

# Images of Suffering, Resilience and Compassion in Post 3/11 Japan 3.11以後 苦難、回復力、慈しみの映像

Carolyn Stevens

## Abstract

In this essay I explore the visual representation of suffering, resilience and compassion as expressed in a Tokyo-based photography exhibition in April 2011. An analysis of the photographs provides an opportunity to re-examine the meaning of disaster and victimhood, and to re-examine a society that responds to tragedy. Of particular note are intertextual references between the 2011 exhibition and other iconic images, some of which represent other historical moments of suffering in Japan, such as the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Minamata poisoning incident. Others reference ideas about family and community. The Tokyo exhibition sheds light on how a society expresses collective feelings of grief, fear and distrust after a major disaster, and how the socio-economic and political context of a contemporary disaster can be interrogated through reflection on the past.

## Keywords

Japan, Disasters, Graphic Arts and Photography, 3/11

I visited Japan in late January 2012, many months after the compound disaster of 11 March 2011 which devastated Northeastern Japan. The effects of the disaster were still being felt throughout the archipelago, as nuclear power plants were shut down one by one, and the population was entreated to save electricity in various ways. This photograph, taken on that trip, is of a drink dispenser. While not directly representative of the immediate

disaster, it illustrates a social response to the disaster, and an eloquent example of action based on empathy in the post 3/11 context. The drink dispenser carries a sign "setsudenchū" (currently saving electricity).



An Automated Drink Dispenser, Tokyo, stating 'Setsudenchū (currently saving electricity); Kirin Beverage Corporation'. Photograph by Carolyn Stevens.

The term *setsuden* (saving electricity) is not new to post 3/11 Japan. It has been used for

many years to describe energy-saving techniques and behaviours used during peak seasons of electricity use such as the height of summer, and/or when power stations went through periodic maintenance or repair. The practice of *setsuden* consists of recommendations such as raising the temperature of one's air conditioner to at least 29 degrees, and not using it until the external temperature reaches 31 to 33 degrees,<sup>1</sup> keeping your refrigerator clean and defrosted; unplugging appliances not in use, and avoiding the use of "sleep mode" on televisions and computers. Before 3/11, practising *setsuden* was certainly an expression of responsible citizenship. It was sometimes necessary during peak periods of usage, especially in summer when air conditioners laboured overtime to ensure Japan's indoor workers and consumers kept reasonably cool. After the triple disaster, however, the word took on an entirely different meaning. *Setsuden* became a pointed reference to changed values in Japanese society. Practically speaking, 3/11 had an impact on the greater Tokyo metropolitan area because the Fukushima Power plants supplied electric power to the area. *Setsuden* activities after 3/11, however, were also an expression of collective sympathy, compassion and solidarity with the people of the affected areas. The inconveniences of saving electricity – such as drinking canned coffee or tea that was not quite as hot or as cold as expected, walking down escalators rather than riding them, or enduring levels of air conditioning or heating that were not at the most comfortable – became an expression of collective compassion. Practising *setsuden* in places like Tokyo was a mark of respect for the much more devastating losses endured by their fellow citizens to the north. Later, *setsuden* came to signify a statement to the government that Japan could manage using less electricity (obviating the need for so many nuclear reactors, or for any nuclear reactors). The practice of *setsuden*, previously seen as an "eco-" friendly or a thrifty practice, was now also an expression of civil

activism with particular reference to the hardship and suffering experienced by the people of the Tohoku region. *Setsuden* became an everyday reference to the ongoing disaster, and therefore its practice took on special meaning.

On that visit to Tokyo in early 2012, the tea bought from a *setsudenchū* automated dispenser was, however, just as hot as I thought it needed to be, causing me to reflect on what "appropriate" energy usage should, or could be. The *setsudenchū* label remained on this machine and elsewhere in public places in Japan, as a reminder of the fragile co-existence between society, technology and nature, and of the complex relationship between people and their environment. How hot should a heated room be? How cold should a cold drink be? The disaster called for people to reconsider actual needs for their energy consumption, and re-set many of these benchmarks to more modest levels. Escalators and air conditioners were generally up and running again in Tokyo by my next visit in 2013, though I noticed in the lingering heat of the long and hot summer season that many public places such as subway cars and department stores did not have the same chill that I remembered from air-conditioned summers past. Notices of *setsuden* may not be as prominently displayed in public places today as they were in 2011 and 2012, but the practice remains as a reference to a collective empathetic response to 3/11. While *setsuden* results in economic savings during times of economic stagnation (and this could be another reason for the persistence of *setsuden* practices), it is also true that *setsudenchū* signs came to be an ongoing reminder of the Fukushima tragedy in the wider Tokyo area. The *setsuden* effort is, however, only one way that a new sense of collective empathy has been expressed since 3/11. Batson describes empathy as a complex emotion, that includes "knowing" the feelings of another; "adopting a posture" of another; "coming to feel as another person feels"; "projecting oneself into another's

