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# ***Wasuren!* – We Won’t Forget! The Work of Remembering and Commemorating Japan’s and Tohoku’s 2011 (3.11) Triple Disasters in Local Cities and Communities<sup>1</sup>**

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Based on extensive fieldwork, this paper explores the needs of people and communities in hard hit areas of Japan’s 3.11 triple disasters including Sendai, Fukushima, Ishinomaki, Kesenuma, Kamaishi, and Yoriage to commemorate the event and their dead, while redirecting efforts to the future. It discusses the activities of Sendai’s *Wasuren!* (We Won’t Forget!) Center to document the disaster and Project Fukushima! organized by Fukushima residents to consider the city’s future after the nuclear disaster as well as examining memorials (as memoryscapes and mourning work) created by other communities in the region where the disasters occurred. It compares local narratives of the disaster by those who experienced it as Tohoku’s disaster, with national narratives of it as Japan’s disaster, including differences in calls to *gambaru* or *gambatte* (persevere), discourses of *sôteigai* (what is “unimaginable”) used following the disasters, and the new national “special tax” (*tokubetsu zei*). The article problematizes the distinction between “natural” and “humanmade” disasters. It argues that policy makers need to consider the diversity of communities involved and the thoughts and feelings about what local people find meaningful in terms of rebuilding and reclaiming their communities and lives.<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

March 11, 2014. It has already been three years; it has only been three years. I am involved as organizer of an event at my university bringing together speakers including scholarly specialists on Japan, a Japanese koto player who grew up in the Tohoku area where the disasters occurred (or perhaps more correctly began as their impact continues), a *Nikkei*

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<sup>2</sup> In rendering Japanese words into Romanized text, certain words typically have a straight line, called macron, placed over certain vowels to indicate a lengthened or long vowel sound. These have been placed on Japanese words, with the exception of place names such as Tohoku, Tokyo, Honshu, and Hokkaido.

(person of Japanese descent) filmmaker who has done volunteer work in Tohoku since the disasters and organized an expressive art project involving children, and a representative of the Consulate General of Japan in the city in which I am based. I am encouraged to learn the event is not unique; events are being held worldwide to mark the third anniversary of Japan's triple disasters.<sup>3</sup> This is encouraging because although the immediate drama of the catastrophic events that pulsed on television screens and other electronic devices worldwide<sup>4</sup> has lessened and other dramas and disasters replace them in more recent headlines, for those living in affected communities before the disasters struck these events are not past-tense and will not be for many years to come, as they work to restore order and meaning to their lives and communities.

The processing of rubble (*gareki*) from the devastated areas was well underway by the third anniversary. Even so, some Japan specialists suggest it will be around as mounds of debris for generations and centuries to come (Bestor, 2013, p. 775), especially along shorelines where much of it was first relocated. Reconstruction planners were well into discussions about rebuilding infrastructure, reinforcing shorelines, and raising ground levels, but a time table for the reinventing of human lives did not seem as clear. Many in the communities that experienced the disasters were three years later enmeshed in attempts to remember those gone, reconstruct their life narratives, rebuild their personal trajectories, and regain community—after the rupture.

The rupture of their lives happened at 2:46 p.m. local Japan time<sup>5</sup> An approximate 9.0 on the Richter Scale, the largest earthquake ever recorded in Japan since modern recording techniques have been in use (EERI, 2011), rocked the coastal areas of the Tohoku region (located in the northeast area of Honshu, considered Japan's "main island"), with an epicenter in the waters off the coast. It triggered a great tsunami bringing waves of water as high as 15 meters rushing inward that would in turn take houses, vehicles, debris, and people back out to the seas. It triggered the meltdown of the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima Prefecture resulting in a nuclear crisis and release of radioactive materials. The date was March 11, 2011, a date now known worldwide as 3.11 and officially in Japan as the *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai* (Great Eastern Japan Disaster/s).<sup>6</sup> Since March is graduation season in Japan, graduation ceremonies had already occurred on that day in some of the elementary, junior, and senior high schools in the coastal towns and cities of Tohoku. For some of the graduating students, their school graduation day would also be the last day of their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Facebook page, "Fukushima is Here: 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Anniversary Worldwide Events" encouraged events commemorating Japan's March 11, 2011 disasters, particularly the Fukushima nuclear disaster (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=663573283701204>, last accessed 28 June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand (2012) for a discussion of the impact of e-technology on communicating the disaster worldwide, and how the immediacy of this coverage was also part of shaping experience of it for many Japanese, including those involved in it.

<sup>5</sup> Japan maintains one time zone for its diverse areas and islands, which enables orchestrating a sense of national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) by having everyone in the country on the same time.

<sup>6</sup> The Tohoku area is in the North Eastern part of what is considered Japan's main island, Honshu. Japanese words tend not to differentiate between singular and plural, hence the Japanese designation could be translated as either disaster or disasters.

In the course of the disasters an estimated 20,000 people died (including both those known dead and those whose bodies were never found) (EERI, 2011), and an estimated 250,000 remain “evacuees”<sup>7</sup>—initially homeless they now are in “temporary” dwellings years later, and may continue to be for many years to come. For those evacuated because of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the biggest number of evacuees, it is questionable whether many will ever be able to return to the places they still consider “home.” The nuclear reactors, while seemingly calmed, are not fully stabilized nor fully under control, and release of radioactive materials continues. I referred to both Japan and Tohoku in this article’s title because although March 11, 2011 resulted in major disasters for Japan it is important to recognize that the effects did not fall equally on all of Japan.<sup>8</sup> The people and communities of Tohoku bore the brunt of the effects and struggle most with the aftermath of the disasters and reclaiming their lives.

Japan’s March 11, 2011 disasters provide a pertinent framework to consider so-called natural and humanmade disasters, or as anthropologist of Japan, Theodore Bestor (2013) has referred to this dichotomy, natural and unnatural disasters (p. 763). There is a tendency to conceptualize the earthquake and tsunami as “natural” disasters, hence beyond human ability to control or prevent, whereas the Fukushima nuclear meltdown is often viewed more as a humanmade disaster resulting from the human decision to put and keep a nuclear plant in Fukushima, in an earthquake prone area in an earthquake prone country. However, upon close inspection the distinction between natural and humanmade disasters, like many other kinds of categorical dualisms (Douglas 2005 [1966]), is problematic. The Fukushima nuclear disaster cannot be fully categorized as humanmade in the sense that the events triggering it were the earthquake and subsequent tsunami (while it is still possible to ask how rational it was to put nuclear plants in areas prone to such natural processes or if this one was adequately maintained). Additionally, some question whether so-called “natural” disasters, including earthquakes and tsunami, should be considered fully natural, as many scholars and environmentalists contend that such disasters are occurring more often or with greater severity, and that cumulative underlying human effects on the environment and natural processes form part of the context of their occurrence (Bestor, 2013; Kane, 2012; Oliver-Smith 2002, 2010).

