After the Flood: The Politics of Reconstruction in Post-3.11 Tohoku

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Littlejohn, Andrew Lewis. 2017. After the Flood: The Politics of Reconstruction in Post-3.11 Tohoku. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts &amp; Sciences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41140207">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41140207</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the Flood: The Politics of Reconstruction in Post-3.11 Tōhoku

A dissertation presented
by
Andrew Lewis Littlejohn
to
The Department of Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Social Anthropology

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2017
After the Flood: The Politics of Reconstruction in Post-3.11 Tōhoku

Abstract

This dissertation explores the confluence of knowledge, power and the production of resilient space through a case study of how the town of Minamisanriku in Miyagi Prefecture is being rebuilt after the tsunami of March 11, 2011 (known in Japan as 3.11). In response to the damage, the local and national governments are enacting an unprecedented, top-down restructuring of coastal space that entails relocating communities to higher ground, building giant seawalls, and imposing new land-use restrictions. My study examines the effects these policies are having on residents, asking why and how they are resisting proposals that in theory (and the government argues) should make them safer. As well as ethnographic research in Minamisanriku and its environs, I draw on formal interviews with a cross section of residents, and analyze documents produced by various levels of government and citizen’s groups. I show how, for many inhabitants of the affected regions, reconstruction is like a second disaster, erasing both pre-disaster social space and the memory of the disasters themselves in the name of a future they have not chosen and cannot see.
Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world’s debris.

*Michel De Certeau*
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The Space of Disaster</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Divided Visions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Agents of Recovery</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Ruined Signs</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: On Higher Ground</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Uncertain Futures</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The Next Disaster</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Map showing Minamisanriku’s location within Tōhoku (Northeastern Japan). Reprinted with modification from Gill et al. 2015. *Japan Copes with Calamity*. Oxford: Peter lang.
Chapter 1
Introduction: The Space of Disaster

There are people who say, “It’s a lovely town, surrounded by nature.”
Yes, it really is a good town. I love it.
But I want you to know there are many kinds of people in this town.
People who couldn’t protect somebody important to them, people who had to give up
their dreams, people who want to go on living here, but had to tearfully, tearfully leave
this town…
There is a deafening roar etched into many people’s hearts, and the memory of the black
sea invading (Katô 2014, 20).

The Wave

At 2.46pm on March 11, 2011 (known in Japan as 3.11), a magnitude 9.1 earthquake occurred
off the coast of Tōhoku.¹ Those by the water knew a tsunami was coming. The sea began to draw
back, gradually exposing the ocean floor. Some 45 minutes after the earth shook, a wave up to
20m (65ft) in height swept through the region’s ports, hamlets, and cities (Aldrich and Sawada
2015). This is when the small town of Minamisanriku became, in the words of one observer,
“umi ni bakashita machi”: the town that turned into the sea.

The triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown that occurred on 3.11
has been called Japan’s worst crisis since the Second World War (Branigan 2011). Just as the
latter marked a historical turning point – the break between ‘pre-war’ and ‘post-war’ – for some
the tsunami has brought Japan into a new, ‘post-disaster’ era. There is a burgeoning literature on
this new age in the social and political sciences, much of which is focused on two sets of issues:
the short-and-long term effects of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant,
and the implications of this for Japanese politics and society (particularly in Tokyo). Some talk
of profound social change: of new ideas about citizenship and its relationship to knowledge

¹ The Tōhoku (literally “northeast”) area is the northernmost region of mainland Japan (Honshū). It
consists of 6 prefectures: Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi, and Yamagata.
Figure 1-1. Shizugawa before the disasters. Photo by Satō Shinichi

production (Morris-Suzuki 2014; Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015), or a reinvigorated civil society and ethos of protest (Shaw 2017). However, not everyone is convinced by these narratives. Political scientist Richard Samuels, in his overview of the institutional response to 3.11 (2013), finds that “time and again, rather than opening windows for new opportunities, the 3.11 disaster magnified normal political processes and reinforced status quo responses.” (Aldrich 2014, 347) All the above begs the question, however: what about in the disaster regions themselves?

I never saw Minamisanriku before the tsunami. Prior to 3.11, the town was relatively unknown: a node in the network of small towns and cities comprising Tōhoku’s Sanriku Coast.²

---

² A stretch of the Pacific coastline spanning Aomori, Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures.
When I arrived in the summer of 2012, things had already changed. The town center was gone. People’s houses were gone, though the landscape was still littered with their foundations. Their boats too were gone, leaving the bays eerily empty. Over the years, I saw many photographs of the town as it was both before the disasters and in their immediate aftermath. Such before-and-after comparisons were everywhere: in exhibitions, books, on people’s walls, and affixed to the exteriors of shops. Many residents had a powerful urge to document the changing landscape and show visitors, like me, around it. The first day I arrived on the coast, the owner of a local drug store insisted on driving me around the outer regions of Kesennuma, a city an hour or so north of
Minamisanriku. He would stop periodically to point out where buildings had been, recalling how the wind would blow up swirls of dust from their wreckage. I imagine residents, looking on these sights, might have felt something like this:

Incomprehensible landscapes spread out all around. The view from the window is completely different to that of yesterday (MS).³

Many statements like this can be found in the testimonies of survivors, as well as those of the volunteers, journalists, and researchers that flooded into Tōhoku as the waters receded. Particularly for survivors, these testimonies are narratives of loss. That which was lost differs from person to person, albeit with commonalities: for fishermen, boats and workshops; for workers, factories and offices; and for farmers, rice paddies and fields. But three kinds of loss cut across these differences. The first is the loss of people: mothers and fathers, spouses and children, friends and relations. In Minamisanriku, 832 people died, accounting for 4.5% of the pre-disaster population (nearly 1 in 20).⁴ The second is the loss of homes. 3,143 houses were completely destroyed in Minamisanriku, 58.62% of the pre-disaster total (Minamisanriku-chō 2012a).⁵ The final is the loss of place. This includes the features of the visible landscape: the “assemblage of buildings, land-use patterns and arteries of communication that constitute” it as a

---

³ This is the text of a caption from Minamisanriku Story, an exhibition of photographs and objects from the evacuation centers organized by the Minamisanriku Town Tourism Association. All quotations from this exhibition are marked “MS.” The translations are my own, as are all Japanese translations unless otherwise specified.

⁴ The percentage excludes those who died in Minamisanriku but were not residents. Across the disaster regions as a whole 18,459 people died (National Police Agency of Japan 2016). The mean death rate was 0.01 (1 in a hundred), with some areas experiencing no causalities. The worst death rate was in the town of Onnagawa, south of Minamisanriku, where 11% of the population (600 people) died (Aldrich and Sawada 2015, 66).

⁵ An additional 178 (3.32%) were severely damaged, many irreparably.
“visible scene” (Pred 1984, 279). But it also exceeds the visible: the loss of place is a loss of time, both as history (or memory) and as future. The flow of local events is suddenly broken, as are the expected biographies of its residents and their belief that it and they have a future (Pred 1984). Many people – a quarter of the population – have left. “Without my family home (jikka) here, what is there to stay for?” one asked me. These forms of loss – of people, homes, and places – intersect and intertwine, both with each other and with the other kinds of loss specific to industries or lifestyles. One fisherman in the north of the town told an interviewer from The University of Shiga Prefecture shortly after the tsunami:

I’ve sent my son to Osaka…If he goes over there, there are part-time jobs and things like that, so for the time being, he’s looking for part-time stuff.

After he graduated high school, for 4 years we did this (fishing) together. When he looks at this situation, he can’t decide what to do, and I don’t know what to do either, do I let him [stay there], do I not let him.

I don’t know because I can’t see the future at all. I don’t have a boat, and everything offshore was done in. And what the state of the sea will be like now… (Yamagata 2011, 11)

There are too many similar stories like this, in which place – and one’s tethering to it – is at stake. A Sendai-based woman, who lost both parents and her family home in the tsunami, said that, “I’m terrified of people asking me, ‘where is your family home?’…Just thinking about it makes my chest hurt and leaves me struggling not to cry.” (Katō 2014, 14) To lose one’s family home is to lose one’s furusato, or rural “hometown,” the phantasmic tie that still binds urban subjects, however tentatively, to declining rural areas (Ivy 1995). In the temporary housing complexes of Minamisanriku, many older women worried that the loss of their houses meant that, at least temporarily, their children and grandchildren in the cities were hometown-less, like

6 He is talking here about the networks of buoys and ropes used for aquaculture, which were also destroyed by the tsunami.
this woman. Rebuilding their homes meant restoring these connections: re-constituting the town within the wider networks of Japanese society (Massey 2005). But housing, however important, is only one piece of the puzzle: one component of a landscape being reconfigured beyond recognition by both disaster and recovery.

This is an ethnography of these reconfigurations. It is important to clarify what this means and what it excludes. It is not primarily about victimhood, nor the experience of trauma, although both are present and part of the analysis. Rather, it is about what comes after catastrophe; specifically, it is about reconstruction, one of the least studied aspects of destructive events (Cretney 2017, 1). It is also about what it means to live, in the words of one resident, “in the midst of a changing landscape” (Miura 2015); a landscape whose parts have disappeared, and continue to disappear, due to both the sudden violence of disaster and the long tail of reconstruction.

**Theorizing Disaster**

In much popular and political discourse, natural disasters are often portrayed as force majeure: acts of God or nature. Such events are called tensai (‘heavenly disasters’) in Japanese, a term that implies a certain fatalism (Gill, Slater, and Steger 2015, 16). Nobody can be blamed for the

---

7 In this dissertation, I use the words ‘disaster’ and ‘catastrophe’ interchangeably. Both refer to a sudden, calamitous event that causes significant damage and/or suffering: in the words of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, “human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community’s or society’s ability to cope using its own resources.” (IFRC 2017) Some researchers argue that it is useful to distinguish ‘catastrophes’ from ‘disasters’ in terms of scale, but this has not caught on in the social sciences (Quarantelli 2006). I distinguish ‘crisis’ from ‘disaster’ in that the former marks intensification – a critical phase – of a pre-existing situation or process, and does not imply a specific triggering event or agent.

8 From the French, meaning ‘greater force.’ Refers in civil law to an event for which no party can be held accountable.
tsunami, people often told me. Where the triggering agent is unmistakably manmade – such as industrial chemicals, oil, or radioactive particles – the ‘natural’ is typically excised from the equation. These are called *jinsai* in Japan: ‘manmade disasters’ for which blame (and compensation) can be apportioned. While the tsunami was widely marked as ‘natural’ (and thus nobody’s fault), the nuclear meltdown was seen as manmade, despite its derivation from the same initial cause. But when the tsunami overflowed the seawalls – those artificial boundaries between one world and another – did it not enter a highly-engineered space that directed and channeled it, placing some people more in harm’s way than others? (Miller, Thomas, and Walker 2013, xii) Does dividing catastrophes into ‘natural’ and ‘manmade’ really help us make sense of them?

Oliver-Smith, one of the most influential anthropologists of catastrophe, says no. Disasters, he argues, cannot be reduced to or equated with what he would later call the triggering event (or ‘hazard,’ in contemporary policy discussions) (Oliver-Smith 1996; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999). They are fundamentally multi-causal. Accordingly, greater knowledge of the trigger event (through improvements in earthquake or tsunami science, for example) does not equal greater knowledge of either the causes or probable outcomes of disaster. Indeed, the ontologies of triggers themselves are open to question, as some ‘natural’ events, like tropical storms, are increasing in frequency due to anthropogenic climate change. In place of the dichotomy of ‘natural’ and ‘manmade’ disasters, then, theorists like Oliver-Smith propose a

---

9 He defines ‘disaster’ as: “A process/event involving a combination of a potentially destructive agent(s) from the natural and/or technological environment and a population in a socially and technologically produced condition of environmental vulnerability.” (Oliver-Smith 1996, 305)
Disaster risk…can never be considered an independent variable. Disaster risk is usually defined in terms of three other variables, namely hazard, exposure and vulnerability. However, these in turn are also dependent variables. Most hazard is a reflection of both socially constructed as well as physical processes; exposure is a reflection of how social relations of production unfold in territory and geography; while vulnerability characterizes a range of social, economic, political and cultural conditions…disasters are not merely not natural, they also don’t exist independently as things or objects. They are only moments of space-time compression within broader social and historical processes (Oliver-Smith et al. 2016).

We can find a parallel here between the trajectories of disaster theory and event analysis in historiography. While traditional history had focused on short time spans and “dramatic accidents” (Braudel 1980, 7), the ‘New History’ associated with the Annales School threw events overboard, focusing instead on the deeper structures underpinning social life: those “coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses.” (Braudel 1980, 31) Events were just crests of foam carried by the tides of history. Oliver-Smith, and other theorists of disaster, have reached similar conclusions regarding catastrophe (Quarantelli 1993; Faas and Barrios 2015; Faas 2016; Oliver-Smith et al. 2016). It is always already there, under the surface, and merely appears spectacularly for a while (Caton 1999, 8). To understand it, we must search for root causes: the social forces and institutional actors that produce patterns of vulnerability and exposure (Oliver-Smith et al. 2016, 14). In other words, we must take a genealogical – or “forensic” – approach to disaster research, asking what kinds of processes (like population growth) and ideologies (such as idealized notions of development and economic

---

10 By ‘relational ontology,’ I mean a theory that treats disaster not as a ‘thing’ in itself, but as a set of relations between other things: “The basic contention of a relational ontology is simply that the relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves.” (Wildman 2010, 55)

11 Braudel called this the longue durée (Braudel 1980).
growth) created the conditions for catastrophe. In the case of 3.11, for example, we might trace how nuclear plants came to be positioned in Tōhoku in the first place, or historical patterns of land-use that placed those least able to escape a tsunami closest to it.

This is a powerful methodology for approaching disaster research, but it also has limitations. Firstly, it is backward looking, more concerned with what disasters are – their ontology, or conditions of possibility – than what they do. As Slater argues, it is necessary to have a pre-history of disaster, but without “listening to the voices of the people” and “detailed accounts of life in the immediate aftermath,” too often this provides “context without a core.” (Slater 2015, 33) Secondly, as with network theories more generally (Latour 2005; Marston, Jones III, and Woodward 2005), there is a tendency for relational ontologies to lose sight of, or downplay, the physical processes involved. The materiality of the world in such formulations, as Ingold writes, “is fully comprehended in the entities connected…as such, the relation has no material presence [emphasis added].” (Ingold 2008, 210) If thinking about disasters in “agent specific terms” has produced limited results so far (Quarantelli 1993, i), this does not mean we should, as Quarantelli urges, view them more as social phenomena than physical happenings. The dichotomy is a false one. Disasters are, certainly, moments within “systemic processes that unfold over time” (Oliver-Smith et al. 2016, 32): earthquakes are, after all, regular products of the ceaseless motion of tectonic plates. But they also do things: to matter, to space, and to meaning. What we need is a better way of thinking about the materiality of catastrophe that does not hive off ‘the physical’ from ‘the social’ (Latour 2005).
The Space of Disaster

One night in 2013, I was sitting in the living room of a small inn that survived the tsunami, drinking with the head of a local non-profit set up shortly after. “Before the disaster,” my companion said, “the town was like a newspaper. Crammed with columns. No room to write anything. But now, everything has been washed away. And we have a sheet of white paper. After the tsunami, I understood. White paper. A good thing.”

Landscapes are semiotic things. There are always multiple ways of reading them, since – unlike space – they are perspectival: different spectators create different readings of their visible, and invisible, components.12 But look hard enough, Matsuda tells us, and you will see in landscapes diagrams of power (Matsuda 2013): signs indexing the relations of authority and control found within historically specific social formations (Furuhata 2007).13 The landscape is, for theorists like Matsuda, a congealed set of social relations that have become fixed in space. What would happen to such a landscape if a tsunami swept through it?

For much of the 20th century, ‘space’ was marginalized as an analytic category in the social sciences, due to the both the dominance of historical epistemologies (Soja 1989) and the rejection of space and place by social scientists inspired by network theories of society (Walsh

12 There is much confusion about the difference between ‘landscape’ and ‘space,’ and certainly no consensus over definitions. For example, Mitchell argues that landscape is “a physical and multisensory medium…in which cultural meanings and values are encoded.” (Mitchell 2002, 14) This definition is similar to that of ‘representational space,’ the third leg of Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite theory of spatial production. Following Furuhata, I think of landscape as both “the physical space seen from a particular point of view” (emphasis added) and “the framed space of visual representations.” (Furuhata 2013, 352)

13 The above is a summary of fūkeiron, or “landscape theory”: a body of theoretical literature that emerged in Japan during the late 1960s in response to profound shifts in the physical and political state of the nation. For proponents of fūkeiron, the growth of Japanese state capitalism had produced increasing control over and rationalization of space, resulting in the proliferation of mass commodities and homogenous landscapes (Furuhata 2007). Resistance meant interrogating these landscapes; searching, in the words of Nakahira Takuma, for “the remote possibility of a single crack” in their surfaces (Nakahira 2010, 10). Perhaps what he needed was a disaster.
and High 1999). In Anthropology, theories of space and place fell out of fashion until relatively recently, not least due to the “globalization craze” (Escobar 2001). The geographer Doreen Massey contends that since the time of Bergson,¹⁴ space has been viewed as “the dead, the fixed” (Massey 2005, 1): an association between space and fixity contrasting with the ongoing dynamism of social and historical change.

Matter is never truly stable, of course (Bennett 2010), and neither is it ‘fixed’ in space.¹⁵ Beneath the seeming stability of landscapes are continual efforts to reproduce and stabilize the relations between their parts: neither space nor place simply are, they are always in the process of becoming (Pred 1984). Social space – the space of social practice – is not analogous to Euclidean, Cartesian, or any of the other spaces of geometry (Lefebvre 2011); it is not simply a surface, or a plane, on or in which we are placed. Instead, it is the product of interrelations between various entities – human and nonhuman – and does not exist prior to their conjunctions (Massey 2005, 10). As a social product,¹⁶ it is continually produced and reproduced through the

---


¹⁵ As with landscape, the distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ is contentious (Low 2016). Tuan, for example, argues that it is through coming to know space sensorially that it is transformed into place (Tuan 2011). Casey, by contrast, argues that as place is given in experience, it is ontologically prior: place is general and space is particular (Casey 1996, 17). I take no position on the ontological or epistemological priority of ‘space’ or ‘place,’ though I do agree with Casey that space is not a neutral, pre-given tabula rasa on which the particularities of culture are written (Casey 1996, 14). Following Setha Low, I see space and place as existing on a continuum, with space a more “abstract construct retaining its…materialist origins” and place referring to “a space that is inhabited and appropriated through the attribution of personal and group meanings, feelings, sensory perceptions and understandings.” (Low 2016, 33) I add to her formulation Pred’s insight that place is not a thing but a process, in which, crucially, the reproduction of social and cultural forms, the formation of biographies, and the construction of material space all interact (Pred 1984, 282).

¹⁶ Following Latour (1993, 2005), I understand ‘society’ (‘the social’) to refer not to some discrete domain of human activity, but heterogeneous networks of both human and non-human actors.
actions of these entities: historical subjects who, in turn, find their trajectories and biographies shaped by it.

Disasters affect the relationships between people and their environments, whether by altering the composition of space or introducing new agents that circulate within it (such as radiation). The result is, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, the transformation of spaces and places from *matters of fact* to *matters of concern*. For Latour, a ‘matter of concern’ is a ‘matter of fact’ that has been demystified. Etymologically, a fact is “a thing…that has *actual existence*” (emphasis added) (Merriam-Webster 2017); in rendering this a ‘matter of concern,’ Latour wants to demonstrate that seemingly coherent objects are ‘gatherings’ of relationships between other, smaller things whose stabilization as a fact is a *problem* (sometimes a political one) (Latour 2004). Leaving aside whether this usefully describes the ‘facts of science’ he applies it to, the language of ‘matters of fact’ and ‘matters of concern’ describes rather accurately social space before and after a disaster. A known landscape – a place – is, when it is stable, a matter of fact: something taken-for-granted by most of the people who inhabit it. Prior to 3.11, few residents thought much about Minamisanriku or its future; it was simply there, the assumed backdrop for their activities. But disaster changed this. When the tsunami swept through Tōhoku, it tore houses from their foundations, boats from their moorings, recombining the material fabric of the coast in strange and unsettling formations. The waters did not just disrupt the relationships between things, however. Both it, and reconstruction, also made them disappear.

A photographer born in Rikuzentakata, who lost both his mother and family home in the tsunami, described its impact on his place of birth like this,

> Even if the names are the same, they have become completely different places than before...If even a tiny bit of the past visage is left in the ruins of Rikuzentakata they become nostalgic...In our present moment when almost nothing is left, the violence of
the clearing of the disaster regions feels, in a way, worse than the tsunami (Kahoku Shimpō-sha 2015, 46-47).

*The violence of the clearing feels worse than the tsunami.* This sounds over the top, to be sure. But one can often hear similar, albeit less hyperbolic, feelings about reconstruction. The sociologist Hiroshige Takeshi has warned that the seawall plans (discussed in Chapter 2) could create a “secondary disaster” in the disaster regions (Hiroshige 2014); what Greenberg calls “the disaster inside the disaster” (Greenberg 2014). Across the impacted regions, residents have been mobilizing to preserve aspects of both pre-disaster space and the ruined objects and places left by the tsunami (see Chapters 2, 3 and 4). If the wave disappeared things – people, homes, places – reconstruction, which is basically synonymous with development, appears to complete the gesture, extending the process of erasure far beyond the wave’s withdrawal.

Minamisanriku, like other parts of rural Japan, was already vanishing, of course. Rural areas have long been “passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence.” (Ivy 1995, 20) Across Japan, “hamlets at their limits”17 are proliferating due to the collapse of birthrates and the flow of young people to the cities. The disaster is, at least in part, a moment when these *longue durée* processes of decline are suddenly and violently compressed in time and space (Oliver-Smith et al. 2016). There is a similarity between attempts to reassure anxious modern subjects that “all is in place and all is not lost” by promoting rural tourism and the need, after disaster, to create a sense of futurity for areas that have no future. In both cases, “the concomitant understanding arises (sometimes obscurely) that such reassurance would not be necessary if loss, indeed, were not at stake.” (Ivy 1995, 10) But if disaster marks intensification,

17 *Genkai shūraku.* The term was coined by the sociologist Ōno Akira to describe hamlets and villages that, due to their majority elderly population and the breakdown of their administrative and ritual life, are on the verge of disappearing completely (Love 2013, 115).
it also creates rupture: singularities in which, however briefly, it becomes possible to conceive of new possibilities in the formation of social reality (Kapferer 2010, 1).

I call the empty spaces left by things that have suddenly vanished *negative spaces*. While I borrow the term from the field of art, I use it slightly differently. In art theory and criticism, ‘negative space’ typically refers to the “recessed areas” around and between positive forms (Daly 2003, 771). What I call ‘negative space,’ by contrast, are areas where the previous relationship between matter and space has been inverted: where the positive, like a building, has been negated, leaving an *absence of a building* in the mind of the observer. This does not imply that they are *empty*: they are in fact thick with affective associations, resonant with the memories of what was once there. But the negation of these is what opens space, for better or worse, to development, including the form of development called ‘reconstruction’ after 3.11. The tearing open of space creates new political moments, new matters of concern.¹⁸ My understanding of ‘the political’ here is strongly influenced by the work of Jacques Rancière, particularly the influential *Ten Theses on Politics* (2001). Politics, he argues, occurs when the ‘police order’ – “the distribution of objects and subjects…each with a prescribed name and place” – is disrupted, resulting in “a radical re-ordering of relations and redistribution of agency.” (Booth and Williams 2014, 185) In this sense, the tsunami is not just a “dependent variable” (Oliver-Smith et al. 2016). It is an *actor* that, in crossing the boundary between land (culture) and sea (nature), disrupts the relations composing the landscape, producing new terrains of struggle.

Recognizing that disaster produces new political geographies requires that we do not separate ‘reconstruction’ and ‘disaster’ conceptually. As Cretney remarks, “the process of disaster recovery is intensely value laden, driven by questions of power, equity and prioritization

¹⁸ Similarly, nuclear disaster rendered other taken-for-granted things – the integrity of nature (Masco 2004), the safety of food (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015), and the relationship between the bodies of children and their environment – matters of concern.
over what is rebuilt, by who and where” (Cretney 2017, 1). Reconstruction is the long tail of the process we call disaster, and it is also inherently political (Olson 2000; Olson and Gawronski 2010; Pelling and Dill 2010; Cretney 2017). The rupturing and ruination of things changes the meanings they carry (Chapter 4); produces what Morimoto calls a “struggle of interpretants,” in which people endeavor, among the cacophony and confusion of disaster, to create and stabilize narratives about and through the new objects and spaces (Morimoto 2012, 267).

Reconstruction is not always a given, of course; it may be delayed indefinitely. In Nepal, nearly a year after the devastating earthquakes of April and May 2015, Time reported that official reconstruction was at a virtual standstill; a situation they attribute to the country’s ongoing political crisis (Kumar 2016). In poor, economically unproductive regions, disaster can lead to total abandonment (or, from a slightly different perspective, manifest the area’s marginality and dispensability on the landscape itself). Lack of official reconstruction, however, does not mean the people who inhabit a space cease to construct it in line with their needs and desires. Minamisanriku, like much of Tōhoku, is dramatically reconstructing, but without a great deal of meaningful input from residents. To understand what they are fighting for, we must first try and understand, however partially, what they have lost.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will introduce Minamisanriku through a tour of the town as I found it in 2012. This is a tour of positive and negative space: of both present forms and practices and memories of what has vanished, as recounted by residents in print or in person. While I introduce some of the history of the areas we pass through, this is history seen “through a rearview mirror. The view is narrow, it bounces quite a bit, and it…mainly reflects landmarks of the very recent journey.” (Bestor 2004, 96-97) The journey is only partly mine,
however. Our trajectory through the town parallels that of the fukkō machizukuri suishin-in\textsuperscript{19}: a group of residents hired by Miyagi University (Sendai) to coordinate between the town and the university post-disaster. On top of their work as liaisons and researchers, the team has been mapping changes to the town’s landscapes since the tsunami. In 2015, they released a guide, *The Great East Japan Earthquake: 4 Years of Damage and Recovery/Reconstruction* (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015), in which they tour each district of the town, describing what used to be there and noting the changes that have occurred since the disaster. This text provides the loose outline of our journey.\textsuperscript{20} Their encounters with lost pasts create a continual sense of dissonance, well captured in Washida and Akasaka’s incredulity that “in only half a year or so, the memory of a railroad could disappear from the face of the earth so cleanly, so completely…” (Washida and Akasaka 2012, 53) When we reach our journey’s end, near the border of Minamisanriku and Kesennuma, I will briefly outline the Town’s\textsuperscript{21} vision for what will fill these negative spaces, often called “the Grand Design”; a vision that, while it aims to carry some of the past into the town’s future, represents to many a further sundering.

\textsuperscript{19} The term translates roughly as ‘town planning for reconstruction promoters.’ They were based in a temporary office called Reconstruction Station in Minamisanriku’s inland district of Iriya.

\textsuperscript{20} There is one omission on this trip: Iriya, an area that, due to its abundant rice paddies, is often described by residents and visitors as “the original landscape of Japan.” While some parts of Iriya suffered damage during the earthquake, its deep inland location protected it from inundation. I do not claim that Iriya residents did not suffer due to 3.11, but the nature of their suffering is different enough to warrant separate treatment.

\textsuperscript{21} In this dissertation, I use the lower-case ‘town’ to refer to Minamisanriku as an area, and ‘Town’ to refer to the local government.
The Town

1. Togura

To reach Minamisanriku from Sendai, you must head north until Monō, where you descend from the highway and join Route 45, which passes through the town on its long journey to Aomori, the northernmost Prefecture of mainland Japan. This is the route by which I first entered the town in the summer of 2012. An hour or so into the journey, we left the highway and began to
wind our way towards the coast. Soon after, I began to see them. The flat, grey stumps where houses had stood; the piles of rubble and twisted metal; the desiccated trees that, despite being halfway up mountainsides, died from the salt water. This was Aramachi, the outermost district of Togura, two and a half kilometers from Minamisanriku’s waterfront. When the suishin-in passed through here after the tsunami, the river paralleling the road was full of debris; a sign of just how far inland the invading waters had penetrated.

Togura, alongside Shizugawa, Iriya, and Utatsu, is the southernmost of four distinct areas comprising the town (Figure 1-3). Before the disasters, it was the second-smallest, accounting for 13% of the total population in 2010 (2,296 residents) (Minamisanriku-chō 2015, 6). Today it is the least occupied, its population having fallen by more than a quarter since the disaster. Before the tsunami, the suishin-in tell us, it had a railway station, “to the west of which was a drive-in (also a pizzeria, and an opticians), and to the east of which there was a fishing shop, frequented by early-morning fishers (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 6).” This is what the area looks like today (Figure 1-4). The ruined foundations left by the tsunami have been demolished, and the former heart of Togura, the suishin-in write, has “changed into a wide plain.” (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 11) Togura today has no center.

The district’s population is dispersed among 9 smaller hamlets, strung along the coast like beads on a strong. The sociologist Ōguma Eiji might have had Togura in mind when he wrote the following description of the Sanriku Coast’s social and topographical structure:

Along each inlet is a fishing village made up of tens of households. A typical village of this sort stands on an inlet area a few hundred square meters wide, along with a fishing port that is flanked by an embankment about ten meters long. Rivers from the nearby mountains flow into the inlet…Connecting each fishing village is a winding road…There is no other way to get to and from the villages (Ōguma 2013).
One such village (shūraku, or ‘hamlet’ in local parlance) is Nagashizu, the first place I stayed in the disaster regions, or hisaichi. I visited many hamlets during my stays in the town, but returned to none of them as often as here. At the seafront is a small harbor, where a ruined water gate (suimon) still stood as of 2015 (Figure 1-4). Behind this, a deep, thin valley extends into the mountainous interior. The hamlet lies near the southern border of the town, where Minamisanriku becomes greater Ishinomaki. To its south lies only Terahama, whose minshuku were all destroyed by the waters, and Kamiwarizaki, whose name (literally meaning “God-split-

---

22 A kind of rural bed-and-breakfast, normally family owned and operated.
point”) indexes the area’s mytho-history. Some think that all the hamlets in this area were once part of ‘Nagashizu village,’ but it is difficult to trace their lineages these days. The local shrine (jinja) used to have many old documents, but these were lost when the tsunami took the priest’s house. Nagashizu’s history was, literally, lost in the flood.

Nagashizu today is a gyōsei-ku: an official administrative area within the larger district of Togura with a population, in 2015, of 123 (down from 165 before the tsunami) (Minamisanriku-chō 2015, 6). One of these is a woman I’ll call Satō, who married into (totsuida) the hamlet some 30 years ago.

When I married into Nagashizu, I moved from a convenient to an inconvenient place. “This is really the countryside,” that was my impression. Now, there’s a highway, right? There was no highway then. Just the old road.

