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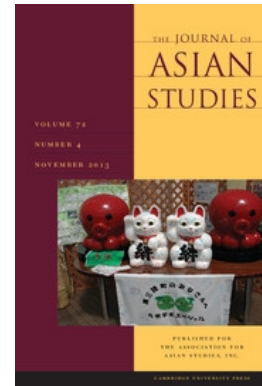
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Disasters, Natural and Unnatural: Reflections on March 11, 2011, and Its Aftermath

THEODORE C. BESTOR

ON MARCH 11, 2011, at 2:46 p.m. local time, an earthquake with an epicenter 130 kilometers east of Sendai off the Pacific coast of northern Japan shook the Tohoku region more violently than any tremor in a thousand years.¹ The quake was approximately 9.0 in magnitude, and it in turn triggered a set of tsunami hurtling across the Pacific Ocean, striking first the coast of Tohoku with waves of unprecedented height and strength, along a coastline stretching roughly 400 kilometers. In Fukushima, 180 kilometers west-southwest of the epicenter, 15-meter waves roared over seawalls supposedly protecting a nuclear reactor built just a few meters from the ocean's edge, starting a chain of events that resulted in an explosion the following day that began the release of radioactive materials (which continues still), sparking high anxiety if not palpable panic in Tokyo, the center of which is 240 kilometers to the south-southwest of the Fukushima nuclear complex.

The enormous toll of disasters across Asia has become all too familiar in the past few years: 15,883 fatalities and 2,654 missing in northeastern Japan, according to an official report (National Police Agency of Japan, n.d.); the estimated 88,000 victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake; the roughly quarter-million souls lost in the Indian Ocean-Banda Aceh tsunami in 2004; and the millions of people displaced in the South Asian floods of 2007 and the Thai floods of 2011, and even as this goes to press, the unfolding devastation in the Philippines.²

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.

3.11: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The triple disasters—formally known as the “Higashi Nihon Daishinsai” (the Great Eastern Japan Disasters)—on a day now and forever known in Japanese as *san-ichi-ichi*,

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¹Data on the earthquake's magnitude and location are from the United States Geological Survey (2011). See also EERI (2011).

²The *New York Times* in 2009 reported approximately 70,000 deaths and 18,000 missing after the Sichuan earthquake (*New York Times* 2009); for Banda Aceh and other Indian Ocean nations hit by the tsunami, BBC News reported up to 280,000 fatalities as of January 2005 (BBC News 2005); NPR reported that flooding in South and Southeast Asia in 2007 displaced over 20,000,000 people in India and Bangladesh (NPR 2007); and the Thai floods of 2011 are detailed in *The Atlantic* (Taylor 2011).

3.11, are well known to the world, for we heard about them almost instantaneously through e-mails, Twitter feeds, and social media, and watched them unfold on rebroadcasts of Japanese news programs, viral videos, and very soon from global network news reporters clambering through the rubble.

This unprecedented global e-awareness of and e-interaction surrounding the events of 3.11 is a defining characteristic of these disasters, for as Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand (2012) demonstrate, social media in this digitally saturated society not only enabled communication along many different dimensions and at many scales of intimacy, but also profoundly shaped the experience of the disasters for many Japanese, including those caught up in the disasters and those who were watching and worrying from farther afield. Digital media (and mediation) are important themes to which I will return.

But first, some reflection on what is the character of a disaster or catastrophe is in order. Thinking as a Japan specialist whose discipline is anthropology and who is attuned to historical studies, I am trying to understand how disaster or catastrophe fits into the narratives created through ethnography and through history. Should we focus on the present and “the event” as an analytic framework (Caton 1999), or on the *longue durée* both of the aftermath and also of precursor events that shaped the potential for catastrophic results? How do these two framing devices come together?

It is no surprise for anyone with even passing familiarity with Japanese earthquakes to learn that the Tohoku coast has been struck by four major tsunami in the past 130 years: 1896, 1933, 1960, and of course 2011.³ And so, should we be attentive to the singular event? Or attentive to the contexts, which include foreknowledge and surprise, as well as recovery and memory?

I am certainly not attempting to simply intellectualize 3.11. “How fast can we theorize massive destruction?” would be a call to race together toward inhumanity. A moment of epistemological doubt is not remotely equivalent in weight to the real crises caused by the earthquake, the tsunami, and the ongoing radiation leakage from the Fukushima nuclear plant. (And I am not suggesting that the Tohoku disasters have triggered—or will trigger—a paradigmatic shift in worldview such as that which the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 inspired in philosophers of the Enlightenment.)

