looks like they are telling us something (…) Do you think that it will happen to us in Fukushima someday?” Miyuna asked.

I had no words to answer and pretending as if I didn’t know about the photo, I fixed my eyes on Miyuna’s mobile phone. Looking at Miyuna, who had just passed her eighteenth birthday, and at the face of Tomoko, who was sixteen at the time, I was trying to remember how many deformed bodies and gazes from the past I had to confront since my fieldwork began—the burned clothes and belongings in the peace museum in Hiroshima, the broken walls and remaining cornerstones in Arai, Sendai, the left behind family photos in the community centre in Fukushima, and the dead grandmother’s crumpled photo in the niche of Satomi’s house. The fading photos suddenly arrived to the present. They seemed to ask, “Why are you looking at us?” in which the image seem to come alive and want something and thus the question was not just what the photo means or do but ‘what they want’ (Mitchell 2005). Miyuna didn’t take her eyes off the photos as she exchanged gazes with them. Across time and space, Tomoko’s face suddenly arrived on Miyuna’s mobile screen, and Miyuna was trying to figure out what Tomoko might have been seeing and feeling at that time.

37 This and some other photos are available at: https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/health/w-eugene-smith-minamata-warning-to-the-world/
What does the photo of Tomoko in the past tell us about the present? The photos that Miyuna found online of the bodies of the Minamata victims seemed to foresee the future. In relation to an idea that Pinney makes, “the image is ‘seared’ with the event which deposits more information than the photographer can ever control. It is this searing which deposits those ‘tiny spark[s] of contingency’ which makes the photograph such a rich resource for future viewers” (2012: 149). Regarding the contingency and exorbitance that photography deposits, Pinney returns to an idea from Walter Benjamin, who made a crucial point that “the complexity of mise-en-scène in its minutes and infinite details will always evade the anxious control of photographer” (ibid.). In his essay, Little History of Photography, Benjamin reflects on how photography can be contingent and how it recalls the immediacy of the “long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently.” Benjamin writes:

No matter how artful the photograph, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it (2005 [1931]: 510).

As anxiety proliferated through the images that might deposit the future of bodies in Fukushima, Miyuna showed me a couple of photos that she took right after the return to her former house. One photo was a red-pink coloured mushroom, and the other one was a shrivelled blossom of a white and blue hydrangea in the garden. I was not quite sure at first what was wrong with them, and she continued, “Look closer. The mushroom and blossom are different from the others around them.” Soon I realised, the pink mushroom and the withered hydrangea were surrounded by other brown mushrooms and flourishing ones. “But your house is in a safe-to-return zone, isn’t it?” When I asked this, Miyuna immediately responded, “Yes, but I think they [the government, media, scientists, politicians] could manipulate the numbers so easily (…) whereas the plants, mushrooms, and our bodily reactions don’t lie.”

From the so-called ‘dark tourists’ (cf. chapter 5), researchers, and journalists to the returnees, the desire to see the ‘real’ evidence of radiation or its lack thereof motivates them to find its presence or its absence through the appearances of material objects. It is believed that Geiger machines and other measurement devices which have been installed by the government and some researchers conducting investigation into the level of radiation could possibly be manipulative, as Miyuna suggested, but that the shape of the plants that don’t lie is ‘irrefutable.’ Or, it could be said that in contrast to numbers that always require interpretation and analysis, what the materiality of human and non-human bodies somehow shows are ‘incontestable’ facts through their shapes and colours, and thus, it leads many to the immediate sense that there is something hidden and yet revealed. If so, what do Tomoko’s face, gaze,
and body reveal? What makes Miyuna feel that Tomoko’s face and body are somehow deviant but closer to the ‘truth?’ Similar to what some people did with the image of the Fukushima Daisy, is there any ‘truth’ of Minamata disease in the photograph? What do human and non-human bodies, and the images of them, ‘carry’ or ‘mediate?’