This article presents processes of recovery focusing on the efforts within affected communities to regain and reposition their lives after having had them ruptured. It emphasizes the work being done in communities to remember the events, and commemorate those whose lives were taken. It also discusses how plans or policies being put into place by governments, particularly Japan’s central government, to rebuild are not always policies approved by those in the local communities. In terms of theoretical approach, it advocates for policies in keeping with Stephanie Kane’s concept of a hydrosocial paradigm. While the initial thrust of Japan’s 2011 disasters was a major earthquake, it was one occurring under water, and the largest cause of destruction and death was the tsunami that it triggered. The nuclear crisis can also be linked to this paradigm, as

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<sup>7</sup> As of June 24, 2014, the overall number of people living elsewhere away from their homes was given by the government reconstruction agency called “*Fukkō-chō*” (2014) as 251,000 people spread over 1,151 cities and town across 47 prefectures.

<sup>8</sup> Writing as someone who grew up in the Tohoku region, Yuko Nishimura (2014) for example argues that these were more Tohoku’s disasters.

it resulted in release of radiation poisonous to water and soil. In her work on social justice, environmental issues, and urban water ecology, Kane advocates for basing policies affecting or responding to water (including excess water brought on by hurricanes and tsunami) on a hydrosocial paradigm that recognizes communities have their own knowledge and customs based on living along or with water over generations. The approach recognizes that both climate change and policies related to water (which in government responses to Japan's 2011 disasters include attempts to raise ground levels and reinforce shorelines with cement walls or tripods) have significant effects on interrelated systems of the local environments and cultures of the communities involved. Kane also points out that a hydrosocial paradigm reveals the falsity of considering nuclear energy as clean based on the lower degree of atmospheric carbon with nuclear energy because this ignores how other industrial processes necessary to creating or maintaining nuclear energy effect or poison water sources (Kane, 2013; Kane & Brisman, 2014).

Other theoretical approaches informing this discussion include those suggested by Gaston Gordillo (2014) in *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*, in which he argues that there needs to be more focus not only on significant ruins of the past, often viewed as historical relics of a time gone by, but on the actual rubble caused by destruction and how people live amongst it in their daily lives. As in many other instances following disaster and destruction, the rubble of 3.11 has been treated by government agencies as seemingly solely something to be gotten rid of---the enormous amount of it making it a long-term project. For people in the communities the rubble is something they have had to live with and amongst. At times what the government designates as rubble is for community dwellers central to their processes of commemoration. This article is also informed by theories of how humans create meaning through constructing and maintaining categories through which things are defined, and how they grapple with forms of chaos, which such disasters represent, when their understandings of these categories and hence meaning in life itself, come into question. It is additionally informed by theoretical discussions of "memoriscapes" and "communities of memory," along with those of mourning work and memory work in the recovery process.

### **Memoriscapes, Mourning Work, and the Process of Human Recovery**

In this discussion I approach what has been happening since Japan's 3.11 disasters occurred or began, and is on-going, in terms of people who were living out their lives in Tohoku towns, cities, and communities they knew not just as bureaucratic jurisdictions, not just as landscapes, but as "memoriscapes." In anthropology, the idea of memoriscapes points out that place is more than just a location for those with close connections to it. It involves and embraces their understandings of life linked to place, and to the people associated with place. Such understandings appear in work done by Anthony Oliver-Smith (2002, 2010) in discussing people's reactions to disasters and forced relocations due to disasters or development. Robert Bellah likewise points out that people can develop deep emotional identification with their particular community through participation in its festivals, rituals, and other events. These merge with connections to other people in the community with whom such activities are shared. Bellah refers to such communities as "communities of memory" in contrast to less compelling "communities of imagination" (Bellah, 1985, p. 154; Creighton, 1998). There can be very different perspectives on recovery by those for

whom these are communities of memory, and those instituting policies from outside the areas, such as those in Japan's central business and governmental core, Tokyo.

I present a discussion and ethnographic vignettes of Tohoku communities affected by Japan's 3.11 disasters based on two research visits to affected areas, the first in 2011 during the initial year following the disaster and another two years later in 2013. Both visits were made in August to coincide with what under "usual" circumstances is the *Obon* period. *Obon* (less honorifically *Bon*) refers to the Japanese custom of honoring deceased family members and ancestors, while conjoining this with festivals (*matsuri*). The idea is that everyone, dead and alive, returns "home" for *Obon*; it was thought of as the time ancestors visited the places they had lived and the people in them, while the living dwelling elsewhere also returned. Festivals and the dances associated with them were a way of entertaining the guests, particularly those visiting from the world of the dead. *Obon* reaffirms patrilineal family lines by keeping alive a sense of the genealogies of ancestors and by reinforcing the personal bonds and commitments of the living members through repeated cyclical interactions associated with the fun and fulfilling festival events. I chose research visits in August around the *Obon* period because of associations of this period with reaffirming community ties linked to specific places and the people in them, with commemorating the dead and with numbers of people raised in the communities returning during this time. Various issues problematized the usual activities for *Obon* in the first year of the disasters. First, many people were displaced or still focused on putting normalcy back into daily life. Second, large numbers of people were still grieving for newly dead or struggling in other ways, drawing into question whether festive activities should be engaged in even if possible.

I attempted to look at the on-going work---emphasizing that it should be considered work---people were engaged in to recreate their life narratives after experiencing 3.11 as an immense rupture. Much of this involved what has been called, "memory work" the extended process of working through loss, rupture, or grief, which rather than being time wasting, inefficient, or obsessive is considered important to allow individuals to work through trauma and loss to reconstruct lives and move beyond trauma. The human need to enact rites, ceremonies, or events that commemorate, memorialize, and mourn those they have known who have died has specifically been called "mourning work" (Isao, 2012, p. 76). The memory and mourning work that I witnessed included setting up memorials, making small gardens where houses or neighborhoods had been, gathering in story-telling or knitting groups to discuss experiences of the disaster and relate memories of loved ones now gone from this life,<sup>9</sup> and restoring photographs that had---along with houses, other buildings, ships, cars, and people---been taken off with the tsunami and eventually returned to land, but not necessarily in the same places from which they had come.

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<sup>9</sup> Given Japanese beliefs surrounding the relations of the living and the dead, it makes more sense to refer to these individuals as gone from this life, rather than simply gone. According to Japanese cultural concepts the dead continue to visit the place in which they lived, and are still conceptualized as being part of it as ancestral or other deceased members of lineage lines which are conceptualized as linked to places.

## **The Rejoice Project: Reclaiming Photographic Images as a Means of Reclaiming Ties**

The last example above involves a form of memory work that spread through affected communities. As photographs, photo albums, and scrapbooks returned to land or were found in rubble, they were not discarded but embraced by affected communities, who often put intense labor into identifying the photographs or recovering the images in them. Communities set up drop boxes where people could leave photographs or photo albums they found. Volunteers spent hours trying to determine which photos went with which families or people. Other volunteers washed them or attempted to restore the images of people in them using image recovery techniques. The importance of this labor-intensive work of identifying photographs and recovering the images of people in them, is reflected in one of the names given to such a project, *The Yorokobi Project*. In Japanese *yorokobu* (the noun form of which is *yorokobi*) means to rejoice. People who had experienced extreme devastation were gaining a different sense of recovery by reclaiming images of people in damaged photographs than they could regain through the rebuilding of buildings and other infrastructure. The photographs were testaments to lives lived and relationships of people with each other. They showed family activities, life cycle events, and customs in the raising of children. By reclaiming photographs people were reclaiming ownership of their life stories and trajectories, while reaffirming ties to other people, including those who died.