For people like myself who live and work outside Japan, but teach about it and try to make sense of it to students and colleagues who also live and study outside Japan, a disaster of this magnitude raises unsettling questions of what the real-life consequences will be for the future of a society whose contours we thought we could generally imagine. Equally importantly, it raises questions and issues about what we thought we knew before the disasters occurred, which are only revealed to be incomplete or erroneous understandings *after* the event.

This sounds a bit like *Alice in Wonderland*: if we look at Japan before the disaster, through the lens of the disasters themselves, do we see a different Japan than we would have thought we saw if the disasters had never occurred?

³Gregory Smits (2011) presents a compelling overview of the many precursors to the events of 3.11.

A bit more straightforwardly, the disasters of 3.11 certainly changed Japan in many short-term and possibly long-term ways; does it also alter retroactively what we thought we knew about Japan beforehand? Does the present change the past? (The answer is obviously yes, insofar as the present impels us to reexamine the past to find clues and answers about questions and issues that we would not or could not have previously thought to pose.)

STEREOTYPES AND ON THE GROUND DATA

On March 11 and for the next few weeks, most of my colleagues and students and I were relentlessly scouring the mediaverse for any news we could find, and trading every scrap of information we could get from our friends and contacts in Japan. The idea quickly took hold among us that the scope of the reporting and mediation, and the immediacy of the social media, offered us—even at a distance—an opportunity to see events unfold in real time on both a macro- and many micro-scales.

As the days wore on, I started to actually listen to what commentators—generally American—were saying about the disasters, not listening simply to glean bits and pieces of information but paying attention to the “story,” the narrative, the spin. And I began to compare it with all the local information my colleagues and I had gleaned from social media, Japanese broadcasts, and so forth. American media comments generally fell into two broad categories. First, the Japanese government had failed and was weak and badly coordinated, unprepared for disaster, and functioning chaotically! Second, the Japanese people were remarkably well behaved, orderly, and stoic.

Astonishingly, the media had painstakingly discovered that the Japanese elite and the Japanese everyperson were acting precisely as established stereotypes would have it!

The critique of the ineffectual government elite reflected a line of commentary that dates back at least to the beginning of the long recession that began in the early 1990s, at the start of the so-called “lost decade,” now going on toward the lost quarter century: government by inertia, the inability to respond with initiative, and amateurish political leadership. The open questions both before and after 3.11 were whether Japanese political and bureaucratic institutions were capable of responding to great crises, and, even more fundamentally, whether they were capable of pursuing change. These questions remain open.⁴

As an anthropologist, the second set of stereotypes—those that portrayed the admirably calm, well-behaved, and stoic Japanese people—caught my eye. Not because I think these characterizations are entirely or necessarily wrong, but because the news media seemed to be stuck with images rooted in Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) and Nakane Chie’s *Japanese Society* (1970), which constructed what Harumi Befu (1980) called the “group model” of Japanese culture and society: a portrayal of a tightly structured social system, internally consistent on most levels, and homogeneously based on harmony, group orientation, self-sacrifice, paternalistic hierarchy, consensus, in-group solidarity, and cohesiveness. After at least two generations of social science research about Japan that has examined conflict, competition, alienation,

⁴Richard J. Samuels’s recent book, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* (2013), directly examines political and bureaucratic responses to the disasters.

minority statuses, social movements to address gender inequality, the human costs imposed by rigidly conformist social norms, and the great diversity of lifestyles and sub-cultures in contemporary Japan, it was disheartening to have Japanese responses to an unprecedented crisis being reduced to homogeneous groupism, often referred to in the Western media after March 11 as a reflection of “Japanese cultural DNA.”

Had the work of a couple of generations of Japan scholars taught the world nothing about the complexities of Japanese culture, society, and behavior? Could it really be so simple? Ordinary Japanese react to disasters simply by reverting to “form,” *really*?

And this led me to wonder whether one could apprehend and analyze what was happening on the ground, in almost real time. As an ethnographer considering this from a great distance, how could one grasp things happening on the ground, how could one recover the immediate lived experiences, the stuff that brings ethnographies to life? What did we already know about Japan that would help illuminate the events and responses in meaningful contexts? And, conversely, how could what we might learn from events on the ground shape or reshape our understandings of Japan—the processes and patterns of culture and society—in significant ways? What could we try to learn that would help make sense of both the intimate and the broad impacts of the several disasters?

My colleagues and I almost immediately seized on the idea to try to preserve and analyze the digital record as it was being formed, the record closest to the various ground zeros, closest to the lived experiences of those who survived; trying to access and collect the “born digital” content of the Web to attempt to record an almost ethnographic account of what would very, very quickly become history.