Taking examples of religious icons and popular cultures, Van de Port (2011) explores this question of immediacy and mediation. He starts with the Greek term acheiropoieta which means ‘not made by human hand.’ What this means is that sacred icons “fell from heaven without any intermediary or came into being spontaneously- ‘just like that’” (ibid.: 74). By denying and concealing the involvement of the human hand, they produce “the sensation that one’s imaginations are not human fabrications at all, but immanent to the world (…) and or, the mediation process is transcended.” The idea can be applied to other powerful reality effects, for instance, “the absolute truth of death; the incontestable factuality of loss, the undeniable experience of the sensuous body, the impenetrable mystery that baffles the observer with the incontrovertible truth of his not-knowing [etc.]” (ibid.: 75). The quest for the ‘real thing’ and the ‘real-truth’ without mediation has been an issue for those living with radiation. Since the given materiality of radiation is imperceptible to the human senses, a variety of strategies have been used by the villagers to detect the ‘real’ absence and presence of that. This seems to be a ‘secular’ version of what van de Port (ibid.: 78-79) exemplifies as “the denial of human agency in mediation processes.” He shares a story of Aziz Dudwalla, a butcher from Leicester who found the name of Allah written in a cut of lamb meat. Interestingly, resonating with the case of the Fukushima daisy, stories abound about the name of Allah appearing in a variety of media, and images of them have popularly circulated online. For instance:

The name of Allah appearing on the inner surface of cut tomatoes and melons; on the hide of a cow; in the folds of the auricle of a new-born infant; in the particular outgrowth of a tree; and even on an aerial photograph of the ocean waves caused by the Tsunami that wrought such havoc on Asian coasts some years ago (Van de Port ibid.: 79).

The denial of human involvement and the immanent presence of God (or, the Devil) raise questions concerning what this emergence means. Does the name of Allah appearing on the surface of materials reveal divine immanence or rather enhance “the mystery of the immediate to produce a sense of its superior power and truth?” (ibid.: 85). What I propose here, following Van de Port, is that the idea of immediacy and the notion of acheiropoieta is yet another aspect of a cultural and political production of a certain reality. This means that what I am looking for is not what is ‘really’ real but rather, as van de Port asks, “the anthropological question how sensations of the ‘real’ (or rather, a real) come into being” (ibid. 86). Or, how sensations of the ‘real’ come into the (image of) human and non-human bodies on the brink.
The terms, *kosho* (“malfunctioned”), *totsuzeheni* (“mutation”), and *kikei* (“deformation”) consistently haunt everyday life in the village. Widespread images of nuclear disaster are not only limited to non-human bodies, the shape of plants, and the constantly changing landscape, but also include the possibility of human body deformation. From the expectation that internal exposure might mutate body cells and cause cancer someday in future to the idea that external exposure might cause immediate death and injury, the mutated leaves of the Fukushima Daisy illustrate the overlaps of human and non-human bodies. The human body has therefore become a ‘real’ place to actualise the existence of invisible risk. Tomoko’s face and body have become ‘real’ for Miyuna as she exchanges her body and gaze with Tomoko’s. Thus, the defacement of Tomoko’s body brings an immediate sense of reality.

Regarding defacement and the face as a place of negation, Taussig suggests how the face appears in the sprawling concatenations of the endless game of exposure and concealment; it defines “the characterisation of negation as sacred surplus whose force lies entirely in the mode of revelation we seek and seek to make” (1999: 3). According to him, what the face reveals is the following:

> I take the face to be the figure of appearance, the appearance of appearance, the figure of figuration, the ur-appearance, if you will, of secrecy itself as the primordial act of presencing. For the face itself is a contingency, at the magical crossroads of mask and window to the soul, one of the better-kept public secrets essential to everyday life. How could this be, this contradiction to end contradiction, crisscrossing itself in endless crossing of the face? And could defacement itself escape this endless back-and-forth of revelation and concealment? Defacement is like enlightenment. It brings inside outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious, indicating the curious magic upon which enlightenment, in its elimination of magic, depends (Taussig ibid.).