Sometimes, photographs were too badly damaged and the images could not be recovered. In these cases those working on them would “apologize” to the photos or the images of people in them. For example, photographs that could not be restored, before being destroyed were first put in a box on which was written “*gomen ne*”–“I’m sorry” or “forgive me.” This indicates that the photographs served as a mediator through which people could indirectly work out their feelings about the sense of loss or severed relationships, along with their frustrations about not being able to recover them---not just the images of people in the photographs but also the people who had died themselves---accompanied by a desire to “apologize” for not being able to save them or bring them back even though they knew this was not their fault.

### **Commemorative Responses of Place Based Tohoku Communities**

The destructive effects of Japan’s 3.11 disasters were experienced differently in different areas. As Bestor (2013) points out, “all catastrophes are local” (p. 772). In 2011, the areas to which I traveled were chosen in part to reflect the three aspects of the triple disasters and cities or communities more strongly affected by each one of them: Sendai---strongly affected by the earthquake, Ishinomaki---a coastal town hard hit by the tsunami, and Fukushima---the area experiencing the nuclear disaster. I returned to these three areas in 2013, adding Kamaishi, Kesenuma, and Yuriage in Natori City’s jurisdiction.

### ***Sendai: From Tanabata Festival to the Determination Not to Forget***

In 2011 cities and communities struggled with whether to hold annual summer festivals while still wrapped up in the drama of recovery only a few months after the disasters, and also given a cultural idea that festive activities may not be appropriate when many people are experiencing grief or sad circumstances. Even in other parts of Japan, festivals and other summer festive events were subdued or foregone to express empathy for the suffering still prevailing in Tohoku. Some Tohoku communities either could not mount festivals, decided not to, or conversely struggled to carry them out. Isao (2012) discusses how it was important for many communities to hold festivals and other performing folk events in the months following the disasters. He discusses survivors performing folk art dances such as *toramai*, the tiger dance, in evacuation centers and how *shishiodori*, the deer dance for dead souls, was performed in some coastal communities in June to mark the 100th day of supplication for dead souls (Isao, 2012, p. 77). The deer dance, according to Isao, is handed down through generational ties in Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures (two of the three prefectures most affected by the 3.11 disasters). Isao (2012) suggests that while enacting cultural performances is not sufficient for an area's recovery, because people are still in need of housing and employment, such involvement has meaning beyond entertainment, or cheering up survivors (p. 86). Such enactments have meaning to participants and survivors because they reassert a sense of continuity with the past, and to local identity and traditions, building momentum to deal with other problems brought on by the disasters by providing hope for continuity into the future.

Sendai is perhaps the most famous location in Japan for the Tanabata Festival. Tanabata, or the star festival, is a summer festival celebrating the story of the goat herder and weaver, who were in love with each other but punished by being transformed into stars distant from each other. However, once a year they are allowed to come into closer proximity. (The two stars involved appear to be closer at this time to human eyes). People celebrate the festival by putting wishes on bamboo or sometimes tree branches and having gatherings, usually under starlit skies, although in modern Japan this has often been commoditized and brought indoors to commercial venues such as department stores (Creighton, 1998, p. 133). The main day of Tanabata (the characters of which mean "evening of the seventh") is celebrated as the seventh day of the seventh month, which most places in Japan now treat as July 7. Sendai holds Tanabata according to the traditional lunar calendar a month later in August, closer to *Obon* activities. Sendai considered cancelling the Tanabata Festival in the first year of the disasters, with many of its population grieving and recovery efforts underway, but made a conscious decision to have the festival. The decision to hold Tanabata was not just about providing entertainment; it was an active decision to "carry on" and embrace a sense of Sendai identity, strongly tied to the Tanabata festival. As in the cases discussed by Isao, the Tanabata festival involved for Sendai dwellers a continuity of place connected to a festival the area was famous for, and connected to people through awareness of how it was participated in and passed on through generations and among community groups.

Furthering "memory work," Sendai also sought to record the disaster for the future by setting up an archival center to record people's experiences and memories of the disaster, along with their memories of those who had not survived. This was named the, "*Wasuren* Center" with the vernacular, *wasuren* strongly asserting, "we won't forget." Sendai had a



newly established community center called “Mediatheque” which had not yet been open a full year. The architect, Toyo Itō, had been scheduled to fly to Sendai on March 11, 2011 to give a talk in the coming days for its one year anniversary which did not happen because the Mediatheque building suffered some damage in the earthquake and also many flights to Sendai were cancelled (Itō, 2012). The building was restored, and a still available area of it allocated for the Wasuren Center. The project addresses people’s need to deal with trauma and memorialize the dead, while recognizing the value of preserving the stories for future generations and later researchers.

### ***Ishinomaki: The Wrapping of Space towards Perseverance and Working at “Doing Normal”***

Before the disasters Ishinomaki was famous for its Manga Museum, highlighting heroes of Japanese manga and anime. Ishinomaki was one of the coastal towns strongly hit by the tsunami; houses, cars, and people were washed out to the seas, and the land, even within city areas, flooded with water for weeks afterwards. By August 2011, the water had subsided and most of the rubble had been shifted from the town to areas along the coast. Rather than just manga heroes, a different kind of heroism was being enacted in Ishinomaki---the heroism of “doing normal” by going through the paces of usual daily life. In August 2011, I arrived in Ishinomaki by bus from Sendai. Many passengers on the bus were coming “home” to Ishinomaki for the annual observances for the dead carried out at grave locations, evidenced by the flowers used for this that they were carrying. I sat next to a young woman raised in Ishinomaki, now married and living in Tokyo with her husband, and returning for the annual observances. I asked if she had been back since the disaster. She indicated she came a few weeks afterwards, when it seemed safer to do so, to check on her parents, and even at that time the roads still had water on them and the bus could not go all the way through. I asked if anyone in her family had been killed by the disaster. She said they were among the lucky ones; no one in her immediate family had died. She paused, then added, in a controlled tone but one I felt kept under constraint a great deal of emotion, “but my Auntie was washed out to sea.” In a community in which death and loss had been so widely experienced she considered her immediate family among the lucky ones, even though a relative as close as an aunt had died by being swept away by the tsunami.

Nearly everyone in Ishinomaki had experienced the death of someone they knew. During my first visit to Ishinomaki after the disaster in 2011, I felt like people were living out a strong example of a type of courage less often recognized but nonetheless heroic, the courage of living every day and working at putting a sense of normalcy into daily life. I sensed that those in Ishinomaki were doing the difficult work of going through usual activities and duties rather than giving in to the immense sense of suffering that surrounded the circumstances the area was in. This could mean interacting with the volunteer stations that had been set up in Ishinomaki, or just going through the tasks of one’s usual job. At the Ishinomaki Information Center banners sent from elsewhere in the country, urging people to *gambaru*, *gambatte*, or *gambarō* (all forms of the verb for persevere or “hang in there”) decorated the center, along with folded paper cranes sent by those in other communities. I asked the man working there some general questions about Ishinomaki, and where I could locate the Peace Boat and other volunteer stations that had been set up there.