By the end of March, the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard University had begun to systematically save as much digital media as possible related to the disasters of 3.11. From the beginning, it was clear that the scope and immediacy of digital reporting and mediation of the triple disasters were extremely important documentation, but were also potentially quite ephemeral. So in collaboration with many other organizations, this collection effort was formalized as the “Digital Archive of Japan’s 2011 Disasters” (jdarchive.org).⁵

JAPAN’S BLACK SWAN

Returning to the questions raised by commentary in the immediate aftermath of March 11, an establishment Japanese response to the criticism that the government

⁵The JDArchive is accessible without charge, and we encourage anyone with interest in the topics both to browse freely and to add new sites and digital files to the ever-expanding crowd-sourced archive (jdarchive.org). As I write this, the JDArchive has recorded and at least partially indexed over 1.2 million digital records about the 3.11 disasters and their aftermaths. The JDArchive is a project of active collaboration among many organizations, including Harvard University’s Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, metaLAB (at) Harvard, Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis, National Diet Library of Japan, Yahoo! Japan, Internet Archive, NCC (North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources), Asahi Shimbun AJW, Sendai Mediatheque, Tohoku University and Michinoku Shinrokuden, NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), 311 Memories (National Institute of Informatics), 311 Marugoto Archives, Hypercities, Tokyo Foundation, Sakura on Project, and many others (<http://jdarchive.org/en/partners>).

was bumbling, inept, and paralyzed, particularly regarding the nuclear component of the disasters, was forming. That defense was couched in terms of “*soteigai*,” a word that can be translated as “beyond expectations,” “outside the realm of imagination,” or “unimaginable.”⁶ This became an instant buzzword with government spokespeople, representatives of the owners and operators of the Fukushima nuclear plant (*Tōkyō Denryoku*, the Tokyo Electric Power Company; universally referred to by its acronym, TEPCO), and the journalists who cover them. The basic point was that it had been inconceivable that events of such magnitude could occur and interact so simultaneously with such catastrophic effects. The cascading nature of the disasters, and the rapidly expanding scope and scale of each new set of problems, was overwhelming the ability to respond, and could not have been prepared for in advance.

The term “*soteigai*” brings to mind the concept of the “black swan” put forward by Nassim Nicholas Taleb ([2004] 2010). Taleb discusses the impact of what he calls “black swan” events—those things that are as exceedingly rare and unpredictable as the birth of black swans themselves—on complex systems: financial, political, social, technological.

I paraphrase his three fundamental criteria for defining a “black swan” event:

- (1) Such events are undirected and unpredicted; they are outliers, rarities, and things that lay far, far outside the realm of regular expectations (*soteigai*, if you will). Nothing in the past convincingly points to the possibility of such an event or occurrence.
- (2) The event or events themselves have a sudden and dramatic impact, affecting large-scale systems as well as micro-local ones, across many dimensions of economic, political, and social life.
- (3) And, although these events are startling—if that is not too weak a word—from the viewpoint of the *contemporary* observer, the events themselves may be explicable in many ways after the fact. Such events are only predictable in hindsight, not in a prospective way.

The extent to which the events of March 11 are “black swans,” or not, leads me back to my earlier question: What do we know after the fact, and what could we have known beforehand, but didn’t see? The point is not simply to refine categorical typologies of “black swan” events, but to try to grasp how such massive events transform the society they affect and how they may alter our understanding of the dynamics of that society.

CATASTROPHES

As the literary critic Rob Nixon (2011, 3) notes, disasters are not all of a kind: “Different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. . . . Avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a

⁶Michael Fisch (forthcoming) discusses the term *soteigai* in detail in an essay titled “Mediations on the ‘Unimaginable’ (*Soteigai*).”

visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match.” His examples are of “fast violence,” happening in “spectacular time,” the stuff of cable news and the 24-hour news cycle, which contrasts with “slow violence”—“a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”⁷ Here, I begin with the spectacular, but the slow and out-of-sight is also important for considering the events of 3.11.

In our everyday understandings and experiences (close at hand or from afar), disasters and catastrophes seem to be fast violence, things that seem to come suddenly out of the blue, not part of, but apart from the normal fabric of life. Yet we know them beforehand; they occur within historical and cultural contexts. They are known events coming at unknowable times.

