

© 2013 Duke University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ©
Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker. Typeset in Minion Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Allison, Anne, 1950–
Precarious Japan / Anne Allison.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5548-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5562-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Japan—Economic conditions—1989– 2. Japan—Social conditions—1989– I. Title.

HC462.95.A45 2013

952.05'1—dc23 2013018903

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

ONE. PAIN OF LIFE

1

TWO. FROM LIFELONG TO LIQUID JAPAN

21

THREE. ORDINARY REFUGEEISM:
POVERTY, PRECARIETY, YOUTH

43

© 2013 Duke University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ©
Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker. Typeset in Minion Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Allison, Anne, 1950–
Precarious Japan / Anne Allison.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5548-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5562-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Japan—Economic conditions—1989– 2. Japan—Social conditions—1989– I. Title.

HC462.95.A45 2013

952.05'1—dc23 2013018903

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

ONE. PAIN OF LIFE

1

TWO. FROM LIFELONG TO LIQUID JAPAN

21

THREE. ORDINARY REFUGEEISM:
POVERTY, PRECARIETY, YOUTH

43

SEVEN. IN THE MUD

The Rhythms of Crisis

As soon as I touched down at Narita—almost three months after the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011—something felt off. After passing the turnoff for passengers in transit, the hall was empty. I breezed through customs as if the only one there. And when retrieving my luggage, the carousel seemed bare. This in an airport renowned for its traffic, for a hustle and bustle befitting one of the most global and visited countries in the world. But in early June, visitors had become scarce. And most of those on my own flight were headed to China.

Was it a sign of crisis, of something out of sync in the flows? But when I went to fetch my limousine bus, normalcy prevailed. Buses lined up just as they always did. And the attendant checking tickets ordered me to stand in the correct direction even though I was the only one in line. Such a pattern

I saw repeatedly in these early stages of post 3/11 Japan: the hydraulics of life pinched in various directions, attempts to (re)claim order by structures and rituals already in place, and new alliances—and dangers—in efforts made to survive.

Such was the case in an outing I joined with a local citizen's group to plant sunflowers in Fukushima shortly after arriving. Knowing I was eager to volunteer up north, an acquaintance invited me to participate in what was intended to be "one wheel in an exchange to help in the recovery and restoration of Fukushima." Concocted almost overnight in the spirit of so much of the do-it-yourself (DIY) relief efforts sprouting up all over Japan (and beyond), this one was to build a partnership (*kōryū*) between citizens in Kunitachi, Tokyo, and the cities of Sakagawa and Shirakawa in Fukushima. Sunflowers help absorb radiation from the soil. But they also, as the organizer Arashiyama Kōzaburō, a well-known essayist now retired in his seventies, told us, were the first flower to emerge after the Second World War and, fast-growing and strong, symbolize new life. It was in one of the cities we were visiting (Sakagawa), that a farmer, upon learning that the cabbage growing in his fields was too toxic to be sold, had committed suicide in April. And, already, farmers in the region had embarked upon a "brightening the region with sunflowers" initiative: a plan designed to cultivate the now dubious fields with a plant that would help dispel the "bad rumors" associated with radioactive Fukushima. Our mission, as symbolic as real, was to give support and assistance to this initiative: plant some seeds and return, in August, to see the renaissance of the soil—six-foot tall, bright sunflowers, the fruit of a citizens' "exchange project."

We started off early one Sunday morning in a cute aqua van parked outside Kunitachi train station. Upon boarding and settling down, the nineteen of us listened to the organizer's greetings, read our itineraries, then passed the mobile mike back and forth for "self-introductions." In short, a typical group outing (including the *omiyage* of local treats purchased in Fukushima we were given when disembarking the bus later that night). The drive proved longer than anything else that day. Three hours up, even longer back due to traffic—but we took frequent pit stops and passed snacks (and beer, when coming back). Meeting up with two separate point people in the local administration in the two cities, we listened to their accounts of the devastation. No tsunami had hit here, but the earthquake had killed nine people, left one still missing, and forced two thousand into evacuation shelters, our partner in Sakagawa told us. He hadn't been

out of his work uniform for three months and been forced to greet Boy's Day (May 5) this year not with the flying fish banners of *koinobori* but the blue flapping tarp on house roofs hit by the earthquake. Both here, and in Shirakawa, we then planted our seeds—digging small holes and covering them with dirt in the long troughs circumventing two fields. About a half an hour in one place, a bit longer in the other, and cell-phone cameras flashing the whole time. Tending to our “tight schedule” we also made two quick touristy stops: one to a famous peony garden and the other to Shirakawa castle to see evidence of where the earthquake had struck.

All in all, it was an outing at once quirky and heartfelt. What was, or could have been, an ordinary excursion of local citizens (of which neighborhoods typically have a number during the year) became something else: a partnership of support for the citizens of Fukushima Prefecture, stretching one circle of sociality to help another and enfolding relief—for those up north—into the (no-longer-quite) mundane and normal everywhere else. Much in the outburst of volunteerism, relief efforts, contributions—of money, food, blankets, sanitary napkins—that poured out from Japanese of all walks of life to those affected by the disaster in Tōhoku assumed a pattern something like this. I encountered student groups, small businesses, groups of mothers or housewives, companies, local wards, university departments, clubs of all sorts, radio stations, restaurants, small shops, and large department stores that organized collectively to volunteer or donate support. For example, a student at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo told me that the spring activity of her club (*katsubu*) had been making a unique onion pastry (“onion sweets”) that they sold along with a pamphlet of recipes that also included information about radiation, growing onions, and farmers affected by 3/11 in Fukushima. All proceeds were donated to relief.

Another group of students at Seika University in Kyoto ran a spring camp at their university during Golden Week, the first week of May, to give kids stuck in Fukushima the opportunity to breathe fresh air. When I meet up with them in July, they are working hard on their plans and fund raising for a follow-up camp (*Waku waku campu*); it is to last all of August and accommodate twenty children. The three students I speak with are a bit breathless with planning and admit they have no prior experience in anything like this at all. Motivated “to do something,” they throw themselves into an endeavor that unfolds as it goes along. This feels less about

hope in the Blochian sense—investing in a not-yet-future (a nuclear-safe Japan) by addressing what is missing in the here and now (children safe from nuclear danger)—than a gesture to do something, anything in the moment. The aim, as worded in the fund-drive poster, is to do “just a little” for the many children in Fukushima who can't leave the affected area. An effort—to protect a few kids for a few days by reterritorializing their temporary existence—in which they solicit the “support” (*shien*) and “connection” (*tsunagari*) of “everyone.” It's not making Japan safe precisely, but it is taking a few endangered kids to a safe(r) place. Something “everyone” can and should do together.