I did not think the dances and festive activities usually held were being conducted that year, but wanted to confirm this. In another article on conducting research I have written about the complexity of asking questions, and how some that seem benign might have hidden depths (Creighton, 2007). Thus hesitantly, I asked, whether the *Obon* dances would be held that year. It did seem the context behind the question made answering it a difficult one, but the representative rose to it, stating clearly but with what seemed a background sense of sadness, “No, we will not be holding the dances this year.” Amidst death, loss, and suffering, along with continuing struggles to get order back into existence, most activities associated with the festival period were not occurring, but with notable exceptions. There were areas set up for children, with activities directed at children common to Japanese summer festivals, fishing for water filled balloon balls from small pools, catching gold fish in small nets, flavored shaved ice, cotton candy, *takoyaki*, and other festival foods.<sup>10</sup> A Japanese proverb, appearing as early as Japan’s first published poetry collection in the eighth century, the *Man’yōshū*, states, “*ko wa takara*” or “Children are treasures” (Creighton, 1994, p. 35). There is also the recognition that children grow up and this does not slow down because chaos and disorder intrude and therefore it continues to be the duty of adults to exert efforts to raise them. Working at “doing normal” in Ishinomaki five months after the 3.11 disasters meant holding festival-style engagements for children. These engagements were typically not the kind set up by large festival operators but were those that children often engaged in during festival time set up by local people. Thus, these activities were not operating so much to generate profit but to maintain such activities for the children in the area.

Reflecting Gordillo’s (2014) recognition that rubble is not only about destruction but about lives being lived in the sense of being “the afterlife of destruction” those living in Ishinomaki lived among and amidst the rubble of the disaster, often still located in city areas on both of my trips in 2011 and 2013, and hills of it heaped along the shorelines. I was in Ishinomaki over the *Obon* periods on both visits, and noted people making the usual visits to long-existing grave areas that are part of the annual *Obon* observances. On these years the grave site areas were filled with rubble, as many of the stones and monuments for family lines had been reduced to rubble, and these areas for graves were not the first priority in the aftermath of the disasters. People came nonetheless to recognize their ancestors and those they had once known, now deceased. In one case in 2013 I stood near a family involving the living grandparent, parent, and child generations. The two children were girls the elder of which appeared to be about seven or eight, and the younger, who could walk and was beginning to talk, about two. Amidst the rubble, the family laid flowers for the ancestors, and also discussed with the two girls their brother, the other child in the family that would have been between them but who had died in the disasters. This and other visits I witnessed to the grave areas amidst the still existing rubble, suggested to me it was not so much the grave sites, stones, or monuments that people---either in such specific cases or more generally in the Japanese custom---were visiting, but that through making such visits people were making visits of tribute to their ancestors and others who

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<sup>10</sup> Takoyaki is a popular Japanese food sometimes described as “octopus balls,” in which small bits of octopus are mixed into a batter which is grilled using small spherical molds to create round balls which are covered with a sauce, and sometimes mayonnaise or other toppings. It is very commonly served and sold on festival occasions in Japan

had passed from this life. Thus they would in this specific case, continue to come to the spots associated with remembering prior to the disasters, despite the surrounding rubble which as a result was part of their lives in the aftermath of the disasters.

Ishinomaki represents an example of the wrapping of space in response to the disaster. Drawing on frameworks by Frederic Jameson (1991) on how culture “wraps” experience, Joy Hendry extensively analyzed Japan as a “Wrapping Culture” showing ways experience is wrapped and made meaningful, including the wrapping of space (1993, pp. 98-122). In 2011 Ishinomaki City was “wrapped” with banners proclaiming some form of the word for persevere, “*gambaru*,” “*gambatte*,” “*gambarō*,” or in the more colloquial Tohoku dialect version, *gambeppe*. With just this one word people were both encouraged to “persevere” and reminded of their collective duty---“let’s persevere.” These banners were found on the train station, city offices, stores, community centers, and schools. In 2011 the wrapping of space in Ishinomaki reflected how a cultural template involving one word, *gambaru*, in various forms could be mobilized to get survivors to carry on amidst the challenge to meaning caused by the disasters. The wrapping of space at schools was particularly noteworthy, as teachers, students, staff, and administrators were all involved in working at “doing normal. By my visit to the same schools in 2013, banners were still wrapping space in the same locations, but their messages had begun to change.

The intense efforts of people to remember, commemorate, and record their experiences, feelings, and thoughts about those who had died and communities that were disrupted, should be considered an important part of recovery work, both of individual lives and areas. Through such work, people were able to carry on in 2011, and were by 2013 beginning to contemplate a future. This is exemplified in the wrapping of space in Ishinomaki. In August 2013 much of Ishinomaki was still wrapped with variations of *gambaru* (persevere), including the more collective *gambarō* (let’s persevere), and the Tohoku dialect version, *gambeppe*. However, the wrappings on the outer connecting corridors of one Ishinomaki school had changed. Whereas the banners of 2011 had admonished, *gambarō Ishinomaki* (let’s persevere, Ishinomaki), they had been replaced with the banners of 2013 proclaiming, “a breath of hope, Ishinomaki” (or “budding of hope”) (*Kibō no ibuki Ishinomaki*) and “take one step towards the future, Ishinomaki” (*mirai e ippon Ishinomaki*). Students were now being informed it was okay and not selfish to dream and have desires for their own futures and that of their community. The banners also suggested it would be okay if this was a slow process taking time for individuals and the community. Similarly at Kennesaw State University’s 2014 conference on “Humanitarian Responses to Crisis,” a Japanese student from Ishinomaki organized an exhibit entitled “Bring Ishinomaki Back Better” emphasizing the future hopes of the younger generation.

### ***Fukushima: The Disaster Guaranteed not to Happen that Did and a People’s Project***

Japan is a country where earthquakes are common, and where in 2011 the coastal areas of Tohoku experienced a huge tsunami following an earthquake for the fourth time in 130 years. Fukushima experienced the disaster which before it occurred area residents were told would never happen---a nuclear power plant meltdown resulting in the release of radioactive water from the *Daiichi* (meaning, number one) nuclear power plant, which is

still ongoing. I had heard about the nuclear reactors in Fukushima while attending a Tohoku regional civil society gathering in Sendai in 2008, held in conjunction with the “Global Article 9 Conference to Abolish War” (Junkerman, 2008; Creighton, 2011) and Japanese citizens’ attempts to maintain Japan’s so-called Peace Constitution and Article 9, the clause in which Japan renounces militarism, against Japanese political leaders’ attempts to eliminate or change it (Creighton, 2011, 2015). Some groups from Fukushima attending the event wanted to educate people about the nuclear reactors in Fukushima, express their opposition to them, and concerns that despite government guarantees of safety no one could really guarantee they would always be safe. They felt that if anything did go wrong, it would be the people of Fukushima who would suffer most, not government leaders in Tokyo or other central cities. Three years later the nuclear disaster in Fukushima made them seem like visionaries rather than fools as those favoring the nuclear reactors sometimes tried to portray them.