Jishin, *kaminari*, *kaji*, *oyaji*—earthquake, thunderbolt, fire, father—are the four things to fear in Japanese proverbial wisdom: a cautionary phrase that reminds Japanese that danger, in the form of cataclysms of natural origin or of exploding human rage, is ever present. And indeed, Japanese history is studded with disasters of various types—some of natural origin, some of human commission, and many a mingling of both. The Kantō earthquake of 1923, Minamata disease in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, or the Aum Shinrikyō gas attacks, followed shortly by the Kobe-Hanshin earthquake, both in 1995. Natural and unnatural disasters are woven throughout Japanese history as unintended (or “slow”) consequences of religion, demography, military expansion, modernization, and even fashion (Walker 2011).

Catastrophes are prefigured with tropes and narratives that are familiar both in forethought and hindsight. The anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff (1988) pioneered the study of “the cultural life of things,” in which they and their collaborators outlined a framework for looking at the “cultural biographies” of objects—and I would extend this to include categories of events—in terms of trajectories of meaning that adhere to objects as they move across time: from being anticipated (or unexpected), to being realized, to being consumed (or experienced), to being celebrated (or grieved), to being recalled or memorialized, and to be embellished in the retelling.

One could, perhaps, think of Proust’s beloved madeleines going from the hands of the baker, to those of the shopper, then the consumer, the writer, and the reader, and on to becoming a metaphor, as marking stages in the biography of that particular cultural object. In my own research (Bestor 2000, 2004), I have examined the cultural biographies of bluefin tuna—from wild fish, to commodity, to plates of sashimi, to objects of international controversy—from the perspective of “cultural biographies” from fish, to catch, to seafood, to becoming a cultural marked type of culinary delicacy, to the cultural cachet (or cultural capital, to use Bourdieu’s [1990] phrase) that accrues to the connoisseurs of bluefin tuna.

⁷Nixon’s (2011) meaning here is very similar to what the anthropologist Paul Farmer (2004) refers to as “structural violence.”

Buttery sponge cakes and raw, red meat are trivial examples, especially in the context of a discussion of catastrophic events. But I would propose that one could regard catastrophes as cultural events, possessing what Appadurai and Kopytoff (1988) call “cultural biographies.” These involve sets of expected or expectable events, images, responses, and resolutions, subject to similar processes of sense-making, meaning-making, memory-making, and forgetting, as the trajectory of that event cuts through but lingers in the consciousnesses of those who may anticipate and plan for it; for those who experience it; for those who respond to it; for those who survive and shape their memories of it; and for observers both near and far who attempt to place the event or events into some narrative of meaning, significance, or memorialization.⁸

As Peter Duus (2012, 175) reminds us, for contemporary Japanese, disaster is “always within living memory.” Tohoku has been hit repeatedly, in living memory and far beyond, with major tsunami. Tokyo and Yokohama were destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake (September 1, 1923); the earthquake of 1995 devastated the city of Kobe and laid bare the inadequacies of Japanese government responses to crises at that time. This memory is reinforced annually on September 1, in nationwide earthquake preparedness drills that underline the basic elements of safety and evacuation; no doubt March 11 will become another national occasion for annual drills and awareness.⁹

We know disasters and catastrophes through history, and through science, as suggested by a 2003 poster for an exhibition at the National Museum of Science in Tokyo, commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake (see figure 1). Note that this exhibition at a science museum also shows another way in which earthquakes are culturally familiar: the map of Japan rests on the back of a gigantic catfish. This reflects the Japanese folklore that the earth’s tremors are caused by restless catfish (*namazu*) beneath the earth’s surface. Woodblock prints (called *namazu-e*) of catfish being subdued became a popular genre in the late Tokugawa period, especially after the Ansei Earthquake of 1855, with its epicenter close to Edo (present-day Tokyo, see figure 2).¹⁰

But much more poignantly, the cultural marking of disasters can be seen in memorial stones marking the high water line for a tsunami that hit Tohoku in the early nineteenth century (see figure 3). Markers like this are found at the upper ends of many small valleys leading to the ocean along the Tohoku coast. Personally, I first encountered such monuments—with great surprise—during a brief survey of fishing communities on the Oshika Peninsula of Miyagi Prefecture in 1988 and 1989. Such monuments not only commemorate the dead, they also stand physically to warn future generations. To paraphrase the

⁸In my visual presentation at the Association for Asian Studies meetings in March 2013, I pointed out resonances between the disasters of 3.11 and the themes of the classic version of *Godzilla*: menace from the deep, devastation of the coast (and on to Tokyo), nuclear radiation, and anxiety about the directions of modernity.

⁹When foreign commentators credited the orderly behavior of Japanese on 3.11 to “cultural DNA,” they ignored or perhaps were unaware of the elaborate preparations and training to which all Japanese of all generations are routinely exposed.