situation"; "imagining how the other person is thinking or feeling"; and "imagining how one would think and feel" given the other's situation.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the ongoing nature of the 3/11 disaster, even when we see the *setsudenchū* sign months and years later, we are pulled back to that moment in time. In this essay, I look at how photography was used in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and note how some photographs similarly pull the viewer back to other points in time. The images presented here work through intertextuality, meaning that they reference other images (which may be a conscious choice on the part of the photographer, or may be a connection made in the mind of the viewer). In both explicit and accidental inter-textuality, the viewers' knowledge of other images has an impact on the way they receive the second image. Here I use the term intertextuality not so much in the destabilising or disruptive function noted in post-structuralist theory. Rather, I focus on the idea that the intertextuality between these photographs of 3/11 and others from Japan's postwar past give the new photos further layers of meaning and resonance.

Given the richness of the media landscape in Japan, it is no surprise that photography was used extensively by both amateur and professional observers of the triple disaster of the magnitude 9 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster of 11 March 2011. Photography represents a human subjective experience, an individual photographer's view of the world which is then portrayed to and interpreted by other viewers. Pettersson writes that pictures and photographs "let us see what is not there".<sup>3</sup> In other words, the embodied experience of viewing a photograph "takes" the viewer to the "place" where the photograph was taken, although this is often a constructed "place", and thus considered "non-localized" by Pettersson.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the Tokyo exhibition of photographs of 3/11, I argue that

the tragedy as portrayed in **Tōhoku** became "non-localized". These photographs portrayed a wide range of emotions in viewers, including sorrow, fear, empathy and even the anger and frustration that many Japanese around the country felt regarding their government's disaster management and energy policies. As Mackie has written about the viewing of photographs in the context of human rights, photographs can be "read in terms of their intertextual relationship with other images and other texts",<sup>5</sup> or as Pettersson puts it, with the "background knowledge (or belief) about the things we see".<sup>6</sup> In this case, the Japanese public, having been inundated with media reports regarding the 3/11 disasters, had a wealth of information to fill in the blanks between the objects seen and the experience portrayed. I opened this essay with a photograph that I – an amateur – took. I now turn to a photographic exhibition which was shown at the Zen Foto Gallery in Tokyo in April 2011 and later in Melbourne, Australia in July of the same year.<sup>7</sup> The photographers featured were both professional and amateur, and the curator who gathered these images was skilful in the framing of the 3/11 experience. The photographs could tap into a public understanding of the event, including both past and present images of suffering in Japan. This essay takes as a launching point this sense of collective knowledge and experience.

## The Exhibition

While the triple disaster was unprecedented in Japanese modern history, we can also place it in a series of tragic events in the twentieth century: the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake, the 1945 Tokyo air raids, the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake and the 1995 Sarin Gas Attack in Tokyo. To do this, I will compare selected photographs from an exhibition of over 100 photographs by a diverse group of 20 photographers taken in the immediate aftermath of 3/11 with other iconic images of victimhood in Japan, especially those

associated with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and those affected by the Minamata pollution incident (1950s to the present). In particular, I focus on how the depiction of suffering works to create a compassionate collective identity. I explore how exhibitions like this allow us to observe how a society expresses collective feelings of grief, fear and distrust after a major disaster.

As most readers would know, at 2:56 pm on 11 March, 2011, there was a magnitude 9 earthquake, accompanied by a tsunami that hit a 500 kilometre stretch of the coast, and caused meltdowns and three hydrogen explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. As of March 2014, the disasters had claimed 15,884 lives, with 6,148 injured and 2,633 people still missing.<sup>8</sup> Kingston wrote in 2012 that the total cost of the triple disaster was estimated at between 210 and 300 billion U.S. dollars, making it the most expensive catastrophe in Japanese history since the Second World War, and the most expensive natural disaster on record.