At the magical crossroads of mask and window, concealment and revelation, what did Miyuna see in the faces of the photograph? Despite the negation and fear that is associated with deformed figures in the images which seem “illegitimate, impure, unstable, maleficent and dreaded” (Hertz 1960: 100), why does the coupling of desire and negation continue to haunt us? Like the Fukushima Daisy, if Tomoko’s face reveals the hidden violence that is caused by deformation, again, we will be stuck with the same question from Taussig, “if having gotten the secret, and what’s next?” Or could this be said that in order to grasp a strange surplus of negative energy that aroused from within the defaced thing itself, what is needed is not “its explanation but its *characterisation* [. . .] for characterization of defacement can never confront its object head-on, if only because defacement catches us unawares and can only be known unexpectedly, complicit with the violence of daily life?” (Taussig 1999: 1-2. Emphasis in original).
d. The bodies in formation

“If you only call the name of the dead aloud, wherever they are, they will be able to hear your voice and will come to visit you,” Satomi said while putting an eggplant and a cucumber on a niche. It was the first weekend after the day of Obon, which is 15th August. We were preparing for Ryutoe, a lantern floating ceremony for the dead which consists of an Obon ritual in Arahama, Sendai. Satomi explained that the eggplant and the cucumber will be a route or a bridge for the dead, but it’s not the only path that the dead can use. In the afternoon of that day, Satomi and I were standing near Teizen canal where the ritual would take place later that day. It was also a day for the former villagers to come to visit their devastated hometown. In Arahama it is hard to find people around, and it remains as a ruin. It is full of people who are ready to meet their past, the dead, and lost homes. I was about to float my own lantern there that I had made a couple of days ago. Instead of the actual name of the dead that most people put on their lanterns, I had drawn things that were in abundance here before the disaster yet have not returned to the village: kani (“crab”), kinoko (“mushroom”), flourishing fine tree forests, kitsune (“fox”) God in a shrine, and stars and firecrackers embroidered in the sky. Many villagers told me that they are still waiting for them to return. Satomi also lit and floated her lantern down the water calling her grandmother’s name slowly but accurately. “Sa-ka-shi-ta I-chi-ko.” I remembered the photo of her that I saw in the niche and realised that the image of her intervenes in a strange way. Her face and name point to her being in an imaginary at the intersection of her presence and absence to which the vision and sound refer.

“There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no colour, sound, or smell; no taste, no touch, no things, no realm of sight, no realm of thoughts, no ignorance, no end to ignorance; no old age and no death; no end to age and death; no suffering, nor any cause of suffering, no path, no wisdom and no fulfilment.” The Heart Sutra chanted by Nembutsuko, a group of Buddhist female chanters, soon resonated across the canal and the bodies of chanters and the landscapes were attuned. Everything seemed to be integrated and present through the absence.
“There are no written sheets for the music.” I remembered these words from the group leader when I met the Nembutsuko group to observe their practice a couple of days before the Obon ritual in Jodoji temple. Hideko who is the oldest one in the group explained how they had practiced and embodied the songs. She continued, “we learned the songs while working in the kitchen, rice field, and the ocean (...)

We just tried to memorise the melody written on the back of the hands with the tempo of our body movement (...) until you can spontaneously figure out the tones and meanings (...) It’s impossible to sing the chants alone since there are no musical instruments or metronome to discern the tune and rhythm (...)
Our body is the musical instrument as well as the sheet of the music.” Listening to the chants indicate that there is neither something recognisable or distinguishable, I looked at the water and at the sky which were gradually filling with the lights, melodies, and the faces of the villagers reflected on the water. Their faces were tinged blush colours from the lights of the lanterns and the sunset as Satomi and I stared at the water that connects us to the ocean and to the dead. I thought that I might have caught a glimpse of her grandmother that kept flitting around the side of Satomi’s face. “Is she here?” When I asked, Satomi smiled without words.