It’s a rias coastline, so you have mountains, and these recessed harbors, these little harbors... There were no shops. It’s inconvenient for daily life, but the food culture is so delicious. You can eat fresh things from the sea, when it’s autumn you have mushrooms. The blessings of the mountains, the blessings of the sea. We kept rice paddies too, so we were basically self-sufficient food-wise.

The effects of this relative isolation and self-sufficiency linger. Like other hamlets, Nagashizu has a keiyaku-kō, a self-governing organization (by and for men) that exists primarily to manage the communal resources of the area (specifically, land owned by the keiyaku-kō itself) and

---

23 “Long ago, there was a village here called Nagashizu-mura. One day, a large whale beached in this harbor, and since the border with the neighboring Jūsan-hama village was not clear, a dispute between both villages erupted over the struggle for the whale.” (Minamisanriku-chō Kankō Kyōkai 2016) Legend has it that that evening a deity split both promontory and whale, leaving the ‘god-split rock,’ a popular spot for viewing the sunrise.

24 “The tsunami robbed people of both histories and memories. In a few short seconds, everything was lost and people’s lives were changed irrevocably. The delicate former atmosphere is but a memory now, as 300 years of history were lost in a moment.” (MS)

25 A rias coast is one that contains multiple coastal inlets. A ria is defined by the OED as “a long, narrow inlet formed by the partial submergence of a river valley.”
coordinate mutual aid activities among its members. While most the town’s *keiyaku-kō* were established in the Meiji period (1868-1912), Nagashizu’s dates to an unknown time before (Shizugawa-chō shi henshū-san shitsu 1989, 266). Of the 37 households in Nagashizu before the disaster, only 30 or so were members, however. When I asked the *kaichō* – an unusually young man who owns a hair salon in Shizugawa – why this was, he told me that it was probably due to the ‘one household, one man’ rule, in which only the *honke* (main household in a Japanese family structure, as opposed to *bunke*, or collateral branch) would be represented. I heard from others that ‘newer’ households – those perceived as having shallower historical roots – were

---

26 Like many parts of Japan, age and authority come together in Minamisanriku through a system called *nenkō joretsu*. I asked the second-in-command (*fuku-kaichō*) of the *keiyaku-kō*, also a young man, how he and the *kaichō* could have control so young. “I may be second-in-command officially,” he told me, “but in power terms I’m second from the bottom.” The “OB” (old boys) are the ones with real power.
often not invited to join. While *keiyaku-kō* (also called *keiyaku-kai*) are the most well-known organizations, other groups exist within and across hamlets: *rokushin-kō*, the ‘older men’s *keiyaku-kō’*; *kannon-kō*, for the wives of *keiyaku-kō* members; and *nenbutsu-kō* for the older women, to name but a few (Shizugawa-chō shi henshū-san shitsu 1989). While the *keiyaku-kō* in Nagashizu is active, it is unclear to what degree any of these groups function today, if they function at all.

Most of the residents of Nagashizu, like the other hamlets in Shizugawa and Utatsu to the north, make their living on the sea. This is not deep-sea fishing, though many men had worked boats as far afield as Alaska and South America in their youth. Most residents of these hamlets are aquaculturalists, raising oysters, scallops, *wakame* (seaweed), and *hoya* (sea pineapples) in underwater farms formed by latticework of rope beneath the water. The most profitable is silver salmon, which brought in just under 14 million dollars’ worth of revenue in 2014, followed by *wakame* and scallops at 4 and 3 million. Silver salmon farming, however, has heavy outlays, and the number of fishermen breeding them has dwindled over the years. The sea, like the land, is divided into plots, allocated to fishermen that possess the requisite permit (*gyogyōken*), available only through membership of the local Japan Fisheries cooperative. Pull up any of the buoys in the bay and you will find on it the name of the section’s sea-owner, represented by a single, large

---

27 “When the first-born son marries and enters the *keiyaku-kō*, his father quits the *keiyaku-kō* and enters the *rokushin-kō* (also called ‘the older men’s *keiyaku-kō’’)…from each house there is one member. To leave the *rokushin-kō*, the person can die.” (Shizugawa-chō shi henshū-san shitsu 1989, 301) The *nenbutsu-kō* is the same for the women.

28 These are Buddhist terms. Kannon is a Bodhisattva: someone that has achieved enlightenment but postpones their Buddhahood in order to help save others. The *nenbutsu* is the invocation of the Buddha Amidha, chanted by members of some Buddhist sects in the hope of entry into his ‘Pure Land.’

29 Fishing does not necessarily account for their total income: many residents of Minamisanriku work ‘half-farm half-sea’ (*han-nō han-gyo*), or combine fishing with seasonal work in the construction industry, running *minshuku*, and other sources of income.
Chinese character. There are other opportunities to make money on the sea, though they arise less frequently. A few times a year, when the weather and the water look right, the Coop will briefly open the sea (kaikō) for taking urchin or abalone. During these openings, which last only a couple of hours, the bay is filled with small boats and the clack-clack of kagi, the long, two-pronged fishing poles used to scrape urchins from the bottom of the sea.

Nagashizu is still a fishing port, though it took some time to rebuild. Only one fisherman managed to save his boat. He was on it when the earthquake struck. Knowing that the safest spot for a boat during a tsunami is the open sea, he headed straight out into the bay (oki ni dasu). He couldn’t return until the next morning, due to the vast quantities of debris clogging the waterfront. When he landed, he found that Nagashizu had disappeared.

After a cold, uncertain night, the sight of their hometown in the morning left people speechless. Both the bustling hamlets and the railroad connecting them to workplaces and schools had been destroyed (MS).

In the first few days, many hamlets were cut off entirely due to broken roads. Route 45, the largest road and main artery of the town, was blocked by wreckage, restricting the flow of people in and out and preventing access to the highway. It wasn’t until the Self-Defense Force (SDF) began erecting temporary bridges and clearing debris from the roads that passage between areas became possible again. Before the flood, in the evenings Nagashizu valley was lit by the 33 houses that lined its sides from the bay to the interior (Figure 1-6). In 2012, with these gone, as soon as night fell it became completely dark. With the disappearance of its parts, the space of the coast became eerily unfamiliar, and un-navigable. “We had a year with no streetlights,” a resident of a nearby hamlet told me.
Do you know how lonely it was? You didn’t know where you were. You didn’t even know if you were on the road. If I was driving, I’d at least know which direction I was moving in. But if you suddenly dropped me somewhere I’d have no idea where I was. Only the roads were left, and if you followed them you’d know you were going somewhere. But you had no idea where you were. Because there were no landmarks.

Nobody lives in the valley anymore, except for the two households that, due to their elevated positions, survived the flood. At night it is still dark, though parts of the road are now lit by tiny, flashing lights. In the harbors, some new workshops have gone up, and repairs to the piers and breakwaters are proceeding. The seawalls (Chapter 2) will come next, though it’s unclear when they will start. For some, life is gradually beginning to look more ‘normal,’ on the outside at least. But on the inside is another matter. Many do not want to look at the sea, even those who
work on it. For all the bodies that were found, there are still people lost down there. These are the
*yukue-fumei* – “whereabouts unknown” – people, who disappeared in the tsunami but whose bodies were never found. In official statistics, they are not listed as deceased, though 6 years later few would predict their return. Their absence is still felt deeply, however. A Buddhist monk that has been visiting Togura regularly since the disasters told me that,

> There are people who died in this tsunami, they don’t know if they’re alive or dead. I think there are many Buddhas\(^\text{30}\) that haven’t realized they are dead. Because there are people who haven’t come back up\(^\text{31}\) (*agatte korarete inai*), people whose whereabouts are unknown. “You’ve died, I will lead you to the other world, you can’t stay in that place,” I’ve been saying this to them all along as I make visits.

> I think you must go to the places where they died, and sit there and pray.

On the anniversary of the tsunami, I returned to Nagashizu to lay flowers and *dango* near the ruined water gate, at a spot where, on that day, my companion had seen two older residents fall into the water. Their bodies were never found. The wife of one of them has never accepted his death, she told me. She tells people he was washed away to Hawaii, where he is stuck with no means of coming home. Now that construction work has started on the harbor and in the valley, there is no chance of retrieving his body, in any case. She thinks about that moment, and what it must have felt like when the mud and water entered his mouth. That instant must have been the most painful, she said.

The last time I visited Nagashizu was in July 2016. Higher-ground relocation had been completed, though only 9 of the 33 households had chosen to build in the new estate. I asked one resident where the people who’d left had gone. The furthest, he told me, was Yokohama; some

\(^{30}\) *Hotoke-san*. In some sects of Buddhism, the deceased are believed to become Buddhas.

\(^{31}\) As in, their bodies have not emerged from the water. Within the new spatial imaginary produced by disaster, the wandering dead are “down there,” in the sea that, presumably, took them. For a poignant account of one man’s ongoing efforts to find his wife’s body, see Percy 2016.
had also gone to Sendai, though as parishioners of the local shrine, they would still return for the yearly festival, if it is revived. I left him and headed for a nearby hill to view the full moon rising over the water. All around were the shrill, trembling voices of higurashi: tanna japonensis, the evening cicada whose melancholy call marks the onset of twilight in the late summer. I could see across to a small, neighboring inlet, previously home to 5 fishermen’s workshop. Only 1 had been rebuilt. No more were expected to follow. I left the hill and followed the road down towards the waterfront, where the path curls around the edge of the inlet and leads to a set of stairs to the top of the new concrete breakwater. Across, on the other side of the harbor mouth, a construction worker was fishing off the pier. The water below me seemed black in the half-light. So calm during the day, at night it shows another face: dark and wild, an opaque surface in perpetual, inscrutable motion.

2. Shizugawa

To reach the center of Shizugawa, the most populous of the four districts, you leave Togura and follow Route 45 past the hamlets of Kurosaki – home to the famous Hotel Kanyō – Hayashi, and Ōkubo, and cross over what was once the Mizushiri Bridge. Before the disaster, you could make the same journey on Japan Rail’s Kesennuma line. But the tsunami severed the tracks, and Japan Rail has, as of now, no intention of rebuilding them. Even before the disasters, they were making a loss.

Shizugawa district used to be Shizugawa Town, until it merged with Utatsu to form Minamisanriku Town in 2005. It was itself an agglomeration, formed by the merger of the old Shizugawa Town, Iriya Village and Togura Village in 1955. Although part of the same town, people from Togura still talk of Shizugawa as a separate entity. Before the disaster, it was the
commercial center and most heavily populated area of Minamisanriku. It boasted several shopping streets (shōtengai), including Tōkamachi and Itsukamachi, the latter of which was described to me by a former shopkeeper like this:

It was really the center of Shizugawa, the urban area, the main street. There was a shopping arcade, a hospital, a police station, a primary school, it was really the main street of the town.

…then bit by bit, Route 45 kept developing, and shopping centers started opening, and then over there the public hospital opened, and then the Takano Hall, which is still there now, the multi-purpose hall. Because of these things, the other side [of the town center] was turning into the main street…but we still had the most shops of anywhere in town.

While central Shizugawa had more white collar workers and shopkeepers than the coastal hamlets, it still contained a significant fishing industry presence. Endō, a former resident of Motohama, the waterfront district next to Tōkamachi, told me that,

Most people in the area were involved in fishing. People working in the fishing industry. People working in the fish processing industry were there too. Because the area was truly right in front of the sea.

Motohama, he told me, once had two keiyaku-kō: an “old one,” whose membership was limited to families living there from before it was called Motohama; and a “new one,” which gathered men from both Motohama and the neighboring Ōmori district. After a fight over “which was the real keiyaku-kō” caused many members of both to quit, a new group was set up. This was open to everybody, including those living on reclaimed land by the waterfront historically excluded from the keiyaku-kō due to their ‘recent’ arrival. For those working in the fishing industry, there was also an ebisu-kō, and a kannon-kō “for the mothers.” The area had its own festival: Shichifukujin-mai, the Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods, in which the dancers would arrive in

Endō is a pseudonym.
Motohama by sea. One young man, who danced it as a schoolchild, still remembers the feeling of his feet, wet in the bottom of the boat.

The first time I visited Shizugawa in 2012, everything was in ruins. Collapsed, sunken buildings, whose interiors were dense meshes of debris, surrounded the Tōkamachi bus stop. Photographs from 2011 show even more uncanny, violent scenes. A house, wrenched from its foundations by the tsunami, sits eerily on top of the town’s health center. The Disaster Management Center (Bōsai Taisaku Chōsha), built to withstand a powerful earthquake, stripped to its metal frame, debris trailing off it like so much broken skin. But photos, as powerful as they are, can’t do full justice to the contradictions in these ruptured spaces: to the experience of looking upon a place that has changed irrevocably. We can turn to texts for hints, albeit small ones, as to what this felt like. Where the shopkeepers of “Fish Street” (Osakana-dōri), once crowded with fishmongers and souvenir shops, had welcomed visitors with familiar greetings, subsidence and changing tide levels had left the area flooded with seawater. The sounds of wind and water have replaced those of raucous crowds (MS).

On the platform of the former Shizugawa station, once busy with commuters and schoolchildren, not a voice can be heard (MS).

When some of the future Recovery Promoters arrived, they found the town center submerged in a sea of debris (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 76). The search for survivors continued among these mountains of wreckage:

People’s cars and daily goods were turned into wreckage instantly. Stripped of everything but a few concrete exteriors, the town looked so small (MS).
Rubble is an uncanny thing, especially after a disaster. The bodies of the dead mingle with displaced matter, producing something whose status is unclear. Is this a body? Is it just rubble? (Yeager 2003) “The debris is thick with feelings,” one member of the Minamisanriku’s Reconstruction Plan Drafting Council put it (Minamisanriku-chō 2011, 7). In their four-year summary of damage and reconstruction, the Recovery Promoters, all of whom were residents, appear uncomfortable with the word debris, preferring at times “the things people call debris” (gareki to shō sareru mono), or “the so-called debris” (iwayuru gareki) (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 71-76). One blogger described his first encounter with the debris the day after the tsunami:

The moment I entered the residential area from the port, I was shocked. There were mountains of debris as far as the eyes could see… I thought about how in that debris, there could be a wretched underlay of bodies, those who had been late to flee and were swallowed by the tsunami. There was no road at all. I climbed over the debris fearfully. It wasn’t that I was afraid of traversing the dangerous rubble, but rather a feeling of respect for the bodies (Moriizumi 2011).

By 2013, everything was gone. Tōkamachi, Itsukamachi, Fish Street. The debris too had been cleared, leaving a landscape entirely bare. In the words of an architect from Sendai, “the earth had become naked.”

Residents were scattered to the wind. As I describe in Chapter 5, allocation of temporary housing units by lottery saw many communities – already fragmented by the dislocations of the disaster – dissolved almost completely. Endō, the former Motohama resident, was assigned a unit in Utatsu, the northernmost part of the town. A year after the disaster, he told me, there was a meeting of the district association:

It was after everyone had moved into temporary housing. Everyone was scattered all over, and there were no activities as a district, and for the higher-ground hamlets and
things like that, we weren’t going to be gathered by district…So, everyone was scattered, and it’s pointless to leave only the name, so we decided to disband the association.

Today, Motohama is an empty plain: “No trace of the former town remains.” (MS) But its shadow lingers in people’s memories. One day, as I was driving through Shizugawa with a local family, the GPS suddenly announced, “coming up on the left is the police office.” The maps had yet to be updated, and on the screen I could still see all the vanished buildings, the former roads. When you drive here, I asked my friend, do you see the town as it was? I recall it all, he said. That used to be a pachinko parlor. Over there was the post office. Another road ran through here, but it’s gone now. We continued north on the new road, until it rejoined Route 45. Keep following this and you arrive in Utatsu, the northernmost district of the town.

3. Utatsu

Utatsu lies just beyond Hosoura, a hamlet where, the Recovery Promoters report, “immediately after the tsunami, a boat sunken into the wall of a house made an impression on us.” (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 100) (Figure 1-7). Utatsu, as already mentioned, was amalgamated with Shizugawa in 2005 to form Minamisanriku. A sense of separateness still lingers, particularly among the older generation. One shopkeeper told me:

We became a single town, but it’s not like everyone wanted this. More people wanted it, but there were still places that wanted things to go on as before…I think it’s a normal way of thinking to want the town to stay the same as when you grew up.

Endō is referring here to the new estates built as part of higher-ground relocation. Unlike many of the small fishing hamlets in Togura, Shizugawa, and Utatsu, residents of central Shizugawa were offered plots in three large estates as part of what I call aggregative relocation. See Chapter 5 for details.
Cross over the invisible border, and the first hamlet you reach is Niranohama, which in 2012 I visited as part of the Sanriku Project. Although well known for aquaculture, many households also cultivated rice in the wide paddies that used to fill the interior. Although the rubble has been cleared, these paddies have not been restored, and all one hears is the rustling of the long grasses (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 101). The first time I saw urchin fishing was here, when the head of a small hamlet’s keiyaku-kō invited me to join him. We maneuvered around the shallows near the port, while the men scooped urchins from the rocks, filling bucket after bucket with shimmering spines. He first left for sea when he was 16, he told me, at a time when it was

34 The Sanriku Project was a multi-disciplinary team of Harvard-affiliated researchers, designers, and medical professionals who visited Minamisanriku in 2011, 2012 and 2013 to help facilitate the rebuilding process and empower local communities.
normal for young men from Utatsu to work on tuna boats after middle-school. They used to fish off the coast of Hawaii, he said, though he only alighted there 4 times. He made enough money to build his first house at age 23. He lost his last house in the tsunami, but wasn’t despondent. “I’m going to build another one. I don’t need a big house.”

When the Recovery Promoters carried on from Niranohama along the main road,

The moment we saw Isatoma district from Route 45 was a huge shock. Where you descend the hill, there should have been a gas station…pottery kilns and shops, houses had stood in rows here. When we exited the tunnel Utatsu Station was on the other side, but the railway bridge had broken and led to nowhere (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 102).

The road continues past Uta-chan bridge, named after a famous otter that once visited the area. Vibrant cherry blossoms along its banks would announce the arrival of Spring. The bridge still stands, and the words “Uta-chan bridge” are still legible. But like Central Shizugawa, most of what filled Isatoma is gone. Today, the only surviving landmark is the red gate marking the entrance to its main shrine (Figure 1-8).

The disaster swallowed all Isatoma’s streets, leaving the foundations of houses like square of a Go board. The huge tsunami reached the primary school, JR Utatsu Station and Nishikōji Temple, but this great red gate remains. (Chiki Shinkō Jigyō-bu 2015, 108)

On the far side of Isatoma, a road leads away from Route 45 along the coastline. On the way, I would pass on my right what little remained of Nagasuka, a popular beach threatened not just by the tsunami, but the plan to build an 8.7m (nearly 3 story) seawall on its former site (I discuss this plan and opposition to it in Chapter 2). Follow it for another 5km or so and you will arrive at Tomarihama, a large fishing hamlet at the far end of the promontory. We end our tour of the town here, at the water’s edge, though if you returned to Route 45, you would find a few more fishing hamlets – or former fishing hamlets – before crossing the border into Kesennuma.
I have given only a small sample of the vanished and the hamlets affected, but there are many more. The story is mostly the same along the coast: everything, from houses to boats, was washed away, and although the names are the same, the places are utterly changed. In one hamlet, after the earthquake those near the harbor either launched their boats into the bay or retied them away from the concrete walls, like they would during storms. The head of one gyōsei-ku described how,

> Until the moment when all the houses were being washed away, my boat was floating...All the other boats had sunk or broken apart. Just when I was thinking, “wow,
my boat is tough,’’ the returning wave came, and a house (being washed away) slammed into my boat, and over it went (Yamagata 2011, 5).

When I visited Tomarihama in 2012, residents of the district were preparing to rebuild the systems of underwater ropes needed for aquaculture. Near the port were dozens of tires set in concrete blocks, each weighing two tons. These were taken, one by one, to the landing bay on a small forklift, where they were then winched to the edge, tied to the front of a boat, and then carefully lowered into the water. The boat would then tow them to their spot where, after a buoy had been attached to the tire on a long line, the rope would be cut and they would sink to the bottom. One of the fishermen told me that other ropes would be spread out between these buoys, creating 7m squared meshes, in the coils of which they would grow wakame. The process would take at least 2 months to complete.

Today, most of the town’s fishing infrastructure has been rebuilt, and output returned to pre-disaster levels. In Shizugawa, a large new fish market was opened; Yoriki port, strangely empty when we first visited, is now full of new boats (though the land behind it is still empty). The Town is being rebuilt, but for those who experienced the tsunami, the sea is still different than before. Many bodies have never been recovered, and their absent presence gives an eerie cast to the waters. Go into the sea for a swim, and “you’ll meet everyone down there,” one resident said to me on a drunken evening. On the third anniversary of the tsunami, a young fisherman from Utatsu wrote,

I went to visit the dead, like I’ve been doing since the disaster. But, they aren’t in graves. To put your hands together in front of a grave containing nothing but objects feels like a formality, a way not to forget. On that day, I went to sea in my boat. It’s where my memories come back the strongest. Where I feel them closest. Reconstruction and prayers can’t be just about the form.
First, we must proceed from the heart (Katō 2014, 18).

**Grand Designs**

Those two, how would they view this town?
The debris has gone, and huge mountains of red earth have risen in its place.
They call it ‘raising the ground’ (kasa-age), supposedly.
I feel lonely watching my hometown steadily disappear.
Father, grandmother, can you see it? (Katō 2014, 46)

There are two words in Japanese that roughly correspond with the English term ‘reconstruction.’
The first and most direct is fukkyū, which means to restore something to its previous state. The second, more common after disasters, is fukkō, which translates roughly as “building back better.” After 3.11, the dominant model of reconstruction is so-called ‘creative reconstruction.’ (sōzōteki fukkō). Minamisanriku, for example, writes in its Master Reconstruction Plan that their objective is:

The ‘creative reconstruction’ of a tranquil yet prosperous town woven out of nature, people, and their livelihoods…Creative reconstruction is not simply the restoration of the pre-tsunami state, but aims to create a new ‘town planning’ (machizukuri) that tackles the problems of a mature society (Minamisanriku-chō 2012b, 26).

In official discourse, fukkō refers to a dichotomous (but not dialectical) process. On the one side, you have what is called the ‘hardware,’ which encompasses all aspects of physical infrastructure. On the other, you have ‘software,’ which includes both programmatic aspects of reconstruction policy (safety drills, for example) and various dimensions of social, cultural and economic life.

For residents, however, fukkō has many other meanings. In this dissertation, I use the word ‘reconstruction’ to refer to both government-led fukkō programs and the manifold ways that residents are attempting to re-stitch relations between (and within) themselves and the places they lived (and will live). These activities have many names. Sometimes, following official
parlance, they are called ‘soft’ reconstruction, a move that encapsulates them within the dichotomous understanding of space and society that underlies official policy. Many people also spoke of kokoro no fukkō, or “reconstructing the heart/mind”: a phrase often accompanying a critique of how, in focusing only on ‘visible’ things, government-led fukkō was neglecting that which was truly important. If the trauma of disaster is spatialized (Maddrell 2016) – as in, it relates specifically to the topography of absences (of people and places) and ruptures produced by catastrophe – then rebuilding space can also be a form of healing; a way of rebuilding the heart, as well as the town.

The outlines of reconstruction policy for the disaster regions were disseminated shortly after the tsunami. As early as April 1st, the government was already pressing for new land-use restrictions and higher-ground relocation (Chapter 5). In Minamisanriku, a draft of the Town’s Master Reconstruction Plan35 was circulating among the administration as early as June, when the Town convened the Reconstruction Plan Drafting Council. This was an advisory body of ‘experts’ invited to review the draft plan and submit possible revisions (I have not established what, if any, revisions were accepted).

The plan promotes a vision of reconstruction based on the principle of bōsai, or disaster prevention (see Chapter 2):

The idea is called ‘multi-layered protection,’ in other words, not just protecting from part of the tsunami [sic] with a seawall, but having strong machizukuri against tsunamis, for example, while carrying out higher-ground relocation and land-readjustment (kukaku-seiri); the soft side, such as information transmission measures for when the tsunami is arriving (signs marking the expected tsunami zone, etc.), and preparing disaster-prevention organizations is also important (Minamisanriku-chō 2011, 2-3).

35 Minamisanriku also commissioned the renowned ‘starchitect’ Kuma Kengo to produce a ‘grand design’ for central Shizugawa. During my residence in the town, a model of this could be viewed in a small, prefab building in the San San temporary shopping arcade. Neither Kuma nor his ‘Grand Design’ figures significantly in this dissertation, however, for one simple reason: hardly anyone ever talked about it.
All of this is straight from the central government playbook – seawalls, “multi-layered protection,” higher-ground relocation\(^{36}\) – and it was decided a mere 3 months after the disasters, when many of those residents were still in evacuation centers, just trying to make it through the day. Looking at the minutes of theDrafting Council, we find surprisingly critical responses from the ‘experts’ invited to review it. On higher-ground relocation, for example, Nakabayashi, a researcher at the Great Hanshi-Awaji Earthquake Memorial Museum, had this to say:

> I don’t think higher-ground relocation should just be about cutting open [sic] mountains…I think it’s important to consider the balance with livelihoods; for protecting life, you could specify land-use depending on distance, like whether you’re 100m (about 2 minutes) from reaching higher-ground, or 400m…in other words, I think we need to come up with a town planning where you can easily reach higher-ground, not a concept where you move all residences to higher-ground (Minamisanriku-chô 2011, 6).

The most scathing assessment came from a researcher at the Japan Institute of Fisheries Infrastructure and Communities: “I think there is nothing in here that’s ‘unique to Minamisanriku.’” The participation of townspeople, he continued, is important: “When making plans for each fishing village (gyoson), residents should be presented with several reconstruction patterns, and through discussion with residents [sic] you should reflect their opinions [in the...]

---

\(^{36}\) It also exemplifies Disaster Risk Reduction (DDR) as advocated the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015). New risks are prevented by restricting residential development within the inundation zone, where only “risk sensitive investment” is permitted (UNISDR 2015, 5). Existing risk for this zone is reduced by the construction of giant seawalls, which should keep out all but the largest (L2) tsunamis. The result should be a “substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health” – the Framework’s expected outcome – as well as reduced damage to residents’ assets when the next disaster occurs. For its proponents of DDR, this is fundamentally a technical, not a political, process; part of “the mutation of political thought into its modern governmental form, in which political authorities in alliance with experts seek to administer a diversity of problematic sectors, locales and activities in the population in the attempt to promote well-being (Rose 1994, 49).” ‘Accountability’ for risk management should be improved, and other ‘stakeholders’ included in the process, the UN states (UNISDR 2015). But the idea that some people might choose to live with risk – that ‘risk’ is not, in fact, a neutral or apolitical metric – is unthinkable.
plans].” (Minamisanriku-chō 2011, 9) In the following chapters, I will discuss each of the major policies introduced in the Master Reconstruction Plan. As we will see, while there was certainly ‘discussion,’ this mainly took the form of ‘informing,’ a form of tokenism in which the performance of participation is sought over genuine input (Arnstein 1969). A caveat is necessary, however. It would be easy to read this dissertation as a denunciation of Minamisanriku’s local government. This is not my intention. As Ōguma says, “the typical Japanese bureaucrat is a serious and steadfast worker,” (Oguma 2013) and this is equally true of Minamisanriku. Certainly, some blame can be laid at the feet of individuals or groups. The decision by Miyagi Prefecture’s Governor, Murai Yoshihiro, to aggressively pursue seawall construction almost certainly contributed to the perception of these plans as fiat (many of them are also being constructed by the Prefecture and not the Town; see Chapter 2). But across the disaster regions, we see many of the same plans being adopted (albeit with some notable exceptions, like Onnagawa). The causes, we must conclude, are largely structural.

While I discuss the gestation and history of policies in the following chapters, my intention is not to give a detailed account of Japanese government structures. This is not an ethnography (nor a history) of Japanese government, though it is about governance, understood as the process by which various authorities structure a field of action (Bonnafous-Boucher 2005, 521). Rather, this is an ethnography carried out in the contact zone where the administration and residents meet, and how their respective logics are reworking, or seeking to rework, the

37 The most commonly held events in which residents and the administration interact are ‘explanatory meetings,’ or setsumeikai. While these sometimes involve “listening to the opinions” of residents affected, since the administration only ‘explains’ already-decided policies, these opinions do not commonly result in alterations.

38 For incisive accounts of how Japanese political structures and culture contributed to both disaster and reconstruction, including the preference for large-scale public works, see Oguma and Akasaka (2015) and Samuels (2013).
landscape. It is only by juxtaposing these things – the technocratic discourse and practice of the bureaucracy with residents’ struggles to articulate a voice – that the impact of ‘reconstruction’ on the ground becomes clear.

**Chapters and Method**

Since my first visit in 2012, I have spent a total of 16 months in Minamisanriku, split over 4 visits: 2 months in summer 2012, 2 months in summer 2013, 11 months from September 2014 to August 2015, and most recently one month in summer 2016. Much of my data is gathered from participant observation with groups involved in both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ reconstruction. I wanted to find groups in all three areas of the town hit by the tsunami (Togura, Shizugawa, and Utatsu), and I also wanted them to vary in terms of occupation (fishermen versus white-collar workers, for example), age, and gender (these latter two variables being particularly important within the town’s social structure). I was concerned, first and foremost, with the frameworks residents used to make sense of reconstruction and explaining what constituted them (Cramer 2016). I also wanted, however partially, to understand something of the *experience* of living in a dramatically changing landscape, as well as how residents experienced processes of official participation; in other words, to take a somewhat phenomenological approach to recovery. These concerns, which evolved over the course of my many visits, shaped the groups and individuals I sought out and the questions I asked. On top of asking these questions, my project also necessitated spending time with residents in their homes and workplaces, and observing their activities related to reconstruction. In some cases, I was invited to not just observe, but actively participate in their activities, and would also regularly accompany groups of residents on visits to higher-ground relocation sites and other areas.
I make no pretense that the above method produced what could be called a representative sample of residents or groups in the disaster regions. This was not my intention; indeed, I would argue it is neither possible nor preferable for a qualitative study. Rather, in seeking out groups and individuals in different parts of the town and from a cross-section of occupations, ages, and genders, I was trying to listen to and observe as wide a variety of perspectives and experiences as possible. A different researcher, with a different set of problems, might well have produced a radically different dissertation. While I acknowledge this observer-expectancy effect, I contend that the conclusions I draw are well substantiated by the material collected. To let the reader draw their own conclusions regarding this, I quote my subjects extensively and, where it is available, provide quantitative data relevant to the claims being made.