The bulk of the Japanese public outside the affected region learned of the "cascading disaster"<sup>9</sup> through a variety of media outlets, and Internet-based social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Mixi. Many of the media images circulating on news programs, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and other social media depicted the immense destruction and human suffering experienced by residents of the Tōhoku region. Soon after the events, many felt the desire to express their condolences to the victims of the tragedy, and to try to help in whatever way they could. The founder and director of the Zen Foto Gallery, Mark Pearson, was one such individual. He quickly put together a photographic exhibition about a month after the disaster, which ran from 15 April to 27 April, 2011. The exhibition drew on the work of 20 photographers, from Japan and other countries, and contained 121 photographs.<sup>10</sup> In an interview Pearson stated

that,

the goals for the show [we]re two-fold: create a sense of community where feelings about the tragedy can be shared, and an opportunity to donate 50% of the gallery's portion in sales to a worthy aid organization.

"This is a very important historical record," Pearson emphasizes. "The scale is unimaginable for those who have not been there. This is a way to visualize and experience it through the eyes of these photographers." <sup>11</sup>

Pearson's comment that the photographs provide "a way to visualize and experience it through the eyes of these photographers" references Pettersson's discussion of "seeing - in", but with a strong sense of localisation, as the place and time of the events were indelibly imprinted on Japan's and the world's imaginations.

### Historical References in Photographs of 3/11

While any exhibition which brought together several artists would likely mean that the photographs would be quite different from each other due to the individual photographers' styles and methods, there were some commonalities and recurring themes. Many photographs went beyond Pearson's original goal to represent the bleak destruction that the earthquake and tsunami had wrought on the region as they referenced knowledge of Japan's past. For example, there were many photographs featuring children's toys and other objects in the rubble, in a variety of children's settings, such as the remains of a school in Minamihama. Focusing on children as victims strongly communicated the intense loss



experienced by the community, which did not just encompass material loss, but also the loss of innocence and the future. This is shown in these images of a primary school which had been not only affected by the earthquake and tsunami but which had also then been gutted by fire. A set of photographs by Nishijima Yūji demonstrates this. While his photographs frame the destruction from a child's point of view, his commentary on the photograph makes intertextual references to other disasters.



Minamihama School. Photograph by Nishijima Yūji.

This picture of the Minamihama school was originally posted along with the photographer's comments referring to Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

In the town of Minamihama, situated on the coast, fires broke out as a third disaster after the tsunami and earthquake. The fire spread rapidly and the entire town was engulfed by flames. Inside a school building, there was an awkward, stinking smell in the air of dead bodies and debris

combined with the smell of the sea. The scene made me think of

## Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>12</sup>

This intertextual link between the 3/11 disaster and the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki proved to be a recurrent theme, as we will see below.<sup>13</sup>

Gallery attendees would also be likely to see the similarities between these photographs and those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even without Nakajima's comments. Furthermore, the curator included a set of black and white photographs of 3/11 destruction that eerily echoed the photographic history of Japan in the Asia Pacific War. Certainly the choice of black and white gives these contemporary photographs a historical feel, and the grainy texture creates an impression of a print's disintegration over time. Stylistic presentation aside, we can also see that there are similarities in content as well. Due to these similarities the new and old photographs constitute a collective archive of suffering. The Nagasaki City Peace and Atomic Bomb Museum,<sup>14</sup> features many photographs in its galleries, and these also include images of ruined schools. The educational system forms an important backbone for many communities in Japan. This shared understanding of the important place of schools in Japanese communities, and the idea that children are symbolic of the future of a society, is the basis of this intertextual understanding, and gives resonance to the later photographs.

Another intertextual reference can be seen in the portrayal of religious objects and settings. Like schools, temples and shrines in Japan are also important markers of collective identity. Many photographs of wrecked gravesites, temples and religious icons were featured in the 3/11 exhibition. The religious icons in destroyed temples, or flung out of place, demonstrate not only the destruction of the land but also of important religious sites. A black and white photograph of a *kannon*

statue,<sup>15</sup> a doll and a stuffed animal combines symbols of childhood with religious symbols. Much of the Buddhist imagery represents the recent deaths, as in this photograph of the offerings made by survivors.