The words *everyone*, *support*, and *connection* recycle in a grammar of affinity during this period immediately following 3/11. An action of doing something; an affect of enduring; a collective “we” treading a precariousness newly shared. As a friend wrote in her blog on April 12, 2011: “We're only getting negative news about the dangers of radiation. Our spirits are dark. There isn't anything to do but endure this uneasiness together” (*Keredomo, minna de fuan ni taenakereba naranainodeshō*). The word she uses to describe the bodily, psychic state of Japan in this moment, when aftershocks continue (as they do throughout the summer) and the earth, still shaking, stays sodden in mud, is *landsick* (*gesenbyō*)—the sickness one has readjusting to land after being on sea for a long time. “Big aftershocks continue. It's been a month. Despite the fact that the cherry blossoms have come out and brightened things, we're still landsick.” A sickness of equilibrium: the balance of earth and water is out of sync, producing a nation suffering from vertigo.

I see much in the way of compassion during the six weeks I am in Japan the first summer post-3/11. Many reach out, give assistance, and show solidarity. And, for some, these acts are melded into the familiar and the everyday. One of my fellow seatmates on the sunflower excursion told me about the volunteer tourism he was planning for later that summer. A *sarariman* who worked hard and would only take a week vacation, he'd decided that this year it would be to Tōhoku with his family and four others to volunteer. Winking, he added that they would drink and play at night but do some volunteer work during the day. “What could be better?” Hoping to capitalize on just this desire, Japan Railways (best-known as simply JR, the national railways) devised a summer campaign for a package deal on the bullet train up north that included overnight stays at local hot springs.

Even without a stint of volunteering added in, a trip north would signal support of the local economy so dependent upon what was now its flagging tourism and agriculture business.

It was the promotion of moral consumerism—much like buying a T-shirt at Gap with a portion of the profits going to AIDS relief in South Africa. Such was the case when friends deliberately ordered sake from Miyagi Prefecture when drinking in Shibuya one night. Gestures of alliance—from the banal and everyday to the much more strenuous and profound (such as the volunteering some Japanese did continually and closeup) were commonplace. So were the signs of togetherness: of being in this crisis together and of facing and fighting it as “one unit.” The Japaneseness of the country in crisis reasserted and reclaimed. Banners posted everywhere read: *Nihon tōitusu* (Japan, as one unit), *Nippon ganbarō!* (Hang in there, Japan!). And as a friend put it when I asked about reconstruction (*fukkō*, one of the buzzwords of the moment along with *fukkyū*, recovery or repair), “don’t worry Anne-chan, we won’t lose [*makenaiyo*],” as if I imagined Japan would sink into the ocean.

But what does “not losing” mean in this context, who does it include, and with what stakes and rubric of “togetherness”? Certainly, the “we” here is the Japanese, as evidenced by the fact that—much reported on in the news and by so many I spoke to—foreigners left the country immediately after the crisis (called “fly-jin” as in flying-away *gaijin*). Many Japanese, from shop clerks to train attendants, thanked me for being in Japan at all this summer and particularly for volunteering up north when I did so. But what, for a foreigner, is optional, becomes more mandatory for the “Japanese.” Charges of disloyalty and selfishness—captured by the new buzzword *hikokumin* (non-citizenly)—got waged against those leaving the country or even the region (outside those mandated to do so by the government in the evacuation zones in a thirty kilometer range of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant). Staying close to home and sticking it out became a badge of loyalty and trust (but also a matter of sheer livelihood for some).

By contrast, exhibiting too much concern about one’s own safety or that of one’s family triggered suspicion. Mothers who’d left homes in Sendai (in Miyagi Prefecture) for temporary shelters in Kyoto to protect their kids recounted to me the ostracism they felt from neighbors back home. And, for those who stayed but tried other tactics for self-protection from radiation—sending homemade lunchboxes to school so children could avoid

the school lunch, for example—faced discrimination as well. In the case of the former, a child pleaded with her mother to allow her to eat the school lunch along with everyone else, as if the danger of group expulsion was worse than that of radiation. And a mother, sending *obentō* to school with her child, told her circle of mother friends that her reason for doing so was simply that she had more time on her hands now since she’d lost hours at work (due, needless to say, to the crisis) (Yamane 2011).

Cutbacks and Protests

When the Great East Japan Earthquake struck Japan’s northeast coast on March 11, it was felt for hundreds of miles. The largest earthquake in the country’s recorded history, it jolted the ground in shocks, then aftershocks, that vibrated for months. People stayed jittery; nervous systems on alert. But the water was the real killer; the tsunami waves, cresting over forty feet high, pummeled the coastline, churning what had been solid—houses, boats, gas stands, and bodies of humans, horses, cattle, and dogs—into grotesque carcasses or worse. Minutes of pounding left unbearable devastation, not the least of which was spewing radiation from Fukushima’s nuclear reactors whose breakwaters proved laughably breakable—the fault not of nature but humans who’d ignored safety precautions and routine drills for years in the interests of saving money and making more profits for its owner, the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). In the end close to 20,000 were reported missing or dead; almost 350,000 displaced; endless businesses, fields, and livestock destroyed; trillions of yen in property damaged; and the effects and threat to life due to radiation exposure remains an everyday, if, elusive and incalculable threat two years later.

The events of 3/11 triggered a crisis of unimaginable intensity. Beyond those it killed, it has made life, for so many, even less safe than it was before: precarity intensified. It has also thrown into relief aspects of life that were precarious already: the fact, for example, that so many of the workers in the Fukushima nuclear plants were, both before and after 3/11, part of the precariat—disposable workers for whom the safety of other Japanese (as in cleaning up and containing the spread and exposure of radiation) are now so intimately intertwined. News reports on precarious employment (dispatch, contract) are much more common these days, and the precariat have assumed greater recognition and sympathy in the general public eye. Sensibilities of Japanese across the country have also been

newly raised to the politics of the “nuclear village” (*genshiryoku mura*), to the location of so many nuclear reactors in the region of Tōhoku where—because of its depressed economy and aging population—residents had accepted the dangers in order to acquire revenues and jobs. Sentiments against nuclear energy and the nuclear industry have soared. So has disgust and suspicion against the owners of the nuclear plants as well as the government for their collusion of interests and for their mismanagement of safety regulations, clean up, and the withholding of (and lying about) information regarding radiation exposure. People who have never protested before or rallied against the government or corporate interest have done so now. A protest in September 2011 drew sixty thousand, many of them mothers brought there out of concern for their children. This was the banner given the entire protest in fact, “to protect the safety of our children.” It was something that everyone and anyone could rally under, even if—as many of these newly marching mothers told a colleague who interviewed them (David Slater who has been actively involved in both relief and research post-3/11)—their protest wasn’t for politics but for life. As if being an activist for life isn’t political.

No one feels safe anymore (which means not just the precariat). And just as more people are giving public voice to their own fears and dissatisfactions, more are making common cause with those of others. As someone I met on the sunflower excursion put it: “we need to create a society where those who suffer are taken care of by us all.” In his own case, an engineer for Hitachi, he was working furiously long days to build alternative energy sources to replace Japan’s depleted nuclear power. By the end of the summer only thirty-four of fifty-four nuclear plants were operating nationwide; by May 2012 the number had fallen to zero. In a country that had been the third largest producer of nuclear energy worldwide and had relied on it for 30 percent of its own power, the majority of Japanese—along with this Hitachi worker—now say they are against nuclear energy and endorse a policy of working toward becoming a nuclear-free country (*datsugenpatsu*), the stance Germany adopted following Japan’s crisis. What this might mean for the industrial viability, economic wealth, and everyday (“modern”) lifestyles of Japanese in the future—the possibility of its “third-worlding”—is much debated.