¹⁰For a detailed account of “catfish prints,” see Ouwehand (1964).

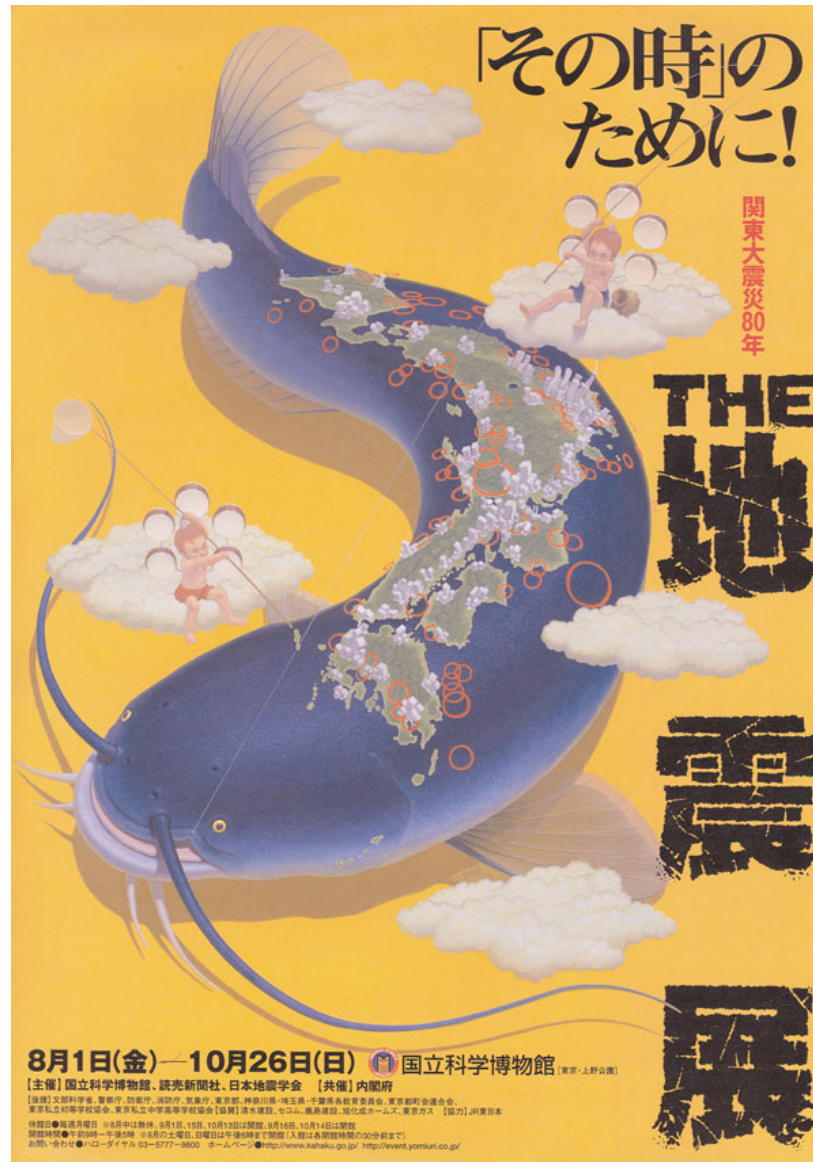


Figure 1. Japan atop a catfish: poster from “The Earthquake Exhibition” at the National Museum of Science, Tokyo, 2003. Used by permission.

messages I have seen: “The waters rose to this point! Flee up and beyond when an earthquake strikes!” “Do not build your houses below this place.” “Do not forget the lessons of the earthquake of the year xxxx” (see also Fackler 2011 and Miller 2011).

Similar memorial stones have already been erected in Tohoku since 2011 (see figure 4), less to mark the waters’ surging edge, and more to commemorate those who died in a specific spot. Now road signs, at least in Miyagi Prefecture, warn motorists (and everyone else) that one is now “entering an inundation area,” or one is now “leaving an inundation area.” The signs appear at the edges of every valley and dip in the road, and often the distance from entering to leaving is only a few hundred meters.



Figure 2. A catfish being subdued by a monkey wielding a gourd (hyōtan), a symbol both of good fortune and victory. Woodblock print by Utagawa Kunisada, *Catching a Catfish with a Gourd*, 1857. Reproduced with permission of the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College. Gift of William Green.

LOCALITY, SCALE, AND GRANULARITY

Catastrophes do not happen in a single place nor are their effects uniformly distributed, either in kinds of damage, in severity, or in the relative degree of suffering they cause among different groups within the local population.