Fallen Kannon statue. Photograph by Jake Price  
Nagasaki temple destroyed, Wikipedia Commons

Offerings made by survivors. Photograph by Clive France.

Without prior knowledge, the first two photographs could be mistaken as those of the same event, while Figure 4 is fully located in the 21st century with the appearance of the popular character Rilakkuma (in the form of the teddy bear of the left).<sup>16</sup>

Similarities in subject matter which enhance an inter-textual reading of the 3/11 photographs can also be seen in Sasaki's photograph of the communal bathing area in the Kesennuma Evacuation Centre. Instead of harking back to 1945, this photograph references another tragedy in Japanese postwar history. Sasaki's photograph evokes an internationally-renowned photograph by W. Eugene Smith (1918–1978), taken in Minamata in 1971. The photograph shows Uemura Ryōko bathing her daughter Tomoko, who had been affected by mercury poisoning *in utero*.<sup>17</sup> This photograph was featured in *Life* magazine the following year to worldwide attention. The original photograph was striking in that it portrayed the 'normality' of a mother's love and care for a child despite their victimhood resulting from mercury poisoning. Sasaki's 2011 photograph would strike a particularly strong chord with contemporary viewers, as they viewed the same





loving interaction between a parent and child despite unthinkable circumstances.



Evacuees at a Kesennuma shelter, photograph by Sasaki Kō for the *New York Times*.

Many of the 120 photographs rely on stylistic patterns – black and white, or over-exposed photographs. This photograph of survivors walking by a large ship washed ashore is developed in monochrome with a deliberate over-exposure to evoke a historical sense.



Tōhoku ship, photograph by Clive France

The style of the photography also evokes an

emotional response, intensified by the references to the style as well as the content of the photographs from the 1940s to the 1970s. I interpret the 2011 photographs as having a sense of moral weight and gravity that make them even more meaningful to those who have seen the older photographs. Given the worldwide attention to the atomic bombings in 1945 and to the 1972 publication of Smith's photograph, it is not at all far-fetched to expect both international and Japanese viewers of the exhibit to make these connections as well. This demonstrates the emotional strength of these images in Japanese civil society's collective memory.

The stories behind the atomic bombings, the Minamata incident and the Tōhoku Triple Disaster are all quite different, but the inter-referencing of these photographs underscores the immediate destructive nature of each of these events, followed by the lingering tragedy of contamination, either through radiation or through mercury poisoning.

### References to Community and Collective Action

The photographs in the "Images of Tōhoku" exhibition showed different members of the disaster-affected community, each portrayed in different ways. Aside from the historical references, representations of the victims of the disaster referenced the larger population through the portrayal of individuals in family units. The people portrayed in the photographs were children, spouses, parents and grandparents, and these familial roles could be transposed into other social contexts. Japanese families are not all the same, but the image of a Japanese father grieving over his missing child and wife creates emotion to which many can relate. The destruction of a particular village spoke to the viewers' worry over the destruction of any village or neighbourhood in Japan. Framing the photographs as family portraits supplements the historical references

– such as the bombed out schools of Minamihama and Nagasaki, for example, or the family in the bath from Kesennuma and the Minamata photographs. A further layer of intertextuality sits beside the historical references if we consider the individuals and families in the photographs as representative of a community of individuals and families in wider Japanese society.

As mentioned above, photographs of children and children's objects were numerous in the exhibition, and they were represented in a number of ways. The exhibition featured pictures of children's toys in the rubble, as well as many photographs of children playing in and around the evacuation sites. While the destroyed schools and scattered toys could be seen as a sorrowful representation, the latter representation of child survivors at play suggested hope for the future. There were many photographs of adults holding babies, projecting a resilient image to a grieving public. The familiar scene of a mother comforting her crying infant symbolised the hope that the community, and its sympathising nation, could be comforted as well.



Crying Baby, photograph by Hiroshi Sato.

Personal loss was represented in photographs of solitary people, often elderly, gazing into the distance or at photographs of lost relatives or

friends. The concentration of representations of elderly residents in the exhibition is not surprising as a disproportionate number of Northeastern Japan's population is elderly. Approximately one third of the affected residents were over 65, which is higher than the national average of 23%.<sup>18</sup>



Elderly Survivor, photograph by Gianni Giosue.