Everything with which it came into contact was integrated. Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous flooding back and forth. Language only seemed itself where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called ‘meanings’ (Benjamin 1978: 48).

In the calling of the grandmother’s name, language became herself and every line of the chants connected together the broken bridges, houses, and people. Was her grandmother present in the moment? If so, how do we ‘know’ the existence of the invisible and is there any sense of a veritable real? I soon realised that the question ran throughout my entire stay of fieldwork. How many times did I need to take a train with Satomi in order to divulge the secret of the radiation or the hidden violence of everyday life? How much further do I need to submerge myself in the ocean or inner Fukushima? Or how long time do Miyuna and me have to fix our gaze on Tomoko’s face? And, if we call Tomoko’s name aloud, can we bring her being into the present? There has been an obstinate recalcitrance against a quick understanding of the meaning to the questions. Every journey that I made during fieldwork seemed to return to the same questions from the first day of fieldwork, where to start and what is next to see the possibility of life. However, Satomi and other villagers told me a different story of the double villages; there is a world under the water or in the sky where everything is reversed. The broken things in this world would be perfectly shaped in the other, and the destroyed town might exist in the sky in its complete form. These multiple worlds coexist with each reflecting on the other. Where I only see the ruins and absence, they see lives yet in formation.
What makes those reversed imaginations which see the ruins and the dead from the past as alive and possible? Walter Benjamin asks a similar question with his passion for surrealism. By taking the ‘tricks’ that he might learn from Breton’s novel, *Nadja*, which shows how to be disenchanted from the allegoric spell of the things in the ‘outmoded,’ Benjamin calls the two characters ‘the lovers’ (1978: 50). According to Benjamin, Breton and Nadja are “the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of ‘atmospheres’ concealed in these things to the point of explosion” (ibid.).

In order to explore the *yume no sekai* (“dream-like world”) where ruins, unfulfilled wishes, and scattered memories are intertwined (cf. chapter one), I have tried to take the same strategy that Benjamin borrows from the surrealists’ tactic of investigation into a telepathic world to show how the passion for being lost in the midst of the mystery can lead us to “profane illumination” which opens “a sphere of images and, more concretely, of bodies” (ibid.). Contra the world which seems to be impervious, profane illumination takes us further: “we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (ibid: 53). And this is, as he continues, “the trick by which this world of things is mastered—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” (ibid.). The *Ogon* ritual ended with fireworks and an embracing of the fragments of the past which were keenly twinkling in the bosom, as if everything had been perfectly returned and they can still see the roads and the houses that had been swamped by the tsunami. The villagers, ‘the lovers’ of their homes, walked around the empty town until late that night.

**e. Conclusion**

One day in March of 2020, at the beginning of the global coronavirus pandemic, I received an email from one of my interlocutors named Miho:

I haven’t contacted you for a while and am wondering how you are doing (...) I gave birth three weeks ago (...) We named him Sowa. This name emphasises the importance of expressing your feeling through words, and of believing in relationships and things around you and finally maintaining hope for the future (...) We hope that he will be able to create peace and harmony around him (...) We spent all day cooking rice, changing diapers and trying to make him sleep, but this repeated chore is not the same for all (...) In observing his facial expressions, the way he cries, and his movements while sleeping, everyday just passes like the blink of an eye (...) He is shaping his body and world now (...) I will never get tired of watching him (...) And, finally we decided to buy a house in Minamisoma, [Fukushima] to finish our rental life and be settled down (...) Here is quite similar
Looking into Sowa’s face and body in formation, I was reminded of a presentiment of failure that I tried to dispel. “There would be no one and nothing but only debris (…) The ruins that will make you stagger and finally throw you down.” I had heard these words from one of the evacuees in Tokyo before the start of fieldwork, and they haunted my entire stay in Japan. Looking at the mountains of contaminated soil bags flashed fast the car window on my way to Tohoku region, I was wondering if my fieldwork was already doomed before it even began.