From the contacts made during participant observation, I also selected a cross-section of individuals for 39 long, semi-structured interviews (ranging in length from 1-3 hours). The questions I asked evolved over time, based on what produced useful responses as well as the changing nature of my research questions (Cramer 2016). As well as residents of Minamisanriku and its surrounding municipalities, I interviewed several consultants hired by the Town to mediate between the administration and the townsfolk. I did not, however, either interview or seek to interview members of the local, prefectural or national government, except for one local government employee that, in his spare time, was also a key figure in a citizen’s organization I embedded with. This may, justifiably, be viewed as an omission. However, I contend that the voices of various government organs are well represented in the dissertation through the many official documents I analyze (which include detailed minutes of numerous committee meetings). Of course, embedding myself within government structures would likely have revealed much that is invisible in these texts; the information contained in them is surely the tip of the iceberg.
Doing so, however, would have meant an entirely different project. Instead, I take official discourses to, on some level, mean what they say: the engineers and scientists promoting ‘hard’ disaster protection (like seawalls) are sincere believers in its desirability, whatever the motives of the politicians and bureaucrats who adopt it.

The dissertation is structured around both a thematic and a geographical progression: beginning at the water’s edge, we move into the former urban center of the town before ascending to the new higher-ground estates and, finally, expanding our view to consider ‘the town,’ and its future. Chapter 2 tackles the most controversial issue in post-3.11 reconstruction: seawalls. Since the 1930s, tsunami risk reduction in Japan has become increasingly reliant on coastal defense structures, culminating post-3.11 in the construction of giant seawalls ranging up to 14.7 meters in height (roughly the equivalent of a 5-story building). I demonstrate how these walls fragment and erase the social landscape of the coastline with profound consequences for inhabitants, particularly fishing communities, who depend on easy access to and views of the sea. I subsequently describe and analyze efforts to preserve remnants of pre-disaster space by moving or resisting the walls.

In Chapter 3, I expand on the themes of agency, democracy, and the impact of catastrophe on coastal landscapes raised in Chapter 2 through a case study of residents’ efforts to preserve the Matsubara Beach, a strip of waterfront in central Shizugawa. This movement is being led by Kamome no Niji-iro Kai (Kamome for short), an organization established after the disaster to both circumvent and influence official channels for resident participation in recovery planning. Based on participant observation with Kamome in 2015 and interviews with residents, I explore how their efforts are both shaped by and make use of official discourses of ‘consensus’ to promote alternative logics to that of official hard reconstruction.
In Chapter 4, I consider another of the material products of catastrophe: *shinsai no ikō*, or ruins left by the disaster. What to do with the ruined structures left in the lowlands is one of the few areas of reconstruction open to democratic processes. In this chapter I describe how the ‘fast ruination’ of disaster disrupts settled landscapes of meaning through a case study of Minamisanriku’s iconic Disaster Prevention Center (Bōsai Taisaku Chōsha). I blend ethnographic material with an analysis of 592 handwritten letters submitted to the local government during the public consultation that decided its future.

In the next section, we leave the low-lying areas and head for the highlands. In Chapter 5, I discuss higher-ground relocation (or *takadai iten*): the policy for resettling residents displaced from the areas now designated as Disaster Danger Zones (*saigai kiken kuiki*). I investigate how communities have sought to preserve their existing social and spatial organization during the move, analyze the problems with both these structures and relocation policy, and describe residents’ fears about the viability of a “town without people.”

While townspeople have been excluded from most decisions concerning hard infrastructure, much of the rebuilding of economic and communal life has been left in their hands. In Chapter 6, I describe efforts to combat depopulation and create a ‘future’ for the town by both rebuilding place attachment and reforming social structures (as well as the tension between these two). I show how new types of associations – particularly non-profits – have flourished after the disaster, promoting a renewed ethics of civic participation now under threat from the withdrawal of reconstruction funding and the economic precarity of the devastated communities.
Divided Visions: The ‘Seawall Problem’

Figure 2-1. The view from Mizushiri Bridge in Shizugawa. Photo by author

Introduction

In 2015, Shizugawa was still dotted with pieces of the seawalls broken by the tsunami. Like other ruins, they have a magnetic quality: a kind of pathos, perhaps, or as reminders of our technological hubris. The broken walls were popular photo spots during 2015’s Golden Week, when the Town was full of tourists and city dwellers returning to visit their families. Ironically, given their negative impact on the environment, many walls have, in their ruination, been temporarily repurposed as hosts for diverse animal life. During my residence in Minamisanriku, I would often walk by the Mizushiri bridge joining central Shizugawa to the southern hamlets of Ōkubo and Hayashi. Beyond its ruined water gate, pieces of a seawall lay disjointed in the water, its fallen blocks a resting place for gulls and cranes (Figure 2-1.). In the summer of 2015, this
water gate was finally disassembled; a sign, perhaps, that the slow pace of recovery was finally picking up. The wait had felt long for many residents. The shape of the future coastline, however, was decided long before construction finally began. Most of the key decisions were made only a few months after the disasters. Many were controversial. Few, however, raised as much ire as those concerning these broken walls.

I first encountered the ‘seawall problem’ (bōchōtei mondai) in the summer of 2012, when as part of Harvard University’s Sanriku Project I visited the hamlet of Yoriki in the north of Minamisanriku. Yoriki is one of 359 seawall sites in Miyagi Prefecture, which has the lion’s share of the 594 total walls planned in Tōhoku (136 in Iwate, and 99 in Fukushima Prefecture). The seawalls are the lynchpin and most visible manifestation of bōsai, or disaster prevention: both an aspiration motivating the re-engineering of the coast post-3.11 and a form of governmentality that transforms coastal space into a “total system” of safety infrastructure (Shuto and Fujima 2009). The seawalls are key components of this system, functioning, in theory, to prevent (bōsai) or weaken (gensai) the disaster that unfolds within it by limiting, structurally, the scale and scope of damage to people and things.

The ‘problem’ here is that many residents, including those of Yoriki, do not want to live behind what some have called “prison walls.” In this chapter, I describe how the seawall plans and the total system they enable came into being and analyze how, and why, some residents are resisting their construction. To the experts and politicians promoting seawalls, the logic is straightforward: if they will (probably) protect lives and property, we should build them. I argue, following Murphy and Nagel, that those advocating a policy to produce an outcome must not simply demonstrate causality (i.e. that the policy will result in said outcome). They must also explain why that outcome should be favored over other values or goals; in this case, the values of
those in whose name space is being reconstructed, the residents themselves (Murphy and Nagel
2005). The effectiveness of seawalls, in other words, is only one component of a case in their
favor; it is not, by itself, a sufficient argument.

The ‘seawall problem’ is a prime example of the technocratic fallacy: the tendency of
bureaucracies and their associated experts to treat political problems – that is, issues of
competing norms and values – as if they were strictly technical problems (Weber 2007). I start
from the premise that the ‘seawall problem’ is an eminently political issue, deriving from a clash
of values between the bureaucracy and residents (and between residents themselves, as opinion is
highly divided). Those who lived through the tsunami know, more than anyone in Japan, what it
is like to experience loss of both property and life. Accordingly, they are better placed than any
distant politician, planner or engineer to evaluate the tradeoffs between protecting lives and
property and other values, whether ecosystem conservation, maintaining sight lines, or
preserving traditional modes of land use. As the critic of post-3.11 reconstruction and member of
the national government’s Central Disaster Management Council Murosaki Yoshiteru puts it:
“Humans cannot live by bōsai alone. We have jobs, livelihoods, families, community, culture,
nature. We need to forefront living together with nature, leading fulfilling lives, having
meaningful jobs, and draw our solutions accordingly.” (Murosaki 2013) The things he lists are
outside the expertise of the total system’s architects, who do not themselves inhabit coastal
space; like De Certeau’s ‘voyeur-god,’¹ they observe it from a distance, the mundane practices of
its inhabitants ignored or invisible (De Certeau 2013). Understanding why many residents

¹ Reflecting on the parallels between viewing New York from the summit of the World Trade Center and
the perspective of city planners, he wrote: “The panorama city is a…simulacrum, in short a picture,
whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The voyeur-god created
by this condition, who, like Schreber’s God, knows only cadavers, must disentangle himself from the
murky intertwining behaviors and make himself alien to them.” (De Certeau 2013, 93)
oppose something that might, in theory, make them “safer” requires a different perspective, grounded rather than aerial; attentive to the practices of residents and how these relate to (and generate) a sense of place. A place, in Tōhoku’s case, marked by recurring cycles of disaster and evolving systems of disaster prevention.

From Evacuation to Protection

The building of coastal defense structures in Tōhoku began on a limited scale after the Shōwa Sanriku Earthquake and tsunami of 1933. In 1956, the Coast Act established standards for their construction; these were revised, however, after the 1959 Ise Bay typhoon, during which “coastal embankments made of soil with solid covers only on the seaside surface were completely washed away by overflowing sea water.” Future structures, it was decided, should be “armored by concrete” on all sides (seaward slope, landward slope and crown) (Shuto and Fujima 2009:269). After the 1960 Chile Earthquake and Tsunami, the number of such armaments increased significantly (Ando et al. 2000; Shuto and Fujima 2009).

The spread of seawalls in Japan’s tsunami-prone regions marked a shift in disaster management systems and their associated infrastructures. Kimura Shūhei describes this as the transition from “structures supporting evacuation” to “structures providing protection.” After the 1933 tsunami, for example, Tōhoku residents were encouraged to relocate to higher ground (Shuto and Fujima 2009); in Iwate Prefecture, some 2,200 houses in 28 communities complied (Kimura 2016).² In Kimura’s field site of Maehama, 200 houses were rebuilt in four ‘reconstruction areas’ (fukkōchi). Asahi Shimbun also funded the erection of stone monuments bearing inscriptions such as “don’t build a house lower than this point,” and “watch for tsunami

² There is disagreement concerning the exact numbers. Andō et al state that 43 hamlets in 20 municipalities were targeted for relocation, but only 23 complied (Ando et al. 2000).
[sic] after every big quake.” These areas and devices, he argues, “added to the everyday landscape of local communities,” promoting awareness of which areas were safe and which dangerous through their articulation within the collection of local sayings, behavioral patterns and social arrangements he calls ‘disaster culture’ (Kimura 2016, 30-32). They told people where (not) to live and where to evacuate should a disaster strike.

By contrast, the seawalls built after the 1960s increasingly “enclosed the communities,” separating them from the sea behind structures that obviated the need to consider risk (Kimura 2016, 32). Unlike stone markers – texts that act as continual reminders of past disasters – these new, enclosing structures were not made to be read (the warnings on such markers were already ignored, in any case). Instead, they embedded a set of assumptions derived from past events into the landscape. Official standards for their height were based mainly on the 1960 Chile Earthquake and Tsunami, due in part to a lack of data from earlier disasters. These walls were sufficiently high in Hokkaido and Tōhoku to block the 1968 Tokachi-Oki Tsunami, leading many coastal residents to believe that “there would be no threat of tsunami [sic] in the future” (Ando et al. 2000, 270). There is evidence that seawalls under 5m in height encouraged development behind them, presumably due to the presumption of safety (although claims that they increased fatalities have been strongly criticized, cf. Nateghi et al. 2016). So long as the walls held, the assumptions built into or projected on them, however, went largely unquestioned.

The walls, of course, broke down on 3.11, rendering the assumptions behind them newly “visible” and open to contestation (Star and Ruhleder 1996, 113). The tsunami overwhelmed not only the coastal defense structures, but the scientific consensus underlying and embedded in them. This can be seen in the widespread characterization of the disasters as sōteigai, a term that Bestor translates as “beyond expectations,” “outside the realm of
imagination,” or “unimaginable.” (Bestor 2013, 767). In September of 2011, the Cabinet Office’s Central Disaster Management Council released a report from a technical subcommittee on lessons learned from 3.11 (which I will refer to as the Senmon Chōsa Kai). The report lists as exceeding expectations: the height of the tsunami; the area and inland penetration of inundation, particularly due to run-up along rivers overflowing their banks; and the widespread occurrence of subsidence.

That these were sōteigai was because assumptions about Japan Trench earthquakes and tsunamis, as already noted, had been based only on data from the small to medium-sized tsunamis characteristic of the last few hundred years. While larger tsunamis were known to have occurred historically, they were disregarded due to incomplete data and the resulting difficulty of integrating them into the seismic source models used to produce hazard assessments (Central Disaster Management Council 2011, 5).³ The overflowing of both the walls and their supporting assumptions revealed to the Senmon Chōsa Kai the futility of trying to prevent such events. Making seawalls high enough to withstand a future 3.11, they write, is “not realistic from the standpoint of financial requirements…and the potential impact on the coastal environment and its use.” (Central Disaster Management Council 2011, 11-12) On 3.11 protection, it seemed, had run-up against its limits.

Unbelievable Plans

I first met Miura Tomoyuki on February 13, 2015 at a setsumeikai in Kessenuma City. The stated purpose of the event was to explain revisions to the Master Plan for the Maintenance of the Southern Sanriku Coastline and listen to “the opinions of prefectural residents” on these changes.

³ Examples include the Jogan Sanriku Earthquake of 869, the Keicho Sanriku Earthquake of 1611, and the Enpo Boso Earthquake of 1677 (Central Disaster Management Council 2011:5).
For most of the residents gathered, however, this ‘Plan’ meant one thing: seawalls. When the floor was opened, the audience went straight on the attack. Miura was the fourth to speak, and his questions the most pointed. Why had the meeting been held on a weekday afternoon, when people have work? What specific examples could they give of measures to protect the environment during seawall construction? Which experts had advised them during the Plan’s drafting? I didn’t know, at that time, that he was one of the most prominent seawall activists in Tōhoku.

The second time we met was at Canape, a café in a trailer overlooking the small port of Nakayama in northern Minamisanriku. In the harbor, repairs had recently finished on the pier and its attendant breakwater, both of which were damaged during the tsunami. When I visited again a few days later, the port was bursting with activity. Boatload after boatload of freshly cut seaweed were landed at the harbor’s edge, while older men, cigarettes dangling from their lips, stirred large boilers full of seaweed and brine. That morning, however, both harbor and water were empty. The waves were high and strong, smashing the jetty again and again in explosions of spray. Only three other people were present near the waterfront, standing around a tiny fire alternately feeding the flames and staring out at the violent swell. Miura pointed to the water, his finger tracing an invisible line along the ruins of the old, pre-tsunami defenses; a line that, he said, marks the location of the future seawall. 8.7m high, nearly three stories: double the height of the pre-disaster breakwater. Much of the port and the whole road behind it, he said, will disappear under its base.

Miura is from Ōya, a coastal village 27km north of Minamisanriku officially part of Kesennuma City. In an essay called *In the Midst of a Changing Landscape* he describes how he first heard of the plan to build giant seawalls:
It was the summer of 2011. The spark was an article in a local newspaper. I couldn’t believe my eyes, seeing this unbelievable plan. However, nobody thought at that time it would become reality. After all, we were still in the evacuation centers. For a while there was nothing about seawalls in the papers and it wasn’t talked about. But the plan was quietly advancing below the surface (Miura 2015, 90-91).

The seawall plans were promulgated a year or so from the disasters, when local administrations began holding small *setsumeikai* along the coastline. Miura recalls how the world ‘seawall’ didn’t even appear in the title of a meeting in June 2012, purportedly called to explain the Ōya neighborhood’s new disaster danger zone (*saigai kiken kuiki*):

Some 300 people were sitting on the floor listening to the explanation. Suddenly, they began to explain about the wall. A shocking plan to fill in the whole beach by constructing a concrete seawall 9.8m high, with a width of 40m, that pushes out into the ocean. The room was abuzz, and angry voices showered the administration with harsh words (Miura 2015, 91-92).

Harsh words have continued to rain down since then. The seawall controversy has dominated media coverage of reconstruction, and many academics and professional bodies have spoken out against their construction. We have no large-scale surveys of either opposition to or support for these plans among residents.\(^4\) We can infer that opposition is widespread, however, from a variety of other sources.

As of November 2014, in Kesennuma agreement had yet to be reached with residents in 13 of the 87 areas scheduled for seawall construction (15%). If we count those listed as “under

\(^4\) A small happiness survey carried out by the Japan Center for Economic Research in Motoyoshi (a subdivision of Kesennuma City containing both Ōya and Koizumi Districts) reported 63% of respondents (n=118) expect their happiness levels to fall once the seawalls are completed, with only 13% saying they expect to be happier. Pessimism about the seawalls did not correlate with personal experience of tsunami damage: the average expected change in happiness levels was a minus 2-point drop (10-point scale) for both those who had lost houses and those whose property was undamaged (2014 Nendo Kenkyūsei Bōchōteihan 2014). The small size of the sample and the survey’s data collection methods, however, make its reliability and generalizability questionable.
negotiation,” the number of areas holding out was 18%, or just under 1 in 5 (Sangyō-bu 2014) (this report is unusual: to date, I have not found similar statistics in other municipal or prefectural seawall reports). Groups either opposed to or critical of the walls have sprung up across the disaster regions. I learned of 12 such collectives during my fieldwork through a combination of personal recommendations, news reports and online searches. The majority (10) were from Miyagi Prefecture, which has the lion’s share of construction sites, with a smaller number (2) from Iwate Prefecture. I found no such groups in Fukushima; one can hypothesize that the smaller number of sites and limited increase in seawall heights there may have provoked less opposition.\(^5\) The list, however is far from complete: many groups have little or no online presence and those that do are often private (Facebook groups, for example), making them difficult to find through standard online searches (which is further complicated by the often-euphemistic character of their names). In many cases, resistance to the seawalls did not involve new organizations, but was channeled through the leaders of small administrative areas (gyōseiku) and pre-existing community organizations (such as shinkōkai).

Although not as reliable as scientific surveys, petitions offer another view on the depth of opposition to the walls in certain municipalities. In 2012, Miura Tomoyuki distributed a petition under the auspices of the Ōya Chiku Shinkōkai Kyōgikai, a network of community organizations representing each of the 13 administrative areas in Ōya District. Although as noted Miura is personally against the seawalls, the purpose of the petition was not strictly oppositional. It called on Kesennuma City to: 1) Put on hold the plan to construct a 9.8m high seawall on the Ōya Coastline; and 2) Ensure resident’s views are reflected in any plans for the area – including those concerning seawall height and design – through a thorough consultation process between

\(^5\) Although seawall height in Fukushima Prefecture is being raised relative to pre-disaster levels (6.2m), the average increase across districts is only 1.3m.
residents and the administration. A total of 1324 signatures were submitted to the city mayor in November of that year, accounting for more than a third of the district’s then population of 3737 (Miura 2015, 93-94). In Ogatsu Town, whose proposed seawalls range from 2.4 to 9.7m high, a recent arrival from Kamakura City called Ōkawa Sayuri has been collecting signatures for two different petitions: one in favor of the proposals, and one asking that they be reconsidered (minaoshi). Like Miura, her stated aim is not to oppose the walls, but to understand collective opinion and have it reflected in the plans. As of September 20, 2016, she had collected signatures from 230 people, 80% of whom chose minaoshi (Kahoku Shimpō 2015). This represents nearly a quarter of the roughly 1000 current residents of Ogatsu (Ishinomaki-shi Sōmu-bu Sōmu-ka 2016).

Taken together, these diverse sources suggest that negative attitudes towards the seawall plans – ranging from skepticism to outright opposition – are common among residents, and possibly very common. The question Miura, and others like him, have been trying to answer since their announcement, is why they were proposed in the first place.

**Towards a Total System**

If the arrival of seawalls in the 1960s marked a turn towards “protection,” their breakdown in 2011 precipitated another shift. Paradoxically, the recognition of the limits of protection has been accompanied not by a move away from hard disaster prevention, but by its extension and re-articulation within an even larger program of spatial reconstruction. This shift in defense measures, as in the 1930s and 60s, parallels a transformation in how tsunamis themselves are conceptualized and modeled.
“Development of future tsunami countermeasures,” the Senmon Chōsa Kai’s report argues, “will...require the assumption of two levels of tsunamis.” The first – later named Level 2 (or L2) tsunamis – are extremely large and rare events like that which occurred on 3.11. As already mentioned, these cannot be realistically prevented by seawalls; accordingly, the authors call for their effects to be mitigated through ‘disaster reduction’ (gensai) measures, with a focus on evacuation and land-use restrictions. The second new category – Level 1 (L1) tsunamis – contains smaller and more frequent events; these, they argue, should be prevented from penetrating inland by ‘coastal protection facilities’ such as seawalls and raised river embankments (Central Disaster Management Council 2011).

Following the publication of the Senmon Chōsa Kai’s recommendations, in July 2011 guidelines for establishing the height of new seawalls were released jointly by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). First, coastal areas should be divided into units by topography. Second, historical data on the height of previous tsunamis within each unit should be collected to establish the relative heights of their L1 and L2 tsunamis. Where data of sufficient quality is not available, simulations based on past and projected future tsunamis may be used. The model tsunami heights established through these procedures should then be used to decide appropriate seawall heights (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2011). In Miyagi Prefecture, the heights of seawalls in coastal areas were officially decided in September 2011 (Nihon Bengoshi Rengōkai 2014, 5). The coast was divided into 22 geographical units (mainly by bay shape, see Figure 2-2.), with model L2 tsunami heights ranging from 1.5 to 10.8m and
Figure 2-2. Miyagi Prefecture Coastal Units. Source: Miyagi Prefecture
generic seawall heights from 5 to 14.7m (average generic height across the 22 units is 7.6m, a little short of three stories). As the model tsunami height exhibits considerable variation within the defined geographical units, the heights of seawall sites within these sometimes varies from the baseline generic height.

If previous structures embedded a set of assumptions into the pre-existing landscape, after 3.11 ‘disaster prevention’ and ‘disaster reduction’ have thus become rationales for the top-down restructuring of coastal space in its entirety. “Structures supporting evacuation” and “structures providing protection” find their synthesis in this framework, which contains three main components: frontier defenses (such as seawalls), tsunami-resistant town development and evacuation procedures (Shuto and Fujima 2009:267). The latter two include:

…secondary barriers utilizing transportation infrastructure to prevent tsunami wave [sic] from penetrating further inland, land raising, construction of evacuation sites, tsunami evacuation buildings and evacuation routes and stairs, and land use and building regulations that account for the risks of inundation. (Central Disaster Management Council 2011:16)

The idea of such a “total system” (Shuto and Fujima 2009) is not new in Japan. In their widely-cited history of tsunami research and countermeasures, Shuto and Fujima note a similar proposal from the Ministry of Education’s Council on Earthquake Disaster Prevention (hereafter referred to as CEDP) released 3 months after the 1933 Sanriku Earthquake and Tsunami, which claimed 3000 lives. The CEDP advocated for, among other things, higher-ground relocation, seawalls, buffer zones, and evacuation routes. These plans were revived and partially implemented in 1997 in response to the 1993 Nansei-Oki Earthquake and Tsunami, which ravaged the island of Okushiri off the western edge of southern Hokkaido.
Over 70 years after its initial conception, the “total system” is finally being realized in Tōhoku due the scale of the 2011 disasters. New infrastructures do not normally replace extant ones; rather, they are fitted into an “installed base” that is resistant to large-scale change (Star and Ruhleder 1996, 13). By contrast, the necessity of near total rebuilding in much of the coastal northeast has left a relatively blank slate on which to operate. Although both the Prefectural plan and those subsequently drafted by local municipalities invariably contain some variation of “the subjects of reconstruction are residents themselves,” in practice the same policies – and thus the same system – have been adopted by most municipalities without any public debate (there are also exceptions: Onnagawa, for example, has decided not to build seawalls).

The effect of integrating relocation, land-use restrictions, and seawall building within a single system is to transform the whole of coastal space into an infrastructure. In common parlance, an infrastructure is defined as a (normally physical) “substructure, foundation” (OECD) or “underlying foundation/basic framework” (Merriam-Webster) for something. Recent anthropological studies tend to specify this “something” as circulation. Witness Larkin, for example, who describes infrastructures as “matter that enable the movement of other matter.” (Larkin 2013, 329) This enabling capacity of infrastructure is not simply a given: “built things” function infrastructurally when linked with “knowledge things” and “people things” as part of a system (Larkin 2013, 329). This definition works well for most of what we commonly call infrastructure. But what, then, are we to make of safety infrastructures? In the context of disaster prevention, we find the relationship inverted: Safety infrastructures function to prevent rather than facilitate circulation (though they may do so in the name of protecting a system of flows from exogenous shocks that would jam it). This seemingly obvious point, surprisingly, appears lost on those who have studied Japan’s seawalls from an ethnographic perspective. Kimura, for
example, parrots Larkin’s definition despite its lack of fit with his own analysis (Kimura 2016). It might be argued that, since they seem to ill-fit our current definitions, seawalls are not, in fact, infrastructures. Such an argument would, however, involve arguing against the fact that coastal defense structures are routinely referred to as such (in both English and Japanese, though with different implications in the latter). Larkin is correct when he says that infrastructures are “not, in any positivist sense, simply ‘out there.’ The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment.” (Larkin 2013, 330) In other words, if most people consider a seawall an infrastructure, it probably is. The question, then, is what it means to describe it as such: what, in other words, is infrastructural about seawalls.

Seawalls, as part of the “total system of disaster prevention” described above, are components of a public safety infrastructure (Kimura 2016). I define “safety infrastructure,” following the International Atomic Energy Agency, as a “set of institutional, organizational and technical elements and conditions established…to provide a sound foundation for ensuring a sustainable and high level of…safety.” (International Nuclear Safety Group 2008, 9) Public safety infrastructures’ primary function is to organize and govern space by delineating and policing a boundary (or set of boundaries) and armoring it against potentially destructive agents (human or non-human) from inside and/or outside (cf. Oliver-Smith 1996). They thus restrict certain forms of circulation so as to allow others to proceed unhindered. This imbues a space with the quality of “safety” by keeping dangerous foreign bodies – like the marauding sea – outside the system (or promising to do so, even if the promise cannot be fulfilled) (Brown 2014). The seawalls make “safety” a property of coastal space, providing a psychological sense of safety (anshin) through performing their effectiveness (anzen) against future tsunamis (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015).
For L1 tsunamis, the walls alone are viewed as sufficient. However, to protect residents from L2 tsunamis – in other words, to ensure the proper functioning of the “total system” as a whole – requires activating the “institutional” and “organizational” elements of the system: in other words, the people. Within the theory of disaster prevention, a complementary relation exists between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures; indeed, given the limits of protection (limits that, as we have seen, have paradoxically encouraged its expansion), ‘software’ is often referred to as essential. The choice of language is revealing here. Far from being “agents of recovery” as claimed by many local fukkō keikaku, residents of the coastal areas are a ‘population’ in the Foucauldian sense, to be managed by what he terms “apparatuses of security.” (Foucault 2007, 29) (I elaborate on this in Chapter 3). To play their designated roles within this system, the people must be properly educated (through evacuation drills, for example) and/or restrained through customary or legal restrictions (against living in the inundation zone, in this case). First, however, the architects of machizukuri must achieve their compliance (or, in local bureaucratic parlance, “consent”) regarding the construction of the system itself.

Uncertain Consent

In 2001, Miyagi Prefecture (which contains Kesennuma City) added obtaining the consent of residents to its guidelines for public construction works. However, ‘residents’ was understood to mean only the affected landowners and those living in the administrative district hosting the construction. The current position of the Prefecture is that seawall building can begin once you have agreement from the relevant landowners (i.e. those individuals on whose land the seawall will be built) (Kahoku Shimpō 2015), even though changes to the land-water interface affect the whole community behind it. ‘Consensus’ is not, in this case, a contractual term; in some cases, it
has been “achieved” through nothing more than a show of hands at a meeting. For the administration, since consent opens to door to construction it can rarely be rescinded; once the machine of bureaucracy is moving, it is night on impossible to stop. Protestations by residents against the seawall plans were often shut down with the response, “we have already received consent.”

To understand why the walls are so controversial, we must understand how they emerged within a reconstruction process that was both too slow and too fast, the machines of bureaucracy producing irreversible decisions about the future while residents were still in the evacuation centers, struggling to fulfill basic needs. Opposition was muted initially due to lack of information, the scale of their loss, breakdown of their communities and precarious living conditions, particularly in the early stages when they were still in the evacuation centers. As local dignitary Onodera Hiroshi explained to me,

> We knew we had to think about the future, but we couldn’t. We were thinking first about how to get through each day. Then, with the passing of time, some of us began to face the future, to realize that we had to think about how to imagine the town…But for the victims every day was recovery. Just surviving. This is where the victims still are now. But you can’t build the future town, the future region like this.

Can resident’s voices be raised, or meaningful consent given, under such circumstances? For the bureaucracy, the question is of little importance; for those who insist that “without residents, there is no recovery,” however, it is fundamental.

Kesennuma City Counselor Imagawa Satoru says that three choices were available to residents regarding seawalls: 1) to raise to the recommended Level 1 tsunami height; 2) to restore to the pre-disaster height; and 3) in cases where there was no wall before the disasters, to not build anything (Imagawa 2016, 1). However, the degree to which residents had – or believed
they had – a choice is contested. Miura Tomoyuki told me that no alternatives were offered at Ōya’s first explanatory meeting and residents did not believe they had options, although some time later the Prefecture said that restoring the pre-disaster wall was also a possibility (email message to author, November 5, 2016). In Minamisanriku, among the many conversations I had about seawalls not once did anyone suggest that height had been consciously chosen by residents. Quite the contrary. In Yoriki, the headman Takahashi described the plan as a *fait accompli*:

I think they should have held explanatory meetings before they made the maps [plans], held a meeting in each area. An informal gathering or something. *That would have given people options* (emphasis added). Right now, it’s all one-sided.

It is possible that some municipalities did present people with options. Kimura Shūhei writes that at an explanatory meeting in Ōfunato City, Iwate Prefecture, residents of one village were asked to choose from three scenarios by the government: 14.1m (L1 height for the entire section plus 1m), 8.7m (L1 height for the cove plus 1m), and 7.9m (height of the existing seawall), with officials openly pushing for the highest option. To his surprise, few locals vocally objected at the time; it was only gradually that a negative view of the seawall emerged (Kimura 2016).

This shows how it is a mistake to view ‘consent’ as something fixed. In the first place, as Butler argues, it is manufactured “by powers to which no one has ever really consented…power precedes consent.” (Butler 2011, 410) Residents do not encounter the administration on an equal plane. As one member of a local women’s group (*gyogyō fujinbu*, or Fisherwomen’s Society) whose husband was as a local councilor said to me, “with the things this administration is doing, us interfering won’t change anything.” I often heard this inertia criticized by more activist residents as both an abrogation of responsibility and an unhealthy dependency on the
government. Others, however, saw its fatalism as both realistic and necessary, helping them allocate scarce emotional resources to more practical activities. This attitude was expressed, for example, by a young local business owner I’ll call Onodera when I asked him if the owners of land needed for seawall construction could simply refuse to cooperate by not selling their land to the government.

ALL: Can people just say, “I’m not selling?”
Onodera: They can, and I think there were people actually doing that, but you could say it’s just a delaying tactic, at any rate it doesn’t do more than draw out the time, I don’t think there’s any merit in that…It’s better to just give up, “that land is OK. I won’t control it. I’ll sell it. If you’re going to do it, do it.” And then figure out how to control things on what land you have left.