A foreshadowing of such cutbacks came in the aftermath of 3/11 when, after initial blackouts even in Tokyo, citizens were asked to undergo *setsuden* (conservation of energy consumption). This entailed a massive turn-

ing down of electricity (everything from city lights and escalators to hand driers in public toilets and ACs everywhere). Businesses and companies changed operating hours to conserve power; workers adopted a new dress code of “cool biz” with open-necked Okinawan shirts instead of button-up suits; and citizens conserved in every way imaginable, including purchasing an array of gadgets such as ice packs worn as neck wraps and spray bottles with instant “ice.” Everyone sweated, and talked about it, in this conservation of power and resensing of the everyday. And, by the end of summer, the goal of 15 percent power reduction had been not only met but exceeded. It was a sign of collective will and disciplined spirits; Japan was fighting back.

But *setsuden* also caused deaths by heat exhaustion, and under the moral imperative of collective *ganbaru*—working hard together—the risks of some individuals were also sanctioned or ignored. The elderly and refugees in evacuation shelters were particularly at risk with little (or no) AC relief. And, according to a news story midsummer, precariat workers in the Daiichi Nuclear Reactor found themselves working longer hours and taking fewer breaks because they felt so driven to restore safety to the nation. This despite the fact that, suited up head to toe in protective gear and laboring without fans in unbearable heat, sweat would start impairing their vision after only a few minutes at work.

Safety and security for whom precisely, and whose responsibility does this become?

Ocean and Death

Flows disrupted, energy restrained. But it is not only leaking radiation and power shortage that draw attention this summer. It is also the enormity of the death and devastation up north: wreckage on an unimaginable scale thrown up by a sea that savaged the coastline with such intensity it took countless lives and livelihoods in a flash. The scenes of destruction that continually replay in the mass media—of entire towns wiped out, miles of coastline reduced to rubble, houses and cars thrown for miles, fishing boats stuck in rice fields—resemble a warzone. Everything looks dead, and this is without showing the bodies (or body parts) of all the living creatures that got killed. Death gets reported less visually through pictures than through statistics (reported daily in the papers in the three categories of dead, missing, and displaced) and through stories: of those who

survived, the horrors they endured, what they know (and don't know) of those who didn't make it, and how those displaced (in evacuation shelters and elsewhere) struggle with the reminder of so much loss. These stories—circulating everywhere—have an aesthetic, a rhythm all their own. On the television, I listen to countless tales, told episodically with temporality uprooted and edges left raw, of lives suspended, families and familiarities torn asunder.

One story, around the hundredth-day anniversary of the crisis (a special day in the Buddhist cycle of departed souls), involves a middle-aged woman whose husband is missing. If she claimed him dead, the woman could start drawing compensation. But she is not ready to do this. Instead she waits and goes to the municipal office daily to check on the new names of reported dead. Meanwhile she talks to her husband for long stretches every day. As the news program shows, she visits his truck—the place where she last saw him alive—and sits in his seat, stroking the dashboard and recounting what has happened to their town, and their house, since the event. So and so survived, so and so did not, this is how we're managing. But it's hard to keep going without him, she utters to the steering wheel at last. When are you coming back?

In the background, we see scenes of the ocean, the culprit, now chastened and calm. It laps against a beach strewn with rubbish and disorder: a sickening site at once familiar and forlorn. There's always a return, at some point, to the sea in this storytelling of tsunami and death. This is the case quite literally in a story I am told by Ueda, a retired man in Tokyo who, ever since the crisis, has been going up to Iwate on the weekends to offer relief. The first time there, just days after the tsunami, he met an *obāchan* (old woman) walking up and down the beach who was thinking of throwing herself in to join her husband who had been swept away in the waves. There are many stories of mainly women attempting to drown themselves to reunite with those claimed by the tsunami. This is the reason Ueda returns every weekend to Iwate himself—to the *obāsan* on the beach. He's trying to keep her alive and has succeeded so far by telling her that, if she dies, there will be no one to give her husband *kuyō* (service for the dead): no one to pray for his spirit as it makes its way to the other side. A reason for living becomes staying alive to service the dead. But another survivor Ueda speaks to is tormented by the fact that since his grandmother's body was never found, he fears that the family can't do proper memorial rites. Her spirit is trapped in the ocean, liminally at sea. Every night he dreams

about her and every morning wonders why he is still alive. Ueda says mental health issues are plaguing survivors of 3/11, and suicide is now the leading cause of death among them.

Rescue and Mud

But death is not the only plotline in these stories—of a raging sea that battered the land and took so much away. There is also the life and death that remains on shore in the mud, in ground still soaked in water and zones once of living transformed now into mush. The tsunami rendered the entire northeast coastline a cesspool of waste: dead remains and dying life entwined—animals, humans, boats, cars, oil, houses, vegetation, and belongings. And before even the thought of reconstruction, there is the chore of cleaning up (getting rid of the dead): a massive job given the scope and degree of the damage. The government responded much more forcefully than it did following the Kobe earthquake on January 17, 1995 (killing 6,434 people), when its slow and mismanaged response became a symptom of Japan's failure of national leadership. This time it called out the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) almost immediately (rather than relegating them to peripheral cleanup as it had in the Kobe case) and, in their biggest mission since 1945, 100,000 troops were sent out—almost half the entire force. In their response the SDF searched for bodies and life, reconnected power lines and cleared travel routes, moved survivors into evacuation shelters and provided food and supplies to those who stayed in place, and tended to the dangers mounting at the Fukushima nuclear reactors. They also did extensive cleanup, razing the ruins of what was unsalvageable and hauling off tons and tons of debris.

In its recovery and rescue campaign, the SDF of Japan were also given assistance from foreign countries—another contrast from the Kobe earthquake when their presumed inability to communicate in Japanese became a rationale for initially declining assistance from other countries (including the United States). This time, offers of help from outside were accepted and, of these, *Tomodachi sakusen* (Operation Friend) conducted (as inconspicuously as possible) by the U.S. Armed Forces was the largest and most recognized. ("It was great," Ueda told me.) Launched the day after the earthquake and lasting until May 4, it cost US\$90 million and involved 24,000 U.S. service members, 189 aircraft, and 24 naval ships.

Besides all the official (domestic and foreign) relief efforts that con-

verged on Tōhoku overnight, so did a slew of NGOs, volunteers, and private cleanup operations (employing precariat workers in a business that, as rumor had it, eventually got taken over by the yakuza, the Japanese mafia). Much of this initial relief work involved mud—wading through it, shoveling out debris, navigating the sludge for signs of life and valuable remains. But while the outpouring of relief and volunteerism from all over Japan and beyond was staggering, not everyone was eager to go up north into the mud itself to help out. I spoke with many in Tokyo who didn't go because, as one woman put it, she couldn't stand to see or feel the death up close, the death that was promiscuously perverse in its origins and trapped in a mud that was exuding an unbearable stench—what I was warned about before going there myself. But when I went in July with a global NGO outfit called Peace Boat, I found the experience almost organically transfixing.