However, what I have shown in this chapter is not only the devastated ruins and the mutated world but also the struggle for being alive in the broken world. In other words, as Sowa does, there is a constant effort to shape the body and the world. Many people I met during fieldwork do not avert their eyes from the broken world and by doing so, they can find the apertures that allow them to remain. This, as Benjamin above emphasises, is possibly the trick of the surrealists; the method of seeing reality as constituted. I argue that in the concatenations of revelation and concealment, from the unusual shape of the Fukushima Daisy and the ruined landscapes to the deformed bodies, what the people involved in this endless chain of images might see is that there is no difference between ‘the real’ and ‘the mere appearing’ and the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal.’ And thus, the only way of ending the endless struggle is “understanding the unbearable truths of make-believe as foundation of an all-too-seriously serious reality, manipulated but also manipulatable” (Taussig 1993: 195). As Miyuna’s words illustrated above, there have been numerical manipulations of the level of radiation that make people feel anxious and uncertain, but what if there is a trick against the trick that allows people to manipulate what we call the real? Despite a presentiment of failure which lingers in everyday village life, I would call this ‘a political’ which draws, “attention to the exuberance with which it permits the freedom to live reality as really made-up” (Taussig ibid.) and creates a body and world which is not only deformed but also re-formed.
Conclusion

“There is a problem only for those who want to see things as problematic!” I heard these words several times during fieldwork—mostly at the beginning and nearly at the end of it. The first time was from a friend, who gave me a ride from Tokyo to Sendai, and the other one was from a fish-seller in Miyagi. I was looking at the mountains of contaminated bags pass by the window as well as at kurosoi (“the rockfish”), which were most likely caught just off the coast of Fukushima, and I asked naively about where the bags and the fish come from. The two local men answered reproachfully as if the problem of radiation was being brought up by my question, and they emphasised that there is no radiation problem since it has been controlled at a manageable level. According to them, the only problem now is the people who want to magnify the issue based on their socio-political views. Considering the widely shared images of the triple disaster and fūhyō higai (“reputation damage” or “harmful rumour”) which stigmatises people and things from Fukushima, their defensive responses were understandable. However, I continue to think—which comes first, the problem or the question? By deciding not to see the issue, the driver and the fishery worker seemed to express a desire to live as they did before the triple disaster. A year later, in 2021, more than decade had passed since the triple disaster, however, the news still reported that Cs-137 and Cs-135, which is five times higher than the standard amount, was detected in a rockfish that was caught off the coast of Fukushima. And, despite concerns and objections from the fishing communities, the government and TEPCO had made a decision to release millions of tons of contaminated water containing tritium from the powerplant into the Pacific Ocean over the course of the next thirty years.

While working with the returnees who went back to their contaminated hometowns where most people wanted to maintain distance and/or escape from it, and by paying attention to their everyday efforts to sense the imperceptible, this thesis has worked to avoid the trap of reinforcing binary perceptions of what exists and does not exist, and similarly, what is a ‘real’ problem versus what is merely a matter of perception. Instead, by exploring the triple disaster through different levels of sensibility amongst people who want to cover and uncover, or erase and embrace the problem, the thesis asked if the triple disaster is equivalent to all other disasters which evoke end-of-the-world narratives and similar experiences of crisis and catastrophe. The thesis has considered, what could be a possibility of life after the end? Or, as argued above in the words of two of my interlocutors, if disaster is not a universal problem but a matter of your own views or thoughts, why do so many returnees express feelings of anxiety and fear concerning what can be done with those who are suffering? What types of language and forms of presentation and representation might be relevant for articulating crushing senses of the imperceptible? Along with the returnees, who claim that there is still life in their contaminated hometowns, there are quite a few people who want to discover what the disaster was/is and what it means. During fieldwork, I met many visitors, researchers, artists, and journalists, and we, including
myself, all tried to find some kind of fact, truth, and depth to the disaster. Despite different interests and backgrounds, one thing became clear—unless our bodies are there and we share a similar condition of life with the returnees—that is, the imperceptible and invisible matter of radiation, then all expertise is invalid. There were many striking moments when I began to feel the fear and anxiety that my interlocutors expressed as well as the same desire to conceal those feelings as if nothing was problematic. The field became ‘a site of transference’ (Taussig 2006). In swaying between those ambivalences in order to maintain everyday life and its normalcy which is supposed to exist, the title of the thesis, the surviving senses, emerged.