Some suspect that financial motivations also mitigate such forms of resistance. One non-profit worker told me that “the owners of the land to be purchased for seawalls have, since the initial decision to build them, come to expect that some money will be coming in.” I heard similar statements from several other residents. Given the straightened circumstances of many post-disaster, such expectations would be understandable, but those same circumstances raise the question of whether those selling are “consenting” in a meaningful sense.

Consent also becomes problematic when viewed in terms of social structure. Conflicts between residents over the walls often intersected with familiar social hierarchies, notably of age and gender: “Since it’s an old-fashioned town, whatever the big-wigs say is gospel,” one young woman active in local non-profits told me, and the ‘big-wigs’ are, for the most part, old men.

While the uneven topography of discontent may reflect genuine differences of opinion between areas, it is also plausible that in many cases whether to oppose or acquiesce to the plans has been decided by the local “big men” (kuchō, kaichō, kanchō) without much debate. One local government worker (himself skeptical of the seawall plans) explained it to me this way:
There are more people with old ways of thinking…But, people thinking about how to build a new town, these people have increased because of the disaster. Young people [thinking about it] have increased. But unless the ratio is reversed, we won’t manage to build a new town. For example, the seawalls are the same. The number of people questioning the necessity of seawalls, the money being spent on seawalls, has risen, but in the end, as an extension of what came before, we’re going to build a seawall, “because the nation has already decided so.” The old people still have the power.

The difficulty of pushing back was often compounded by the technical nature of the issue (and the unwillingness or incapacity of government administrators to present information in a comprehensible form). This was made clear by the headman Takahashi, who asked the Sanriku Project in 2012 to survey the opinions of Yoriki residents on the seawall plan and prepare visualizations to help them evaluate it. To help residents situate the new walls within existing landscapes and sightlines, we decided to superimpose seawalls of various heights over images taken on their daily routes. Examples of these can be seen in Figure 2-3, taken from the roads used by residents to enter and exit the harbor.

A few days later, I was sitting in the meeting room of the Yoriki temporary housing compound, along with Takahashi and several other residents (the men at tables, the women lining the wall to the back of the room). On a sheet pegged to the far wall, a member of my team projected a series of slides depicting the results of our questionnaire on the proposed Yoriki seawall. The survey results showed a slim majority of respondents against the proposed height of 8.7m. It also showed that the upgrading and maintenance of escape-routes was resident’s primary concern (rated number 1 out of the available options), appearing to echo Takahashi's feelings that so long as proper escape-routes are in place, the wall is unnecessary. Most interesting for our story, however, is the effect that some of the slides had on the audience. During the presentation, they were for the large part quiet and passive. However, when the slides in Figure 2-3. showing how the view across the bay would be affected by different sea wall heights were shown, the
room came angrily to life. One man, pointing at the image, declared that if that is what an 8.7m sea wall would do to the bay, then he would leave the hamlet. This meeting began a chain of events that would lead, the following year, to the moving of Yoriki’s proposed wall.

Many people only really ‘learned’ what the seawalls would mean through such images (similar composites have been made in other areas, see Figure 2-6.) As people learned more about what they had ‘consented’ to (if they believed they had consented at all), their opinions often shifted. In the following sections, I examine why, beginning with the question of necessity. The walls were supposed to protect residents and their property from the ocean’s incursion. But what if the invading sea found nothing and nobody to destroy?

**What is Being Protected?**

In November of 2014, I sat talking with Old Man Sky as a group of elderly fisherpeople prepared shells for scallop-farming in a tiny, concrete-floored shack at the entrance of Nagashizu valley. Outside the doors, red marsh-flowers bloomed in the stagnant waters left by the tsunami. They seemed to glow in the early light. As work wound down for the morning, I joined one old man for a smoke by the small river that winds from the deep interior down into the bay. He told me that the piles of red earth that now filled the valley would be used to raise the river banks, making river walls. Old Man Sky came over and pointed to the ruined water gate that still stands, 3 years after the tsunami, at the entrance to the harbor: “the seawall will be as high as the that gate, some 8 meters.” The road that passes between the valley and the harbor will be raised, creating a join seawall-road. I asked what will happen to their small workshop. “It’ll be gone. Only those 3 or 4 houses will be left,” he said, pointing to the trio of residences that, due to their elevated position on the sides of the valley, had survived the tsunami.
Figure 2-3. Sample perspective studies in Yoriki. Source: Sanriku Project.
When I revisited in 2016, construction on the walls had proceeded significantly (Figure 2-4.).
Old Man Sky’s small allotment was still there, sandwiched between two giant earth mounds. In
the valley where the houses once stood, two or three small fisherman’s workshops had also been
erected. Aside from the undulating buzz of cicadas, the interior was mostly silent.

The total system outlined above is part reality, part aspiration. It is real in the sense that it
is being constructed even as I type this; each completed seawall portion, relocation area, and land
re-adjustment adds a piece to the puzzle. It is aspirational in that we have no experimental
evidence that it will function as intended. Some residents argue that the feeling of safety (anshin)
created by the walls is itself dangerous because it promotes complacency; a point vigorously
disputed by seawall proponents, who argue there is no evidence that seawalls increased mortality
during previous disasters, and that they probably saved lives (Nateghi et al. 2016). More
fundamental, however, is whether anyone will be left to protect. In many of the smaller hamlets
like Nagashizu, higher ground relocation and post-disaster depopulation has left empty spaces.

In late 2015, NHK News carried out a survey of 101 hamlets scheduled for seawall
construction in Miyagi Prefecture. They found that in 41 of the sites, preparations were
continuing despite considerable changes to local conditions. For example, out of 67 locations
where the original justification for seawall construction was “protecting the hamlet,” 37
contained no housing. A local non-profit worker from a hamlet near Nagashizu, Gotō Kazuma,
told me that,

I once asked a prefectural official: you say you’re going to build an 8.7m seawall, but this
is land nobody can live on anymore, right? I asked, what are you going to protect with
this seawall? If we’re going to move up [to higher ground], a seawall is unnecessary.
Even when there is no-body to protect, however, there may be other physical objects (infrastructures, personal property) threatened by the water’s incursion. There is little reason to doubt that the walls will, in theory, protect property, as has been demonstrated by Nateghi et al (2016). In central Shizugawa, where an industrial zone is planned for the lowlands behind the wall, there will be shops, factories and many people present during the day (at least for the immediate future; the long-term economic prospects for the town are not good). But in Nagashizu, like many other small hamlets, the only structures will be the small workshops of the dwindling fishermen. It is hard to imagine that, should a wave again crash through the valley, the cost of rebuilding these could come close to that of raising the walls. In 2013, a team of graduate students at the University of Tokyo’s Graduate School of Public Policy carried out a cost-benefit analysis of the proposed seawall in Kesennuma’s Koizumi district (currently under construction). By comparing its construction costs and financial estimations of sightline damage to the value of
the property it would protect and the final value of the wall itself, they calculated it will lead to a net-loss of more than 179 million dollars over a 50-year period. “From a cost-benefit perspective,” they conclude, “we consider that the current plan should be halted.” (Kaku et al. 2014, 33)

**Severed Flows**

The seawalls are, of course, going ahead. They may well protect property, if there is any left to defend. But their monumental edifices effect several other operations on the space of the coastline. Firstly, walls, whatever else their functions, are dividers. Seawalls divide the land from the sea, impacting those objects and subjects, human and non-human, that flow within and between them. Concurrent with this division, they perform a second operation on coastal space: erasure. Their wide footprints (more than 40 meters’ width for a 10m high wall, for example) bury swathes of coastal land under concrete; land with long histories of habitation and use. Of course, seawall construction also has other impacts. The purchase of private land for their construction, for example, means that even if they are one day dismantled a large amount of coastal space will have been transferred from private to public hands. Division and erasure, however, are particularly central to understanding the widespread opposition to their construction. The seawalls cut through and divide the more-than-human, social space of the coastline, with profound impacts on the phenomenal experience of place and the relations between the constituent parts composing the space thus divided.

There is, of course, a degree to which this is an explicit objective. Establishing seawall height is “the foundation for the drafting of reconstruction plans” (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2011). Division is necessary to protect national territory
from the exogenous threat of the wave; it is also inextricable from the official re-zoning of the low-lying coastal areas, as seawall height is central to the modeling on which the danger zones are established (although they will not stop Level 2 tsunamis, they do reduce their degree of inundation, and thus affect the size of the zone). In Kesennuma, Imagawa Satoru claims the proposed seawalls will remove 20% of coastal space from the Disaster Danger Zone due to this effect (Imagawa 2015). The zone is important because whether one’s residence was (or is) inside or outside it determines eligibility for certain programs/compensation. For example, only residents whose home was or is within the zone are eligible for higher-ground relocation. Since changing the size of the seawall means changing the size of the zone, it has a cascading effect on all these relationships. This, Imagawa claims, is one reason why local authorities are resistant to changing the plans: without establishing the zone, local administrations would be unable to properly plan for and access funding for higher-ground relocation within the designated time frame for recovery funding (Miura 2015, 91).

The imposition of a barrier between land and sea does not simply keep out external threats. In addition to modifying and establishing relationships between and within inland areas, the walls restructure the land-water interface: those interstitial spaces mediating the ocean and the interior. In July 2016, I was driving through Minamisanriku with Abe, an ecologist and former professor who left his academic position to come and work in the town. I asked him what he thought about the seawalls. “We don't need them,” he replied emphatically. The walls, he said, will have a very damaging long term-effect on the ecology of the coast by severing the flow of nutrients and organisms from the land to the shallows. This threatens fishing and aquaculture, Abe told me, by robbing tidal flats of the plankton they are rich in, reducing the available sustenance for oysters and other marine life cultivated by local fisherpeople. A former
schoolteacher, now Fukkō Machizukuri Suishinin, told me it would also alter flows within the shallows themselves:

The ocean currents change. The flow of the ocean, you know. When that happens, there are a lot of marine plants and suchlike that were attached to the rocks, they detach; places where urchins and abalone would attach are totally, you can’t take them anymore…Places that were good for fishing until now, they become totally useless.

These points have been echoed by other ecologists and environmental organizations. The Science Council of Japan, for example, claims that due to their likely environmental damage, the proposed walls violate the legal obligation to protect the environment enshrined in the Coast Act and River Act (Science Council of Japan 2014, 8).

All of this should, in theory, be avoidable. The guidelines released by MLIT and MAFF in 2011 state that decisions over seawall heights should, among other things, “take into consideration the diversity of uses of the coast, environmental protection, and the need to harmonize with the surrounding landscape.” (Nihon Bengoshi Rengōkai 2014, 5) I asked Abe whether environmental assessments have been carried out. He said while in some cases they have, the results have only been used to mitigate the damage caused by initial construction and not to alter the plans themselves. When I pressed Abe on why the environmental sciences are being ignored, he stated simply that “there is an intimate relationship between the construction industry and the government.”

---

6 This can be roughly translated as “promoter of reconstruction planning.” Several residents were hired by Miyagi University for this position, acting as liaisons between the university and the townspeople and conducting a variety of projects, such as documenting damage and recovery efforts.
Divided Visions

It is not only ecological flows that are interrupted by the new walls. For the residents that inhabit coastal space, they transform how these flows and the space they constitute are experienced. In official theory and practice, coastal space is understood as a set of discrete components, each of which is embedded in hierarchically organized, discrete, vertical chains of control commonly described as *tatewari gyōsei*, or “bureaucratic sectionalism.” That space is already divided in this manner is an implicit premise of the frequent calls for bureaucrats to think more “synthetically” (*sōgōteki*). For example, in Watari the waterfront is divided between the Prefecture, local municipality and national bodies, as depicted in Figure 2-5. Such divisions are normal in reconstruction plans generally (see Chapter 1 on higher-ground relocation, for example);

---

7 A town some two hours south of Minamisanriku also badly impacted by the tsunami.
different entities are responsible for seawalls (or sections of seawalls), depending on whose land they are being constructed.

For resident’s, however, coastal spaces are experienced quite differently. As Gotō Kazuma told me, “we don’t live as if these are separated; we live here among all of them connected.” Social space may be divided, but through different practices and namings than the administration’s. It is not, like the blank terrain of the simulation, “a surface on which we are placed.” It is composed of and does not exist prior to the arrival of the entities that inhabit it; it is always under construction (Massey 2005, 10). The daily, mundane practices of habitation – making one’s way through space, marking it with the “imprint of previous journeys” (Ingold 2000, 241) – are how we know space, sensorially, as place (Tuan 2011).

Large-scale infrastructures like the seawall profoundly alter the phenomenal experience of these places. Unlike the planner who views space from on high, we do not contain within our heads a bird’s eye schema from which we navigate: “to travel from place to place involves the opening and closing of vistas, in a particular order, through a continuous series of reversible transitions.” We can understand exactly where we are while having no idea of our geographic location. (Ingold 2000, 237-238) The sequencing of these vistas takes the form of stories; narratives of past movement through which we construct and represent trajectories through and of space. Ingold’s choice of “vista” is not, presumably accidental here: vision is one of the dominant modes of knowing place. Visual perception has both representational and tactile elements: transforming external objects and events into (internal and external) representations, often mediated today by the camera, and allowing an active exploration of and “direct contact” with the world analogous to touch (Kramnick 2015, 315). Both modes of perception are affected by the seawall’s division of coastal space.

73
To illustrate what I mean, let us look at the minutes of a meeting of the Ōya Satoumi-zukuri Kentō Iinkai, in which members comment on several proposals for moving the seawall at Ōya beach. Out of the 64 comments on specific proposals, nearly a third (20) took a phenomenological perspective, their appraisals activating a view or trajectory within the space itself (albeit with varying degrees of specificity). I have collected several here:

Being surrounded by the seawall, psychologically, when you can’t see the ocean you feel a sense of unease growing. You have no sense of freedom. For a person swimming in the ocean, it feels better to survey the land, not concrete. All you can see from the ocean is a wall of concrete. If it’s a vertical seawall, while you might be able to preserve some of the beach, getting down to the sea would be difficult, and when fleeing from the sea, you’ll no longer be able to climb up from anywhere. Although even now we can’t see all the ocean from the road, we had the psychological relief of knowing the sea was there at the end of the pine trees. If this becomes concrete, there’s a big possibility that our consciousness of how close the ocean is will fade. Before, in places where buildings blocked our view of the sea, we weren’t conscious of how close it was. If you can’t see the sea, you don’t think how close it is. There are people who, when they didn’t have any work to do, would watch the ocean from their houses, it’s not good that they won’t be able to see it anymore. I’d like us to consider livelihoods where you can feel the ocean.\footnote{In the original, each sentence was a distinct comment, with no author/speaker specified.}

Notice how vision, in one shape or another, is central to most of the above comments; the most popular proposal was the only one in which “you can see the ocean well from all positions.” “We will not be able to see the sea” – is the most oft-heard (and oft-reported) criticism of the seawalls across the disaster regions. Often, this is connected to the necessity for local fishermen – many of whom, as near-shore fishers, work within sight of the coast – to monitor the daily moods and tempers (the unadara, or “face”) of the sea. As Gotō Kazuma told me,

Our main industry is the sea. The fishing industry. To go to sea now, you must climb over a mountain. There are many problems. Once you’ve moved to higher ground you can see the sea clearly, but when you’re down in those low areas, now you can’t see it.
From the color of the waters, the quality of the clouds, and the strength and direction of the wind, decisions are made about fishing strategies (Kimura 2016, 7), or whether to fish at all. In Togura district, the southern part of Minamisanriku, during the short sea urchin and abalone seasons the decision to allow fishing (kaikō, or “opening”) was normally made the day before through observing the conditions of the sea. “Their knowledge of fishery,” as Kimura says, “is inseparable from their vision of the landscape.” (Kimura 2016, 7) The walls offer to protect their lives at the same time as they interrupt this vision. “Protecting life,” Abe concluded as we drove along the coast, requires “protecting livelihoods, without which it doesn’t matter if one lives.”

People care about and value being able to see the sea. For many, this visibility is central to the feeling of safety, irrespective of the wall’s concrete effects; others would accept some trade-off in terms of safety to preserve sight-lines threatened by division. The walls, however, do more than simply divide the social space of the coastline (and the communities that inhabit it). They also erase. The things they remove are not simply material, though they exist in space; they are both highly localized and incorporated into networks of circulation (of people, of affects) that extend throughout and beyond their surrounding areas. Sometimes they are easy to visualize. Often, like lines of visibility, they stage and connect things that are harder to see, and even harder to model.

Erasing the Coastline

I first visited Nagasuka beach in February 2015 with Takahashi. Before the disasters, Nagasuka was a popular bathing spot for locals and tourists in the north of the Town. Now, “the beach here has disappeared,” he said, pointing to what was left of the sand: a thin film of yellow behind the black stones abutting the water. Since the disaster, there have been efforts, led by a non-profit,
clean up and restore part of it further down the coast, despite its planned disappearance under a seawall’s concrete footprint. One local involved in these efforts is a woman I’ll call Sasaki, a young mother working at another non-profit in Utatsu. Her desire to preserve Nagasuka is about more than tourism, though it is undoubtedly a draw for people. For her, it’s about something deeper: her memories of playing there as a child, and wanting her own child to have such memories. The wall erases a space from her childhood, producing a (literally) concrete absence at the edge of the sea. “Aren’t there people advocating for it to be kept”, I asked her one day over lunch. “Yes,” she replied sadly, “but important people in the district have said ‘don’t oppose it,’ and now they can’t speak out.” We talked about photos she’d posted on Facebook: of her son, his hands grainy from digging in sand and water, smiling into the camera. She often posts images of the sand, the water, and the light at Nagasuka; photos of her son, playing on the beach.

“I’m looking for some way to show how I feel about this place. I can’t write in words that I’m against what’s happening, that I want to keep the beach. It might be easier on my heart to give up, but I’m not going to accept that it’s gone until the end.”

Much of the Japanese media coverage and scholarly literature on the seawalls has, as already noted, focused on its effect on sightlines; in other words, on the problems caused by division. Erasure, however, has been less commented on, despite being implicit in most critiques (some of the most notable successes among resident’s efforts also involve resisting it). Miura Tomoyuki, describing the impact of seawalls, put it to me like this: “the space between the land and the sea disappears.” Like division, these erasures have negative consequences for fishermen. In 2012, as part of Harvard’s Sanriku Project, I carried out interviews in the hamlet of Niranojama, a short drive from Yoriki. Residents were afraid that the new seawall would squeeze fishing operations into an overly constrained space; moving it further inland, they
believed, would preserve valuable space for fishing operations and boat storage. In Miura’s
hometown of Ōya, like Nagasuka, it is not the harbor but the beach that is the focus of
preservation efforts. Every few days, Miura posts photos of the landscape on his Facebook wall.
Sometimes, he also posts pictures of Nagasuka, as it gradually disappears under the concrete
(Figure 2-7). From an urban perspective, the trade-offs might appear nonsensical: who would
choose a beach, however picturesque, over safety? But for an area with scarce resources and an
intimate relationship with the water, to keep and restore spaces like Ōya beach – “our pride and
joy,” as members of the Ōya Satoumi-zukuri Kentō Iinkai called it – is to “revive a way of living that keeps the ocean and the coast alive.”

In August of 2015, the head of the Ōya Chiku Shinkōkai Renraku Kyōgikai and the Ōya Satoumi-zukuri Kentō Iinkai sent a letter to the Mayor of Kesennuma introducing the Iinkai-led plan to setback the seawall and preserve the beach (discussed in Chapter 3). In it, they describe the beach as “the symbol of Ōya district” and an indispensable resource for both tourists and locals: the only beach in the Prefecture to be selected by the Ministry of the Environment for inclusion in both its 1998, 2001 and 2006 editions of “the beaches of Japan.” (Oikawa and Haga 2015) To lose it is to lose more than a valuable tourist attraction (though it is also that): it means losing their chiiki-sei (identity as a region): that which defines and separates Ōya as place, it’s ‘Ōya-ness’ (Ōya-rashisa), in local parlance.

Central to Ōya-ness, and Minamisanriku-ness (Minamisanriku-rashisa), is the idea that a special relationship with nature in general, and the sea in particular, is foundational to place-identity in a double-sense. It characterizes both the place itself and the self-image of those who identify as inhabitants of that place.9 When asked “what is special about the town” by a local non-profit, a cross-section of residents gave an answer relating to its natural environment: the sea is so close, the views are so beautiful, the ocean’s edible bounties are so delicious. (373Net 2014, 10) “We live with the sea,” I often heard around the coast; “Sometimes the sea is terrifying, at other times bountiful.” That is the tradeoff of proximity: to have one, you must accept the other. It is here, in considering what it means to have a “relationship with the sea,” that division and erasure come together.

9 That such a self-image is probably common to coastal communities more generally does not detract from this point: what matters is not whether Minamisanriku is distinct from other areas in concrete terms, but how people believe in and articulate its supposed distinctiveness, and the window this creates into what they claim to value.
One needs both the interstitial spaces – the tidal flats, the harbor wharfs – and the aesthetics of presence sightlines allow: gazing on the sea from the land, or the land from the sea, and making both present to oneself (Kramnick 2015). Beaches and harbors are spaces where people mingle with the ocean and the non-human life that traverses its narrow boundaries. Many of my older friends in the town learned to swim in the sea: “In the summer holidays, it was all about the sea…Diving off the rocks, swimming to nearby rafts…Schools would have swimming lessons on the beach.” (373Net 2014, 63) That children today, cooped up inside by overly cautious parents, restrictive safety guidelines and the addictive allure of video games, can no longer relate so bodily to the environment was a constant lament of older residents. Seeing within and across these spaces creates a sense of the ocean’s continual presence. Of course, it is also possible to espouse the value of nature and support the seawalls. Many pro-seawall residents presumably do; many want, as Kimura points out, both a safer built environment and some form of ocean visibility (Kimura 2016, 8). For others, however, a reconstruction process that makes Minamisanriku livable – for current or imagined future residents – requires preserving a relationship with the sea emerging through the aesthetics and tactility of its presence: to both see the sea and touch it.
Conclusion: Saying No

In Minamisanriku and Kesennuma, we know of only a handful of cases where residents successfully altered seawall plans. There may possibly be more. Per MLIT, as of January 2016 changes had been made to seawall height or location in nearly a third of all seawall sites: 27 in Iwate, 154 in Miyagi, and 1 in Fukushima (Kahoku Shimpō 2016). It is not clear how many of these are due to genuine attempts by the government to address resident’s concerns. In many cases, there may be a convenient overlap between resident’s desires for change and revisions already decided by the bureaucracy for technical reasons. It is also unclear how many of these involved changes of height vs location; the former appears far more difficult. Miyagi Prefecture, for example, is highly resistant to what have been called “heights with no basis” (Imagawa 2016, 2). It is also probable, as Miura put it, that in many cases small concessions have been granted without fixing the “fundamental problems” that motivate resistance.

Nonetheless, revisions have been achieved. When I visited Takahashi in February 2015, I asked him to explain what happened in Yoriki and what role our visualizations and survey data had played. He told me that things began to move after he took our survey results to a seawall meeting held by the administration and, in his words, “hurled the data at them…” After that, talks begun among and between residents and the administration. Several months after our survey in February 2013, at a meeting called by the Takahashi and the town’s Fukkō Machizukuri Suishinin, residents of Yoriki decided to reject the current seawall proposals and request that the seawall location be moved further to the interior. This request was accepted, and in May a revised plan was released in which the seawall was moved 70-100m inland, with the overall length less than a third of the original: “There will no longer be concrete flowing into the
sea, and we’ve been able to protect an environment where the sea is visible from the hamlet.”

(Fukkō Machizukuri Suishinin 2013) How was this achieved?

Making the effects of the seawall visible likely played a role, as did strong community ties. In the eyes of one Fukkō Machizukuri Suishinin (himself a resident of Yoriki), “the plans have been revised because residents were able to come together and raise a collective voice.”

(Fukkō Machizukuri Suishinin 2013) For a tiny, tight-knit hamlet with an engaged leadership like Yoriki, the conditions for consensus were certainly present. In Ōya, Shizugawa and other larger districts, however, achieving change required residents to navigate more and deeper divides. In the next chapter, I dive deeper into a case study of how residents managed to alter the seawall plans in these areas, asking what it reveals about the possibility for greater democracy in the disaster regions.

I last visited Takahashi in the summer of 2016 at his workshop in Yoriki. His staff were hard at work processing sea urchins when I arrived. We sat down to talk in a small storage room where he entertains guests; at the back, on a raised dais, his six-month old grandson, born after my last visit, was fast asleep. “The town is awful right now,” he said. “We can’t envision it. Ordinary people can’t imagine what [the town] will look like when completed, so we can’t evaluate [it].” I asked him about Nagasuka, where construction on the seawall had proceeded apace since last year. The seawall will likely destroy what is left of the sand, he said, before noting a certain irony: that they are concreting over a natural beach in Nagasuka and shipping in sand for a man-made beach in Shizugawa (Sun Ole Sodehama). A short while later, we got into his small white truck and drove over to view the wall. The northwest portion appeared complete.
Although it’s gentle gradient made it less imposing than some of the steeper structures when viewed from above, standing at the bottom I was struck by its height (Figure 2-8). From the road to the water, there was only concrete. All that was left from before were the shattered black stones filling the gap between the slope and the blocks lining the waterfront. Like in Nagasuka, across the disaster regions the walls are rising. In a few cases, residents have managed to move them; in an even smaller number, resist them entirely. Most residents of the Sanriku coast, however, will soon be living with and behind them. Will Takahashi’s grandson, sleeping so peacefully in the storage room, find a town – and a life – he values behind their grey eminence? For many residents, how profound the impact of division and erasure will be is hard to imagine. For better or worse, they will not need to wait long to find out.
Chapter 3
Agents of Recovery

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described how many groups have sprung up in opposition to seawall plans across the hisaichi. One such group is Kamome no Niji-iro Kai, whose name translates loosely as the Seagull’s Rainbow Society (hereafter referred to simply as ‘Kamome’). In January of 2015, I joined them on a visit to the waterfront of Shiomi District, where central Shizugawa meets the open sea (Figure 3-1). In the Meiji period this was the site of Matsubara beach; a stretch of sand that gradually dwindled as the town center developed. Before the disasters, the waterfront contained a public hall, gymnasium, library, park (with baseball pitch), and the Chile Plaza, where a Moai statue was erected to commemorate the 1960 Chile Earthquake and Tsunami. Today, Matsubara is unrecognizable. I was not there in the months following the disaster, but photographs show a blasted landscape, stripped of its identifying features. The few buildings that were not swept away were ruined, their carcasses disassembled and removed over the next few years as part of the rubble clearance. The park, of course, was obliterated; the Moai too was broken by the tsunami, its severed head found some distance away, buried under debris.

On the day we visited, nearly 4 years later, the rubble was also gone. Pyramids of earth blocked the view to the sea, and a low, continuous drone, punctuated by the high-pitched rattles of diggers and trucks, hovered in the air. Our destination was the remains of Matsubara beach, where part of a ruined seawall still jutted out into the bay. At issue was the future of two features of this narrow strip: the remains of the ruined, pre-disaster fortifications, and the crumbling, concrete waterfront leading to them (Figure 3-2). In a rapidly changing Shizugawa, this area
was one of few still retaining the immediacy of disaster: a place that, as one member of the group put it, “has yet to be touched.” It was in a worse state than people expected. As we walked along the waterfront, we could see below us white rocks mingle with warped metal and broken concrete at the water’s edge, from which bent steel bars protruded like unearthed roots. Behind us rose an ochre earth mound some 15 feet high, marking the location of Shizugawa’s proposed seawall. At 8.7 meters, the generic height for the Port, it would swallow what remained of the former waterfront unless moved, as Kamome were requesting.

Disasters wreck landscapes: they pull them apart, disrupting the relations between the parts that constitute them. But they also generate new spaces, which can become symbolic in
both the immediate and long-term aftermath of disaster. Multiple pasts – individual and collective – and a ruptured present mingle in these spaces. The outline of the town as it was remains at Matsubara, as do traces of the tsunami’s ferocity. For some residents, at least, these sites are meaningful: places where the palpability of disaster can be transformed into new objects and sentiments; where one can still touch some remnant of a vanished, and vanishing, past; and where one can commune with a nature red in tooth and claw. To others, the wave-eaten landscape is like an open wound, a constant reminder of loss and an impediment to achieving ‘normalcy,’ like the ruined Disaster Prevention Center (Bōsai Chōsai) discussed in Chapter 4.

The local and regional governments take the latter view: that Matsubara is little more than a safety hazard waiting to be “cleaned up” (kirei ni suru), a euphemism for complete redevelopment. Visiting the seafront, members of Kamome had no illusions about the area’s
safety. Some level of clearing up was necessary, most agreed; the protruding steel rods, in particular, would have to go. Others wanted to leave it as is and rope or fence the area off so that visitors could only view it from afar. There was general agreement that the sliver of ruined seawall at the far edge should be kept. After walking the length of the waterfront, we clambered up the steep, dirt surface of the earth mound marking the future seawall, smudging our clothes with ochre dust, and gathered in a circle to debrief and say our goodbyes. A friend of one Kamome member, visiting only for the day, sidled up to me. “It’s so hard…” he said, “Should we leave the remnants of the disaster, or develop the space…”

Everyone knows that the coast’s days are numbered, that the ocean, inch by inch, will eat it away. “We must preserve it with the understanding it will break down,” one member said. But for all its fragility (or, perhaps, because of it), for the members of Kamome this tiny piece of land became a subject of almost utopian dreaming. A space where, in an environment being reconfigured beyond comprehension, they could define for themselves a tiny part of what the new town might be, and what meaning it could carry; where, within the massive spatial engineering of disaster prevention (see chapter 2), they could create a different vision for what should be done with the spaces wrought by disaster.

Across the affected regions, one can find many comparable organizations, all of which have subtly different structures and are incorporated into official decision-making processes to greater or lesser degrees. In this chapter, I focus exclusively on a case study of Kamome, which granted me total access during my residence in the town. Although, as I already mentioned, the specific configuration and purpose of each group differs, the ones I am aware of share similar organizational dynamics: rather than functioning as competing power centers, they articulate with and modify existing power structures in order to achieve alterations, minor or otherwise, to
official plans for coastal reconstruction. In doing so, they constitute themselves as subjects of rights – we, the residents – not through opposition to, but tactical articulations with and extensions of preexisting structures of power and political ideologies (Subramanian 2009, 4).