Like many relief operations, Peace Boat targeted one locale; this was Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture on the coast—a town of sixty thousand where 40 percent of households sustained major damage and four thousand were dead or missing. Choosing the short-term option (two days, three nights instead of the longer trips conducted in one-week blocks) for which I had to bring all my own food, bottled water, and sleeping and work gear (a job that took me literally days to prepare for in Tokyo), I head out on an overnight bus from Shinjuku. There are sixty of us in the two-bus caravan, mostly youths in their twenties and thirties, including college students, housewives, people in-between jobs, and many of them part of the precariat. After arriving at our temporary home base (a converted fashion school) with porta potties, a couple faucets, and racks of drying rubber (rubber boots, gloves, raingear) outside, we store our gear in our gender-segregated dorms and dress to get going. By 7:30 AM we are lined up in our *han* (groups) to do morning exercises. And an hour later, after driving through the wreckage of the city, which none of the visuals from the TV or newspaper has remotely prepared me for, we're into the belly of the disaster itself: Ishinomaki's downtown area with its jagged lines of fragments still standing—shops, statues, street signs—next to boats in the middle of parking lots and buildings crumpled into a waste dump.

Our job is to tackle the waste dump. But little is said about the overall aims other than that we're there to help and be respectful of those who have incurred so much loss in Ishinomaki. Stress is placed on the immediacy of the action and on the ethics of care. (We're told to greet everyone we see, to be mindful of not getting hurt or overdoing things as that would

be a bigger burden for the locals, and to run up the hill if another earthquake and resulting tsunami hits while we're there—a distinct possibility our head leader tells us matter-of-factly.) Our focus, in other words, turns to the mud. And, after gathering our equipment—wheelbarrows, shovels, buckets, bags—my team heads to the street where we've been assigned to shovel mud from the rain ditches (*sokkō sōji*). Suited up in rubber from goggles to boots (and with masks on our faces, helmets on our heads, and rain pants taped shut to the tops of our boots), our bodies quickly become hot and spent by the work—removing the cement blocks in the street, digging out the sludge in the ditches, and replacing the blocks. The labor is hard, the mud heavy, and we all push ourselves for hours.

But our rhythms—of shoveling, schlepping into wheelbarrow, greeting the few residents walking by—bounce off one another, generating an energy that mediate and mitigate the mud. A mud that oozes everywhere: standing in pools, smeared against buildings, encased in the ruins of what had become this downtown. Slimey, inky, riddled with particles—some decipherable (like a child's toy) but most not—and pungent with a smell that hasn't left me yet, the mud fills our senses. It also feeds a sensuality—a social sensuality—so powerful to some in this operation that they stay on for weeks, or return, time and time again. In the evening, when we assemble to share our objectives in coming and our reflections from the first day, a number say that helping out just felt like the right thing to do: “we're all Japanese and this is something I could do.” Some add that the work feels good, and a number say they haven't felt so alive in years. One woman in her early thirties admits that she's a loner and being a volunteer staff member now gives her contact with others, a community. And a man in his mid-twenties, just returning from abroad, says Japan had been dead when he left but it is now stirring again. “This time I won't leave. We young people are going to remake Japan.”

When my team returns the next day and our assignment is to remove the mud-infested things (*mono dasu*) inside someone's home, the owner—a man in his seventies—joins us, supplying us drinks and telling us his story of survival and loss during our breaks. He thanks us repeatedly for laboring so hard to empty the house that soon will be gone. Apparently this is a job—picking through his belongings by hand to find anything of value (photos, certificates, prized dishes)—that the SDF cleanup crews can't perform. But, in truth, we salvage almost nothing. The slog inside his house is almost unidentifiable: everything has dissolved into mud,

which makes our own work digging out and depositing as trash on the curb treacherous. But in working together with the man who has lost so much, in our rubber suits, hot beyond belief, slipping in the disgust of the mud, there is a pain collectively, if not equally, shared. A relationship—of sorts—produced through the willingness to enter the mud and touch the traces of life but also death that we find there. As Talal Asad notes about a sociality formed in pain: “as a social relationship pain is more than an experience. It is part of what creates the conditions of action and experience” (2003, 85).

But what kind of action is this? While tremendously moving, the work we do moves little in fact. Ten of us working hard for six hours barely manage to clear one floor of a tiny house. What we retrieve seems scant: maybe two boxes worth of photos, certificates, a few cups and plates. A bulldozer razing the house would have been far more efficient. But that wouldn't allow for recovery of anything “precious.” And there would be no human touch. This would seem the point as much, if not more, than anything else in this relief work: just being there, alongside those who have suffered so much, and giving recognition—and respect—to the dead.

The woman who is my group leader can't articulate the reasons she's come here. Maybe thirty, married to a Nigerian, she tells me her job is in “night service”: probably working in a bar or club. She's a part of the precariat. But ever since the crisis, she's been working as a volunteer staff in the Tokyo office of Peace Boat: almost nonstop it seems and as much, if not more, than the hours at her part-time job. Her husband's visa has run out so he's in Japan illegally now. Their life is risky, but “this—,” she says, gesturing to the razed landscape we're passing on the way to our worksite in the bus. The sentence goes unfinished. Completed not by words but by action, by her body that moves once we arrive at the mud with an energy and resolve that stays remarkably strong. An action in the moment, circumscribed by the immediacy of the here and now, the life and death indeterminacy of the “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 2011) of muddy relief work. This woman is the one who helps me when I stumble. She's also the one who washes the last of the rubber gloves at the end of the day. And as we leave on the bus, she tells me she'll be back next week for another two days.

Waving from the parking lot are the skeleton staff who stay put in Ishinomaki. The head leader bows to the bus showing us a panda figure buzz cut into his hair. This youngish man assuming leadership of a relief operation is probably a precariat like the woman beside me. Is this the new

post-3/11 generation of Japanese young people, I wonder? Ones who defy, or transform, what I've heard so repeatedly (pre-3/11) of the de-social, uninvolved, apolitical Japanese youths? Or is this something that existed already in the conditions of life—and temporality of living—that I've been tracking in this book of precarious Japan? Action taken on the part of taking care not only of oneself but also of others, even strangers: those with whom one shares the condition of ontological vulnerability. Precariousness as establishing human relations and as a means of calibrating what is precious in life.

Radiation and Washing Memories

When I talk with Ueda, the man who is going up every weekend to Iwate to talk the obāsan on the beach into staying alive, he tells me that what is hard for the survivors is their inability to see a future. They have no reason to keep living because they can't see anything ahead of them (*saki ga mienai*). What he means is that the routines and relationships that grounded normalcy have been so broken that time seems literally to have stopped: the situation Jonathan Lear described for the Crow Nation upon losing their right to hunt buffalo (see chapter 4). In his book *Radical Hope* (2006), Lear writes that it is not only a way of life that is lost but also one's subjectivity: the ability to see, or know, oneself in the face of radical change and, in this case as well as that of 3/11, utter devastation and death.