It is easy when looking at the “fast violence” (in Nixon’s [2011] terms) of the immediate catastrophe, the event, to think of it as an undifferentiated set of calamities affecting



Figure 3. Stone marker of a nineteenth century tsunami's high-water level in the village of Aneyoshi. Photo by Ko Sasaki/The New York Times/Redux (Fackler 2011).



Figure 4. Monument to tsunami victims in a single neighborhood of Kesenuma. Photograph by author, July 2012.

an entire region in some more or less uniform fashion. But locality matters, and the effects of catastrophic events are infinitely variegated in scale and granularity. Tip O'Neill famously said, "All politics is local." So too, "all catastrophes are local." In the case of 3.11, the three disasters struck regions differentially. In the case of the earthquake and the tsunami, at particular times and in identifiable places; in the case of the nuclear

disaster, beginning with an explosion, but with no end in sight, spreading invisible damage (or worse, unidentifiable risk) over a diffuse geography where its effects are difficult to track.¹¹ From north to south, the tsunami devastated 400 kilometers of coastline, but the extent of the *physical* damage east to west extended in some cases less than a kilometer. Of course, in the case of Fukushima the dimensions of the contamination are difficult to determine, both on land and by sea, but the impact on perceptions of safety extend almost beyond measure.

This lack of uniformity in the disasters' impacts also contributes to some of the differences between analyses that focus on aggregate, macro-regional, or national trends—those looking at central government responses or policy decisions, for example—and other analyses that examine the micro-local, the ethnographic. Approaches that examine 3.11 from a perspective on the *longue durée* are also distinct from those that focus on the event, sometimes in an almost phenomenological way. Different scales (and different units) of analysis are employed by the many commentators and researchers who are already publishing extensively on 3.11.¹²

As an anthropologist, my own predilections point toward the micro-local and the ethnographic, seeking some balance that examines events in their own contexts but also incorporates a long-term perspective. So I focus on localities (in my own limited experience this means the Sanriku coast of Miyagi Prefecture, rather than the areas closest to the Fukushima nuclear disaster) and on questions of scale and granularity. And so three specific aspects of 3.11 stand out for me: the importance of local knowledge in framing responses, the multiple scales (or granularity) on which one can examine similar phenomena, and the local memorialization of events.

Local Knowledge

The first responders to disaster are obviously local people, and intimate knowledge of the local social (and geographical) terrain is critical.

During my first visits to Ishinomaki and Minami Sanriku-chō, driving along the mountainous coastline, sharply indented with small bays and short, steep valleys, the terrain was complex. In the wreckage of houses still visible one could clearly see how differences of just a couple of meters in elevation were all that had stood between destruction and safety, and that after the destruction even insiders must have had great difficulty in knowing what was where, how to find a place, and most critically, how to find a person. In conversations then and in later visits, people mentioned to me the role that local knowledge played in directing rescue and relief work in the days immediately following 3.11. For example, local drivers for major home delivery services (*takkyūbin*) turned their intimate knowledge of local roads and terrains, of where people

¹¹Satsuki Takahashi (2011, 5) discusses a fourth dimension of disaster: “‘damage by rumor’ (*fūhyō-higai*) to the reputation of fish landed in Fukushima and Ibaraki Prefectures. Japan’s food labeling regulations dictate that landing locations are clearly displayed on fish packages. The government has now set radiation safety standards for fish, but many consumers conceptually tag any fish from these localities to be “‘suspicious.”” Nicolas Sternsdorff Cisterna’s (2013) work also examines consumer perceptions of food safety post-Fukushima.

¹²To illustrate the range of approaches by foreign scholars, consider Samuels (2013), Kingston ed. (2012), and Gill, Steger, and Slater eds. (2013a; 2013b).



Figure 5. Convoy of fire trucks entering the disaster zone, March 16, 2011. Photograph by US Navy photographer, Specialist 3rd Class Dylan McCord, <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/2011TsunamiFireVehicles.jpg>, in public domain.

had lived and where people had evacuated, into directing the movements of the “official” first responders, including fire departments from outside the region, self-defense force troops, and other emergency personnel. Without their literally grounded knowledge of communities, outside relief workers simply would have been lost (see [figure 5](#)).¹³

And in what were for me unexpected ways, the local information capabilities of other businesses were also crucial. When I visited the devastated coastal town of Minami Sanriku-chō (Miyagi Prefecture) for the first time in January 2012, a tiny Family Mart

¹³Hiroataka Takeuchi has documented (with his students), many aspects of local businesses’ responses, including the reliance on delivery drivers as guides (Takeuchi and Stone 2012; Takeuchi, Nonomura, et al. 2012; Takeuchi, Sakai, et al. 2013; Takeuchi, Stone, et al. 2013; Takeuchi, Kosinski, et al. 2013).