Ethnographic studies of disasters, ‘natural’ or otherwise, seem to inevitably arrive at the conclusion that “policies and practices need to consider local culture.” (Faas and Barrios 2015, 292) In recent scholarship, this includes the “ritual and quotidian practices” through which people give meaning to space, which frequently conflict with the ideals of urban planners wedded to neoliberal principles of urban development (Barrios 2011, 119). The persistent lack of attention to local space-making – to how the people who occupy a space use, experience and construct it – in disaster-related policy-making raises the problem of democracy, or lack thereof (often referred to as ‘the problem of participation’). Different visions – what we can call spatial imaginaries – do battle in the aftermath of catastrophe, with the lines often drawn between residents (who may or may not have legal title to the space in question) and the state.

Against the disembodied, ‘rational’ actor found in much political theory, many recent studies have shown that sentiment – including that derived from place attachment and the sense of one’s place with broader spatial imaginaries – plays a powerful, perhaps definitive, role in motivating political thought and action (Krause 2008; Barrios 2011; Cramer 2016; Koch 2016). But the material world is still seen as a mute spectator to, or backdrop for, politics, including the politics of post-disaster rebuilding. Place is political because – or if – people think politically with it. In Barrios’ study of neighborhood recovery planning in New Orleans, for example, it is planners’ lack of familiarity with (or total disinterest in) residents’ “embodied dispositions and affective attachments” that rendered their recovery plans unsatisfactory (Barrios 2011, 125). In the Introduction and Chapter 1, however, I argued that the tsunami is also a political actor, which
despite efforts to exclude it erupts into the settled landscape, disrupting it and the logics that
distribute and stabilize its parts (Rancière 2001). The political nature of disaster also extends
beyond the moment when the tsunami ‘speaks.’ The receding waters left newly politicized
geographies, uncanny terrains in which the relationship between meaning and matter had been
destabilized (see Chapter 4). The activities of groups like Kamome are political here because
they posit, against the local and prefectural governments, a different logic for refiguring the
ruptured space. A logic that seeks, in opposition to the Town’s push for ‘development,’ to
establish new continuities between past, present and future, while preserving within the town
traces of the tsunami and its violence. To succeed, however, residents had first to acquire a voice
within the process of reconstruction.

Subjects and Objects

Every reconstruction plan – including Minamisanriku’s – includes some variation of “the
subjects of recovery are individual residents.” This is true, up to a point. Residents must resurrect
their workplaces, rebuild their homes, and re-knit their social networks, and without their efforts
to do so, recovery could not take place. But acknowledging this does not imply that they should
initiate or decide among policies, as individuals or groups. Nor does it imply that their particular
concerns should be part of the calculus on which decisions are made (though the geographies of
their sub-populations are relevant). Within the discourse and practice of bōsai (disaster
prevention), as I argued in Chapter 2, residents of the disaster regions are viewed as a
population: a social body with its own “laws of movement, expansion and decline,” to be
managed through a variety of apparatuses (Butler 2007, 478):

---

1 See Mitchell (2002) and Booth and Williams (2014), among others, for arguments that non-human
action can be called ‘speech.’
The population is pertinent as the objective, and individuals, the series of individuals, are no longer pertinent as the object, but simply as the instrument, relay, or condition for obtaining something at the level of the population (Foucault 2007, 42).

In the affected regions, this “something,” as I argued in Chapter 2, is bōsai, the prevention of future disasters. Residents are simultaneously objects – that on which the mechanisms of disaster prevention act – and subjects in the Foucauldian sense, called upon to conduct themselves in ways appropriate to achieving the goals of protection (Foucault 2007, 43). They are not agents of recovery, at least with regards to ‘hard’ reconstruction (see Chapter 6). The population may be further subdivided where necessary to achieve bōsai, but only for the purpose of transforming the whole. In this sense, residents form the ‘soft’ part of a dialectic of space, their ongoing interactions with the ‘hard’ (physical infrastructure) conditioned by land-use restrictions and appropriate training.

While ‘victims,’ as collective subjects, are not the authors of policy, information about resident populations is crucial to the successful planning and implementation of reconstruction programs, most notably higher-ground relocation. Government procedures for both drafting and carrying out relocation plans require the continual monitoring of public sentiment. When drafting the plans, for example, local authorities are required to submit how many residents intend to participate. Over time, many will change their mind, requiring alterations; accordingly, they must be surveyed multiple times throughout the plan’s gestation and implementation. The ‘discussion groups’ (kentōkai) mentioned in Chapter 5, for example, did not serve to alter basic plans per

---

2 Bōsai also articulates neatly with the shock doctrine tendency in Japan and other countries’ responses to disasters; namely, to use them as opportunities for construction industry-enriching ‘modernization,’ largely through massive public works.

3 In much of the central government literature on bōsai, residents of the disaster regions are described as ‘victims’ (hisaisha).
resident’s wishes; rather, they provided channels for the administration to effectively (and repeatedly) survey residents’ intentions regarding relocation and alter certain aspects of the plans in response to these raw numbers (the number of plots and size of *danchi*, for example). Residents were being “listened to,” but not in the way they desired (for more details, see Chapter 5).

There is, however, a contradiction at the heart of *bōsai* and its associated reconstruction programs. Residents are a population to be managed, but first they must give their consent. Their subjectivity cannot be fully subordinated to technical imperative, for the appearance of choice—willingly entering a social contract—is necessary for both the perceived legitimacy of the system and its practical implementation. This is a recent historical development, and its legal status is ambiguous. In Miyagi Prefecture, for example, gaining resident’s consent for public works has been promoted since 2001 (see Chapter 2 for more details). This is part of a general trend towards greater citizen participation in planning since the 1960s that picked up speed in the late 1990s (Sorensen and Funck 2007). There are also eminently practical reasons for the Prefecture’s stance: most of the land needed for reconstruction programs is held by private owners, and expropriation is difficult in Japan.

As the choice of words suggests, the perceived necessity of ‘consensus-building’ still does not imply that residents should be involved in selecting or drafting policy. Rather, consensus-building is a process by which decision-makers attempt to persuade a population or sub-population of a plan’s necessity; it also refers to efforts, most commonly by residents themselves, to ensure that any apparent ‘consensus’ is, in fact, collective. In most cases, the separation between decision-makers and the demos is maintained by this process; residents simply affix their seal on a *fait accompli*. But opening the sphere of policy to ‘the people,’
however marginally, creates opportunities for influencing government that did not previously exist. Consensus-building is a contact zone where technocratic and democratic processes collide. These tensions are particularly acute in the hisaichi, where the near-complete restructuring of the coastal areas is at stake. It is here that residents seek to influence the direction of recovery, whether by temporarily withholding consent or using the space opened by consensus-building procedures to subtly alter reconstruction plans. Those who do so are struggling against the label of victimhood to assert themselves as agents, not ‘subjects,’ of recovery.

**Agents of Recovery**

A common theme in my interviews with residents was agency, individual and collective: that true ‘recovery’ would be achieved when townspeople could do things for themselves. One young man active in recovery efforts told me,

I don’t want to say, “because I’m a victim” any more. How I can escape from this framework of victimhood…the definition is, rather than ‘victims,’ ‘people making the town,’ that’s recovery…

For me, when the people of this town are trying to ‘make the town’ (machizukuri), to take positive action, I think it’d be OK to call that reconstruction (fukkō). Right now, it’s still ‘somebody will do something for us,’ that kind of atmosphere, the [administration] will do something for us kind of thing. It shouldn’t be like, “we’ve got funding from the country for this.” When people think, “I want to make the town like this, so what can I do”; when everyone is able to say, “let’s do this,” I think the town will have finally recovered.

Such agency did not necessarily exist before the disasters. Many of my interviewees attributed the difficulties of organizing residents to the weakness of pre-disaster democracy at both the local and national levels; a weakness that, as one local activist put it, derives from the tendency of townspeople to “depend on the administration and wait for the hand of god,” and of
government workers to “engage with residents by ‘explaining’ instead of listening.” A local guide working for a non-profit set up after the tsunami described it to me like this:

In Japan, to be honest, I don’t think democracy has taken root…The difficulty is the idea that you can leave everything up to the administration. And then if there is something you find repugnant you complain about it. I think there’s a large section that thinks democracy is complaining about things…At some point, the administration became paternalistic to ordinary people.

This sense of paternalism is based on a presumed vertical separation between the social and the political (Ferguson 2007). For those living in Minamisanriku (and other municipalities across Japan), the state is something Other (even when its members are drawn from their own ranks, and continue to live among them). Collectively referred to as gyōsei, or “the administration,” the organs of governance are understood through idioms of scale, distance, and localization. In theory, the different levels of Japanese governance – the national level (kuni, or ‘country’), prefectural level, and municipal level – are organized horizontally. Minamisanriku’s Reconstruction Plan, for example, writes explicitly that “we are not in a hierarchical relationship” with the Prefecture and the Country, although the plan includes “programs led by” these two, and financial support from them is “indispensable.” (Minamisanriku-chō 2012, 8)

This last point is crucial: since the central government controls the purse strings, and the cost of recovery dwarfs the modest tax income of local municipalities, they have powerful structural incentives to follow its lead (Oguma 2013). In practice, despite attempts to decentralize post-1990s, the Japanese political system resembles more a nested hierarchy (Brenner 2001) than it does a flat network (Marston et al, 2005), even if this verticality is as much a product of how it operates in practice as a fact of its design. At the municipal level, residents are organized into administrative districts (gyōseiku), each of which appoints a leader (kuchō), normally through
mochi-mawari, a process in which the position circles among elder male household heads. In some cases, these headmen have acted as community representatives, and some districts have resisted aspects of reconstruction plans. Just as often, however, they function to smother dissent (see Chapter 2). Despite this carefully differentiated system in which each small district of 200 or so has nominal representation, Kudō told me that,

After the disasters, when we had to start building the town again from zero, we didn’t have a foundation for dialogue with residents, which should be a precondition [for rebuilding]…To do a bit more of, to talk together and decide things might have been a hassle, but if you follow that process, when a disaster like that occurs you already have a foundation…It’s because the way of doing things pre-disaster was half-baked that we’re in this position today.

Residents active in reconstruction often claimed the rest of the townspeople were mukanshin, or uninterested. One young man described it this way:

I particularly feel this way about reconstruction, that the people of this town aren’t really interested in the town itself. Is what I sort of feel…I think that everyone has consider what a “better town” is. I’d like people to give their opinions on that at least. For the most part, you don’t know what people want, you know.

Things have shifted since the disaster, however, whether out of necessity of due to the rupturing of the everyday. Much of the taken-for-granted fabric of the town has come apart and, as I argued in the Introduction and Chapter 1, ‘matters of fact’ have become ‘matters of concern.’ (Latour 2004) Many people I met told me that disaster had prompted them to act, like this young woman from Togura: “Before the disaster, I didn’t have any interest in the town, but because we had the disaster, I wonder if there are things I can do.” Another young man put it like this,
The disaster has been an impetus, there are lots of people who are super concerned about the town and acting positively, who want to do something, I think people like that are in places like this [non-profits] for sure.

They are also in organizations like Kamome.

**A Museum of Ruins**

Kudō founded the group in May of 2013. They meet twice a month, with a “flat organization” (in stark contrast to pre-existing community groups, which tend to be strictly hierarchical). The name, as Kudō explained in an interview with online magazine Femin, derives from the perception that “in Minamisanriku, seagulls are like family. We want to think about the town like a seagull, viewing everything from above…and for there to be opinions of all colors, like a rainbow.” (Kashiwara 2014) Unlike the older neighborhood associations (particularly those with exclusive membership, like keiyaku-kai and keiyaku-kō), the group welcomed recent arrivals in the town (often known as I-Turners, see Chapter 6). They even welcomed me, permitting me to participate in meetings, accompany them on site visits, and assist in running some of their public-facing events. In their first year, Kudō explained to me, they were focused on ‘hardware.’

In contrast with groups attempting to resist seawalls entirely, they adopted a pragmatic, incrementalist approach:

> We talked mainly about things in the plans, like the location of staircases, inclinations, what to do about things like that, rather than dreams and stuff. It was maybe half [of what we talked about]. Of course, the premise was that we’d take concrete actions, so everything had to be specific. Numbers, structures, times; you must move forward with a hook connecting people to the next [step] or, there are lots of groups that end after one or two meetings, and plenty of meetings for talking only about dreams.

> We’d talk about things other than height, like the shape or the inclination or things like that, the location of stairs, the width, the width of each step on the stairs, you know? If you don’t make requests about those kinds of things you’ll just lose time on the height, we shifted to not talking about height and making detailed requests about the
structure. By doing that, even though I hate the height, we’ve asked for things that will bring it as close as possible to the ideal, where you can go down to the river, where a couple can sit and watch the river, and a child can play with its mother, those other areas.

A few days after visiting Matsubara, the members of Kamome gathered in their regular meeting place: Hachiman Jinja, the head shrine for central Shizugawa, where Kudō works as a negi, or senior priest. Sometimes we would meet in the ground floor office, among the clutter of Shintō paraphernalia and documents from the many committees she sits on. More often, we would assemble in a large, open room on the second floor. We were gathered that day to discuss our impressions of and hopes for Matsubara, Kudō said, to “arrange how we can explain [them] as townspeople.”

We gave our responses one-by-one, while Kudō noted keywords on small post-it notes. Much of the early discussion focused on the zone’s animal life and its possible status as a shinsai no ikō, or remnant of the tsunami (see Chapter 4). One young man that I’ll call Suzuki, a recent émigré with a background in ecology, imagined it as a site where nature and disaster intertwine, and could therefore be observed together. “I came here because I wanted to take children on visits to the seashore,” he explained. “I felt like, with a remnant of the tsunami like that preserved, we could observe the living things among the debris.” The perceived inseparability of nature from disaster – of life by the sea from the ocean’s perils – was not confined, either spatially or temporally, to Matsubara post-3.11. One participant, a young man born in Minamisanriku that I’ll call Onodera, saw in Matsubara’s ruination a more general lesson, suffused with nostalgia for the place as it was:

I remember, as a child, playing baseball and fishing there. There is something left that brings back memories of that time. I wouldn’t like to lose it completely. To be honest, I don’t think I want to live with a sanitized nature. [I want it] as it is, you could say. There
are good things and bad things, there are terrifying times. I think we shouldn’t clean up the coastline; we need to keep parts where there is the fear of nature, the danger.

Much of the danger in Matsubara’s case came from the debris, particularly the broken steel bars. Debris, as I argued in Chapter 1, occupies an ambiguous position. On the one hand, it is homogenous and unmarked; earmarked only for “tidying up” and disposal (often through incineration) (cf. Gordillo 2014). For Onodera, however, as a material product of the tsunami it also carries a kind of weight, even significance: a symbol and index of the danger inherent in ‘nature,’ and coastal life in general (Ueda and Torigoe 2012). He imagined taking the reinforcing bars poking out of the concrete and sculpting them into a monument – a mountain of steel bars, or “a mountain of debris.” With most of the tsunami’s debris already removed (and what little remained scheduled for “cleaning up,” meaning erasure), such a ‘mountain’ could well be the last remnant of gareki in the town.

In our next meeting, less than a week later, we began to brainstorm ideas for programs using the space. Based on the previous week’s discussion, Kudō had divided the area into three zones, which she called the “three faces of the waterfront”: the “zone that survived the tsunami,” the “zone washed away by the tsunami,” and the “zone that was washed away, but we will grow” (egurareta kedo, sodatete yuku zo-n) (Figure 3-3). How, she asked, could one spend 40 minutes in or around these three areas? What would one do?

The first to present a detailed plan was a local man I’ll call Satō. He brought his own homemade map to illustrate. The far-left area with the ruined seawall would be closed, left for nesting seabirds (premium tours could also be offered, he mused, in which people would be temporarily allowed in). The middle section would be crossed by raised paths, with a
small bird-watching facility. Next, the young ecologist Suzuki presented a proposal for a 
“disaster prevention picnic” program, in which mothers could bring their children to the 
waterfront, showing them the organisms dwelling in the ruins of the seawall. Another member 
suggested that the area might be of interest to researchers; a place for observing how man-made 
structures change when left to the elements. Onodera was still dwelling on the debris and its 
potential for signification. “I don’t want people to visit and that be it,” he said. They should take 
something of it with them, he said, and display it in their homes. My favorite idea, expressed by 
a young, female I-Turner working in a local non-profit, involved treating the area as a work of 
art: a “natural museum” composed of ruined objects and the living things inhabiting their porous 
interiors. The view itself is an ikö, Kudo summarized. Not a single, monumental relic, but a 
tapestry of objects sutured by disaster into a single space. The fragmented, broken matter of
these objects makes them symbolically labile; a clay for making meaning, their potential for signification both constrained and considerable.

How to use the space was still up in the air, but the plan to preserve it was already making the rounds. One of the older members of Kamome, who sat alongside Kudō on an advisory board for the committee drafting the Town’s Plan for Promoting Reconstruction (Fukkō Suishin Keikaku), revealed that the other board members had heard of and were actively discussing it. Another participant, who works for the local government, announced that he had met with the Prefecture and asked them to put the issue of moving the wall to the Shizugawa Machizukuri Council. To be successful, Kamome’s plan had to pass through this organ: the official source for gathering resident’s opinions on reconstruction and, in theory, modifying actual reconstruction policy accordingly. Passing the Council both requires and indicates that policy suggestions represent the voice of the people. “We have to get this decided,” he said, reminding everyone in the group to attend the Council’s next meeting. “Speak your minds! Say everything you can think.”

**Official Channels**

Participation is a core ideal of contemporary planning theory and a staple of liberal democratic planning systems (Huxley 2013). In Japan, as elsewhere, greater citizen participation in planning has been proposed as a solution for a variety of problems related to environmental management and sustainability. Much of the broader planning literature on ‘participation’ is normative: residents as citizens are seen as having a right to participate in planning decisions (Huxley 2013, 1532). Lefebvre’s ‘Right to the City,’ popularized by David Harvey (Harvey 2003; 2008) and widely cited by planners, is just one of the most influential attempts to not only develop a
normative basis for citizen control over shared space, but also integrate it within a broader conceptualization of democracy. As Huxley points out, much of the academic literature on participation (including that which doesn’t go as far as Harvey) takes it as a “given ideal and aim,” an institutionalized and self-evident solution to a variety of ‘common problems’ that can easily travel across diverse socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. In practice, however, while the terminology might be the same, specific practices of ‘participation’ across time and space differ significantly, as do the contexts within which they are enacted as a solution.

Demands for more, less, or different kinds of something are only intelligible when “situated within particular and nationally/locally specific understandings” of democracy and citizenship:

Specific, but often implicit, understandings affect how participation is theorized and conducted in ‘plannings’ that have different histories and are underpinned by different assumptions about space and place, economy and society, politics and administration, law and regulation, rights, obligations and citizenship, the individual and the collective. (Huxley 2013, 1533)

Huxley calls for us to attend to how particular forms of both ‘planning’ and ‘participation’ come to be constituted in response to particular problems, potentially displacing other, more radical forms of action (such as “communalism, local socialism, resistance or revolution”) (Huxley 2013, 1533).

In Japan’s case, there has been shift since the 1960s – when environmental and student movements became prominent in Japanese society – from top-down practices of ‘city planning,’ or toshi keikaku, towards what is called machizukuri. This translates roughly to ‘town-making,’ and covers a variety of practices that, as Sorenson and Funck describe, aim to “achieve more bottom-up input into local place management in which local citizens play an active role in environmental improvement and management processes.” (Sorensen and Funck 2007, 1)
Machizukuri is the Japanese instantiation of the general turn towards citizen participation in developed nations during the latter half of the 20th century. While it attempts to create a contact zone between “up there” and “from below,” however, machizukuri, like many imagined topographies of struggle, reproduces what Gupta and Ferguson call “vertical encompassment”⁴: the self-evident verticality of state-society relations (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ferguson 2007).

As I outlined in the Introduction, post-disaster reconstruction is known as fukkō machizukuri – town-making for the promotion of reconstruction – indicating at least a nominal commitment in the disaster regions to bottom-up processes without disturbing the overall topography of power.

This is to be achieved through a core element of fukkō machizukuri: consensus-building. The blueprints for consensus-building as pursued in Minamisanriku-chō and other parts of the disaster regions can be found in a document published jointly by the City and Housing Bureaus of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) in June 2012, Procedures for Fukkō Machizukuri in the Disaster Regions of the Great East Japan Earthquake: Guidance for Consensus-Building (hereafter Guidance for Consensus). Aimed specifically at local governments, this document states that:

Since collective relocation seeks to move victims from their previous place of residence, and the development of urban surface areas will transform the character of their assets, in both cases consensus-building [emphasis added] with affected victims is essential for realization [of these plans]. (Guidance for Consensus 2012:2)

Noting that there is no standard procedure for simultaneously creating consensus among ‘victims’ and drafting a “realistic” plan for reconstruction, the authors offer a “model process” for consensus-building that prioritizes “implementing reconstruction programs smoothly and

⁴ Claims of vertical encompassment are claims that “naturalize the authority of the state over “the local” by merging three analytically distinct ideas – (1) superior spatial scope; (2) supremacy in a hierarchy of power; and (3) superior generality of interest, knowledge, and moral purpose – into a single figure: the “up there” state” (Ferguson 2007, 385).
speedily.” (Guidance for Consensus 2012, 2). While the procedure, at least on paper, allows for the possibility of specific reconstruction policies being reassessed based on input from the target group, in practice this is not the case, not least because, as the authors note in the opening paragraph, “the majority of municipalities have already formulated [their] reconstruction plans” (Guidance for Consensus 2012, 2). In simple terms: everything important has already been decided.

The guidance outlines a basic distinction between what the authors call *fukkō jigyō* (‘reconstruction programs’), defined as “programs determined by laws such as…collective relocation and supplementary programs like land readjustment,” and *machizukuri keikaku* (‘*machizukuri* plans’), or “plans that aim for consensus-building through dialogue with victims.” It is this latter category of plans, they state, that should be developed through the process they outline. This sleight of hand has profound implications for how we should understand official consensus-building: its goal is not to encourage resident participation in deciding policy, but to realize their compliance through the public performance of consensus. In other words, the purpose of *machizukuri* plans is to ensure residents consent to the reconstruction plans that have already been decided. This imprimatur must be (or be seen as) collective: to “reflect the voices of residents,” in official parlance. An individual voice, however loud or discordant, does not matter, only the chorus of the group. But how should this be achieved?

In some areas, pre-existing resident’s groups (*gyōseiku, keiyaku-kai/kō, shinkōkai*, etc.) have functioned to “gather the voices” of their constituents (see, for example, how residents of Yoriki hamlet successfully moved their seawall in Chapter 2). A key recommendation for consensus-building as outlined in the MLIT guidance, however, is to have ‘victims’ establish new, independent *machizukuri* councils, or *machizukuri kyōgikai* (Guidance for Consensus 2012,
These are quasi-governmental organs, to be funded by the local administration (who can, if necessary, withdraw said funding) and run by a neutral, third party coordinator.\footnote{Funding for machizukuri councils is within the remit of the Program for General Promotion of Urban Resilience (Toshi Bōsai Sōgō Suishin Jigyō), provided by the Reconstruction Fund and controlled by municipalities (Guidance for Consensus 2012, 6-11).}

Minamisanriku’s Shizugawa Machizukuri Kyōgikai, for example, describes itself as:

…an association that put residents at the center, and asks them to discuss future machizukuri. With the Disaster Reconstruction Plan as its foundation, we will collect opinions on topics such as future housing and industry, make suggestions to the town administration, and promote the revival of local communities, assuming a central role in local resident’s activities (Minamisanriku-chō Fukkō Jigyō Suishinka 2012).

The Councils certainly gathered a lot of opinions. Whether their ‘suggestions’ had any weight, however, is another matter.

**The Machikyō**

In Minamisanriku, three machizukuri councils (hereafter referred to by the popular shorthand machikyō) were set up after the disasters: the Togura Machikyō, representing residents of the Southernmost district of the town; the Shizugawa Machikyō, for residents of the formerly populous center; and the Isatomae Machikyō, for the inhabitants of northernmost district of Utatsu’s former commercial area. The Togura Machikyō had disbanded by the time I arrived for fieldwork in August 2014. The Isatomae Machikyō was active, primarily discussing higher-ground relocation. This function had been taken over in Shizugawa by kentōkai, or ‘discussion groups,’ for future residents of the area’s three relocation sites. The Isatomae Machikyō and Shizugawa’s kentōkai are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. The Shizugawa Machikyō, established in August 2012, was by far the biggest citizen’s group in terms of potential membership (whether it had the largest actual attendance is questionable, as well shall see). Anybody who had lived or
was still living in the catchment area of Shizugawa Primary School was eligible, indeed encouraged, to join: “we request the participation of all households that meet the requirement,” states the flyer announcing its establishment, and “although participation is not compulsory, we hope that you will understand the impetus behind the Council, and request again everyone’s participation.” (Minamisanriku-chō Fukkō Jigyō Suishinka 2012)

I asked for permission from the organizers to sit in on Shizugawa Machikyō meetings, but was refused. Even well-known and influential outsiders active in reconstruction work were not given access (this was not the case in Utatsu’s Isatomae Machikyō, where I was allowed to observe meetings of the Masuzawa Section and accompany members on field trips; see Chapter 3 for details). However, I did interview several regular members, including some that served on its board of directors, and spoke about it informally with many residents during my yearlong stay in the town. The most succinct description of it I heard from one of the board members (yakuin): “It’s the largest organization, where people from the administration are meant to give talks, and then report back the opinions they hear (kiita iken wo agete ikeru), but we’re still groping for how to reach that level.”

The Machikyō opened with three subsections: The Relocation Section; the Park Section; and the Industry Section, which was composed mainly of people involved in commerce, according to one member that I’ll call Takahashi. Her initial motivation in joining the Machikyō was information:

I didn’t know what was happening, so thought I should go myself. There was no information going around, only lies. Any kind of information: the state of reconstruction, plans, etc., if you didn’t do something you wouldn’t find out anything. It’s the same now.
Takahashi joined the relocation section, where, “we would discuss together about how best to make [the housing], what kind of environment would be good, but I suppose you could say ideal versus reality.” The hopes of we ordinary people were, she said, without exception cast as “unacceptable, unacceptable, impossible, impossible” by the government side. “That’s all we heard for a year, among all that repetition the people who’d been taking part in the Section disappeared.” She continued, with a bitter laugh, “even if you go it’s useless, whatever you do is useless…in the beginning, there were about 10 people [in the section], maybe more,” but about half dropped out during the first year. That attendance was down at the Machikyō despite it having the largest nominal membership⁶ was confirmed by another resident, who works for a local non-profit: “Even though it has all those members, when you do a general meeting only 20 people come.”

Takahashi: The number of members has kept going down and down. There’s a big gap between what the [administration] and the common people are thinking, the administration sees the Machikyō as only for making a record. However much you raise your voice, it’s simply recorded and that’s it. I understood that the meeting’s purpose was to make an alibi…The town [administration] wants to decide things; [they] want to decide as they please, but if they do there will be complaints, so they made this structure where they can say “we’ve listened to everyone’s opinions.”

I heard similar things from other residents who, having attended early meetings, stopped going for the same reasons. One member, still participating in 2015, told me:

There’s only 30 minutes to an hour to talk…there’s no way you can have deep discussions. It’s a little, I wouldn’t say it’s pointless, but there were meetings where I felt like it was just for the town and the [consultants] to say, “we’ve done it.” I didn’t feel like it connected to any things in the future.

⁶ The population of Shizugawa was over 6186 the year it was launched (Minamisanriku-chō 2015).
One consultant justified the “impossible” responses by appealing to Japan’s strict legal frameworks for reconstruction.

[People] say ‘we want you to do this,’ and even if we understand the sentiment we can’t say ‘ok.’ I’m sure other countries are the same, but Japan in particular has these kinds of standards, a lot of standards and things like that, and they’re very strict in a certain sense, there’s no flexibility at all. So, there are lots of things that can’t be done in line with resident’s wishes.

He is correct that, within the scope of reconstruction’s political and legal framework, many things are unchangeable (or very hard to change). But part of the problem with ‘participation’ is that the Machikyō would only discuss things that had already been decided. Not only were options restricted within particular policy spaces (higher-ground relocation, for example, is heavily regulated, as I describe in Chapter 5), but residents also had no input into which policies were chosen in the first place. One local business leader that I’ll call Itō described this to me.

Itō: Things like ‘you can’t build in the inundation zone,’ ‘housing areas will be on higher ground,’ they’re only publicized when the plan has been finalized, when the policies have been decided, and they say, ‘this is what it’s going to be.’ So, you know there was this Machizukuri Council right, it’s still going now. I was asked to join and take part in the discussions, so I went. I thought we were surely going to discuss these kind of things: not being able to build at all in the inundation zone, higher-ground relocation. Then, when it came to the discussion, we were asked to talk together about what kind of community should relocate, things like that.

AL: The ‘soft’ side, right. The ‘hard’ side…

Itō: …was already decided.

There was accordingly a perception among several members that I spoke to (including some directors, who are more privy to its inner workings) that the Shizugawa Machikyō existed to rubber stamp decisions already made by the Yakuba, who decided the content in advance: “They call it a machizukuri association, but there’s an element of purely going along with the
administration’s will.” One director that I’ll call S narrated his discovery of the Council’s inner workings to me as follows.

S: In the beginning, I was a regular member of the Council. But I thought this, it’s just for making some evidence that “we listened to you guys”…I hated that, so I was thinking of quitting…This apparently was heard by one of the directors. This director, you know there’s a meeting ordinary people can come and see, right? Above that is a meeting of directors called the Yakuin-Kai. A yakuin is a director. That person gave me a call…and asked me “will you not quit, but become a director?”…and that’s how I uncovered the whole scam.

It’s a first-floor, second-floor structure. We [yakuin] are in the higher place, and we decide whether to “send down” information to those people. That’s what they call it, “send down”…Takahashi: They send it down but don’t bring it up, it’s all decided already!

All of this is by design, of course. In Guidance for Consensus, MLIT and the Land Agency include a sample constitution and funding guidelines for such machizukuri councils that promote a hierarchical organizational structure, with a Chair, directors responsible for the operation of the council, board members appointed from amongst the membership for a 2-year period (appointed by whom is not stated), and funding rules that allow for “the head of the city, should they conclude that the association’s program implementation is inappropriate,” to “issue a warning or corrective orders.” (Guidance for Consensus 2012, 11) Machikyō thus fit the broader pattern of machizukuri processes as wholly or partly sponsored by various levels of government (Sorensen and Funck 2007, 33). In other words, they articulate with and form another layer of vertical encompassment.

All these problems were exacerbated by a transformation in the Machikyō’s institutional structure in 2014. The previous three sections were dissolved. Discussions about higher-ground relocation were transferred to three new discussion groups (see Chapter 5). Resident’s input on economic recovery was to be sought through the Minamisanriku Chamber of Commerce and
Industry, whose members had, according to one Machikyō member, constituted the bulk of the Industry Section (as records of attendance are not available, I was not able to independently verify this). All remaining issues (including those related to the park) were to be debated in a new section titled “Section for Building a Bright Future” (Kagayaku Mirai-zukuri Bukai). One director described the resulting stagnation:

When there was a set theme, like with the Park Section, there were intense discussions…but now it’s…all sorts of topics, issues. How to use buses, things like that. They did that one for three meetings apparently, because although people wanted to talk about the park, it took time to receive permission from the national government. So, there were 3 months or so where the timing wasn’t right to officially ask people to talk about the park, and they had 3 meetings about the buses. Three meetings!