One response to such loss is not to merely mourn all that and those who have died or to move resolutely forward with plans for reconstruction but to stay awhile with the pain and uncertainty. To sit with it, hold it, sometimes for others, those too distraught to do much about it themselves. Not closure but something quite different, giving a space and time for not-closure, respecting the dead but also sensing the precariousness of the in-between when attachment to others includes those both living and dead.

I feel the sense of precarity immediately on the third volunteer trip I take to Fukushima Prefecture later that summer. Hearing they have a volunteer shortage (and calling ahead to make sure they'll take a foreigner), I head close to the evacuation zone where the “contaminated beef problem”—high levels of cesium radiation detected in cattle fed hay left outside after the nuclear reactors exploded—breaks the very day I arrive in mid-July. In this place (Haruno machi)—emptied of children, mothers pushing baby strollers, almost anyone on a bike or moving around outside—

much of the talk centers on animals. Stranded dogs, recovered horses, abandoned cattle. In the municipal office where I go to sign in the walls are covered with information: lists of missing and dead, instructions on how to claim damages and compensation (and to claim death for bodies not yet found), directions for volunteers. There's also a shrine to the dead and a wall of pictures of missing dogs. Outside a digital dosimeter posts the daily cesium levels.

The day I show up to volunteer, there are fifty-five of us (the numbers and where we're from are posted on a board; one hundred is ideal, we're told). This is an older group than the Peace Boat operation: mainly men, some retired, none local. At the instructional meeting we're assigned to one of four activities, and mine involves recovery of images. Trooping to a building close by in our boots and donning masks and gloves in the entrance hall, we enter a room with a long table where we'll soon be working in silence. Given retrieved photos from tsunami-battered homes such as the one my team had emptied in Ishinomaki, we are to "clean" these (*kirei ni suru*) as best we can. "Be respectful," our team leader urges us as if these photos are a form of life itself. But that's all in the way of instruction for a task we're to pick up as we go along. It all feels very Buddhist. The room quiets down and our team leader turns the radio on to *enka* (a popular form of melancholic music).

Dusting off dirt with a toothbrush, we dab—with wet towels and wipies—to recover the semblance of a group outing or face. Sometimes we discard photos that show too little promise; the man sitting next to me—breathing like Darth Vader through his mask—gestures to the trash bag when he feels I'm wasting my effort. Otherwise, the rubbing and wiping stay steady. A room full of small movements. Laboring cocooned under our masks, intimate—but not—with those whose images we are trying to save. We hang the finished photos on clotheslines draped throughout the room. During one of the breaks, a volunteer says he is haunted by the image of a young girl in one of the photos, is she alive or dead? And another, one of a group of men in their thirties (who have been given a week off from their company to volunteer), says he finds the work disturbing. He prefers shoveling debris.

As I later learn, this activity of washing images to preserve "memory things" (*omoide no mono*) has become a nationwide effort: it is done not only onsite, where the tsunami hit, but also "outsourced" to volunteers, many of them schoolchildren, laboring throughout the country. It is done,

as a gift of sorts, to the victims of the tsunami, almost always by strangers. In the bulletin put out by the municipal office, it informs residents about "taking home your memory things!" As it describes, these are "things that have been gathered from the rubble by the SDF, police, and firefighters, and their dirt carefully removed, one piece by one piece, by the hands of volunteers." They are assembled weekly at the municipal office—for victims to come and inspect. But, "when confirming ownership of memory things," one needs to show a driver's license or some kind of proof of identity (*hon-nin kakunin*)—a problem, I'm told, for some who have lost everything, including any form of self-identification (not only from home but from files that have been washed away in municipal offices as well). Not only are bodies of dead missing, so are the records of existence for some who have survived. Things out of place, identities disappeared.

The cleaning itself is an arduous task, painstakingly slow, and rarely produces a truly clean image. Most results are fragments; edges rubbed off revealing traces at best: one face out of a group of three, a mother holding empty air. They resemble what Tim Ingold describes about drawing, a visual art that sketches rather than projects images in what he calls "way-faring," "breaking a path through a terrain and leaving a trace, at once in the imagination and on the ground, in a manner very similar to what happens as one walks along in a world of earth and sky" (2011, 178). Drawing is at odds with a representational art like oil painting where the logic tends toward totalization: "its aim is to wrap things up, to enframe, and thereby to enforce a kind of closure" (179). By contrast, the aim of drawing, as Ingold puts it, "is always to prise an opening, to find a way through." Anti-totalizing, drawing involves more a process than a structure: an act, and action of "gathering," which is "more analogous, perhaps, to sewing and weaving than to shooting arrows at a target" (178).

This seems an apt description for the activity of washing memory things: the effort made to prise an opening (out of death and destruction) and leave a trace at once in the imagination and on the ground. The results are hardly representational in that they don't fully capture an image from the past. They're snippets of memory that have both weathered and been transformed by the tsunami, with traces of the water now part of the image—water-logged photos with the frame rubbed clean. And they emerge as an act of gathering. In the room where I work that day in Fukushima, alongside eight others in the morning and twenty by the after-

noon, we're assembling parts of people's lives. People we don't know, nor do we know whether they survived and, even if so, will ever want, see, or claim the images getting cleaned. But we "clean" nonetheless. A "we" of strangers, gathering together and gathering with the dead, to sew and weave whatever this is in a gesture where the act is as important as the thing we produce.

The day I clean photos, no one local is part of our team. I'm told that those hit hardest by the crisis are subsumed by other chores or just the toil of getting through the day. In this town, close to the evacuation zone and the Daiichi nuclear reactor with its radiation now leaking into the air, earth, and water of the environment where people once made their lives/livelihoods, life itself feels removed of the frame (Ingold 2011, 220). The train lines have been washed out, the streets are empty, and any produce still growing (or cattle slaughtered, fish pulled from the sea) is now suspect. Those in evacuation shelters are getting moved out to temporary housing and starting to claim compensation. But jobs are scarce: a situation of socioeconomic precarity that preceded 3/11 in this region of the country overly populated by elderly (even more so than Japan at large), one of the reasons that so many who died were elderly. One of the pressing issues facing the country, as well as each of these regions hit the hardest by the crisis, is whether—or to what degree—to rebuild. It is a question of resources: how to pay for not merely reconstruction but, even before that, cleanup (as well as where to deposit the radiated soil—the newspapers report that school playgrounds in Fukushima are getting covered with a layer of fresh soil yet piles of radiated soil are left onsite given that no one else in Japan is willing to take it). But, it is a matter also of viability, which means security of and for life: security of employment, security from nuclear exposure, security from the danger of future (natural and nuclear) disaster.