Figure 6. The only store left in Shizugawa, January 2012. Photograph by author.

was the only retail outlet to be seen, housed in a temporary steel structure (see [figure 6](#)). This convenience store (*konbini*) was clearly a critical institution in the community, important not only for food and drink, but for its point of connection to the myriad national networks—financial, postal, journalistic, commercial—that constitute contemporary Japanese life. This tiny and close-to-makeshift *konbini* was the portal for survivors to participate in national life, but as Takeuchi, Nonomura, et al. (2012) document, the sophisticated information-gathering systems of the national chain stores enabled them to chart, analyze, and deliver(!) the products most needed or desired in zones of destruction. I never expected to be celebrating the convenience store as a critical piece of social infrastructure, but on that visit, I came to see how vital that kind of connectivity must be to people who have lost almost everything.

Granularity

The scale of recovery efforts, related of course to locality, can be seen in terms of granularity, by which I mean the extent to which things that are similar in a broad sense can appear in very different ways in different frames of reference.

A few brief examples: the cleanup of rubble (*gareki*) has been intensely important since the very beginning. And in my several visits, even as cleanup continued, the enormity of the task was never-ending (see [figure 7](#)). In Ishinomaki, I saw the construction of ziggurats of debris that will presumably be covered in turf and tower over the riverside of the city as memorials and playgrounds for centuries to come. In Kesennuma, I was taken to visit an industrial-strength recycling site (many hectares in area) where heavy-duty trucks bring in rubble to be separated—steel rebar here, crushed concrete there, burnable wood beyond the piles of household appliances, automobile tires on the far flank. Here the recycling of the disasters takes place, as it does in every community along the coast, at a massive scale that speaks to the power of the government (national and prefectural) to direct recovery, and the boon to the national construction industry of



Figure 7. Industrial-strength cleanup and recycling, Kesennuma; broken glass and ceramics on pier in Niranohama; a solitary shoe, also in Niranohama; July 2013. Photographs by author.

such projects. (As I watched the heavy trucks, I was struck by how many of them had license plates from far away; the farthest I recall came from Nara Prefecture.)

Sitting on the dock of a bay, in a tiny coastal hamlet, Niranohama, my former student Dr., Andrea Murray and I examined the much smaller but equally sorted piles of rubble, measured in hundreds of kilograms rather than tens of thousands of tons, as in Kesennuma.

A pile of shattered ceramics, carefully culled to be ceramics and glassware, was sitting on a fishing pier for a hamlet, which would have had less than a hundred households before 3.11. Someone sorted all this, so that the only remaining pile of debris was this site that could only suggest memories of past domesticity: smashed tea cups, broken serving bowls, fragments of kitchen sinks, drinking glasses reduced to shards. All this, carefully collected and piled together, for what? I couldn't ask.

And less than 2 meters away, a single shoe apparently still stuck crushed in the mud sixteen months after the tsunami struck. In any Japanese community I have ever visited, a single muddy shoe would not remain on the street for more than a couple of hours. Had it been there since 3.11? Who would one ask? What would an answer mean?

Picking up after disasters happens on a very local scale indeed.

Memorializations

Disasters are remembered in very local ways. The profoundly simple, the profoundly moving, the spontaneous, the intentionally upbeat (see [figure 8](#)). In my visits to the



Figure 8. Good luck amulets casually arrayed on a wall, Minami Sanriku-chō, July 2012. Photograph by author.

Sanriku coast, memorials to the events were ubiquitously on display. In a fashion not dissimilar from shrines erected in many other parts of the world, the random exceptions to the fury of the disaster—the single pine tree that survived on the beach at Rikuzentakata, or the religious artifacts that survived unscathed along paths and lanes in Minami Sanriku-chō—are focal points for simple, spontaneous, anonymous remembrance.

Earlier I mentioned the profoundly moving carved stones that mark the high water levels from historical events with warnings to heed the lessons of the past and to flee in the event of an earthquake. I have also shown a contemporary memorial stone in Kesennuma with the names of the over seventy individuals who were swept away from their place of refuge.

Profound monuments also arise more or less spontaneously. The building that housed the Disaster Prevention Center in the center of Minami Sanriku-chō gained national fame; it was here that a woman on the staff stayed on the town's public address system warning again and again that residents should flee. She died on the spot, broadcasting until the last, carrying out her responsibilities to the community, along with roughly thirty of her colleagues.