Not all citizens’ groups in the disaster regions functioned this way, of course. Miura Tomoyuki (cf. Chapter 2) told me that in similar groups in Kesennuma, residents could propose topics for discussion in a more bottom-up fashion. But the complaints I heard about the Shizugawa Machikyō are not unique. For example, I heard from someone involved with running a similar group in another part of the disaster regions that the local administration saw it as an “otetsudai,” or helper: a forum where they could introduce policies they want carried out, have them approved, and returned to them with the imprimatur of the people’s voice. This allowed the administration to avoid accusations of “doing what it pleases” while ensuring the ‘correct’ policy decisions were ultimately approved. The topics of discussion, like the Shizugawa Machikyō, “came down” from above (orite kuru), and sympathetic members of the group were prepped in advance on what to say during meetings. The Machikyō thus performs rather than enacts
participation; it might, generously, be put somewhere between “informing” and “consulting” on Arnstein’s famous ladder.\(^7\)

While *machizukuri* processes are typically sponsored by and incorporated into various levels of government, they are also descendants of the environmental and social movements of the late 20\(^{th}\) century (Sorensen and Funck 2007). Yes, they replicate features of previous, ‘top-down’ paradigms; and yes, for the most part they exist more to ‘achieve consensus’ by explaining than to empower citizens regarding policy-making. But their very existence – and the necessity of performing participation – also creates opportunities that did not previously exist. Performances can be wrested to other ends. If something passes through the Machikyō it gains a little more weight, bears a little more the imprimatur of “the people’s voice.” This voice, once recognized, is hard to completely ignore. Residents understand this, even those with no illusions about the nature of the organization’s structure, and very different ideas about the meaning of

---

\(^7\) Arnstein’s ladder lists 8 levels of participation, ranging from “manipulation” (level 1) to full “citizen control” (level 8). “Informing” and “consulting” are levels 3 and 4, and are grouped under the heading “tokenism.” They are defined as follows: “Informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation. However, too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information - from officials to citizens - with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in planning, people have little opportunity to influence the program designed "for their benefit.”...

Inviting citizens' opinions, like informing them, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation. But if consulting them is not combined with other modes of participation, this rung of the ladder is still a sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account. The most frequent methods used for consulting people are attitude surveys, neighborhood meetings, and public hearings.

When power holders restrict the input of citizens' ideas solely to this level, participation remains just a window-dressing ritual. People are primarily perceived as statistical abstractions, and participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire. What citizens achieve in all this activity is that they have "participated in participation." And what power holders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving "those people." (Arnstein 1969, 219)
participation. The question was how, in Kudō’s words to Kamome members, they could make their claims “as townspeople.”

Raising Voices

Given that disasters produce significant opportunities for development (cf Klein 2007), it is no surprise that much of the hand-wringing over the lack of meaningful participation in reconstruction has come from architects and planners. Arguments for greater citizen participation in *machizukuri* are often consequentialist. For example, consensus-building can help secure the “smooth implementation” of already-decided programs (Guidance for Consensus 2012, 2), or improve local environmental governance through ensuring buy-in and drawing on the knowledge of local residents (Sorensen and Funck 2007).

Residents, however, take a rather different view of how citizens should be involved in planning, and how their participation can or should relate to its ostensible goals (Krause 2008). Two of the most common criticisms of reconstruction plans in general are “the voices of residents are not reflected” (*jūmin no koe ga hanei sarenai*) and “the voices of residents are not listened to” (*jūmin no koe wo kiite kurenai*). The critiques of the Shizugawa Machikyō cited earlier can be considered more elaborate variations on these two basic themes. Such denunciations have a normative import: they suggest that the government *should* listen to residents, and their desires *should* be reflected in plans to reconstruct the disaster regions.

Part of the problem here is that the goals of planning are rarely derived from these desires in the first instance. I showed in Chapter 2, for example, how the government is pushing through the new seawall plans despite considerable opposition from many residents. As Harvey says, “the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social
ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire” (Harvey 2008, 23), a point entirely lost on the architects of reconstruction, whose position seems to be ‘if you build it, they will adapt.’ Harvey’s point is echoed in the critical scholarship on machizukuri. Sorenson and Funck argue that, “it is…essential that the people living in and using shared spaces are actively involved in defining the conceptions of livability that are relevant to that place and which have sufficient support to be possible (Sorensen and Funck 2007, 41).”

The last sentence is particularly important. As already mentioned, ‘consensus-building’ is a collective process: it is the will of ‘the people’ – not individual persons or small groups of people – that matters. Harvey states the Right to the City is “a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power” (Harvey 2008, 23) In the tsunami-hit regions, however, the necessity of any proposal being collective leads, as Kudō told me, to the easy dismissal of those that are not pitched as such: “We’re always asked, ‘Is this the collective will of residents?’”

However, ‘consensus’ is a controversial term in contemporary political theory. Advocates of participatory democracy, such as Jurgen Habermas (Habermas 1999), often argue that, through adequate processes of deliberation, it is possible to reach “forms of agreement that satisfy both rationality…and democratic legitimacy.” (Mouffe 2009, 83) Other theorists of contemporary liberal democracy – most notably Chantal Mouffe – see things rather differently. Democracy is defined, she argues, by antagonism; the clash between opposing forces that, whilst they shouldn’t be ‘enemies,’ cannot be expected to reach or maintain consensus. This latter perspective appears to closer to the reality of the disaster regions, where disaster and reconstruction policies have opened new cleavages within the population: between those who trust (or acquiesce to) the government and those who don’t; between those in favor of and those
against the seawalls; between those with children, terrified of the impact of radioactive particles on their bodies, and those without, who want to stay; between young and old, women and men, husbands and wives. As Miura Tomoyuki told me (see Chapter 2), issues like the seawalls easily create opposing camps, where people “are divided by support or opposition.” A journalist working for a major national newspaper, discussing how rural social structures constrain certain voices (those of the young, or female-bodied) while elevating others (“you can’t argue with the father, with the elders”), wondered aloud to me whether consensus is possible in any meaningful sense. Building ‘collective will’ is certainly very difficult. As Sorenson and Funck state,

Within even small areas there will always be multiple stakeholders, with crisscrossing relationships and interests, varied degrees of embeddedness and engagement in the area, diverse conceptions of the meanings of and aspirations for livability, and varied capacity to engage and influence outcomes…

…Citizen groups attempting to intervene in local policy processes are faced with existing practices and actors, among which land-owners, developers, the construction industry, and other place-based economic interests commonly have great economic and political power, and significant incentives to protect established practices and priorities. The municipal governments responsible for local urban planning and place management are often more responsive to such economic interests than to small citizen groups.

(Sorensen and Funck 2007, 26-41)

In Chapter 2, I described the efforts of Miura Tomoyuki, a resident of nearby Kesennuma City, to alter the plans for the proposed seawall in Ōya district. In an essay published in 2015, Miura recounts how, when he brought his petition to City Hall, the Mayor told him that, in fact, they also wanted to setback the seawall. His petition, the Mayor continued, would be useful for convincing other government organs to go along with the plan.

Miura: I realized that the City [Mayor]’s intentions were, in fact, the same as residents’. Suddenly, common ground had been carved out between residents, and between residents and the administration: a moment when we had partially achieved consensus (gōi keisei). We had found common ground, and made things easier to advance. If we local people [sic] had got involved in the debate over height, it would have created an
adversarial structure among residents, and probably opinion would have been divided with the administration. (Miura 2015, 95)

In this narrative, the process of consensus-building was mobilized to different ends than those of the national administration. For Miura and others like him, the goal was not simply to build acceptance of government plans. Nor does it involve the unrealistic assumption that any part can speak for the whole (there being no ‘whole’ in the first place). Rather, it appears a contingent tactic for achieving small yet meaningful alterations to reconstruction plans in the context of a requirement that, for people to have a voice, that voice must be ‘the People’s.’ It achieves this through seeking (1) moments when the intentions of diverse actors align and can be reinforced, and (2) avoiding further conflict by excluding from consideration those positions likely to create further division. Consensus here is not a means for achieving collective, rational decisions as Habermas imagines it (Mouffe 2009), nor does it relate to some putative Japanese cultural essence. It does not even matter whether ‘true’ consensus is achievable. Rather, it is a tactic that seeks to enlist diverse actors into a network that, in turn, channels a set of claims and desires through both the bureaucracy and the new organs of participation.

Political Tactics

Normative theories of participation (including machizukuri) are typically aspirational, not descriptive. But rights – whether to the city or anything else – are no more universal than ‘participation.’ Rather, rights politics emerge out of and in continuity with existing structures and histories of claim-making in any particular place (Subramanian 2009, 3). In the disaster regions, gyōseiku, keiyaku-kai, shinkōkai – long-standing, hierarchical local organizations – became organs, post-disaster, for resisting (or mitigating resistance to) official policy through organizing
their sub-populations and articulating their ‘voices’ within official channels (see Chapter 2).

Groups like Kamome, by contrast, emerged in response to and as a means of modulating new structures, like the machizukuri councils. They are tactical assemblages that seek to insinuate themselves into the space of official policy-making, “fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety”; they must “constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.”” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces other to them.” (De Certeau 2013, xix)

If the Shizugawa Machikyō promises participation while adding another layer of vertical encompassment, groups like Kamome seek to circumvent this by operating both inside and around this structure. Firstly, they try to overcome barriers to understanding by creating a space where members can figure out official plans and rehearse their responses to them in advance. Where possible, Kudō and other members try to get materials ahead of the Machikyō meetings:

> We learn how to run meetings, and we’re doing this to create a system where we can make the things people talked about our own ‘materials’ and bring them up at public meetings…When you sit on a cushion and talk you become able to express yourself more and more. Because we imitate people who are good at speaking we become good at speaking ourselves…I don’t call this ‘practice,’ but by holding meetings together it becomes practice for everyone in the end.

Such practice allows them to more effectively intervene in the public performance of the Machikyō. Kudō described it to me like this: “when you have a space like this you can practice, it becomes easier to speak up in a public forum.”

Secondly, they seek to influence what comes up for debate in the first place by operating behind the scenes. There is a continual game afoot in which residents seeking to influence reconstruction plans attempt to decipher, or uncover, the power relations imminent in a decision (who decides what, where, and when) under conditions of imperfect information. Recruiting into their orbit individuals of appropriate status or positioning within social networks, whether
vertical (such as *senpai-kōhai* relations), or horizontal, allows for the strategic exercise of influence upon institutions and their outcomes. One activist who successfully passed a citizen’s proposal to alter seawall plans in his district described it to me like this: you do the rounds, meeting with key figures and “sowing seeds.” At each stage of constructing the proposal, you meet with relevant parties at both the local, regional and, if possible, national levels. He even connected at one point with vice-ministers at the Department of Reconstruction. Once he has convinced the head and board-members of his local citizen’s organization (thus receiving the seal of ‘the people’), the plans will be presented to the Mayor of his city, who will, he hopes, advocate for it at the national level: “He told me he will cooperate on this plan. It’s OK if he pretends it’s his thing,” he concluded, “the things I can do in the shadows are increasing.”

Kamome was also a strategic node in many of these networks. Its members included people active in local nonprofits; on the board of directors of the Machikyō; on local government advisory committees; and even a local councilor. “Everybody here is a player,” a member once said to me. One of the most important connections was embodied by a figure I’ll call Y, who worked for one of the consultancies hired by the town council. Y would frequently attend Kamome meetings as both a representative of the government’s position, and a source of information on what was happening behind the scenes (I never asked, but can hypothesize that he also, in turn, brought information on the group’s deliberations back to the administration). In March 2015, at one of Kamome’s regular meetings, Y arrived with an update on how the plan to preserve Matsubara had been received by the Town and the Prefecture:

Y: Both keeping the ‘nature’ (the waterfront) and the ruin would be difficult. The Mayor has said that so long as it’s in a “dangerous state, the town can’t possibly” manage it, although he has been supportive of your activities. For the Prefecture, the problem is that the two parts [new and old seawall] would need to be near each other to count as one
unit, meaning that the Prefecture would need to put the seawall right next to the broken part. There’d been no harbor, but you could preserve the seawall. To date, the town has been planning on the assumption that the Prefecture would manage [the area].

Two months later, Y returned to the group with an update. Kudō, unhappy at both the town’s refusal to manage the space and the possible loss of the harbor – “the meaning of the waterfront will disappear,” she put it – had decided to activate another network. She went to visit a man I’ll call X, a major economic player in the town who sat on innumerable boards and committees. He was highly supportive of the project: like many older residents of Shizugawa, he remembered playing barefoot in the Matsubara sand as a child. He apparently went straight to the head of the town’s Urban Development Section, who allegedly said that personally, he’d like to move the seawall; later, he went to the Prefecture, and asked them to “make room for accommodating everyone’s wishes.” Y, who had arrived towards the end of Kudō’s explanation, confirmed this: “X is putting pressure on the town!” He is not the only nendai no kata, or “older person,” supporting them; other oyabun have put their weight behind it, Kudō said; “because they have experience of the place, they’re in accord with our aims. You could call it attachment.” The Prefecture still won’t manage the damaged waterfront, Y told us, so either the town had to be persuaded to do that, or some “new vocabulary” could be found: instead of ‘managing,’ ‘leaving as it’ (hottoite), perhaps with a fence around it. The options would be discussed between the town and the Prefecture, and then sent down to the Machikyō “in a ‘sort of decided’ state (kimatta yō na katachi de).” Plans were made by Kamome members to sound people out in advance of the meeting, including at other, similar groups. “We’ve made the final push,” Kudō said. Now all they could do was wait for the Prefecture’s decision.

---

8 Meaning “the father,” typically used for the leader of a Yakuza organization. In this context, it refers to the powerful, presumably male elders of the town.
In mid-September 2015, the members of Kamome met on the second floor of the shrine. Our numbers had been swelled that day by observers: two PhD students writing an article for a periodical by the Japanese Institute of Landscape Architecture, two architecture students from Miyagi University, a team of visiting architecture students from MIT and, later in the evening, some anti-seawall activists. It seems word of the group’s success (or, to be more precise, probable success) had spread. The heat that evening was intense. Outside, the trees were full of the melancholy trills of late-evening cicadas.

Kudō gave the observers a brief history of their drive to preserve Matsubara. A final decision had yet to be reached on the seawall, but things were looking promising. The plans had come down to the Machikyō’s second floor, but were being held there until an underwater survey to assess the plan’s viability had been completed. After that, the setback proposals should come down to the Machikyō, where how to use the preserved space could be debated. If they made it that far, their success was surely guaranteed. One of the visiting seawall activists grew visibly excited: “I think they should keep it whatever the results of the survey!” he exclaimed, “You have a place to debate things.” “Because we have this space,” Kudō agreed, “we can practice, it becomes easier to speak in official spaces.”

After the meeting wrapped up, we all split into small groups to chat and exchange business cards with the newcomers before dispersing into the hot summer night. I stood in the corner with some of the visitors, who continued to marvel among themselves about the group and its achievements. One was particularly effusive, repeating again and again his surprise that they managed to preserve part of the waterfront. A regular Kamome member, with a bitter smile,
brought his thumb and forefinger close together; for all that effort, he said, they had only achieved “a tiny bit.”

Early the following month, I attended my last Kamome event: a party to celebrate the end of the summer festivities. The group had hired a restaurant in the Kamiwarizaki camping ground at the far Southern end of the Town. Although most people were on soft drinks, the party was uproarious. The windows were open wide, and occasionally large, black insects would crash into lights or bowls of food, sending murmurs of consternation through the group. After we had eaten, Kudō told us about a recent meeting of the committee to re-design the Town’s 10-year Master Plan. In the section meetings, they had proposed the slogan discussed earlier by Kamome, “forest, village, ocean: a town surrounded by life” (*mori sato umi, inochi wo meguru machi*) as an alternative to the unpopular “just right countryside” (*chōdo ii inaka*). It will now go up, she said, to the commission, on which the powerful father of one Kamome member sits, for approval. She gave him a sidelong glance as she explained this; his face creased in the smile of one who already knows what is required of him.
Chapter 4
Ruined Signs

Figure 4-1. The Chōsha on March 11, 2015. Photo by author

Introduction

When the tsunami washed over the town on March 11, it swallowed boats, homes and over 20,000 people. The receding waves left landscapes of debris – *gareki* – in which the material fabric of the town (boats, buildings, fishing ropes) became matter out of place: a jumbled archive of objects unmoored from their normal bearings, through which people searched feverishly for the remains of their relatives. The clearing of the *gareki* revealed a landscape stripped bare. It
also, however, left new objects, or rather old ones refigured: *shinsai no ikō*, the material remains of the disaster itself.

On the fourth anniversary of the tsunami, I left my apartment south of central Shizugawa and headed for the most famous of these sites. In the Town’s former administrative and commercial center, now a barren plain, sits the Disaster Management Center (Bōsai Taisaku Chōsha, hereafter ‘Chōsha’): one of the only buildings in that area to survive the tsunami, albeit as a carcass (Figure 4-1). On this day of remembrance, traffic around the Chōsha was even busier than normal. The plaza in front of it was crowded with TV crews and their detritus. Reporters lined up to do their pieces to camera, the steel-girdered symbol behind them, while photographers hunted for images of the bereaved who, arriving in ones and twos every few minutes, clasped their hands and bowed their heads before its monumentality. At 2.46pm – the time when the ground trembled – a voice over the town’s loudspeaker system announced a minute’s silence; a long, high-pitched siren pierced, and all around the coastline people gathered at the water’s edge brought their hands together in silent prayer.

After the disaster, as local authorities across the tsunami-hit regions seek to reconstruct their municipalities in new forms, what to do with ruins like the Chōsha is a matter of significant controversy. Many towns (including Minamisanriku) have held public consultations on their future, making ruination one of the few aspects of post-disaster reconstruction open to democratic processes. In the Chōsha’s case, the town is riven between those wanting to preserve it and those who would see it torn down out of concern about the financial burden and respect for relatives of the dead. This conflict was at its peak during my fieldwork (2014-2015), when momentum shifted dramatically towards the preservationists.
In this chapter, I analyze the Chōsha as a case study of the semiotics of ruination, or how people attempt to define and stabilize the meanings of the objects and spaces transformed or created by disaster. During my 11-month residence in central Minamisanriku, I discussed the Chōsha with many residents and observed several key events related to it, including the Town Council’s vote on its future. My argument draws on both these experiences and formal interviews with residents. The main source materials, however, are 592 handwritten letters accepted by the local government’s public consultation on its future (obtained through a freedom of information request). I reviewed and coded each letter using *in vivo* codes. I then clustered these codes into categories based on substantive similarities to reveal key themes and associations. Although I occasionally report numbers for context, due to the open nature of the consultation question, partial (and, on occasion, difficult to read) responses and redaction of identifying information, these should be seen as suggestive rather than demonstrative of trends within the population. Letters referenced are designated “PC” followed by submission number.

The Chōsha, and other *ikō*, demonstrate how stabilizing the relations between meaning, matter and space is an important component of both collective memory formation and post-disaster reconstruction (cf. French 2012). They also suggest that these processes are intimately related. Ryō Morimoto, building on the arguments of Marshall Sahlins (Sahlins 1999) and Richard Terdiman (Terdiman 1993), argues that post-disaster efforts to re-establish continuity in the face of rupture revolve around two, often conflicting, modes of semiosis: culture, which seeks to modify and translate memories of the event into emblems that represent and produce a collectivity (French 2012); and trauma, which involves the internalized replication of highly personalized recollections. While I question the outward-inward dichotomy – Hutchinson, for example, shows that trauma is often generative of new political communities, as is also the case
in Japan’s disaster regions (Hutchison 2016) – the debate over the Chōsha models a similar
distinction, with the relatives of the dead asserting an un-representable traumatic experience
against the desire, at different scales, to incorporate the memory of disaster into a future-oriented
discourse and practice of bōsai, or disaster prevention. For ruins of the tsunami, both demolition
and preservation are techniques of memory, albeit ones that seek, in reworking the materiality of
the past, to realize very different futures. Both positions find their zero point in the bare, ragged
matter of the ruin itself.

**Theorizing Ruination**

The last 15 years has seen an intensification of interest in 20th century ruins in the humanities and
social sciences to the extent that “We seem to be in the midst of a contemporary Ruinenlust.”¹
(DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 465) In anthropology, two categories of ‘ruin’ in particular are
attracting attention: ruins of empire and ruins of modernity, “those shells of abandoned factories,
burned-out tenements, boarded-up schools, weedy lots, piles of concrete rubble, and faded
commercial districts” (Dawdy 2010, 762) seen as its inevitable byproducts.² Much of this work,
in line with a cross-disciplinary resurgence of interest in his ruin concept, draws inspiration from
the writings of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin developed his theory of ruins in opposition to what
Naomi Stead calls the “totalizing aims” of classical symbolism, a form of aesthetics that “seeks
to transcend time and history, thereby displacing the anguish of life with images of stabilized
harmony and eternal perfection.” (Koepnick, cited in Stead 2003, 54-55) For Benjamin, the

---

¹ ‘Ruin lust’, or deriving pleasure from ruins.

² While the ruins generated by disasters – which have some overlap with these categories – have also
been studied in the new millennium, they tend not to be treated within the same theoretical frame (an
obvious exception would be Dawdy’s appeal to anthropologists to view disasters and their ruins through
the lens of “what Benjamin called an object’s afterlife”) (Dawdy 2010, 773).
damage wrought by time on objects served, paradoxically, to reveal truths about them by undermining this wholeness and demythifying them; revealing, among other things, both their transience and specificity (Stead 2003).

Benjamin’s insistence that the ruined form reveals some truth — “the hope and hubris of futures that never came to pass” — resonates with scholarship critical of contemporary economic and political orders, capitalist or otherwise. The result has been a startling array of ruin studies across disciplines (for a recent overview, see DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). If ruins have become good to think with, however, attempts to theorize ‘The Ruin’ in a nominal sense are now less popular; DeSilvey and Edensor go so far as to call them “futile.” (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 474) Gordillo, in his monograph on ruination in the Argentine Chaco, goes further, taking issue with the concept of ‘ruin’ itself. If, for Benjamin, the ruined form serves to undermine the object’s pre-ruin symbolism, for Gordillo it is rubble — that unmarked, “inferior, lesser type of matter” — that reveals ruins themselves as a particular kind of modern, elite fetish (2014:6). By contrast, for his interlocutors who live with and among rubble, the elite discourse on ‘ruins’ is hardly salient: “my questions about ruinas (‘ruins’) usually encountered blank stares…I had to rephrase my question and ask again, this time about “old walls” or “piles of old bricks.”” (Gordillo 2014:6) The trouble with the elite ruin fetish, he argues, is its transformation of the “sensory, multifaceted texture of places” into a particular kind of homogenous abstraction divorced from local discourse and usage (Gordillo 2014:8). While for Gordillo the mismatch is between ‘elite’ and ‘subaltern’ understandings, other sites suggest different cleavages. Low (2004) and Sturken’s (2004) work on Ground Zero in New York, for example, demonstrates a tension between ‘local’ and ‘extra-local’ scales and actors: while residents of Manhattan are not
‘subaltern,’ they certainly lack political power, and whatever significance Ground Zero holds for them is of little relevance to those tasked with deciding its future.

If there is no Platonic ‘ruin,’ however, it does not however follow that attempts to theorize ruination are similarly misguided. ‘Ruin’ is, in Stoler’s words, both a “claim about the state of a thing and a process affecting it”; both a noun and a verb (Stoler 2008, 195). The latter refers to an active process that can occur to a variety of material substrata. This process can be further divided according to speed (Stoler 2008; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; Lucas 2013). By analogy with Rob Nixon’s theory of ‘slow’ violence – those “calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans” (Nixon 2011, 6) – we can talk of slow ruination, the processes of entropic decay to which all untended objects are subject. Fast ruination, by contrast, refers to the swift dissolution effected explosively and spectacularly by some external force; if slow ruination may correlate with a sense of crisis, the violence of fast ruination is a crisis in itself. Natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis fit the latter category, although their consequences may also be slow (as with the ongoing leakage of nuclear material from Fukushima Daiichi). Ikō, like other products of fast ruination, are those things that weathered the wave and the quake and became conceptually and discursively separated from the mass of the rubble they produced.

It is not only the material that was changed, however. While studying ruins may remind us that “our world is very much material” (Lucas 2013, 10), ruination is also a semiotic process involving transformations in the relations between material, meaning, and space. To date, there have been several productive attempts to bridge the material-semiotic divide, some of which have become influential in the humanities and humanistic social sciences (cf. Akrich and Latour 1992; Escobar 1996; Haraway 1991; Latour 1993; Law 2009; Keane 2003). However, if it is true
that “social analysts may no longer feel themselves forced to choose between ‘symbolic’ and ‘materialist’ approaches,” as Webb Keane claims, it is also true that some version of the opposition persists (Keane 2003, 409). Within sociocultural anthropology, for example, a sub-disciplinary divide continues to channel those working on ‘material culture’ and ‘linguistic anthropology’ down different tracks. We still often find ourselves demanded to choose ideas or things, despite the fact that signs have a material substrate: it is the “physical durability” of objects and landscapes that permit them “to carry meaning into the future.” (Foote, cited in French 2012, 341)

Bridging this divide requires, as Keane argues, that we pay attention to the ‘logical causal’ relations between material things and the meanings they are made to carry without reducing the things themselves to simply vehicles or, conversely, determinants of those meanings (Keane 1997; Keane 2003; Lenoir 1994). However, we must also recognize that these things always exist in and compose space. Massey contends that at least since the time of Bergson, space has been viewed by social theorists as, in Foucault’s words, “the dead, the fixed” (Massey 2005): an association between spatialization and immobility contrasting with the dynamism of history. Theorizing ruination as a material-semiotic process brings time back into anthropological and sociological theories of space by showing what happens to meaning when matter itself is on the move. All objects, once the act of upkeep has been deliberately or by force of circumstance abandoned, are subject to ruination. This degradation, fast or slow, produces it as a vehicle of meaning and, importantly, object of contestation within the ordering and re-ordering of social space; space that is sometimes reconfigured slowly, bit-by-bit, and other times dramatically and instantly altered, as when the tsunami swept over central Shizugawa, eviscerating the Chōsha and taking the lives of those who sought shelter in it.
At the Center of Disaster

The most detailed reckoning of what happened to the building is that of Mayor Satō Jin in his autobiography, *3 Years as Mayor of Minamisanriku* (Satō 2014). His narrative begins on the 2nd floor of the local administration’s headquarters at the end of the Town Council’s monthly meeting, with some 20 administrators and 26 councilors in attendance:

> It happened literally as the discussion was turning to ‘how to take safe and secure town planning to the next level…’, just past 2.46pm. An explosive shock shook the headquarters violently. “It’s an earthquake!” (Satō 2014, 24-25)

After 40 or 50 seconds of shaking, the Mayor crawled out from under the meeting room table and made his way to his office where, alone amongst the fallen shelves and scattered books, the cabinet containing his emergency clothing was still standing. After quickly changing, he hurried over to the Crisis Management Office, on the 2nd floor of the adjacent Chōsha. In line with established disaster procedure, all staff from the General Affairs Division, Planning Division, Crisis Management Division and other management-level staff present in the headquarters had gathered there, along with many residents. In the broadcasting booth in the corner of the Crisis Management Office, two staff – one of them a young woman called Endō Miki – were taking turns to broadcast over the Town’s loudspeaker system, “A large tsunami is coming. Please evacuate to higher ground.”

On arriving, the Mayor first checked the available information on the earthquake. The magnitude was supposedly 7.9 (this proved a dramatic underestimate), with the expected height of the tsunami 6 meters: “If everything went according to the Meteorological Agency’s announcement, I figured the tsunami should be within the range that could be stopped by the seawall.” (Satō 2014, 27-30)
It was when wreckage began to flow down the Hachiman River at the side of the Chōsha that he realized the tsunami had breached the floodgate and shouting (he claims) to all the staff to “climb to the roof!” ascended to the top of the building. From the direction of the sea, a cloud of yellow dust was rising as building after building broke; with a loud crumpling sound the adjacent headquarters of the local government broke apart and crashed into the side of the Chōsha, the rising water cascading over the latter’s roof:

At first, I was standing on the side closest to the sea, watching the headquarters fold and break. But the waves suddenly rose with a ferocious momentum, hurling me bodily into the emergency staircase.
I do not remember much of the time I was drowning in the tsunami. But, I survived.
(…) 8 of us, including the Deputy Mayor, Endō Kenji, had been thrown into the emergency staircase.
Those left on the roof, including two staff that had earlier climbed the antenna, numbered only 10. (Satō 2014, 36)

43 people died that day in the Chōsha. Endō Miki was not among the ten left standing on the roof; residents later told how, as they fled to higher ground, they had heard her continuing to broadcast warnings until the waves broke over the building. As this powerful story of sacrifice captured the local and national media, in Minamisanriku debate arose almost immediately about whether to preserve or destroy what remained of the structure. The Mayor nailed his colors to the mast early: in an interview for Nikkan Spa!, he stated that, “Speaking personally, I’d like to preserve the Chōsha as a monument so that we do not forget this disaster,” though he also noted that “From the perspective of the relatives of the deceased, I’m sure some ‘don’t want to look at it,’ or find ‘[looking at it] stirs painful memories.’” (Nikkan Spa! 2011) In September of 2012 three options were presented to the town council for consideration: early disassembly, preservation or postponement of the decision, with ‘early disassembly’ subsequently approved and recommended to the Mayor. Despite having signaled his support for preservation, he
announced in September of the following year that, although it was a “bitter decision,” the Chōsha would be disassembled (notably, he made no mention of ‘the feelings of relatives of the deceased’ in doing so, citing instead the initial and long term costs of maintaining it) (Satō 2014, 224). In November of that year, he applied to Miyagi Prefecture for disassembly as part of its wreckage clearance program; the same program that had already been used to dismantle 36 ruined facilities in the town, including what remained of the Shizugawa Public Hospital. Its fate appeared to be settled.

However, despite having previously stated that no financial support would be available for preserving ruined structures, opinion at the national and prefectural level appeared to be shifting. On the 28th of October 2013, during a meeting with reporters, the Governor of Miyagi Prefecture, Murai Yoshihiro, stated that “regarding the ruins left by the tsunami (…) we would like to set up an expert committee to look at them from a wider perspective.” (Satō 2014, 224) Shortly after, on the 15th of November, the Ministry of Reconstruction announced that funding would be provided for the initial costs of preserving one site in each municipality. One week later, at a meeting of local government heads on the 22nd of November, Governor Murai confirmed the establishment of the Expert Committee (Satō 2014), with local authorities putting up sites for consideration. The question of how they choose these brings us to an even more fundamental problem: how and why did some objects become ‘debris’ and some ‘relics’?