The focus of the fieldwork and thesis moved from the (im)materiality of radiation to the medium of sensing and the coherent relationship between radioactive substances and other social, political, and environmental elements. The matter of radiation has become a blind spot in which forces of the unseen have been activated, and all the social, cultural, and political processes were extrapolated regarding what exists and how to handle it. In conceptualising this type of reality as an assemblage, the thesis engaged with the idea of threshold experiences, porosity, fluidity, and attunement in order to emphasise how humans and non-humans equally participate in shaping sensorial experiences. The ruined landscape after the disaster often indicates the absence of materiality and meaning, yet, the thesis shows, following one of my interlocutors’ words, “the ruins are not empty or dead but alive; they are full of wind, sounds, water, and memory.” The ruined landscape and its elements are key to sensing a world which does not clearly show itself, yet still survives.

As seen in each chapter, the perception of the nuclear matter is mediated by material and immaterial substances which shape senses that are not taken-for-granted abilities but social and historical constructs. In chapter one, I focused on the borders and boundaries that mark different levels of radiation and shape different senses of space and safety, and yet, also challenge returnees’ memories and sentiments toward their hometown. In so doing, the chapter showed how border crossing becomes a threshold experience that questions what is real and unreal. In chapter two, the medium of sensing the invisible is water and its porosity. By focusing on the idea of an empty grave and the matter of the missing, the chapter asked how the porosity and fluidity of the ocean problematises dichotomies between water and land, life and death, and space and place in such a way that illustrates another threshold experience—memorialising the disaster through the weathering and eroding landscape. The focus of chapter three was on acoustic experiences of the invisible. Using ethnographic accounts that depict the returnees’ strategies which sway between attention and inattention, hyper-sensibility and intended taciturnity, the chapter considered what is heard through the tacit conversation between people, things, and the environment. It also discussed how those sensorial experiences constitute an ‘apparatus’ which reveals all the senses working together in an integrated way. Chapter four explored the Soma Nomaoi horse festival in Minami-soma, Fukushima to show how the militaristic ritual is performed in the context of two ‘post-
times’ in Japan—that is, post-war and post-disaster. By focusing on the historical trajectory of the samurai body as a symbol of the nation, the chapter connected the stage of the Soma Nomaoi to deeper historical contexts which formulate a sense of defeat and kyodatsu (“exhaustion and despair”) in post-war Japan. In so doing, the chapter showed how the ritual attempts to transform a sense of victimhood into one of nationhood and how the desire to be a nuclear samurai has gone unfulfilled. The chapter concluded like an empty signifier in which the armour of the samurai drifts over all the memories of defeat, fear, and anxiety—floating on the never-ending chain of desire toward masculine corporeality.

Chapter five asked about the future of the disaster through the problem of contaminated soil bags. As one of the most controversial issues in the area, the bags evoke both the solidity and the porosity of the disaster. In chasing what happens to the mountains of the contaminated soil bags and how they are perceived by the returnees, the chapter showed how the time of the disaster has become spatialised through the materiality of the bags, and it asked, if radioactive waste lasts longer than the lifespan of a human, what kind of futurity can be imagined and remain in the area? The sixth and final chapter explored the key terms of mutation and deformation and how irradiated environments are internalised as the fear of a deformed body. Yet, instead of taking mutated and deformed life-forms as evidence of radiation and its effects, the chapter raised a question regarding how the invisible and imperceptible become ‘real’ through certain ‘appearings’ and how they impact what we call the normality of the body and the totality of the real. In so doing, the chapter challenged the idea of a real which is supposed to consist of a deceptive surface and a concealed truth. Instead, it asked if the sense of mutation and deformation might paradoxically open up a chance to see the real as really made-up in order to create a political body and world which is not only deformed but re-formed.