The framing of the elderly in these situations in the exhibition represented an intensified expression of the common fear of loneliness and helplessness in one's later years. While the photographs of children represented the loss of innocence, the photographs of the elderly showed another vulnerable social group placed in unthinkable conditions. This vulnerable social group, however, is not a rarefied minority, but a group of people that are part of families around the country.

Photographs of survivors gazing at their loss were numerous in the exhibition. Personally, I found this photograph of a father looking for his family very moving and it was this photograph that prompted me to write this essay.





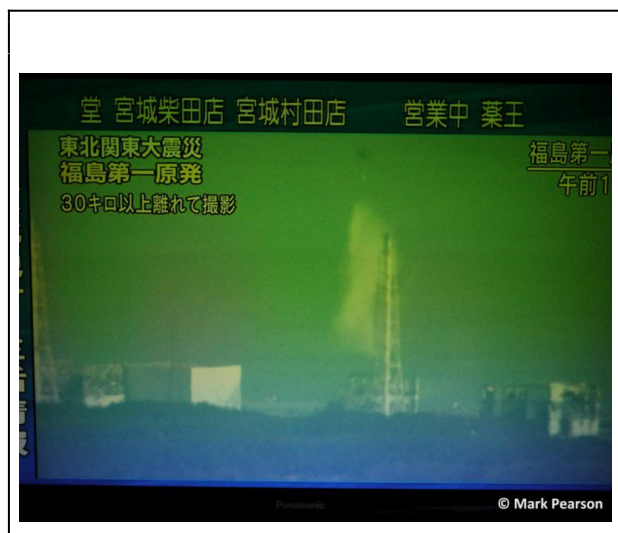
Survivor searching for his family in a Minamisanriku evacuation centre. Photograph by Sasaki Kō.

I have a 5"x7" reproduction of this photograph, of better quality and finer resolution than the digital reproductions here. In the print, the details are sharper, such as the trails of tears down the father's face as he holds up a photograph of his wife and child between two fingers, and the familiar shiny creases of his quilted down jacket, a ubiquitous piece of clothing in the Japanese winter. The sharp focus of the father against the blurred background of the evacuation centre accentuates the isolation he must have felt in his loss. The viewer is drawn into his pain wordlessly and completely, for any father from any town or city in Japan could imagine the same light feel of a UNIQLO jacket on his arm as he raised the photograph of his family in an evacuation center.

While children, parents and grandparents represented a large part of the social collective portrayed in the exhibit, there were other groups of people marked as typical examples of members of the wider Japanese community. Another evocative representation in the exhibition were photographs of the Self-Defence Forces and other emergency workers who provided rescue and relief services for the survivors. These photographs of rescue provide an image of hope compared with the

photographs of destruction and loss. Immediately after the disaster, Prime Minister Kan Naoto authorised the mobilisation of up to 100,000 SDF troops, including reservists.<sup>19</sup> These images focused on the rescuers' respectful assistance and daring heroism, which contrasted with the devastating losses pictured in other photographs. These heroes could also evoke empathy for their hardship, for certainly their efforts involved both physical and emotional sacrifice, given the enormity of the task and the severity of the damage to affected areas.

The exhibit as a whole closed with a photographs which suggested a further collective, which I have termed the observers and sympathisers. They are visible in Figure 11 below, but we can think of them as implied in every photograph in the exhibition. The observers and sympathisers include but are not limited to the photographers, gallery workers, visitors to the gallery, and those viewing the exhibition online. To me, a member of this third group, one particular photograph stood out as a concrete representation of this collective membership; it was not a picture of a survivor or a relief worker, but the photograph of a screen capture of one of the many media representations that flooded Japanese and international media outlets very soon after the disaster.



Screen capture of a television broadcast on Fukushima Daiichi. Photograph by Mark Pearson.

Pearson's photograph powerfully cast the viewers of this disaster as a collective, as a group who watched in horror first as the destruction of the earthquake and tsunami was revealed, and later as the nuclear crisis developed. This and others in the series show how the triple disaster drew in a nation that felt indirectly and directly affected (in the latter case, most clearly through the nuclear accident) by 3/11. This photograph is especially evocative precisely because of its everyday, ordinary quality: a television screen as viewed by domestic and international audiences on the day of the Fukushima Daiichi explosion. It captures the moment that the nation realised the extent and ongoing nature of the original tragedy, and that 3/11 had ceased to be a localised issue; it was now a national concern.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it was simultaneously an international concern as the images were seen on television, computer and smartphone screens around the world.