The Remains of the Tsunami

The literal meaning of shinsai no ikō is relics, or remains, of the 3.11 disasters themselves: in the words of the Mayor of Minamisanriku, “buildings and topographies [chikei] left behind in the disaster areas.” (Satō 2014, 222) Not all such remnants became recast as ikō, whether sites of
death or deliverance. As Marita Sturken notes, “places of violence and loss of life do not automatically produce feelings of sacredness.” (Sturken 2004, 315) Why, among all the manifold sites of death in the town, the Chōsha has been singled out as particularly symbolic is a question repeatedly put by opponents of its preservation. In the words of Chiba Miyoko, Deputy President of the group Relatives of the Dead for Disassembly (Kaitai wo Nozomu Izoku no Kai), “Although the Shizugawa Public Hospital and the old people’s home had more victims, they were torn down immediately, with no voices raised in objection. It’s strange that they only want to keep the Chōsha.” (Kahoku Shimpō 2015a)

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami clearing the debris was given top priority in order to expedite restoration and reconstruction. Miyagi Prefecture’s commitment to completing the clear-up within three years saw most ruined buildings, including the hospital, disassembled before any debate could occur. The Ministry of Reconstruction’s announcement of limited financial support, however, marked a move towards preservation of ruined structures as part of “the shifting of reconstruction into a new stage” (Fukkō-chō 2013). The magnetic objects preserved as ikō are, in the first instance, those that did not become debris, mainly through remaining tethered more-or-less whole to their original location (as with the Chōsha), though sometimes also through the monumental incongruousness of their transplantation. In enduring through the debris’ stripping away, these remnants or, in fewer cases, transplants became focal points in the now denuded and empty landscapes.

Such endurance is not in itself sufficient, however, as Chiba Miyoko’s words remind us. These structures must be separated from mere ruined objects (and debris) by transforming them

---

3 For example, the No. 18 Kyōtoku-maru, a 60-meter fishing boat washed inland in the city of Kesennuma.
discursively into ِikō (cf. Gordillo 2014). The current candidates for preservation share traits not only with structures already disposed of, like the hospital, but with innumerable small, often personal sites across the affected regions: what Theodore Bestor describes as “focal points for simple, spontaneous, anonymous remembrance.” (Bestor 2013, 777) Sometimes these become visible only on the anniversary of the disasters, when people lay flowers or light incense at spots where people died. Others are marked by tangible, if impermanent, signs, such as a makeshift Buddhist altar, or good luck amulets placed along a wall. Often the sites are invisible to unrelated parties: one family I spent time with in Kesennuma commemorated their loss by planting sunflowers near their former home, which they often returned to water. The ruined foundations
of such homes (Figure 4-2) were regular sites of pilgrimage for many of their former occupants, and for the outsider such stumps continue, as Kimura Takurō of the Expert Committee describes, “to have impact because they make you understand that a house used to be there.” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2013, 3) The disaster regions are full of such remains, although many have already disappeared with the clearing of the gareki and commencement of reconstruction.

Within this topography of visible and invisible, personal and collective, large and small sites of remembrance, candidates for official preservation as ikō share several qualities distinguishing them from the smaller, more personal sites. Most importantly, they are publically-owned. The minutes of the Expert Committee shows that members initially believed they could propose sites not submitted to them by local municipalities, and accordingly two privately-owned buildings were put forward: The Takano Kaikan in Minamisanriku and Yuriage Middle School in Natori City. However, due to the necessity for cash-strapped municipalities to use Ministry of Reconstruction funding a majority of members subsequently backed limiting discussion to the publically-owned properties already proposed by municipalities. Although several members stressed that falling outside the committee’s scope did not mean an object could not be defined as an ikō, in practice the lack of government support, coupled with the exigencies of reconstruction plans, have made this largely the case. Apart from the Takano Kaikan, all privately owned properties discussed by the committee have since been demolished.

In their final report, the committee put forward a tripartite definition of ikō: buildings, structures and geographical features that show traces of the tsunami; things that would be of use for both the “repose of souls” (chinkon) and future-oriented efforts at preventing and reducing

---

4 The Ministry of Reconstruction announced in 2013 that each municipality in the disaster areas would receive funding to cover the initial costs (not exceeding the cost of demolition) of preserving one site, including temporary preservation. (Fukkō-chō 2013)
disasters; finally, things conserved “on site as they are.” The import of such ikō, they argue, is
also three-fold: firstly, in places that have acquired religious connotation and/or saw significant
death, the aforementioned “repose of souls;” secondly, the “transmission of disaster culture”; and
finally, the creation of “a message that transcends the area and can be inherited by future
generations.” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 3) Shinsai no ikō, in marking a
class of objects uniquely produced by the disasters of 3.11, is not so purified an abstraction as the
fetishized ruin idea Gordillo describes (Gordillo 2014, 8). Nonetheless, the category must
“transcend the framework of a single municipality” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi
2013, 1), amalgamating the characteristics of its constituents in the service of a purported greater
good.

However, in the words of committee member and mayor of Sendai Okuyama Emiko “Ikō
all have specific circumstances; they are not ‘general’ but ‘specific’ things.” (Miyagi-Ken
Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2014, 2) The possible meanings of each building, or object, derive
from a complex interplay of variables: the material characteristics of the structure itself, its
patterns of use, the demographics of those who used it, protocols to be followed in the event of
disaster, and how the tsunami was affected by the surrounding topography, to suggest but a few.
How ikō such as the Chōsha came to be used and understood by both residents and extra-local
visitors is highly variable, dependent not least on whether people died there (and who they were).

The committee released its report in January of 2015. Among the 9 sites that were
evaluated,5 the Chōsha alone received the highest rating: “It is the most well-known

5 The other sites were Arahama Elementary School (Sendai), Kadonowaki Elementary School
(Ishinomaki), Kōyō High School (Kesennuma), JR Senseki Line Nobiru Station Platform (Higashi-
Matsushima), Nobiru Elementary School (Higashi-Matsushima), Hamaichi Elementary School (Higashi-
Matsushima), Nakahama Elementary School (Yamamoto-chō), and the former Onnagawa police box
(Onnagawa). (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015)
internationally (...) and with no less an impact than the Genbaku Dome, it can deliver a powerful message.” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 25) On the 28th of that month, Governor Murai visited Minamisanriku to introduce these results and propose that, since more time was needed to debate whether or not to preserve it, the Chōsha should be placed under prefectural control until March 10, 2031 (20 years from the date of the tsunami), with maintenance costs covered by the Prefecture, during which time the town could make its decision. This would involve an explicit reversal of the Town’s previous decision to demolish the structure, one that had been welcomed by some members of a particular demographic: relatives of those who died there.

**Affective Sites**

Not all ikō were sites of death like the Chōsha. Those that were, however, are often seen as harboring some immaterial residue of the deceased. As one young woman whose father died there put it to a reporter, “When I come to the Chōsha, I feel like I’m meeting my father.” (Kahoku Shimpō 2015b) 29% of submissions to the public consultation in favor of demolition cited the need pacify or liberate the dead from the site by demolishing the structure, performing a kuyō (memorial service) and/or erecting a memorial stone. As one said, “we cannot leave the spirits of those who passed away in that place.” (PC 67)

It is unclear how many relatives of the dead are in favor of disassembly: any information pertaining to the identity of the author and their status was redacted from the public consultation documents I obtained. A local news article about the first meeting of the small pressure group

---

6 The Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, centerpiece of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial.

7 The minutes of the expert committee show that this plan was inspired by the British system, which they claim requires a 30-year waiting period.
Relatives of the Deceased for Disassembly (Kaitai wo Nozomu Izoku Kai) in November 2014 listed 15 members (Kahoku Shimpō 2014). Another from December 2015 noted that “many members of the group are elderly,” raising the hypothesis that opinion may be divided along generational lines (Kahoku Shimpō 2014). Irrespective of the numbers involved, what is clear is that the debate over the Chōsha has, from the outset, been shaped by the claim that the relatives of those who died there suffer when they see it (“miru no ga tsurai”). Nearly a third of respondents (31%) to the consultation who said they find the Chōsha painful to look at described it as provoking memories: of the disaster, of the people they lost, and of the ruined, freezing landscape that greeted them after the tsunami:

The people who died appear before my eyes (PC 514).

The landscape of the disaster comes into my mind (PC 505).

When I see it, my chest feels like it will split (PC 413).

In these accounts, the Chōsha is a trigger embedded into the landscape. The only appropriate way to show consideration for this suffering, demolitionists argue, is to immediately disassemble the structure. Nearly a quarter of letters in favor of demolition listed concern for relatives as a motivation, second only to the assertion that, since the town had already committed once to demolishing it, there was nothing to debate in the first place.

Those who wish to preserve the Chōsha are thus struggling against the need to offer propitiation for both the souls of the deceased and the feelings of those they left behind; “feelings that,” as deputy leader of the pro-demolition group Chiba Miyoko puts it, “we cannot escape from” (Kahoku Shimpō 2015a). The debate over the Chōsha is an example of how victimhood, as Jeffery and Candea argue, “can be a prime way of suspending or attempting to suspend the
political through an appeal to something non-agentive and “beyond” or “before” politics.”

(Jeffery and Candea 2006, 289) In the words of Onodera Hiroshi, local dignitary and former head of the citizen’s group Committee for Building a Splendid Utatsu (Subarashii Utatsu wo Tsukuru Kyōgikai): “the relatives of the dead are suffering. The sadness of losing your family cannot be healed in twenty years. They stand before the stage where to preserve the Chōsha or not is debated. [Emphasis added] The Mayor, and the Town authority, must face them.” (Kahoku Shimpō 2015a) This is why ikō – unlike other aspects of hard reconstruction – cannot be treated by the authorities as purely technocratic matters (much as they would like to); the Chōsha is a vessel, or prison, of the dead and a trigger for their memory.

At the same time as it indexes the dead and the disaster, for some the Chōsha also triggers memories of the town as it was. A small number of demolitionists (5%) say they want a new town; a far larger minority (14%) oppose preservation because it…

…is getting in the way of reconstruction. Right now, the town is buzzing about the reconstruction (fukkō) of a new town. Isn’t the Mayor going on about reconstruction? (…) If just the Disaster Center is left as it is ‘reconstruction’ will be meaningless. I want to see the new, changed streets. (PC 60)

In containing memory (Clark 2015), space can hold back progress when the erasure necessary for the emergence of the new is prevented. This recalls Paul Connerton’s argument that some forms of forgetting may prove helpful, or even necessary, in the establishment of new forms of identity: “Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by tacitly shared silences.” (Connerton 2008, 63) Where memory is encoded in space, these silences are established through erasure. Disagreements about memory revolve around a common understanding that the Chōsha is a remnant and signifier of the vanished past, and preservation
involves maintaining, within the new town, the memory of this past and its violent disintegration.
For the izoku in favor of demolition and their supporters, this causes only suffering (almost none of them recognized it as having educational value, and 11% explicitly denied it). The debate over the Chōsha thus captures and channels a broader disjunction between two ways of coping with the proliferation of absences (and memory traces) in the current, liminal state of the Town: firstly, to scrub clean and rebuild, and secondly to preserve, in however mangled a form, ruins from the town ‘as it was’; objects that, in their ruination, offer the potential to experience both memory and bōsai (and memory as bōsai).

**Performing Abjection**

On June 15, 2015, the town council’s Special Committee on Great East Japan Earthquake Policy convened to vote on a motion submitted in support of the prefectural plan to take control of the Chōsha until 2031. The motion was introduced by 4 councilors headed by Gōtō Shintarō, the youngest official by a considerable margin (34, compared to an average age of 61). His introductory speech, which built to a tense, emotional crescendo, is worth quoting at length:

> Since the disasters, the environment surrounding the Disaster Management Center has been continually changing (…) as the situation changes, so do people’s minds. As time goes on the minds of izoku and residents will continue to change (…). The most important thing is not to discuss what to preserve or where to preserve, but to give residents the choice (…), to have as many residents as possible participate and make the choice as the entire town.

> I understand that no small number of izoku and residents desire disassembly (…), I have no desire to ignore the feelings of the izoku. It is possible that at the end of our deliberations we decide to disassemble it. Right now, the TV cameras and the microphones are facing the izoku of those who died in the Chōsha (…), is it not enough? (…) Shouldn’t we stop placing all the burden on the izoku, and by making this the problem of the whole town share the burden that they carry?...
Later, during the debating period, in a voice nearly breaking with anger, he delivered an even more forceful statement of this position: “[the Chōsha] is not the exclusive property of the izoku.” Although several councilors initially spoke against it, and the head of the committee appeared unwilling to call the actual vote, at the last the motion was carried unanimously.

Statements like the above, echoed in the speeches of other councilors and quotes circulating in the media, assert simultaneously bureaucratic and democratic logics. While they do not claim that the izoku (or some of the izoku) are not suffering, they argue against feelings, including those associated with suffering, as being relevant criteria (“we need to consider things calmly”) and assert that the experience of loss should not grant one a higher stake in the decision than membership in the collectivity called ‘the town.’ As performances they seek, in opposition to the primacy claimed by suffering, to assert the need for a majoritarian politics (Jeffery and Candea 2006). Suffering, in other words, is not in itself an argument.

What, then, are relevant criteria? For supporters of preservation, the answer lies in the truth that its gutted carcass supposedly reveals: the destructive power of the tsunami. For a tiny minority of respondents, the Chōsha’s ruin does reveal some “truth,” in Benjamin’s sense: the folly of siting a disaster prevention center in the lowlands of a tsunami-prone region. For many more, however, ruination makes a new truth, in and of the object on which it acts. This truth is the size, power and horror of the tsunami itself.

A large majority of submissions (65%) to the public consultation in favor of preservation cite educational concerns, such as passing on knowledge of the tsunami to future generations of residents (“kōsei ni tsutaeru”) that, not having experienced it first-hand, would be ignorant of its power, or incapable of visualizing it. At the center of this argument lies the ragged materiality of the structure and the impact of gazing upon its ruined visage. The Expert Committee on Disaster
Ruins, for example, writes in its final report that “the form [of the Chōsha], with all internal and external materials washed away, and only a carcass of steel girders remaining, demonstrates forcefully the destructive power of the tsunami.” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 24) This materiality, supposedly, transcends language; or, to be more precise, proffers a concrete facticity that language alone does not. As councilor Muraoka Kenichi put it during the Town Council debate on its future, “people’s words can be used to mislead, but the Chōsha that stands there speak no lies.”

In Peircean terms, to preserve the structure is to conserve a decaying index,\(^8\) where decay itself has an indexical quality: the height of the building is the height of the water, and the stripped and scarred girders track its destructive force. It is this indexicality that enables, in Clark’s words, ikō to “perform their abjection in the service of memory culture” by working “affectively to invoke and evoke the environment, milieu or situation within which trauma was allowed to occur by deploying the visible residue of that trauma on the landscape.” (Clark 2015, 84) But what, in itself, is the value of this? What “is the value of siting the horror exactly where we are standing?” (Clark 2015, 87) If demolition serves to open space for renewal through removing the locus of trauma, preservation is also seen as a technique of collective memory; a way of mitigating a perceived “thinning of the conditions of calamity,” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2013, 2) where things that could preserve the memory of the tsunami are in the process of disappearing. 22% of submissions to the public consultation in favor of preservation make cited memory-related concerns, often some variant of ‘if we tear it down, we will forget.’

For example,

---

\(^8\) In Peircean semiotics, an index is a sign that “interrelates with its semiotic object through some actual or physical or imagined causal connection.” (Cobley 2001, 31)
To ensure that when there is damage like this again ‘there are zero victims from Minamisanriku’, I absolutely want [the Chōsha] to be preserved. Do those who desire disassembly want to forget everything? If you can’t see the Chōsha, will you be able to forget? I never want to forget (PC 13).

Remembering also has other kinds of value. For some, erasure represents an irrevocable sundering from the past, in terms of both the town and the people that inhabited it:

[On visiting the site] I fell into depression and a sense of loss at the thought that ‘everything will disappear’, as if my friends and senpai that fell victim there will be erased. (PC 66)

If this is removed from Minamisanriku, I want to scream ‘what will be left’? (PC 7)

While only a handful of submissions also explicitly mention tourism, some 15% of comments in favor of preservation allude to the economic impact of preservation. As one local guide told me, “We already have a sense that that we can preserve our livelihoods due to people visiting from outside. That’s why (…) if you asked their thoughts on what to do about the Chōsha, I think most of the people in the Recovery Shopping Mall would be probably be in favor of preservation.”

While perception of the Chōsha’s value is widespread, the wound in the town’s psychosocial landscape cannot be left untreated. Many times, I heard some variant of “preserve it yes, but the question is how to preserve it.” This question refers not simply to how to arrest its further physical degradation, but the problem of how it should be articulated, both materially and discursively, within a larger structure (including the broader network of shinsai no ikō across the disaster regions). Opposition to simply preserving the structure as “it is” (ari no mama), or leaving it to naturally decay (mimamori-hozon), shows how its iconicity and indexicality also produce a kind of unease about the object’s openness to multiple interpretations (Taylor 1996, 68). Meaning does not simply inhere in the ruin; we need to ensure they say what we want
(DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 467). For example, for member of the Expert Committee Mayor Okuyama it is essential that ikō be “connected to digital information,” particularly online archives (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2013, 4).

To put this in semiotic terms, “icons and indexes in themselves ‘assert nothing.’” (Peirce, cited in Keane 2003, 418-419) To function socially, they must be “furnished with instructions,” including what Keane calls ‘semiotic ideology’: “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world,” such as culturally-specific distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ (or intentional) meanings (Keane 2003, 419). If ‘semiotic ideology’ refers to more macro systems (albeit dynamic, non-totalizing and permanently incomplete ones) (French 2012), Ryō Morimoto draws our attention to more micro-level semiotic operations, such as the changing significance of stone tablets bearing testimonies of previous tsunamis or the ascribing of symbolic weight to the ippon-matsu, or last standing pine tree, in Iwate Prefecture. Such operations, he argues, are part of a broader drive to “minimize the differences between individual interpretations of the sign and promote collective consciousness.” (Morimoto 2012, 267) It is no coincidence that the examples of semiotic transformation Morimoto cites involve either physical objects, including one that survived the tsunami (the pine tree). Disaster necessitates the reconstruction of meaning precisely because it uproots, demolishes or degrades that which contains and spatializes it. The battle over the Chōsha shows both a common understanding of its indexicality and a profound disagreement about how it should be contextualized: as a site of innumerable personal traumas or a collective emblem of disaster prevention.

9 While the distinction between signa naturalia and signa data – between signs that occur ‘naturally’ and those made by intentional beings – appears as salient in contemporary Japan as in ‘classical antiquity’ (Manetti 1993; Morimoto 2012), evinced by the post-disaster discourse on tensai (natural disaster) and jinsai (manmade disaster) (Gill, Slater, and Steger 2015), what counts as tensai and what jinsai is the subject of significant contention.
Even for those in favor of preservation, the centering of the new town around ikō as symbolic cores (in the manner of the oft-cited Genbaku Dome etc.) can provoke unease: member of the Expert Committee Ushio Yōko, for example, worries about “whether it’s OK to entrench the image of ‘a shinsai no ikō town,’ and whether such a town could attract people.” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2014, 6) While many hope that “people’s feelings will change over time,” it is precisely because preservationists wish to let go of neither the town as-it-was nor the absent-presence of those incorporeal beings that remain attached to it that the Chōsha must be preserved.

Conclusion

On June 1, 2015, the local government released the results of the public consultation. Of the 588 valid comments, 350 (59.5%) were in favor of the Prefecture’s plan, with 206 (35%) against (Minamisanriku-chō 2015). On June 30th, the Mayor announced that the town would accept Governor Murai’s proposal, saying at a press conference that “time is necessary to discuss honestly the role of the Chōsha with the next generation, who must carry the town forward.” (Katō 2015) The agreement to cede control to the prefecture was formally signed on September 1st. These results are a clear victory for those who argued against affording primacy to the suffering of the izoku and thereby legitimizing the practice of erasure.

In July 2016, I visited central Shizugawa again for the first time in nearly a year. Since late 2015, the plaza in front of the Chōsha has been closed due to surrounding construction work. Over the last year, the raising of the land had proceeded apace, and the structure is now dwarfed by earth embankments some 5 or 6 stories high. The Takano Kaikan, rejected for consideration by the Expert Committee, still stands, competing with the earth mounds surrounding it for
visibility. Across the main road from the construction works, a small observation space has been opened for visitors to view the Chōsha and clasp hands from a distance. Bit by bit, the town is being rebuilt, its pre-disaster form nowhere to be seen (PC 105).

In the new lowlands of Shizugawa, perhaps only the Chōsha will be left to remind residents of what once was. The *de facto* preservation of its ruined form refuses to let the old lowlands fully dematerialize and be replaced by fading memories, memorial stones, or other such symbolic objects. For both relatives of the dead in favor of disassembly and their opponents, the Chōsha functions as a decaying index produced by the spectacular violence of fast ruination.\(^{10}\) While preservationists claim to read in its scarred surface the ferocity of the waves, relatives speak of the people who vanished in it and the memory of their pain and loss. If the building itself, in the latter case, comes to stand for the absent presence of the tsunami’s victims, for preservationists it is one of the few remaining traces of a town (and its people) disappeared through both disaster and recovery. The Chōsha indexes two kinds of absence – of people and place – at the same time that it positively inscribes, within the reconfiguration of social space, the memory of the original trauma as *bōsai*: that which will prevent future disasters. It remains a monument to the damage wrecked by disasters not just on matter, but on the meanings that matter carries. Rebuilding these relationships is another burden for those living in the space of disaster; spaces stripped and fragmented by the tsunami even as it leaves ‘new’ sites – ruined sites – in their midst.

\(^{10}\) On taking control of the structure, the Prefecture immediately announced that they would be conducting a survey on how to prevent further degradation of the structure, highlighting the processual nature of ruination and its attendant indexicality (Kahoku Shimpō 2015c).
Chapter 5
On Higher Ground

Introduction

In mid-2015, I joined the local priestess and parishioners for a festival on Mt. Horowa, near the hamlet of Horoke in Shizugawa. Horowa Shrine, located deep in the mountain above Horoke, was one of several Shintō shrines connected to what the locals called “Hachiman-sama,” Shizugawa’s main shrine. The deity that resided there would, once a year, visit Horowa to witness hōnō kagura, votive dances that drive away misfortunate in the coming year. As we were preparing to ascend the mountain, I overheard one of the sodaisan, or representatives of the parishioners, complaining that they don’t have enough young people to carry the mikoshi1 anymore. When the priestess suggested inviting young people from other districts, he bristled. “This is our festival,” he replied. “If it stops being that, what’s the point?”

The path to the shrine is a steep dirt road. In previous years, pilgrims would ascend on foot (no mean feat when carrying a mikoshi), but today both deity and parishioners ride by car. When we arrived at the peak, we found 30 or so middle-aged and elderly residents waiting, many of them already drinking. After the ceremony and ritual dances had finished, we followed the mikoshi back down to the town in a truck, terrified by the steepness of the track. By the time we arrived, some of the parishioners were already changing into white court robes and hats, ready to carry the deity through Shizugawa on its way back to Hachiman Shrine. After a brief lunch in Horoke’s community center, we proceeded down the road, a group of children lazily banging a taiko drum at the head of the procession. The day before, on its way up the mountain, the mikoshi had followed the same route as before the disasters: from Hachiman Shrine, through Itsukamachi and Nakasemachi, past Tajiribatake and then by car up the long,

1 A kind of palanquin used to transport a deity (kami) between shrines.
steep path to the mountain shrine. Only this time there was no Itsukamachi, no Nakasemachi, no Tajiribatake. No town at all. Just fields of long grass, and the *mikoshi* tracing a path through the negative space.

The first priority in post-disaster reconstruction, legal scholar Shiozaki Yoshimitsu argues, is the rebuilding of homes (Shiozaki 2014, 67). Homes are a precondition of individual and family recovery: “rebuilding the heart/soul” (*kokoro no fukkō*) requires reconstructing, among other things, its dwelling place. But houses, like people, also exist in relation to one other; rebuilding homes means both restoring the webs of relations between residences and altering their respective positions within these networks. The importance of this can be seen in the town’s Master Reconstruction Plan, which states that, “To ensure that every individual townsperson can proactively face reconstruction,” they must “prepare to maintain the bonds (*kizuna*) of regional community that support them.” (Minamisanriku-chō 2012, 8)
Much of the Japanese literature on higher-ground relocation and machizukuri treats ‘community’ as a self-evident category, requiring no critical elaboration (and certainly no definition). But ‘community’ has many meanings in Tōhoku. Sometimes it is associated with the hamlets or administrative districts themselves, as in the anonymous suggestion at a Machikyō meeting that “people should be gathered by administrative district, so that [new] administrative districts close to the long-established ones will form.” (Takadai Iten Bukai 2013, 9) At other times, it denotes smaller units within these, such as han: groupings of 10-or so houses within hamlets, which nominate a han-leader (han-chō) to represent them at the area-level and circulate information from the local government. People also talk about social networks (hito to hito to no tsunagari) or ‘bonds’ (kizuna) within and across these territorial units: terms with which ‘community’ often appears in conjunction (‘the kizuna/tsunagari of community’). Often, these are familial connections, referring to the extended networks of relatives that cluster in and across certain areas. All the above have been disrupted, sometimes irreparably, by the dislocations that followed the tsunami, as residents were moved – first into evacuation centers, then into temporary housing – or left the town entirely. Many people say it is necessary to reconstruct these riven ‘communities,’ but as the above diversity implies, nobody quite knows what they are.

Implementing higher-ground relocation requires a thorough grasp of residents’ intentions. This means that unlike other areas of reconstruction policy, the local administration has surveyed them repeatedly. One of the most revealing results is from a survey of former residents of central Shizugawa carried out by the Town in early 2013. The government asked residents whether “pre-disaster social ties” (shinsai-mae no tsunagari) and “post-disaster social ties” (shinsai-go no tsunagari) should be prioritized during relocation. The full results are summarized in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total (households)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-disaster social ties</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-disaster social ties</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>421</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Source: Shizugawa Machizukuri Kyōgikai, 2013.*

A plurality of respondents chose “no preference” (44%), which I understand to mean that preserving “social ties” was not a priority for them regarding reconstruction. 39% indicated otherwise, with the overwhelming majority (35%) choosing pre-disaster ties. Although not in the majority, the results indicate that a third of residents were concerned with preserving pre-disaster networks, however these are defined.

As Barrios points out in his analysis of reconstruction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch, official discourses on resilience often treat communities as bounded entities with clearly delineated insides/outsides and stable structures over time (Barrios 2014). ² This belief plays an important role in many late capitalist societies (Macfarlane 1977), including Japan (Ivy 1995), where the rural is often seen as a repository of ‘traditional’ (and threatened) values and social structures that, in the cities, have weakened or vanished with the onset of capitalist modernity.

² In recent years, social capital approaches to disaster recovery have also become prominent in both quantitative and qualitative studies of recovery, particularly in political science (for the application of social capital theory to 3.11, see Aldrich 2012, 2015; Aldrich and Sawada 2015) Like any social science concept, there are considerable disagreements over what ‘social capital’ means and its methodological implications (Gaggio 2004; Nagashima 2010), and it is not my intention to wade into these debates here. What is useful about the social capital approach is that it allows us to measure and compare the relative importance of social ties in disaster and reconstruction vis-à-vis other variables, such as seawall height (Aldrich and Sawada 2015), without subscribing to “any one view about the internal links that bind the units they study” (Macfarlane 1977, 632). But it also tends to treat, for understandable methodological reasons, the units in questions as coherent, spatially and temporally.
(see Chapter 6). Research on rebuilding social groups after disaster has, therefore, often had to recapitulate long-standing anthropological critiques of these assumptions (Barrios 2014).\(^3\) recognizing both the processual nature of group formation and the transformative effect of catastrophe (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Fortun 2001; Barrios 2014). As Barrios cautions, “the capacities that help communities adapt and recover from disaster may not be present before a catastrophic event, they may be the emergent product of the relationships that shape the reconstruction process.” (Barrios 2014, 330).

However, in the rush to critique bounded notions of culture, Anthropology has often “lost sight of the continued importance of place-based practices,” particularly with regards to group formation (Escobar 2001, 147). Some anthropologists and sociologists (particularly those under the influence of social network theory) have actively rejected space and place as useful concepts (Walsh and High 1999), focusing exclusively on deterritorialized notions of ‘network’ and ‘community’ that seem to float above and have little relationship with their geographical loci. More recent research on ‘community’ has pushed back against this, insisting that social relationships “occur through space” and are “the means by which spaces and places are produced and reproduced” (Walsh and High 1999, 258). Even the most mobile and translocal of subjects – diasporic, for example – derive their sense of membership and continuity through a connection to a putative homeland (Eriksen 2002); the most minimal criteria for group membership often appears a real or imagined connection to a territory (Anderson 2006). Some groups really believe themselves geographically embedded and socially bounded, to greater or lesser degrees. Our task is not always to show how such beliefs are ‘wrong,’ but to probe their effects: they can strongly

---

\(^3\) In 1977, Macfarlane called the concept of community “one of the controlling myths [emphasis added] of our time.” (Macfarlane 1977, 631)
influence how people approach reconstruction and work to constrain the transformative potential of rupture as they try to reproduce, as much as possible, “things as they were.”

The Meaning of Community

Drive along the coast and you will find no boundaries between hama,\(^4\) although the topography, defined by innumerable small inlets,\(^5\) does give each a feeling of separation. But spend any time talking to people, and you will find the space thick with demarcations: of aza, one of the smallest areas in the Japanese postal system; of gyōsei-ku, or administrative districts, which envelop several aza and appoint district heads (ku-chō) to represent their interests at the municipal level; or of chiku, the three formerly-independent villages that merged to form the town, each of which contains many administrative districts. When talking about their own location, residents often use the all-encompassing term ‘chiiki.’ Although this is commonly translated as area or region, it implies a sense of belonging more commonly ascribed to ‘place,’ which is accordingly how I translate it. Places, like landscapes, are perspectival, with subtly different horizons depending on one’s positioning (Appadurai 1996). Their boundaries are not clear, but their centers certainly exist (Ingold 2000): places have proper names – Kamiwari, Fujihama, Nagashizu, Hadenya – that carve them out as “pockets of hidden and familiar meanings” within the landscape. These names order the space; spell out the possible trajectories one can take through it (De Certeau 2013, 104). Each place breaks down into yet more names, more potential itineraries,

\(^4\) Hama 浜 means a plain next to the ocean, and is often translated as ‘beach’ or ‘seashore.’ In areas like Minamisanriku formed by many coastal inlets (or ria), hama are considered discrete and coterminous with hamlets (shūraku); one often hears talk of “kaku hama hama…” or, “For each of the hama…” in policy discussions. As neither ‘beach’ nor ‘seashore’ adequately conveys these spatial characteristics (a hama need not have a beach at all), I choose to leave it untranslated.