In exploring the different types and qualities of viscosity created by strange characteristics of nuclear pollutants that shape the way of sensing the unseen, the thesis reveals how life-forms in a contaminated world, which may seem to be irrelevant at first glance, actually constitute the constellation of the crisis of the triple disaster. In so doing, the thesis seeks to connect the Fukushima disaster to the wider context of crisis, from socio-political crisis to ecological disaster, and ask if there is a possibility of being and living otherwise in post-disaster times. From the recent experience of the global COVID-19 pandemic to the warnings of climate change and global warming, narratives of catastrophe and constant crisis as a shared condition of human-ity saturate daily life. Even though there is a spectrum of sensibility and acceptance, from denial to so-called eco-anxiety, we tend to be, on one hand, overwhelmed by narratives prophesying the end-of-the-world and of humanity. On the other hand, some may be a bit attracted to narratives which claim that all the anxiety and uncertainty of life is not only our own but rather a universally shared condition of life. Likewise, the triple disaster might scare us since it brings up many adversities that could irreversibly destroy life on earth, and it tempts us to consider if indeed there will be an end to everything. Like a doomsday judgement, we might expect that the end will ultimately shed light on what happened and why. However, what I have shown in this thesis through a focus on the
everyday life of the returnees is the normalcy of crisis. There is not only the devastated ruins and the feeling of despair but also the struggle for remaining alive in a broken world—instead of having a clear conclusion or ending, there are ongoing questions regarding what went wrong and how everything could be different. And, if there is a world after the end of the world, how is it possible to remain in the world once it has been broken and not yet completed?

Like my interlocutors looking back at the past that might have predicted their present, the thesis is written in the same posture—turning towards the past and reminiscing every moment from fieldwork which appeared puzzle-like at the moment. If ethnography can only be written in retrospect and my writing always arrives too late since life has continued in the ruins of the disaster, then a conclusion is forever postponed. In this regard, the thesis is perhaps an anti-thesis of all narratives about the imminent end-of-the world. Rather, it considers the question, if catastrophe is not a forthcoming event but the past already behind or underneath us, how can we remain otherwise in a broken world? Thus, there is no end as long as there are life-forms before and after my fieldwork which will continue to live. This issue continued to haunt me while I dwelled in a small shelter built of writing of this thesis.

Considering the continuity of the disaster and the life-forms within it, two children appeared in this thesis, Tomo and a new-born baby, Showa; they might be the ones who will see the future of Fukushima. The conclusion of the thesis could be written by them if it won’t be postponed again. Unlike most key interlocutors’ experiences of the triple disaster that was described in the thesis, these two kids do not have a memory and sentiment of hometown before the disaster. These Fukushima no kodomo (“children of Fukushima”), who are often stigmatised yet have the potential to build themselves and their homes otherwise, might sense the world surrounding them in a totally different way. If Walter Benjamin (2003[1935]) was right about how the contingency of sense and perception is intertwined with social, political, and technological change, how might the surviving senses in the aftermath of the triple disaster be shaped and reshaped through different generations? This question needs to be further explored and researched. Also, since the porosity of water and that of radiation challenge nation-state borders, the release of the contaminated water from the destroyed nuclear powerplant catalyses different types of fear and anxiety in fishing communities not only in Japan but also in other neighbouring countries, particularly, the two Koreas. Growing up in South Korea where national borders and the remnants of colonisation overwhelm the possibility of solidarity which might be formulated through a shared sense of suffering and precariousness, the key question of this thesis regarding the fluidity of crisis can give rise to interesting and important discussions concerning environmental disasters and nuclear matters which are intricately intertwined with the history of colonialisation, modernisation, and (post) war-time memory in East Asia.
References