The skeleton of the building still stands, and, although there is community debate about whether to preserve it or to eradicate such a glaring symbol of the painful day, it has become an iconic site (some compare it to the Hiroshima A-Bomb Dome) that attracts visitors from across the country. An impromptu shrine has been established at the front of the building, with candles, incense, chains of folded origami cranes, and, most poignantly, a pair of eyeglasses found at the scene (see [figure 9](#)).

Other memorials or commemorative displays are much more overtly and (presumably intentionally) inspirational and upbeat. If *soteigai* was one of the buzzwords of 2011, the other surely was “*kizuna*,” a term that can roughly be translated as “bonds,” “ties,” or “being intertwined,” with strong nuances of “community.” In December



Figure 9. Skeleton of the Disaster Preparedness Building in Minami Sanriku-chō; impromptu altar in front of the building; close-up of altar, including personal effects found in the rubble; January 2012. Photographs by the author.

2011, a Kyoto-based foundation selected *kizuna* as the “*kanji* of the year,” for its emblematic role in rallying Japan’s spirit following the March disasters (Okada 2011).

Figure 10 below shows *kizuna* in an uplifting display: a pair of *maneki-neko*—beckoning cats, bidding good fortune—at a makeshift marketplace in the devastated village of Shizugawa (in the town of Minami Sanriku-chō). Shizugawa was the scene of some of the



Figure 10. *Kizuna*! Beckoning cats in Shizugawa, July 2012. Photograph by the author.

most extensive damage and loss of life in the 3.11 tsunami. The character painted on each of the cats is “*kizuna*”—bonds, connectivity, “we’re all in this together.” Visitors to the market have signed the cats with inspirational (and to be honest, stereotypically clichéd) messages, such as “*Ganbarou Tohoku!*” (“Hang in there, Tohoku!”).

CLOSING THOUGHTS—THERE CAN BE NO CONCLUSION TO THIS

There are many ways to analyze 3.11. There is the question of fast (or spectacular) violence versus the grinding “structural violence” that Farmer (2004) talks about, and that Akasaka, Oguma, and Yamauchi (2011) expand upon. There are related perspectives that evoke Ulrich Beck’s (1992) analyses of “risk society.” The disasters have been viewed on the macro, aggregated scale, as well as on the ethnographic micro-scale. And some analysts take a perspective on the long haul, while others focus on the immediacy of local response to local events and direct contexts.

Nothing can bring all these perspectives together, nor should they. 3.11 cannot be reduced to a single point of perspective. All of us who are concerned with how to approach the disasters that regularly befall the regions of the world and the societies and cultures that we regard with affection must know that analytic perspectives can only get us so far. Apprehending 3.11 requires an expansive and philosophical point of view.

To return to my “Alice in 3.11” question early on, can current events alter what we see of what came before? Can they change the past that is relevant for us to understand now and the future?

It is the *event* that draws our attention to the *longue durée* that provides the context within which the event makes some kind of sense—or at least suggests paths of causation and significance that we may not have previously considered. And thus the “event” begins or resumes its trajectory as something with a cultural biography (à la Appadurai and Kopytoff [1988]).

But the event doesn’t hold our attention very long. The 24-hour news cycle, of course, has no *longue durée* mode. If, as someone once said, “history is just one damned thing after another,” she or he was surely anticipating cable! Film at 11! The event gets all the attention; the context is downplayed if explored at all.

So where do we stand, where can we stand when confronted by disasters in the world around us, mostly far away but from time to time unexpectedly close at hand?

On the most basic human level, the catastrophes perhaps remind us of the *longue durée* and of our mortality as individuals: as John Maynard Keynes wrote, “Long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead.”

But in the event, in the moment so to speak, 3.11 reminds us that there is hope in the immediacy of the collectivity, because “we are all in this together.”

Kizuna!

Acknowledgments

I am reluctant to think that my comments here represent anything other than preliminary reactions—even two and a half years after the fact—to events that will cast a

shadow far beyond my lifetime. 3.11 will resonate for generations, most obviously in the effects of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, but also in the lives of communities up and down the Tohoku coast, whose futures are unclear and subject to many fluctuations, some of them entirely unforeseeable at the present moment, over the coming century or beyond.

My thoughts about 3.11 have been formed in conversations with many people in Japan as well as with a wide array of colleagues in Japanese studies outside of Japan. I must acknowledge people who have helped me peer into the expected consequences (and some of the unexpected ones as well) of the events of March 11, 2011.

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