The intertextual understanding of community was also seen as a call to action for some. Photography was used extensively after 3/11 not only to communicate the empirical reality of the disaster to a national and international audience, but also to strengthen community through the evocation and expression of empathy. I suggest, then, that this community is called to action through a variety of activities. In this case, the community responded with donations of time, goods and money,<sup>21</sup> as well as activism and protest on a national scale.<sup>22</sup> This community was not limited to the domestic arena: private donations from the United States totalled over US\$30.3 million, and Taiwanese citizens donated over US\$29 million.<sup>23</sup> The Australian Red Cross noted in March 2012 that over AU\$27 million had been passed to the Japanese

Red Cross for the Tōhoku region.<sup>24</sup>

The intertextuality of these sets of photographs provides resonance and meaning, but the links between these documented disasters also suggest further connections. I have chosen to include specific photographs from the past to underscore the similarities between the representations of these disasters. Despite the differences between these separate historical events, reflection upon what Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Minamata and Fukushima have in common causes us to re-examine what is shared by the victims of each disaster.

Of the photographs in this exhibition, the Sasaki Kō photograph of the deserted street with the 'bright future' label is one of the more famous inclusions. Reproduced in the *New York Times*, it reached hundreds of thousands of readers internationally. The photograph also could be seen as a reference to a 'brighter' time, when Japan's socio-economic outlook had not been shadowed by extended recessions, political scandals and severe natural disasters. Viewers would 'remember' images of main shopping streets of their own home towns in the past, and of the 'bright future' they had expected for these places. As framed by Sasaki, however, Fukushima becomes a reminder that bright expectations can be dashed by the natural and man-made disasters.

Sasaki's photograph also presents an ironic view of the optimism generally associated with technology in Japan. In the Tōhoku region, government authorities, industry and some sectors of civil society seemed to believe that, in David Harvey's words, "[the] scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want and the arbitrariness of natural calamity."<sup>25</sup> This can be seen in projects such as the construction of sea walls that were thought high enough to protect coastal villages, and earthquake resistant features built into the aging nuclear reactors. In his essay on postwar Japan, Shun'ya Yoshimi refers to a "techno

national" discourse in Japan which shaped identity in the reconstruction and high growth eras. "Techno nationalism" can be defined as a progressive, modernist belief that the nation state is made powerful by the creation, ownership and ongoing advancement of technology.<sup>26</sup> This is not a particularly "Japanese" phenomenon, but it is especially important in Japan because Japanese national identity was restored after defeat in the Asia Pacific War through economic successes derived not from natural resources, but rather from technology. Even earlier, the dramatic changes in Japan in the late 19th and 20th century disrupted the supposed binary between the "modern" West and the "backward" East.<sup>27</sup> Japan's adoption of technology and its success with its innovation bolstered its international standing and allowed a middle class standard of living previously unattained in other Asian countries. Though the nuclear industry in Japan was already growing, the worldwide 1973 oil crisis suggested to Japanese politicians and industry leaders that to rely wholly on imports was unwise.<sup>28</sup> Currently, 30% of Japan's electricity is nuclear generated.<sup>29</sup>

The nuclear industry in Fukushima and other parts of the country, though, is not just about generating electricity for the household appliances that Yoshimi described. As early as 1969, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saw the existence of nuclear technology on Japanese soil as a "technological deterrence" to other nations.<sup>30</sup> Japan has been excluded from international restrictions in its handling and storing of plutonium because of its "special status as the only country in the world to have suffered atomic bombings",<sup>31</sup> yet these facilities mean that Japan could build a bomb relatively quickly (and with the Abe cabinet's recent reinterpretation of Article 9 in June 2014, nuclear energy in Japan could soon no longer be "peaceful"). "Nuclear villages" like Fukushima, created by partnerships between the Japanese government, Japanese industry and international partners, serve to make solid

the abstract, positivist notions of technonationalism (and techno-internationalism) in postwar Japan. The failure at Fukushima as framed by the photographer Sasaki Kō and others, calls our attention to the hollowness of these concepts, and how techno-nationalism has failed the people of Eastern Japan, and wider Japanese society, in a variety of ways.