A city-wide series of events took place in Fukushima in August 2011, collectively called, “Project Fukushima!” as a grass roots people’s initiative. This included a “Folk Jamboree” of musical performances, theatrical presentations, and art displays. While the events were intended to be grassroots festive activities for what usually was a festive season, they also represented a call for social involvement by Fukushima dwellers, and for local and national governments to listen more to average residents. Those who initiated the project saw its purposes as getting local people talking about Fukushima’s future and then getting the voices of Fukushima people put into policies for its future. The project logo, appearing on banners and T-shirts, was a big red ball similar to the red disc on the Japanese flag, but with a “tag” transforming it into a speech bubble. Thus, while evoking symbolism of the Japanese flag, it shifted the symbolism to the voices of the people via the speech bubble rendition rather than the national political body.

I mentioned my earlier encounters in 2008 with the groups protesting the nuclear reactors to a Project Fukushima! organizer. He smiled, then indicated he knew of such people before the disaster, and used to think they were silly, because the reactors had been there a long time and the government gave assurances they were safe such that he, too--- prior to 3.11---had thought they were safe. After the nuclear disaster of 3.11 he no longer thought those claiming there might someday be an accident were silly. He did not make a declarative statement about whether nuclear power plants should be allowed or not because the conceived purpose of Project Fukushima! was to engage as many Fukushima area dwellers as possible in discussions about the future of Fukushima, to insure that policies oriented at rebuilding the Fukushima area be guided not just by government officials, those in Japan’s core cities, or central development planners, but by local people who understood, knew, and lived the life of the area. Concerns about health and sustainability of natural resources were now also seen as central to the discussions. As mentioned in the introduction, a hydrosocial approach (Kane, 2012) questions the viability of nuclear energy sources by exposing how processes of obtaining it, such as through fracking, pollute water sources. Nuclear power plant disasters such as occurred in Fukushima, reveal as well how the use of nuclear energy poisons water systems in the aftermath of such disasters or breakdowns with serious long-term consequences.

### ***Kamaishi: Rebuilding Community at “Everyone’s House”***

By the summer of 2013, for government and policy planners the initial phase of disaster relief had moved towards an emphasis on getting things “back to business as usual.” However, many community dwellers were still more focused on remembering and commemorating what had happened and their dead, and readjusting their sense of life at personal and community levels. Given the large number of “evacuees” from the disasters, initially many were sheltered in emergency settings such as school gymnasiums. By 2013, these people were now housed in “temporary” dwellings which themselves were becoming new forms of residential communities. Itō, architect for Sendai’s Mediatheque building, began what became known as *Minna no Ie*, or the “Everyone’s House” project. This involved putting up small buildings to serve as community spaces in areas with temporary dwellings to allow communal gathering places (Itō, 2012). One was erected in Kamaishi. Here there were tables for people to sit at and chat together over a cup of tea, a piano for music and collective singing, a television for collective viewing. The “Everyone’s House” project was an attempt to balance desires for privacy and collectivism, by creating spaces for community interaction among those now living in the housing projects, many of whom were used to more community interaction in the places from which they had come. The “Everyone’s House” project was an attempt to work the espoused needs and desires of those from local areas into the policies surrounding the construction of the long-term temporary dwellings for those who were left homeless or needed to be evacuated due to the disasters.

### ***Kesennuma: Matter Misplaced—People in the Water, a Ship on Land***

In many affected areas people attempted to embrace life through art and garden projects. During the *Obon* season of August 2013 an “art park” was constructed with outdoor art installations at the “ground zero” area of Kesennuma, another coastal community hard hit by the tsunami. In addition to visiting ancestral grave sites, people in Kesennuma visited areas and placed flowers where there had once been residential neighborhoods---washed away or reduced to rubble by the disaster. In one of these destroyed neighborhoods was a huge ship, the *Kyōtoku Maru No. 18*, which had become an iconic symbol of the disaster featured on covers of books and photographic magazine collections of the disasters.<sup>11</sup> The ship, in anthropological terms, represented “matter out of place.” Structural and post-structural anthropologists point out that humans derive meaning through establishing categories that define things. Disorder and a sense of chaos arise when things cease to conform to their categorical boundaries, and in the process become matter out of place (Douglas, 2005 [1966]). Seen from a distance the *Kyōtoku Maru No. 18* might appear to be on the ocean, where categorical understandings suggest it belongs. However, it was blown inland by the tsunami and thus sat in a spot where houses used to be. The expected categorical order had been violated and reversed, houses, neighborhoods, people that belonged on land had been swept into the seas, and a huge ship that belonged on water was

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<sup>11</sup> For example, it is the image on the cover of a collection of ethnographic articles on the 3.11 disasters, called *Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011* (Gill, Steger, & Slater, Eds., 2013).

on land where a residential neighborhood had been. In an area close to the ship, someone had planted a garden of sunflowers that were in full bloom. Near the sunflowers was a handwritten sign, asking people to leave them alone and indicating that the person had planted them in that spot every year for the past 27 years. The effort of growing them was an attempt to restore a sense of order, meaning, and continuity with the past. Within days after my visit to this spot news articles around the world reported that the people of Kesennuma had voted on whether to keep the ship and transform it into a commemorative site or destroy it; those favoring its destruction won. The decision was far from unanimous and the Mayor of Kesennuma himself indicated he had wished to retain it as an historic symbol of the disaster. The explanation for the decision given in news reports from those who wanted it destroyed was that seeing it there filled them with sadness.

### ***Yuriage: A Place for Remembering, a Monument for Commemorating***

Yuriage on the outskirts of Natori City also suffered greatly from the tsunami and had been referred to in news reports as the “town that disappeared” or “was washed away.” About 750-800 people, roughly 10% of its population, died and nearly all the rest were forced from their homes. The Yuriage “*Kiroku*,” or “Record” Center was set up in a mobile trailer near what had been the Yuriage Junior High School—a site that became a pivotal point of commemoration for Yuriage dwellers. The Kiroku Center also became a focus of people’s activities of commemorating others, and dealing with their experiences in the disaster. A female volunteer at the Kiroku Center from Natori City, said she decided to volunteer the day after the disaster when hundreds of evacuees began entering the school near her home to be sheltered in the school gym. She was shocked. She knew the disasters had happened, but was in near disbelief that they had struck so close in nearby Yuriage, even though Natori City itself was intact. By volunteering at the center, she felt she was enacting collective and community values of helping others in difficult times.

The Kiroku Center allowed people a chance to discuss their memories over knitting and embroidery groups (for women), tea chat groups (for men and mixed adult groups), taiko (drumming) and theatrical groups (for youth), and art groups (for children). Often the voices of children are underrepresented in attempts to understand such disasters and how they affect people. The Kiroku Center enabled children to express their thoughts and feelings. As policy makers planned reconstruction of Yuriage, one Kiroku Center art project had elementary school aged children make models of how they would rebuild Yuriage. One girl designed a building on “stilts” to allow waters to pass under the base residential area, with a tower on the house top people could escape to in a disaster. At the top of the tower she put a helicopter landing pad.