Hope

In his first public speech following Japan's Great East Earthquake on 3/11, Emperor Akihito asked Japanese citizens to remain hopeful and calm and to help one another out. The theme of hope (*kibō*) reverberated throughout the country. But hope had already been much in public discourse where, primarily in the negative, it registered as a catchword of the times. If hope

is the capacity to imagine a horizon of expectation beyond the here and now, something about the moment and the way Japanese were living it out had sapped the collective imagination about tomorrow. But in the early days following 3/11, a number of voices claimed hope's return.

Murakami Ryū, the novelist and public personality mentioned earlier for his book *Kibō no kuni no ekosodasu* (2002), wrote a commentary titled "Amid Shortages, a Surplus of Hope" that circulated widely; a friend even posted it on her blog. Noting how the Japanese have been adept at organizing collectively in the face of great adversity in the past, he praised their response to the crisis now: of orderliness, civility (no looting), sacrificial efforts made by workers in the nuclear plants (such as the "kamikaze fifty" who first went in). "Our way of life has been threatened by the crisis," he admitted, and the government and utility companies have failed to adequately respond. And yet, as he continued: "for all we've lost, hope is in fact one thing we Japanese have regained. The great earthquake and tsunami have robbed us of many lives and resources. But we who were so intoxicated with our own prosperity have once again planted the seed of hope" (*New York Times*, March 16, 2011, 17).

Similarly, Azuma Hiroshi, a professor of philosophy, the leading figure in *otaku* (nerd-fan) studies, and author of *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2011), adopted a hopeful rhetoric in a commentary published six days after the earthquake (both his and Murakami's articles were originally published on the op-ed page in the *New York Times*, then republished in Japanese following that).¹ Already he noticed a radical turnabout in something akin to the public imagination or collective spirit. This contrasted to how little pride the Japanese had felt in their country ever since Japan's defeat in the Second World War but particularly in the last two decades, a period marked by the bursting of the bubble economy, tumultuous turnover in leadership, the Kobe earthquake of 1995, and the incompetent response of the government: "Only recently the Japanese people and government were seen as indecisive and selfish, muddled with complaints and bickering. But now, they are boldly trying to defend the nation together as if they were a changed people. To borrow an expression from the younger generation here, the Japanese people seem to have completely transformed their *kyara* [character]" (March 16, 2011, 17). Admitting that this seeming transformation in the early days following 3/11 could lead to nationalism, Azuma said that he "nonetheless wish[es] to see a ray of hope in this phenomenon."

In both cases, Azuma and Murakami sensed something in the early aftermath of 3/11 they referred to as *hope*. The sense of a turn, or return, to a collective working together; a willingness to see beyond the singular, atomized self; a spirit of belonging to and in a state of becoming alive (again). This view was widely shared: seeing hope, and hoping for hope, as the affect and effect of 3/11. It was as if natural disaster had shocked people out of their “social disaster” (*shakai saigai*) of the relationless society, aging demographic, and a social fabric where communities collapse and lose ties—as one reader writing into a newspaper put it. This view alone was hopeful. That jolted by the tremors underfoot, pounded by the waves of water pouring over land, and sickened by the radiation now spewing out from nuclear reactors melting down, Japanese people responded with traits of “character” that indexed a renewed bond both to each other and to Japan. As Rebecca Solnit (2009) has written about the surging of community that can arise in the face of disaster, there was much talk of this in post-disaster Japan. People were showing a (re)commitment to life with others. I felt it too: a retired man in Tokyo taking weekly trips to Iwate to keep an obāsan from joining her dead husband in the ocean; precariat youth becoming the new reserves of volunteer relief work(ers) in Ishinomaki.

Belonging became the new buzzword: belonging to one another, to Japan, to a homeland transformed by mud and radiation. References to connectedness (*tsunagari*) and bonds (*kizuna*) gushed everywhere—from a rise in marriage applications to surveys pronouncing its new importance to a majority of Japanese. On January 1, 2012, the banner phrase coined for the New Year was “*en no jidai*”—an era for relationships using the same word *en* as in *muen shakai* (or relationless society). But, for all the euphoria (and nationalism) surrounding togetherness, it also was very much of the moment: a “we-ness” brokered in an emergency not entirely or equally shared. Produced out of the immediacy of crisis, people certainly came together to conserve energy (*setsuden*) in the cities, send or deliver supplies up north, shovel mud or visit evacuation shelters in disaster zones, wash recovered pictures all over the country. There was a gathering of life and death; a wayfaring through the muddiness, quite literally, of debris. But what of the next step, of the life beyond destruction and death, and of the time beyond when time stopped for those that it did? What of a time of new forms of precarity and the continuance of the old?

Genda Yūji, the founder of “hope studies” (*kibōgaku*) at Tokyo Univer-

sity’s Institute of Social Science, traveled to Tōhoku one month following the crisis. Accompanying Uno Shigeki, a political scientist and fellow member of the hopology faculty, they went to Kamaishi in Iwate Prefecture where Uno had been conducting research on the ideology of hope for five years. “Hope has disappeared,” the mayor said when they called, distraught over his inability to do anything to save the many who died. In a region already struggling with economic decline and an aging population, Kamaishi was hit hard; 888 dead, 156 missing, 154 missing treated as dead (in a population of 39,578 in 2010). When asked if there was anything they could do, the mayor told the professors to just come up and show their faces (“*tonikaku kao o dashite mitara*”), as if presence alone—sharing and sensing the pain—would be something. But when they went, Genda took along calendars, knowing how important time is in the construction of hope. Because thinking about the future—thinking oneself into the future (tomorrow, then the next week, on a calendar)—becomes “the energy for action” (*Asahi Shimbun*, July 23, 2012, 13). Genda distributed calendars among victims as both a symbol and method of hope. A vision of living into the future that demands action and energy now: Genda’s (quite Blochian) notion of hope.

In a newspaper article four months after the crisis on how to revive hope in the stricken areas, Uno and Genda also speak of the action demanded by the state—in managing cleanup, reconstruction, the nuclear accident and industry. They emphasize that the work of moving forward and rebuilding needs to be a collaboration between the local and national government just as between the victims in Tōhoko and citizens (helping out) all over Japan. Noting how popular the mention of hope became across the world after Obama introduced it in his political campaigning, they express wariness about the politics of hope; it’s dangerous to think that hope is something that a politician (or anyone) can give. Hope shouldn’t be top-down—or pronounced in the name of a collective Japan that exerts pressures and exclusions all its own. Rather, it should come from going to the scene itself and hearing from those victimized. “Go up and give support, like giving a calendar,” Genda advises. As he and Uno see it, this—the social ecology of hope—stems from a relationship; what I call an ethics of care built from a precariousness ontologically shared if differentially distributed (Butler 2009). Not just personal—based on the efforts of volunteers working alone or in NPOs—but also between the local and national government: working together to make not only Tōhoku but the entire

country livable (as in secure for employment, from nuclear fallout, toward hopeful horizons).