## Conclusion

Our gaze as viewers is focused on the subjects and the subjectivities of those portrayed in the photographs, and of the varied emotions experienced by the people of Tōhoku region and of the Japanese public at large. The photographs also, however, documented the presence of another, perhaps less visible, group: the photographers who had gathered at the site to capture the moment, and whose observation of the tragedy was then passed on to the viewers of the exhibition. By looking at these photographs, the viewers, too, vicariously experienced these moments in the subjects' and the photographers' lives. While the Tōhoku disaster was in the first place something which happened in Japan, the fact that the gallery owner and curator of the exhibition is a resident foreigner in Japan, and many of the photographs were taken by overseas photographers, suggests that the national sense of victimhood and compassion was felt just as vividly by the foreign community, and arguably, by the rest of the global community.

While viewers of these photographs are understandably first struck by the suffering of the Japanese victims, and reminded of tragedies past, I would argue that the intertextual references to World War II and Minamata invite reflection on the economic and political processes that contributed to all of these photographic representations. The expression of compassion today, looking back decades or just a few years, arose in a context still governed by a structure that seeks to control the natural environment in ways that



benefit corporations and political parties as much as they are meant to enrich individual lives. This common thread links especially Minamata and Fukushima. In remembering this, we might venture a new definition of compassion: one that calls the viewer to positive action, rather than serving as a defence mechanism against fear and instability, or to sanitise the historical record.

Photography is immediate and unapologetic, which is one of the reasons it so effectively communicates the suffering of victims. As Mackie notes, exhibitions can be "illustrative" of an incident and/or an individual's experience of that incident, but without knowledge of the history of the moment, the image has little meaning.<sup>32</sup> Viewed as a whole in the Zen Foto Gallery, we can "infer a narrative through looking at the juxtaposition of images" included.<sup>33</sup> I hope the readers of this article will take the time to look at the Facebook gallery of this exhibition in its entirety to see all the photographs and consider their own narratives arising from this viewing: what connections can they make from viewing the 3/11 photographs juxtaposed against their personal cumulative experience? My inclusion of the *setsudenchū* automated drink dispenser in this article gestures towards this exercise: that Tokyoites save energy in solidarity with those who are still suffering in temporary housing in Tōhoku. Does the need for electricity surpass the needs of these residents and their land? Does the experience of the poisoning of the land and water around Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Minamata give us any insight into how Fukushima can recover?

These photographs are also a kind of protest, which makes "visible the pain of others who have suffered similar losses...validat[ing] those feelings for each other but also for the broader public".<sup>34</sup> This solidarity should not, however, crowd out the space for public reflection on the role of the national and local governments, their relationship to industry, and the use of

technology for corporate profit. When we congratulate the public for saving energy in solidarity with those suffering in Tōhoku, can we also reflect on the irony of the "bright future" that the nuclear reactors promised them? When we see the signs of lingering compassion through artistic representations and everyday life, such as the *setsudenchū* sign, we need to not only reflect upon what has happened but also ask ourselves: where to next?

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## Author Biography

**Carolyn S. Stevens** is Professor of Japanese Studies and Director of the Japanese Studies Centre at Monash University. Her major publications include *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity and Power* (Routledge 2008), *Disability in Japan* (Routledge 2013) and the co-edited volumes *Sound, Space and Sociality in Modern Japan* (Routledge 2014) and *Internationalising Japan: Discourse and Practice* (Routledge 2014). She is currently Editor-in-Chief of the interdisciplinary journal *Japanese Studies*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Natsu - Eakon wa Nando ni Nattara Tsukemasuka" [In the Summer, How Hot Does it Become Before You Put on the Airconditioning?], *Yomiuri Online*, 16 July 2012. Retrieved 7 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> C. Daniel Batson, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena", in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, Jean Decety and William Ickes (eds.), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2009, pp. 3-15.

<sup>3</sup> Mikael Pettersson, "Seeing What is Not There:

Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-Localization', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2011, p. 279.

<sup>4</sup> Pettersson, "Seeing What is Not There", p. 280.

<sup>5</sup> Vera Mackie, "Putting a Face to a Name: Visualising Human Rights", *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2014, p. 216. Retrieved on 2 August 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Pettersson, "Seeing What is Not There", p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> I directly viewed a [selection of the photographs](#) in Melbourne, and the remaining pieces on line. Readers are encouraged to look at the exhibition online to see the works I was not able to include.