In the year following the disaster, people of Yuriage devoted their efforts to building a memorial at the junior high school, where several students had died. With the surrounding dwellings gone and vacated, the school, although damaged and beyond use, stood alone in the area; the clock at the center of its main building stopped at 2:46, the time the earthquake struck. During the *Obon* season people placed flowers on the memorial, using it as another site to commemorate the dead in addition to the usual grave visits. Many ran their fingers along the engraved names of the newly dead from the disaster in the monument, perhaps to enact a sense of more direct contact with those gone. The numbers of those visiting the site, suggested it was used as a memorial to others who had died and not solely the junior

high school students. By 2013, despite the school and monument having been the focus of village dwellers attention, the school was set for demolition on the grounds it was damaged and potentially unsafe.

**Figure 1: Yuriage Jr. High School and Memorial**



Source: Photo by Millie Creighton

The decision did not necessarily reflect the desires of Yuriage dwellers, and those I spoke with objected to it because they felt the venue had become their place of commemoration. Another plan had been made to raise the land level of Yuriage. Again, this was not necessarily desired by Yuriage dwellers and no one I met favored it; many had protested it and continued to complain about it. Such plans involve raising the ground and bolstering shorelines for additional support in case of a future tsunami, and thus seem logical to policy planners based in urban cores such as Tokyo. However, local dwellers had concerns other problems might result, such as danger from landslides or shifting lands. In many of the affected communities fishing was a primary form of livelihood and one of the work activities of area fishers is observing the sea/ocean. Many talked about spending a great deal of time each day observing the waters and gaining a sense of their rhythms and flows, important knowledge for later activities on boats. They believed buttressing shorelines and raising ground levels could lead to misinterpreting the waters, endangering fishers. Thus local dwellers' objections to certain policies were not based on lack of

engineering knowledge, but concerns about losing other knowledge essential to their work and safety.

The disparity between the government's policies in the aftermath of the disasters and what many of the local dwellers thought would be better for the area, can be considered in reference to the call for a hydrosocial paradigm to consider such disasters (Kane, 2012), and in light of other increasingly relevant discussions of how human lives interface with the rubble of destruction and the aftermath of disasters. A hydrosocial approach recognizes that people living on, near, or with waterways for many generations have certain forms of knowledge about how to live in such conditions, and places more emphasis on understanding their perspectives and the rationales for them in formulating policies and plans for future development. In the case of the school, the government plan to destroy it, saw it simply as rubble to be removed. As rubble it perhaps partly represented the possibility of danger as was asserted. It may have also represented something not alluded to, that such disasters could and had happened, thus not representing a noble monument to smooth governing or one that could reflect national pride. For the people of the area, however, the school even if in the form of "rubble" had become an important and pivotal site of interaction and interface, a site of memory and commemoration, and of working through their trauma to regain meaning in their lives.

### ***Gambatte* (Persevere!), *Sōteigai* ("Who Could Have Known?"), and *Tokubetsu Zei* (Special Tax)**

To understand the context of the 3.11 disasters it is pertinent to consider the relationship between Tohoku and the national polity of Japan based in more core areas, particularly Tokyo. This section attempts to do that by looking at some of the discourses and responses surrounding the disasters, an espoused cultural value on *gambaru* or *gambatte* (perseverance), the rhetoric of *sōteigai*, unimaginable, or beyond expectations (Bestor, 2013, p. 767), and the national government's new "special tax," an additional income tax levied on all residents of Japan to supposedly deal with the costs of the disasters. It has been pointed out that in the relationship between Tohoku and the national state of Japan, Tohoku is neither treated as an equal partner nor equal region from the perspective of the governing power of the state, based in Tokyo. Yuko Nishimura (2014), for example, discusses the history of this relationship as one in which the Tohoku region was colonized by a larger power, and suggests this remains the operative relationship. The Fukushima nuclear plant disaster reflects the desire of the national government and power agencies to place nuclear plants in more outlying regions, and suggests the lesser power of these less core regions. The opposition to the placement of such plants, and activities of groups from Fukushima against their presence such as those I met in 2008 prior to the disasters, suggests that at least some of the region's residents saw the relationship this way.

### ***Gambaru***

Discussions about uses of *gambaru* (in various forms of the word) began following the disasters. In Sherry Ortner's (1973) terms, *gambaru* is a "key symbol" that summarizes several cultural themes at once, in this case the Japanese value on perseverance, the expectation one cannot give up, the suggestion that success or at least improvement will



come eventually if one perseveres, and the duties and obligations one has to oneself and to others to keep at something even when one has lost the will to do so. It was impressive to witness the extent to which this cultural idiom could compel people to keep on going, and indeed persevere in the aftermath of catastrophic disasters. Criticism surrounding the use of *gambaru* came from those who felt it was used as a panacea to address all problems by government agencies that were bumbling responses to the disasters and placing responsibility on those affected to overcome simply through perseverance, rather than enacting more adequate responses for those affected.

The use of *gambaru* also often seemed to have quite different meanings within affected communities and at the national level. Within communities it was a way of addressing personal sufferings, loss, and psychological trauma experienced by area survivors, to enable them to “hang in there” until they could direct themselves at rebuilding their futures. National campaigns often referenced both Tohoku and Japan (i.e., *gambarō Tohoku*, *gambarō Nihon*—persevere Tohoku, persevere Japan) usurping the sense of the disasters as Tohoku’s, and more strongly making them Japan’s disasters. National slogans also seemed to merge “rebuilding” Tohoku or Japan with narratives of “returning Japan” to a former prominence, at times seemingly to a more pristine “Japan-like Japan,” and a call for greater patriotic nationalism on the part of all Japanese.

### *Sōteigai*

One refrain frequently heard following the disasters involved *sōteigai*, something impossible to foresee, or as Bestor (2013 p, 767) puts it “beyond expectations” or “unimaginable.” Bestor points out this became a buzzword of government spokespeople and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (*Tokyo Den ryoku*) also known as TEPCO. The word became a defense against criticisms of the government for its failure to ensure better safeguards before the disasters, have better policies to address disasters in place, and respond more efficiently to disasters. It had particular cache as a response to criticisms about the nuclear disaster. *Sōteigai* suggested the magnitude and resulting consequences of the disasters were simply unthinkable prior to 3.11 and therefore no one could have put into place policies to react to the situations that resulted.

Despite discourses of *sōteigai*, people from communities affected and elsewhere in Japan questioned the idea that it was all unimaginable. First, although the initial disaster, the earthquake that triggered the other two, was the largest known, massive quakes in the area were known, hence a large earthquake should have been imaginable given their historical occurrence. It was the fourth time in 130 years (1896, 1933, 1960, and 2011) that the Tohoku area had been struck by a massive earthquake followed by tsunami (Bestor, 2013, p. 764). Posted warnings from previous occurrences reminded people to expect a tsunami to follow a major earthquake. One of my reflections on the assertions it was “unimaginable” came from previous research on Japan’s department stores in which I learned that large department stores often have equipment and specialized staff always monitoring seismographic activity in areas of store buildings not accessible to customers, in order to respond to such “unimaginable” occurrences should they occur. Apparently, large-scale retailers can consider putting such precautions into place in order to respond quickly to something not expected, whereas the inability to prepare for the unexpected seemed a viable defense to government and TEPCO spokespeople.