In this, both Genda and Uno express frustration with the national government that is getting acted out by individuals only vested in their own interests and politics. And here they wish that some of the young people so energetically volunteering would turn now to politics and become the politicians leading Japan into its future. The old structures—of politics, family, authority—need to change and loosen up: become “loose relationality” (*yuruyakana kizuna*) rather than “strong relationality” (*tsuyoi kizuna*) in Genda’s terminology. Their final message is clear; what happened in the north is a disaster and problem not just for northerners but for all of Japan. Just as the activist Yuasa Makoto sees “net café refugees” (working poor) as symptomatic of a “refugeeization” plaguing the entire country, Uno and Genda link the future and hope of Tōhoku to that of Japan itself: “Hope is not just a matter of individual by individual of those hit by the disaster; it’s a matter for all of Japan. If things go well in the stricken areas, things will go well in Japan too. But Japan’s future can be seen perhaps in whether or not we can make the stricken areas into a region where people can have hope” (*Asahi Shimbun*, July 23, 2011, 11).

But what constitutes hope, as a vision for the future, can radically differ. In Tokyo protests against the nuclear industry exploded. Starting almost immediately and sparked by shock and disgust over TEPCO’s mismanagement of its nuclear reactors and the government’s collusion in lack of oversight and safety precautions, they spread to other cities (Osaka, Kyoto). In April hundreds of mainly youths in their twenties protested in Yūenji; by June thousands joined the multisited protests all over the city, including older, middle-aged, working and non-working Japanese; by September as many as sixty thousand demonstrated in protests organized around “save our children” (*kodomo mamorō*) and notable for the mothers and labor organizations that showed up. Enraged about the dangers unleashed by the meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor, protesters clamored for a nuclear-free (or safe) future Japan, which, for most, meant shutting down all current reactors until or unless precautions could be sufficiently guaranteed. By the end of summer, only thirty-four out of fifty-four reactors were still running. And nine months later, on May 6, 2012, the last reactor shut down, making Japan nuclear free for the first time in decades. Though two reactors (the Ōi reactors in Fukui Prefecture) were restarted

two months later in July, Japan remains today relatively nuclear-free, if precariously un- and underpowered.

Up north, by contrast, views regarding TEPCO and the nuclear industry that brought jobs and revenues to (what was otherwise) an economically depressed region have been more guarded. As Kainuma Hiroshi, author of *Fukushimaron* (Fukushima theory, 2011), notes, the nuclear power plants were an “effective local developmental tool” that sutured local governments to the industry. And for the people of Fukushima, the nuclear power plant constituted their social environment, their relations of being and belonging: not something on television but their friends, classmates, coworkers, acquaintances. The battle over nuclear energy isn’t their business. The deeper issue, writes Kainuma, is the structure of the center and periphery. These nuclear power plants generated energy for Tokyo, not Tōhoku, and Tōhoku is structurally positioned—in the political economy of the nation—as what Akasaka Norio has called Tokyo’s colony (*Asahi Shimbun*, September 10, 2011). As he predicts, reconstruction in Tōhoku will be carried out by big companies in Tokyo returning the profits and revenues once again to the colonizer. As for people in Fukushima, one-third say they would leave if they could, fearful of being able to find jobs, rebuild their homes, reconstitute life of any kind in the stricken areas. And, of course, there is the radiation—not, curiously enough, something I heard local people talking much about when I visited there myself in July.

Ritual and Contamination

Instead, when stopping in at the municipal tourist office when I saw it open on the empty streets of Harunōmachi, the staff was eager to tell me about the upcoming *nomaioi* festival: a regional festival in late July that, dating back a thousand years, recreates a battle scene with four hundred mounted samurai in traditional Japanese armor with long swords and ancestral flagstaffs who ride across fields on their horses. Though Harunōmachi wouldn’t be having it this year because of the crisis, it was being held by Minami Sōma next door: something local officials hoped would draw in tourists from the rest of the country. Introduced to the “scribe” of the festival when he came into the office and then taken to the municipal office to interview local officials (something the young Japanese woman

I was traveling with wanted to do for the DIY relief she was organizing as part of the NPO she'd started virtually the day after 3/11), we were told about the "hope" that was riding on this event. A traditional ritual, a ritual from the past, seen as a means (a method of hope) to engineer revenues and life for those staying in Fukushima, now a stricken area within kilometers of the evacuation zone.

When two women, a mother and daughter, who had crafted clay figurines of a namaoi festival displayed at the municipal tourist office, befriended us and offered to drive us the twenty kilometers to Minama Sōma (no rental cars were available because of the surge of relief and cleanup workers) so we could visit a temple there now housing an evacuation shelter for horses, they shifted the conversation when we asked about radiation. As for the protests in Tokyo, it seemed an alien concept—a reaction I'd had from my team leader with Peace Boat as well. Riding in the bus to the stricken area, she'd wondered what kind of action was protest: "why not come here and shovel mud instead?" And, on their side, few protesters I joined up with in Tokyo had volunteered up north—a division of labor or differential cartography (relief versus protest) of hope? In Fukushima attention seemed more geared to treating the disaster and devastation one could see (unlike the invisibility of radiation) on the ground. But even this was hard to take in. When we ask the two women befriending us if we could drive to the beach, they graciously agree. But the scene there—of mile after mile of rubble, shards of mismatched ruins, boats on top of houses, hotels ghostly bare—seems too much and the two stay inside the car. Just as the man whose home we helped clean of mud in Ishinomaki told us he was glad there was no electricity after 3/11 because seeing the image on the television would have been too much to bear.

Hope is collective action, in my paraphrase of Genda, not just a feel good togetherness: "we Japanese as one." It is a working partnership recovering, relieving, reconstructing the stricken area, moving it—and Japan—forward, cultivating hope. Such a practice is riddled with difficulties, needless to say. Just one is in the radiation endangering all of the country, but particularly Tōhoku—a region that, as ground zero of the nuclear accident, is seen as the source of a contamination associated with everything coming from there. If safety from nuclear exposure is an issue facing all of Japan, how does this get navigated on the ground when some people live closer and rely—for their jobs, livelihood, place of residence—on literally the land so contaminated now? In the politics of "from Fukushima" con-

sumption, showing solidarity with the region abuts against seeking safety for oneself (and one's family). One food home-delivery service in Tokyo reported in September that customers of the service were exhibiting two tendencies; one was to avoid any food produced in the Tōhoku region, the other was to actively support it. The first group was younger (mainly between twenty and forty), and the other group was older (fifty and above) (*Asahi Shimbun*, September 23, 2011).

Even rituals, those summer festivals whose cyclical repetition would symbolize hopefulness this year, got tainted by radiation. In Kyoto controversy ensued when the decision to use trees torn down in the tsunami in a traditional bonfire event (*Gozan no okuribi*) was then overturned due to fear the wood had been contaminated (even though it came from two hundred kilometers away from the Daiichi nuclear plant). Similarly, a "support reconstruction" charity fireworks festival held in Aichi prefecture cancelled their plans to use made-in-Fukushima fireworks when citizens complained they "might spread radiation from the sky" (*Asahi Shimbun*, September 21, 2011).

Precarity and the Future

On the first-year anniversary of 3/11, a Japanese friend of mine wrote to me.