<sup>8</sup> National Police Agency of Japan, 'Damage Situation and Police Countermeasure associated with 2011 Tohoku District; of the Pacific Ocean Earthquake 11 March 2014'. Retrieved on 19 March 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Kingston, "Introduction", in Jeff Kingston (ed.) *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> For a full view of the exhibition, see "The Images of Tohoku Exhibit". Retrieved on 23 January 2014. For other materials regarding the exhibition see 'Links for the Zen Foto Gallery', retrieved on 23 January 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *La Lettre de la Photographie*, "Tohoku Images of a Disaster", 2011. Retrieved on 23 August 2013 [please note the link is no longer available].

<sup>12</sup> This comment has since been removed from the post, but was originally attached to [this image](#). Retrieved on 23 August 2013.

<sup>13</sup> This theme recurs in several articles in this issue.

<sup>14</sup> See the [Nagasaki municipal website](#) for examples of photographs taken directly after the atomic bombing.

<sup>15</sup> Kannon is the Japanese name of the Bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, the Buddhist deity of mercy.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the complex meaning of this character, see Carolyn Stevens "Cute But Relaxed: Ten Years of Rilakkuma in Precarious Japan," *M/C Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2. Retrieved on 22 November 2014.

<sup>17</sup> In 1997, the Uemura family began to refuse permission to reproduce the image, citing that the struggle to publicise the plight of Minamata victims was complete, and the further duplication of the photograph prolonged their mourning of their daughter's death in 1977. In 2001, Smith's widow released a statement agreeing with the Uemuras' request (see Aileen M. Smith, 'The Photograph "Tomoko and Mother in Bath"'. Retrieved on 23 January 2014). Some have argued compassionately against the withdrawal of this masterpiece of modern photography (see Jim Hughes, "Tomoko Uemura, R.I.P", *The Digital Journalist*, 2000. Retrieved on 23 January 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Alexandra Harney, "Japan's Earthquake and the Hazards of an Aging Population", *The Atlantic*, 23 March 2011. Retrieved on 20 January 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Yuki Tatsumi, "The Role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake", *Stimson*, 17 March 2011. Retrieved on 27 January 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For a precedent of this transference of nuclear issues from the local to the national, see Anna Shipilova, "From Local to National Experience: Has Hiroshima Become a 'Trauma for Everybody' ?", *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2014, pp. 1-19.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the volunteer movement in

**Tōhoku** after 3/11, see Tom Gill, Brigitte Steger and David Slater (eds), *Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the international response to the disaster, see Vera Mackie, "The Rhythms of Internationalisation in Post-Disaster Japan", in Jeremy Breaden, Stacey Steele and Carolyn Stevens (eds.), *Internationalising Japan as Discourse and Practice*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 196-206; and Matthew Penney, 'The Voice of Ten Million: Anti-Nuclear Petition Movement Launched in Japan', *The Asia Pacific Journal*, 2011, and Jennifer Robertson, "From Uniqlo to NGOs: The Problematic "Culture of Giving" in Inter-Disaster Japan" *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 10, issue 18, no. 2.

<sup>23</sup> The Japan Daily Press, "[US #1 Donor to Japan's Earthquake Recovery, South Korea not even Top 20](#)", 08 April 2013. Retrieved on 27 January 2014.

<sup>24</sup> The Australian Red Cross, '[Long Road to Recovery for Japanese Disaster Survivors](#)', 9 March 2012. Retrieved on 27 January 2014.

<sup>25</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of*

*Cultural Change*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Shun'ya Yoshimi, "'Made in Japan': The Cultural Politics of "Home Electrification" in Postwar Japan', *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 21, 1999, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Shun'ya Yoshimi, "Made in Japan", p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> World Nuclear Association, "[Nuclear Power in Japan](#)", 2014. Retrieved 16 October 2014.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Norihiro Kato, "[The Ambiguities of Japanese Nuclear Policy](#)", *The New York Times*, 13 April, 2014. Retrieved 16 July 2014.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Mackie, "Putting a Face to a Name: Visualising Human Rights", p. 221.

<sup>33</sup> Mackie, "Putting a Face to a Name: Visualising Human Rights", p. 222.

<sup>34</sup> Katie Keenan, "Publics and Protests: Demonstrations of Public Grief in the Wake of Tragic Events", *Anthropology News*, Vol. 55, Nos. 1-2, 2014, p. 8.