It seems questionable to assert as “unimaginable” a large earthquake occurring in an earthquake prone country or such an earthquake being followed by a large tsunami since history indicates this is what happens. Another pertinent reflection I had on claims of *sōteigai* occurred while watching a video made as the disaster unfolded in Yuriage. As the video begins everything seems normal to anyone who has spent time in such rural areas of Japan. It is some time before things begin to change, and then at first slowly; water appears along the roadways, later cars and other things begin to be taken away by the water. Then the full drama of the tsunami sweeps into play and one sees the violence of the waters with houses and everything else being swept off. According to a worker at the Kiroku Center, the video was made from the upper floor of the Yuriage Junior High School just near the school clock that ever since the disaster was stopped at 2:46 p.m. by a Yuriage Junior High School second year student (making the student 13 years old given the standard ages at which Japanese children proceed through the school system), on a cell phone the student took out, and started recording on when the earthquake struck. It seems the video existed because a 13-year-old school student could imagine that something big was coming, despite the government’s and TEPCO’s assertions of this being “unimaginable.”

Failures to prevent and respond to the third disaster, too, were couched in *sōteigai*, that it was “unimaginable” that such a series of events as an earthquake and tsunami would trigger a nuclear plant meltdown subjecting Fukushima, the rest of Japan, and potentially the world, to release of radiation poisoning. As indicated, I had heard of the Fukushima nuclear plants three years prior to the disaster while in Sendai in 2008 conducting other research. To reiterate, groups from Fukushima were attending the event I attended, whose members opposed the nuclear plants in Fukushima, and were trying to educate people about their concerns. They talked with me at length, indicating the government always said the nuclear reactors were safe, but that they thought one could not absolutely guarantee this, and that if anything went wrong, they---Fukushima dwellers---not people in Tokyo, would be the ones to suffer or suffer most. Three years later, they were shown to have been correct. If “After Fukushima” I had first heard these sorts of comments, I might have wondered if people were only afterwards convinced that prior to the disaster they had been reassured the reactors were “safe” and that nothing could go wrong. However, they told me this three years before any of us knew that someday we would be referring to 3.11. Although *sōteigai* discourses presented the accident at the nuclear power plant as “unimaginable” it is clear that the presence of such groups claiming an accident could possibly occur or could not be guaranteed not to occur, shows that members of the citizenry could---and did---“imagine” that it was possible for something to go wrong, for a nuclear power plant accident to occur.

### ***The New Tokubetsu Zei or Special Tax***

A new “special tax” levied on all Japanese and non-Japanese residing and working in Japan went into effect January 2013 called, “*Fukkō Tokubetsu Shotoku Zei*,” or Disaster/s Special Income Tax, and often referred to as *Tokubetsu Zei*, Special Tax, or “Tokubetsu Tax” in short. The tax was levied as an additional tax based on income, to be withdrawn or paid for the next 25 years. I was living in Japan at the time the special tax went into effect, and many Japanese I spoke with were surprised by it. Although there had been discussions about the possibility of instituting something like a special tax, many people felt they did not know that the decision to do so had been made. Even those who handled financial

payments at the place I worked indicated they were surprised by it, and not sure how to apply the tax the first month in January.<sup>12</sup> The “special tax” was supposedly levied to address the costs of dealing with the Tohoku disasters of 3.11. It is pertinent to recognize that it was levied in a country also having experienced two decades of stagnant economic growth, and a burgeoning unemployment rate. The new “special tax” thus came at a time when many average Japanese had long already been struggling through economic difficulties. There were sentiments of empathy for disaster ridden Tohoku, but skepticism over the new tax. One woman indicated she would not mind paying the additional tax if she really thought it was going to help people in Tohoku. But, she asked me, if I really thought it would go to help Tohoku. Another woman said, “Don’t you think there will be another major disaster before the 25 years is up?” Her question, echoed the feelings of many that the special “temporary” tax might never go away.

Reports of the funds’ first usages, critically suggested it was an excuse to increase tax revenue for other problems under the guise of the Tohoku disasters. The first uses of the money from the new special tax funds were reported as used to purchase new fire trucks for Tokyo, Japan’s most prominent city and one not located in Tohoku. The rationale was that some of Tokyo’s fire trucks were sent to Tohoku to assist following the disasters and therefore were exposed to radiation contamination from the Fukushima plants. While some of Tokyo’s fire trucks were deployed this way, the rationale seemed the reverse of government stances that the amount of radiation being released was not proven to be harmful (at least to people despite supposedly being so to fire trucks). The second reported usage was monies given to the whaling industry to boost morale, which was seen as low due to opposition by environmental and animal rights groups. While some Tohoku areas affected by the disasters, such as Kesenuma, conduct whaling activities, the rationale for this expenditure was indirect, involving the idea that seeing the whaling industry’s morale boosted would boost morale among those who experienced the disasters. More recent reports also claim the special tax is not necessarily going to Tohoku relief. A Hokkaido Shinbun (Hokkaido Newspaper) (2013) editorial from October 10 reported that \$23 million of the fund were used to counter the Sea Shepard’s Whaling Disruption, and \$600,000 of it used to upgrade motor ways in distant Okinawa, along with several other misuses. Reports of such usages call into question whether the special tax rationalized and passed as a means of dealing with the financial fallout of the disasters was not, or has not become, an additional means of collecting tax monies for any purposes to which the government wishes to apply it. It both creates an additional strain on all Japanese and residents of Japan already feeling the difficulties of strained financial times, and reflects a potentially persistent attitude towards Tohoku and other regions less central to Tokyo that their issues are not granted the same priority as central areas.

### Concluding Notes

Ending this essay with “conclusions” does not seem appropriate because those who experienced the disasters are still dealing with them in their daily lives and will be doing

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<sup>12</sup> Specifically, in this case, they did not know whether the tax was supposed to be applied to foreigners such as myself or only to Japanese, and initially did not withhold money for the tax from the pay of foreigners, making it necessary to withhold larger allotments on subsequent pay periods.

so for a long time to come. There are still an estimated 250,000 people who remain dislocated because of the disasters, communities that still require rebuilding for anyone to return, and some---those in the affected Fukushima nuclear evacuation zone---are places to which people may never be able to return and hence must rebuild their lives elsewhere. In many cases people have been and will continue for a long time to live their lives in the presence of the disasters' rubble, revealing it as "the afterlife of destruction" (Gordillo, 2014). This essay suggests that the emphasis on removing the rubble, and reconstructing buildings and other infrastructure is not the only or necessarily foremost aspect of restoring affected communities. The disasters did cause collapse of buildings and infrastructure, rendering them uninhabitable or unusable for their previous purposes. However, the disasters also ruptured people's lives, the futures they had envisioned and expected until that day. For many, the disasters evoked issues of meaning in life they needed to deal with as well as the need to rebuild dwellings and other forms of material requirements.