News about Japan's Great East Earthquake is reported on television every day. We are surprised again at the degree of the damage. And we're angry again at how little progress is being made. The problems we face are huge. It's a new problem for us; and how to resolve them is totally unknown. I feel we're already too late. Politically, the parties only fight between themselves. What is happening to Japan? I feel very uneasy. Is there any future for children? One year has passed.

Even if all I feel is precariousness, there's nothing to be done. All we can do is pray and give assistance. But nothing is progressing. I wonder what will happen to us?

What has happened to the sense of a new era of belonging to a newly re-energized and collectivized Japan now—at this stage of post-3/11? In a letter by a reader published in *Asahi Shimbun* in August just four months after the disaster, a fifty-eight-year-old man wrote that reconstruction needs to be a reconstruction not only of businesses and towns in Tōhoku

but also of the Japanese social structure. What he describes is a transformation of soul to relieve the “disaster” of communities where ties between people have frayed and old people die all alone. What is needed, he says, is a plan for (re)connection (*musubu keikaku*) on a human level. A blueprint for ways that people can regain a sense of identity and meaning in life (*ikigai*) away from mere accumulation, competition, and wealth. A plan for making Japan a place where people share and are connected to each other: what he calls “an economy of people” (*Asahi Shimbun*, August 1, 2011). This is also what I’ve been calling—and tracking—throughout this book as *ibasho*: a space where one feels comfortable and at home. But can *ibasho* be effected through a plan, *mandated*—as the term would seem to imply—by the state or a statelike body? Is this where precariousness can or will be handled? Perhaps not, as my friend suggests with her worries about politics and the squabbling and ineffectiveness of national leaders—a complaint I hear time and time again these days.

In the distrust that has emerged, and spread, among an ever-wider contingency of citizens against the national government and its collusion with the nuclear industry that has put the lives and safety of people at risk (as many are inclined to see it these days), there has been remarkable push back at the local level: municipalities that are refusing to allow their nuclear reactors to restart without beefed up safety precautions (if then). The mayor of Osaka, Hashimoto Tōru, is one such maverick. Young (in his late thirties) and the son of a yakuza mafioso, he resisted pressure from Tokyo to restart the nearby nuclear reactors in Ōi (that restarted anyway in July 2012), earning him populist praise. He represents a new, youthful kind of politician, as does the new mayor of Yubari, a once prosperous mining town in Hokkaido that went bankrupt in 2007. Having been assigned to advise the town for a year when working in Tokyo’s social welfare department, Suzuki Naomichi was then asked to run for mayor by a group of citizens sensing the need for radical change. He won at the age of thirty-one, becoming the youngest mayor in the history of the town. These are signs of change—and promoting flexibility and change—in the political culture of postwar Japan. But the very reliance on local initiative and peoples’ movements today signals a crisis of indecisiveness and uncertainty in the national leadership that makes many people uneasy, just like my friend. And this uneasiness could lead people into accepting something much more totalitarian on the part of their political leaders, even their young leaders.

Hashimoto Tōru, the new mayor of Osaka, has stated that once politicians get their seat after election, it means that they are given *carte blanche* to practice even dictatorship.

My own sense is that things are still in the mud. And that is not altogether bad as long as people can stay with the uncertainty for awhile and give both the lives that have been lost and the changes brewing in the current landscape (tapping into that resurgence of sociality and channeling it to structural transformations that would turn the tide on the socio-economic inequities, trends toward securitization and precaritization of pre-3/11 Japan, and gross negligence of corporations like TEPCO) the time needed to prevent mere repetition of the past. Stay with the present, precarious as it is, and face the pain but also the pleasures of working together in the mud.

As mentioned earlier, a recent book getting attention these days is by a young Japanese in his twenties proclaiming that those in his generation are quite happy, much happier, in fact, than any other generation, with a satisfaction of life approaching 87 percent. Despite all the indications of a society and economy in decline—low birthrate, an aging population, precarious employment, diminishing resources—young people are content because they live, and act, in the present. In his book *Zetsubō no kuni no kōfuku na wakmonotachi* (Happy youth in a country of despair, 2011), written after the crisis, Furuichi Noritoshi disputes that many of his generation have truly fallen victim to poverty. Poverty is twenty years in the future for his generation with baby boomer parents who worked and saved enough to keep their children materially comfortable. Youths only require two things, he writes: acceptance from others (*shōnin*) (which they can easily get on the Internet with social media) and enough money to buy street chic clothes at UniQlo (doable by living at home and working even a part-time job).

This presentist living, content in the here and now at a basic level of social and material subsistence, Furuichi calls happiness. Today’s youths are not driven by the aspirational normativity of the competitive society of the family-corporate system of Japan, Inc., nor are they driven by social justice, the ethics of care, or politics of precarity of such figures like Yuasa Makoto and Amamiya Karin that I’ve filled my book with. Furuichi doesn’t claim that his relationship to the world is one of hope nor is he interested, for the time being at least, in a temporality of the future. And

if he ever goes out to volunteer or join an antinuclear protest, he says it's more like a consumer choice; he could just as easily watch a home drama on tv. Having fun (*tanoshi*) in the moment is what matters.

This too then is part of the mud. For if Furuichi is at all right about his generation (one decade younger than those in their thirties like Amamiya and Yuasa), they represent a generation disenchanting from the past but not invested in the future. This does not make them necessarily alienated, withdrawn, or enervated—as their critics so often pronounce. But whatever this is, it is part of the mix of the becoming that is post-3/11 Japan. There are some youths shoveling mud in Ishinomaki, others are becoming mayors of towns, and still others are happy to live with their parents and hang out online with their friends.

Is a temporality of the forever-present precarious?

With people still living in temporary housing, decisions to be made about reconstruction, a nuclear industry to dismantle or figure out how to live with, and security and precarity of all the old(er) types still at bay, the present is soon not the present anymore. If not the future (or no future), what is it? Who can live (securely) in it? And with what kinds of “economies of people” (a “we” that includes and excludes whom)?

I leave these questions dangling over a post-3/11 Japan that still, for the time being, is precarious, just like everywhere today.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1. PAIN OF LIFE

1. Japanese names are written last name first.
2. N.H.K. ni yōkoso translates as “Welcome to the N.H.K.” NHK is the national broadcasting system in Japan. But in the story the main protagonist, who is suffering from delusions, thinks this stands for Nippon hikikomori kyōkai or the Japanese Hikikomori Association.
3. Manga are comic books, while anime are animated videos or cartoons. Takimoto Tatsuhiko, the author, published the novel in 2002 with Kadokawa shoten. The manga version, also published by Kadokawa, was serialized in its manga magazine *Shōnen Ace* between June 2004 and June 2007. The television anime, broadcast in twenty-four episodes, was televised by Gonzo between July and December 2006. There are English versions of the novel, comic book, and animated cartoon.
4. This is somewhat of a new usage by Yuasa, which he takes from words like *tamekomu* (to hoard or save up) and *tameiki* (to sigh).
5. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) is one of the first scholars said to have used the word.