The road forward will be long and not easy for those still struggling with the aftermath of the 3.11 disasters. Part of the struggle in the Japanese context, involves the characteristics of rural communities with close ties and interwoven relationships that link the nexus of people and place. The communities affected and destroyed by Japan's 3.11 disasters, were for those living in them valuable memoryscapes. In such communities place---land, water, mountains, plants, animal life, seasonal cycles---and the people in them, merge in people's memories, and sense of identity strongly connected to place. Uprooting and transplantation elsewhere is not a simple solution, neither is returning to rebuild communities where so many were so suddenly rendered no longer part of the place, at least among the living in it. For those coming from such communities who experienced and survived the disasters memory work and mourning work is important to the rebuilding of lives, identities, a sense of community, tradition, and continuity with the past needed to help envision a pathway into the future.

Reconstruction policies should listen to and consider the needs and desires of local dwellers. Kiwa Nakano (2014) discusses the reconstruction of Genkai Island in Fukuoka Prefecture, after an earthquake in 2005 destroyed 107 of the community's 232 households. Local people were very much involved in the overall reconstruction process, from planning to implementation. They formed committees in the usual manner of community processes along occupational, age, and gender lines that worked towards understanding people's needs and desires for the rebuilding process. This extensive local involvement is thought to have contributed to the successful reconstruction of the Genkai-Island community, hence providing a good example of cohesive and integrative rebuilding for Tohoku reconstruction.

Another issue upon which there is at this point no full conclusion, is the nuclear power plant in Fukushima Prefecture. While the plant has been brought under "control" to some degree, it is still releasing radioactive materials. Furthermore it is not fully clear if its current seemingly stabilized state can be guaranteed to continue or whether something else might occur, even something currently "beyond expectation" or "unimaginable." Since Japan's 3.11 disasters nuclear plants have been shut down for review, and the country has been enmeshed in discussions and debates over whether to reopen them or disband nuclear reactors. Often citizens' groups protest their reopening, while government leaders argue they are needed for inexpensive power and the problems can now be addressed such that

they will be “safe” in the future. It is also not certain the degree to which such decisions will be made at local or national levels.

While considering these issues, I was invited to attend a series of Japan-Canada policy discussions for disaster response, recovery, and risk management. Arriving at the country’s capitol, Ottawa, I encountered at this international airport advertisements promoting nuclear energy proclaiming that if people were serious about addressing climate change they should embrace nuclear energy. Why? Because according to the advertisements it was “safe, reliable, affordable.” As a scholar of Japan, and someone who had been in the devastated areas including Fukushima, I could not help but reflect upon these advertisements. Although there are many different opinions and stances on which energy sources should be used in the future, “After-Fukushima,” it seemed odd to see nuclear energy declaratively characterized as “safe, reliable, affordable.”<sup>13</sup> What happened in Fukushima, as at previous other locations in the world, draws attention to the reality that one cannot say for sure that nuclear reactors will be safe, and stands as testament that nuclear accidents can happen and happen in habitats of human civilian dwellers resulting in massive displacements and loss of life. Moreover, taking the hydrosocial theoretical approach to nuclear energy reveals indirect ways that water resources are polluted in obtaining nuclear energy and further problematizes counter-narratives that advocate the possibility of containment. The emission of radioactive elements in water from the disaster affected plant in Fukushima shows that this poisoning of water sources is a serious reality with direct and widespread consequences.

Not only were the reactors eventually not “safe;” they were not “reliable” and have not yet been rendered into a completely “reliable” condition. The nuclear disaster aspect of 3.11’s triple disasters, also problematizes whether nuclear energy is “affordable” or an inexpensive (or less expensive) form of energy. If the expenses of dealing with the nuclear plant and radiation disaster, which include clean-up costs, costs from the destruction of much of the land (some of which may not be habitable nor usable for humans again), the costs of keeping large numbers of evacuees in “temporary” shelters which are becoming not so temporary, and the medical costs to accrue over time both for the regular health checks that must now be undergone by area dwellers and treatment of ailments that might arise in the future due to radiation exposure are considered, nuclear energy as witnessed by the Fukushima disaster is shown not to be such an “affordable” option. As previously discussed, the costs, and projected continuing costs, of the disasters are so high, that Japan instituted a “*tokubetsu*” or “special” tax that everyone residing in Japan must pay on top of existing taxes already being paid, levied as a way of dealing with the expenses of addressing the Tohoku disasters, including the Fukushima nuclear radiation disaster. The new “special tax” has been put in place for the next 25 years and even this could prove insufficient, especially given the likelihood of additional disasters. It is another financial

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, this should have seemed odd even “Before Fukushima” given the history of nuclear plant accidents in civilian areas since 1952 beginning with the nuclear plant disaster at the Chalk River facilities in Ontario, Canada, and including others in Washington state, at Chernobyl, etc. Some people (none that I know of who work on Japan) even describe Fukushima as a “good” example of a nuclear accident—meaning one that the response to was “fairly good” and the result “not so bad.” As a scholar and a Japan specialist I find the concept of a “not so bad” nuclear radiation accident unacceptable and something that should be “unimaginable.”

strain on a populace many of whom are already struggling given Japan's two decades of economic difficulties. The nuclear reactor disaster in Fukushima thus challenges the concept that nuclear plants are "affordable," just as it questions they can be "safe" and "reliable."

Policy pursued to address Japan's 3.11 disasters, should consider the varying perspectives of different communities and the people in or from them. Drawing on Kane's theoretical work (Kane, 2012, Kane & Brisman, 2014) policy planning should involve a more hydrosocial paradigm and understanding of local lives and cultures of those situated within the communities involved. Despite all being part of the Tohoku region, there is variability among the communities and in understandings of the concept of community. A uniform approach to reconstruction of devastated areas and reclaiming of people's lives should be avoided, and instead policies recognizing that disasters are local and have local meanings should be the priority. Different areas were affected differently by 3.11's three disasters. Additionally, those from different communities find meaning in commemorating the disasters and the dead in different ways, and invariably find meaning in reclaiming other specific elements of their lives or traditions, such as festivals and folk performances or customs. In thinking back to the three-year anniversary event to commemorate 3.11 that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, holding it was partly a reminder that Japan's 3.11 disasters are not past tense to those from affected communities still struggling to rebuild and reclaim their lives and cultural traditions. The motivations for myself and I believe the rest of us involved, fit with sentiments rendered by Bestor when he writes:

As human beings---as well as scholars and observers of Asia---we must honor the memories of the many victims of these and other disasters, and celebrate and support the efforts by survivors to rebuild their lives, their communities, and their societies. (2013, p. 763)

Policies attempting to incorporate the above imperative, must also recognize local knowledge, feelings, and understandings, and be attuned to how people in communities affected find meaning in terms of facing, addressing, and commemorating the disasters and their experiences of living with them in the future.

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