\(^5\) This kind of coastline is called ‘rias-style’ (riasu-shiki) in Japanese.
Figure 5-2. Gyojo, or sea pastures, for different aquacultural products in 1989. Source: Shizugawa-chō shi

on water as well as land. To the fisherman, each rock in the inlet has a name to be navigated by.

There are no walls between these places. And yet, they often feel hermetic: *heisa-teki*, or ‘closed,’ in the words of locals. Young migrants from the cities regularly told me of their struggle to be accepted. “I still don’t think I’ve integrated,” one nonprofit worker that moved to Minamisanriku from the Kantō area said; “to integrate, I think you need to base your actions on a thorough understanding of the relations within each area of the town.” Perhaps the closed feeling of some hamlets is a hangover from the days when they really were discrete. Many *hama* are separated by several miles. Today, a household might have 2 or 3 cars, but a couple of decades ago, I heard, they would often have only one, and even that was used sparingly. The roads destroyed by the tsunami were, in historical terms, fairly new: the municipal road linking
Shizugawa to Highway 398 only opened in 1987. The Japan Rail Kesennuma Line, which linked Togura, Shizugawa and Utatsu to the other municipalities along the Sanriku Coast, dates from only a decade before that in 1977 (Shizugawa-chō shi henshū-san shitsu 1989, 909-915). For younger residents, who have often lived in the cities, place seems less relevant to their self-image: they are mini-cosmopolitans, whose networks range across the town (and beyond). But for those who grew up when chiiki were separate – administratively and physically – in an age before telecommunications, the boundaries may feel harder drawn.

On the other hand, it might be contact, not discreteness, that has led to the insistence on social and spatial boundaries. Anthropological research on ethnicity has shown that, contrary to popular belief, “ethnicity is frequently most important in contexts where groups are culturally close and enter into contact with each other regularly.” (Eriksen 2001, 262) Talk to the residents of any particular hamlet and you will soon hear how different it is from those around it. Different places have “different ways of thinking,” different dialects (hōgen). “You can’t communicate with people from other places,” the leader of one keiyaku-kō told me. But for all the talk of difference, many areas are very similar, at least superficially; the insistence on separation is just as likely a product of contact with and linkages across other areas, municipalities, regions and cities (Eriksen 2001).

There could also be an economic dimension to the relative formalization and closure of place-based social networks in rural Japan. Abner Cohen saw the pursuit of group interests (including economic ones) as the foundation of ethnic identity (Eriksen 2001); a point which (like much of the ethnicity literature) also applies to formalized ‘communities’ (Portes 2014). Keiyaku-kō, with their exclusive membership (see Chapter 1), exist in part to manage communal resources, such as collectively-owned land; local fisheries cooperative associations, which again
map onto *chiiki*, perform similar functions for oceanic commons. Recognizing this allows us to see how people can be invested in delineated social networks without ascribing particular value to the “we-feeling” some argue is foundational to them (Eriksen 2001, 266). After 3.11, many people are staying in Minamisanriku because they must. Fishermen and farmers have sunk costs, in a double sense. On top of their boats, tool, and embodied knowledge, their right to work the water is geographically circumscribed due to the fishing permit (*gyogyoken*) and cooperative (*Gyokyō*) system, which assigns them areas of the sea as watery pastures (Figure 5-2). They cannot simply move to another area and start fishing there. In one small *hama* to the South of the town, less than a third of households washed away are moving to the higher-ground estate. Others are rebuilding on their own land, and some have left: about 15% of households, accounting for over a quarter (25.4%) of the population. It would be easy to assume those who stay do so out of community spirit, but when I visited in the summer of 2013, I heard a different story. The white-collar workers have left, one fishing family told me. They’d have left too, they said, if they didn’t have to make a living through aquaculture. “I hate the sea,” the wife said.

Whatever their reasons, many residents strongly believe their networks to be discrete, embedded in and shaped by places with distinct and separate histories (and resources to be protected). While place acts as a frame, there is no one shape to these groupings; rather, they are contingent, historically-evolving networks of exchange within these named areas. Shizugawa’s official history, published by the town in 1989, captures this well:

> In this place, if you remove organizations like administrative districts that are connected to the town government, the neighborhood groupings based on proximity are not clear. They would probably turn out to be so-called associations between people in neighboring places and [relations of] mutual help. In everyday relations, people exchange seasonal foods, congratulations and commiserations; they exchange things when members of their respective families are ill; in recent years, they exchange good wishes on entering university, graduation, school
trips, getting a job, and going on holiday. In places near the shore, when they’ve taken a lot of fish, distributing fish is another kind of relation.

Until the Shōwa 30s, this kind of mutual aid between neighbors was not uncommon. When planting rice or threshing wheat, houses near each other would gather acquaintances in groups, called yui or yoi, and help each other. Also, on the 7th day of the 7th month of the old calendar, people would come out from the houses using the same communal well and clean it together. (Shizugawa-chō shi henshū-san shitsu 1989b, 330-331).

Information flows through these exchanges. One resident fond of popular psychology described community as a kind of “information space,” in which the circulation of information produces and reproduces social ties. A guide born in Togura described it to me this way.

There are lots of closed places here. Japanese people call you, Andrew, a foreigner; just like that, people who are not from this place are called ‘outsiders.’ (yosomono) In the end, it’s because the people of this place know everything, all the private information, about each person. It doesn’t matter whether there’s a [Personal Information] Protection Law or not. We know everything. Including whether you’re rich or not, clever or stupid; everything. I think, maybe, that people get worried when somebody arrives that they don’t have this information about.

I saw – and took part, to a lesser degree – many exchanges of information, labor, and goods within (and sometimes across) areas, particularly in farming households in Iriya and fishing households in Togura. Many people I met said, however, that cooperation was declining, particularly after the disasters. “Anyone can see the physical things,” one said, “but previously when something needed to be done, you did it through invisible connections (mienai tsunagari); now, when outsiders come in and do stuff, do these processes happen anymore?” The coupling of work with money has undermined cooperation, another said. Similar lamentations can be found in much of the literature on rural Japanese communities (Beardsley 1969; Smith 1978; Embree 1995). Whether they refer to an idealized or imagined past or reflect a genuine decline in

---

6 Late 1950s to early 1960s.

7 Yui is written with the character 结, meaning ‘to tie’ or ‘to bind.’
the *communitas* produced by semi-ritualized communal labor (and actual ritual practice), I cannot say. Such beliefs are hardly unique to Tōhoku, nor rural Japan. Recognizing this does not make them irrelevant. If ‘community’ is to mean anything in the new higher-ground estates, these dense ecologies of place-based exchange must be rebuilt.

Such relations, however, do not float above the surface of the landscape, as imagined by many network theorists; they are not ‘deterritorialized.’ (Appadurai 1990) The labor producing both the matter of exchange (like fish or rice) and the loci of collective action form an ensemble that Ingold, in his critique of landscape theory, calls a ‘taskscape’ (Ingold 2000). Landscape formation is not just a matter “of transforming ‘sheer physical terrain into a pattern of historically experienced and constituted space and time,’” as “human beings do not, in their movements, inscribe their life histories upon the surface of nature…rather, these histories are woven…into the texture of the surface itself.” The landscape must, therefore, “be understood as the *taskscape in its embodied form*: a pattern of activities ‘collapsed’ into an array of features.” (Ingold 2000, 198) In Minamisanriku, these features include everything from the patchworks of rice paddies that fill the valleys to the forests covering the mountainsides, most of which are manmade.

Among the countless musings on higher-ground relocation and its implications for the above post-3.11, one of the most perceptive (if not quite ‘Ingoldian’) is the following by Murosaki Yoshiteru, Professor Emeritus at Kobe University and an expert in disaster risk reduction: “Community is produced by *connections to land and connections to people* [emphasis added]. Ordinarily, the normal pattern is that connections to land produce connections to people,” perhaps through a taskscape. “However, in the present situation, where people have lost their prospects regarding land, we have to cherish a process that creates connections to land from
connections to people.” (Murosaki 2013, 90) The anxiety over community-building reflects the severing (or severe disruption) of previous relationships between ‘people and land’ and ‘people and people,’ and the need to recreate both in a way that ensures continuity with the pre-disaster state. However, while reconstruction thus necessitates reconstituting social bodies (Oliver-Smith 2016, 79), relations (of exchange, information, obligation, or anything else) cannot, as we have seen, simply be lifted off the ground and transported elsewhere. Higher-ground relocation involves withdrawal from one set of those relations (and their undergirding logics) and entering another. Some residents describe this as tokaika, or urbanization: the transition from a rural way of life (hama seikatsu, or harbor life) to a more urban mode. Viewed at the individual household or administrative district scale, these might appear micro-level effects, but they also relate to far broader restructurings. The flipside of relocation is re-zoning: the transformation of previously inhabited coastal areas into primarily industrial and commercial ones. This has been achieved by the consolidation of land owned by residents into monolithic blocks of state-owned land in the central and coastal areas of municipalities. The reconstruction of housing is thus one element in the broader spatial restructuring of the disaster regions. This restructuring also has temporal dimensions. In late 2014, one of the consultants involved with Shizugawa’s higher-ground relocation told me, in a rare moment of candor:

Whichever way I look at it, I can’t imagine a town without people. In the future, in Shizugawa or Isatome, I wonder if they can find some means of evacuation or something on the upper part of buildings, so they can live there or something; if they can come up with some contrivance, a way of doings things where people can live there and work there.

When talking with the young people of Isatome, I heard something I hadn’t thought about before. Everything was washed away in the tsunami, their friends were scattered all over, their neighbors were scattered all over; with everyone in the long-house like temporary housing, their neighborly relations, the feeling of wanting to help each other, those things are gradually waning. Memories of being scolded for playing in the river; memories of taking abalone even though it’s forbidden, and selling it for a
profit; memories of all gathering together in the shrine; when they remember those things, they see how important they are, these kind of human relationships, human feelings, and those places. If it’s possible, they want to revive these things, and pass them on to their children, there were lots of opinions like this. This might not be possible in a town that people don’t live in.

Muroasaki Yoshiteru has called “true reconstruction” that which “connects to the future” (Muroasaki 2013a); by implication, the current policies, which erase much of the past, are future-less. The decision to stay in the town – to take out loans, to purchase land, to build a house – means choosing to invest in one’s perceived future there. In Chapter 1, I described how the disasters drastically altered the formation of biographies and their relationship to place (Pred 1984), prompting profound anxiety among residents about whether they, and the town, have a future. These fears are particularly acute regarding housing. Vale et al. argue that physical rebuilding is “merely the entry point for capacity building, self-determination, and psychological healing,” (Vale, Shamsuddin, and Goh 2014, 16), to which I would add biography formation and a sense of futurity (which go together). The ability the “see” a future of these places, I was told, is essential; allowing residents to grasp, on an emotional and imaginative level, both the new forms that are emerging in the highlands and how long they will take to emerge. The need to “make reconstruction visible” (fukkō mieruka) in this way is well-understood by the Town, but recovery continues to be delayed, not least due to the unexpected difficulty of untangling people’s previous “connections to land.” Residents struggle to see the future is not just due to disaster and its dislocations, however. It is also because they have little or no part in the conception and gestation of hard reconstruction: the struggle to ‘see’ the future and the desire to shape it are intertwined. Daniel Aldrich, citing Nakagawa and Shaw’s research on the Gujarat and Kobe earthquakes, argues that “individuals in more civically active and engaged communities expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the process of planning and recovery
than survivors from more fragmented and less involved areas.” 10 years after the Banda Aceh tsunami in Indonesia, the most successful housing projects are not those built for residents by the government, but those in which non-profits, initially in defiance of the law, assisted residents in rebuilding themselves (Vale, Shamsuddin, and Goh 2014). Although the government says that rebuilding community is an explicit goal of reconstruction, many early policies were adopted without their input were, in fact, highly damaging to the social fabric. Chief among these was the decision to allocate temporary housing by lottery.

**Temporary Life**

For the first few weeks, and in some cases longer, residents lived in evacuation centers. I was not there to witness, but heard a lot about these centers in later years. Suffering was a constant theme, and some suffered more than others. The location of toilets outdoors, for example, led to elderly residents restricting their eating and drinking to avoid nighttime trips, sometimes with serious consequences. Women and children also had a particularly bad time in the centers, and were often the first to leave, although this made it difficult for them to access aid, which was delivered to and distributed there.

Despite these problems, for the most part evacuation centers did not fragment social networks after 3.11. Because they gathered people present in their immediate vicinity, citizens’ groups like keiyaku-kō/kai or administrative district associations sometimes continued to function. In Utatsu, the Isatomae Keiyaku-kai held a meeting less than two weeks after the tsunami, during which they decided to relocate *en masse* to the group’s collectively-owned land. The speed of this decision, which came before the local government had begun drafting reconstruction plans, led to the early adoption of the group’s choice of site by the administration.
I did not hear many examples of mobilization like this, however. Most residents in the hinanjo were focused on getting through each day. Others were skeptical of relocation plans. Preparing new estates takes considerable time and resources. One resident recounted to me his thoughts on hearing the plan for relocation:

I heard about it in the evacuation center you know. At a time when we couldn’t even make boundaries with cardboard boxes. I said this. Where is this higher ground? Who owns the land for this higher ground? When will this higher ground be ready? Because it takes time to get the OK from the landowner. It takes time for the construction work.

During that time, residents would live in temporary housing complexes, or kasetsu jūtaku (hereafter referred to by the popular shorthand kasetsu). The first complexes were completed in late April. Initially, units were allocated by lottery. This was immediately controversial. In his autobiographical account of the disasters, the Mayor of Minamisanriku defended the measures, saying that although he understood the desire to protect communities “so much that it hurt,” the government had to be neutral:

We prioritized first households that needed carers and those with infants, and decided that for other households, [entry] should be decided fairly and impartially by lottery…Everybody hoped to enter the temporary housing being built in the town…the chance to enter [them] had to be equal. That’s why we chose lotteries (Satō 2014, 99-100).

However, if parts of the town’s dense networks had been preserved in the evacuation centers (though not without considerable stress and dislocation), allocation of kasetsu by lottery severely weakened them by scattering their members. Many were moved outside the town entirely, with kasetsu established in the neighboring city of Tome accounting for over a fifth of planned units as of July 2011 (Minamisanriku-chō Sōmu-ka 2011). Pre-existing associations such as Keiyakukai or Jichikai ceased to function due to community fragmentation; as many people said to me,
“we couldn’t contact each other, because we didn’t know where anyone was.” Some organizations were officially disbanded, such as Motohama’s neighborhood association in Shizugawa. The status of many still nominally active – particularly administrative district associations – is unclear, as the boundaries of these districts are due to be redrawn once higher-ground relocation is complete. The struggle to ‘preserve community’ thus began with this transition from the evacuation centers to the kasetsu.

In 2015, I interviewed the head of the neighborhood association of one of the first districts to move collectively into kasetsu. Initially, he told me, the Town was only planning to build 1080 units internally, with 2500 located in neighboring towns and cities like Tome. Moving to Tome, he believed, would mean the death of their area; something he claims is backed up by recent surveys, which apparently show that only 40% of Tome kasetsu residents are planning to return. He began lobbying hard for a kasetsu complex to be constructed in and for his district, and by May had succeeded in persuading officials at the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism to grant permission, forcing the Town’s hand. The latter’s official policy was also changing. The impact of dispersal on residents had apparently been recognized. We can see the shift in plans for kasetsu construction published by the local government in June 2011, which lists whether entry was or will be decided by lottery or “preference given to people from the area” (chiku yūsen). 88% of units constructed before June 2011 had entry decided by lottery. For those due for completion later, this dropped to only 52%. The size of the complexes was also changing. Those constructed before June 2011 had an average unit number of 62; those after, 39. One can hypothesize the shift indicates a move

8 I have not been able to confirm these numbers.

9 The Town must also apply to the Ministry and receive approval from the Minister to construct kasetsu.
towards more and smaller *kasetsu* for each area, in contrast to the large estates built earlier (other explanations are also possible, such as the limited availability of suitably large plots of public land; *kasetsu* cannot be constructed on private property unless a work-around is found, as was sometimes the case).

For those already allocated, however, the damage could not be undone, and they accounted for over half of all *kasetsu* residents. I first visited the *kasetsu* at Heisei no Mori in 2012. With 246 units, it was one of the town’s largest complexes. Like the other early *kasetsu*, its units were allocated by lottery. The government has not released data on *kasetsu* occupants’
areas of origin, but in 2015 I was shown a map listing the *aza*\(^\text{10}\) of origin of each head of household in Heisei no Mori (Figure 5-3). Residents from the two largest *aza* in Utatsu – Upper and Lower Isatomaе – were the most numerous, occupying 1 in 5 plots. The average number of occupants from each of the 32 *aza*\(^\text{11}\) represented was only 4. This variability of geographic origin and the scattering of *aza* within the estate are two pieces of evidence that residents’ claims that lottery allocation fragmented and dispersed their communities are not exaggerated. Although the Mayor said in late 2012 that there were no ‘lonely deaths’ in Minamisanriku (*kodokushi*, the phenomenon of people dying alone and going undiscovered for some time), our guide told me there they had occurred in Heisei no Mori, as had suicides. Many elderly people were living there alone, without the support network of friends and family that are essential for their wellbeing (Aldrich 2015, 31). For families, by contrast, the units felt excessively cramped.

The *kasetsu* didn’t just disrupt relations between residents through geographical dispersal, they also established a new cleavage between *kasetsu* residents and the so-called ‘*zaitaku*,’ which means ‘those with homes.’ A few people whose houses survived told me they felt unable to enter *kasetsu* complexes, and as the latter were where aid was dispersed, this bred resentment. I often heard *zaitaku* residents criticize the “overdependence” of *kasetsu* dwellers on aid. “People’s greed has come to the fore,” one complained, underscoring the complex politics of resentment that aid and its overlap with housing dynamics has created after 3.11. Miura Tomoyuki (Chapter 2), who also lived in *kasetsu* for several years, talked of similar effects within them: when someone is thought to have gained an unfair advantage, he said, “all eyes

---

\(^{10}\) One of the smallest geographical area within Japan’s postal system. Distinct from *ō-aza*, the four large districts (Togura, Shizugawa, Iriya, and Utatsu) comprising the town.

\(^{11}\) These 32 *aza* were part of 10 different administrative districts. The average number of households from each district was 11. Districts typically contain between 100-200 households, though some had as many as 500.
were on them.” He did not, however, see this as an uncovering of people’s inner desires, but rather a product of the desperation produced by the environment itself. Leaving, he hoped, would restore ‘normal’ social relations. And most people I spoke to were desperate to leave. “I don’t want to die in the kasetsu,” one elderly lady told me, and people had died. “When you collide with reality like this,” said the leader of a former administrative district, “you understand the need for speed. To end one’s life in this temporary home is unthinkable.”

To the Highlands

In early 2015, the path to the future Masuzawa estate\(^{12}\) was still a wide earth channel cut into the mountain. When followed upward, the groove opened onto a plateau of red earth and stone: a construction site resembling a Martian landscape in its current, blasted form. As we proceeded upwards along the channel – which would, soon, become the main road to the estate – my guide, an architect heavily involved in local reconstruction activities, asked me, incredulously, “is there any country that cuts through mountains as readily as Japan?”

We were on our way to the first site visit for future residents, many of whom had never set foot there before. First to arrive were local government officials, consultants, and representatives of the construction workers. Prospective residents soon followed: groups of late middle-aged and elderly men and women, shepherding handfuls of small children that danced excitedly around the site to the consternation of the consultants, worried that they might tumble over its ragged edges into the valley below.

\(^{12}\) I use the British word ‘estate’ (short for ‘housing estate’) in lieu of the American ‘project,’ due to the latter’s specific association with poverty. Estate here means “a residential area in which the houses, streets, etc., have all been planned and built at the same time,” per the OED (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).
As each bunch of residents arrived, they were handed a set of maps, the back of which showed a soft, watercolor image of the future estate (Figure 5-4). After the head of the local council’s Recovery Promotion Department gave a brief address, the consultants began to explain the site. They gestured across the red expanse, tacking back and forth between map and space; motions that, they hoped, would establish relationships between the bucolic representation and the current reality and, by doing so, make the future visible. “Do you see that road below? Imagine that the ground under your feet was lowered to its level, or the level of that other housing complex, over there on the other side of the valley.” On one side of the plateau, a pole bearing a small, handwritten sign had been driven into the earth: “ground here to drop 16m.” Other poles were scattered across the space, marking similar shifts in verticality, or the position of future infrastructures like the main road through the estate. To demonstrate the size of each
plot, the consultants directed four of us (including me) to stand at the corners of an invisible square and raise our hands, our bodies joining the signs.

This was the first of several visits to relocation sites I accompanied residents on during my yearlong stay in Minamisanriku (August 2014-2015). For all the efforts of the organizers to orient people, there were many misunderstandings (not least due to maps held upside down). But, for the most part, they were happy occasions: rare opportunities to grasp some image of what the future will look like, specifically, the future site of their residences. Such chances are appreciated. A regular refrain among residents during my time in the town was “we cannot see what the future will be like” (saki ga mienai). Recovery is intimately connected to the potential for imagining the future; something that, as one informant put it to me, “we cannot live without.”

The local government has become increasingly aware of the need, in their words, to fukkō mieruka: make reconstruction ‘visible.’ But for many residents, the shape of the future town is still unfathomable, and their own futures remain uncertain. The two intersect in one question. Where will we live after the tsunami?

The foundation of spatial restructuring in the disaster regions, as I argued in Chapter 2, is the Disaster Danger Zone (saigai kiken kuiki), within which residential development is now prohibited. This has displaced residents who lost their houses, most of whom lived within what is now the zone. These land-use restrictions are seen as necessary by proponents of fukkō machizukuri, who aim for a radical break from past practices of reconstruction. Iokibe Makoto, Chair of the national Reconstruction Design Council in Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011-12, hereafter referred to as RDC), explains: “We must end the history that has been repeated until now; that is, the history of rebuilding the same houses and towns where they will be washed away by the next tsunami.” (Iokibe 2016, 301) Neither he, nor any other
proponent of higher-ground relocation I’ve read, ever asks why this was the case. Murosaki Yoshiteru has called higher-ground relocation a “mistake” based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between space and society (Murosaki 2013b); a point elaborated on by Motoda Yoshitaka, who wrote that the option to rebuild houses in the tsunami inundation zone should have been retained, because fishermen “prefer to live as close as possible to the port. If you live in the port you can get information, you can work until late. You can respond quickly to changes in the ocean, and it’s easy to launch your boat.” (Motoda 2011, 6) I heard similar views from some residents: “For people who want to see the ocean from their homes like before, let them go there, to the places where they can see the sea.”

The national government’s preference for higher-ground relocation was publicized early. On April 1st, less than a month after the tsunami, Prime Minister Kan outlined in a press conference a vision for reconstruction based on new land-use restrictions. Housing would be moved to higher-ground, he said, with residents commuting to work in fishing ports and seafood-processing facilities located near the sea (Shiozaki 2014, 123). The RDC, convened by Kan shortly after the disasters in April 2011, shared this position. Iokibe summarizes its rationale as follows:

Against a tsunami, there is nothing else to do but “flee,” and higher-ground relocation is a way of ‘fleeing’ for all forms of social life.

After the Sanriku Tsunamis of the Meiji and Shōwa eras, higher-ground relocation was attempted in some parts, but this time the nation will provide comprehensive support for all victims that desire it. In today’s society, ‘new towns’ on top of hills are an everyday sight. (Iokibe 2016, 277-278)

---

13 Some buildings did move in response to past shrines: Shintō shrines (jinja), for examples. Shizugawa’s Hachiman Shrine was moved to higher ground after the 1960 Chile Earthquake and Tsunami, and survived 3.11 mostly unscathed.
Although commonly referred to as ‘higher-ground relocation,’ the scheme is officially titled the Program for Promoting Group Relocation for Disaster Mitigation (Bōsai Shūdan Iten Sokushin Jigyō, hereafter referred to by its popular shorthand, Bōshū). The legal framework for Bōshū was established in 1972 with the passage of the Act on Special Financial Support for Promoting Group Relocation for Disaster Mitigation. Prior to 3.11, Bōshū had been used some 30 times, including after the Chūetsu Earthquake of 2004, when 115 residential plots were built. 3.11 is the largest Bōshū program to date, and can be considered a massive stress test for its framework.

It is possible, as Tsukui argues, that many alternative ideas for relocation were nixed due to lack of funding: many ‘experts’ were forthcoming with novel ideas for relocation, but these did not generally come to fruition (Tsukui 2012:100). In his analysis of the law authorizing collective relocation programs, he argues that it does not, strictly speaking, regulate relocation itself; rather, it specifies how funding should be provided for certain aspects of plans, such as land purchase and preparation. However, in practice the restrictions imposed on funding left only a narrow set of possibilities for municipalities that had no choice but to use central government money.14 If many futures were, for a moment, possible, early decisions concerning relocation as well as its institutional and legal framework quickly made them unthinkable. Ōguma Eiji has described this framework as suffering from the “twin evils of fragmentation and rigidity”: fragmented, in that responsibility for various aspects of recovery are distributed among a variety of government organs, without any clear coordinating mechanism15 (so-called ‘bureaucratic

---

14 Initially, only three quarters of the costs of relocation were to be covered by the central government; in the third supplementary budget, the remaining quarter was allocated from the newly-established Great East Japan Earthquake Reconstruction Fund and the re-allocation of tax income to the disaster regions (Tsukui 2012).

15 In the aftermath of 3.11, there has been an attempt to tackle the former problem by establishing the Ministry of Reconstruction (Fukkō-chō): a new government organ with a limited lifespan (it officially dissolves in 2021, 10 years from the date of the tsunami), whose primary responsibility is to coordinate
sectionalism,’ or *tatewari gyōsei*), and rigid because both its various legal codifications and the institutional culture of Japanese bureaucracy makes even minor adjustments to on-the-ground realities difficult (see Chapter 2 for how this played out with seawalls). Bōshū establishes a program zone, and cannot provide funding for things that cross this border. For example, the number and width of roads within the estates is restricted; roads that will connect the new estates to other parts of the town are national-level projects under the control of different ministries, and cannot be easily altered by residents.

Bōshū provides funding for various aspects of relocation, such as land purchase and plot construction, under a strict set of guidelines (Tsukui 2012). Not least among these is the specification that “that which moves is the hamlet, not the town.” (Tsukui 2012, 100) The system does not, in principle, allow for forced relocation: the hamlet must move willingly as a collective.16 This emphasis on collective rather than individual victims aligns with the broad principle, established in the Basic Act on Disaster Control Measures of 1961, that “the subject of reconstruction is not the individual, but *regional society* [emphasis added].” (Oguma 2013, 6) The government does not, in principle, provide aid for the creation of private assets. While this approach appears to respect pre-existing ‘communities’ – the hamlet, it presumes, is the basic unit – its restrictive nature becomes apparent when one considers the aforementioned variation in how people conceptualize ties. At a presentation on relocation in December 2012, for example, there were the following questions and answers:

---

16 In previous disasters, a minimum of 10 residences was required for relocation, but this was reduced to five following 3.11.
Q. We can’t all talk together as a hamlet. If we gather 5 neighboring households or more we can relocate as a group, right?
A. The relocation program aims to preserve communities by moving as a hamlet. Accordingly, we do not recognize several households ignoring the relocation plan for the entire hamlet.
Q. On this occasion I’d like to relocate to a different hamlet’s higher-ground estate, is it possible?
A. At present we are making plans for each hamlet, and restricting relocation to those within said hamlet (Fukkō Suishin-ka and Kensetsu-ka 2012).

Here we see how the government’s legally-sanctioned recognition of one possible community – the hamlet – can grind against residents’ actual investments in ‘communities’ of different qualities and scales. There is a third, spatial element to this. Residents are aware that their social relations are not simply a network laid onto a pre-existing space, but an integral part of the complex ecology of place. Choices about hard reconstruction – from roads to seawalls to higher-ground estates – affect the circulations and exchanges integral to this ecology. Not least among these is the choice whether to disperse or amalgamate the hamlet.

There are two models of higher-ground relocation in the disaster regions. The first is what I call aggregative relocation, in which multiple pre-disaster hamlets or areas are amalgamated into large estates. This is where the question of how – and if – to preserve pre-disaster communities is most fraught. The second – following the critical language of both observers and locals – I call divided relocation (bundan iten). This entails the remaining members of a pre-disaster hamlet relocating together to a small plot as close as possible to their original residences. If aggregative relocation requires the emergence – or deliberate creation – of new community structures, divided relocation represents an effort to preserve as much as possible both a pre-existing group structure and its relationship to (and role in composing) a place. In a small number of cases, two or more hamlets are relocating together. This does not mean, however, that they differ substantially from other divided relocators; the new estate can
simply be subdivided into two or more areas. I saw one memorable example of this principle in early 2015, when the leader of one small hamlet showed me plans for the joint meeting hall they would share with another hamlet locating to the same site. The plan called for two identical structures joined at the center: the main meeting room would be split in two by sliding doors that could, in the event of joint-hamlet meetings, be drawn back. Otherwise, they would operate separately within a single building. Originally, they had planned for two sets of toilets and storage rooms, but issues with plumbing necessitated grouping these.

In Minamisanriku, the local government chose aggregative relocation as the model for the larger, semi-urban centers of Shizugawa and Isatomae, and has also built a large estate in Togura. In Shizugawa, three estates were established, named according to their geographical location: The West, Center, and East Estates. Fittingly for the town’s former center, these three sites account for the lion’s share of all plots (345, or 41.7%). While the number of plots and design of the 3 Shizugawa estates have evolved over time, their locations were decided as early as June 2011, when a draft plan was circulated among members of the advisory committee for drafting the Master Reconstruction Plan. Outside of these centers, residents of the town’s smaller hamlets in Togura, Shizugawa and Utatsu are pursuing divided relocation, with their share of total plots amounting to 28%, enough for 233 households.

Other divisions are also implied by the implementation of these plans: the flow of information across hamlets is impeded, for example. Territory and knowledge map here, as concerns over privacy (and the government’s commitment to safeguarding ‘personal information’) restrict the sharing of details about future estates with those not registered to occupy them. Two former residents of central Shizugawa (A and B) that both participated in the Machikyō told me that:
A: Everything was a secret…The committee members for Center District would get information on that, but nothing about West District. Nothing about East District either…That information was only for insiders. Center is for Center, East is for East, and West is for West.
B: It’s good for Shizugawa to know about Shizugawa, but we also want to know about Utatsu, about Togura, you see…
AL: Information sessions too, are only for the people moving…
B: …to that place only. Or, only for the people building individual houses. Even though there are people moving to the disaster public housing there, they are separated out (bundan)…[information about the town] is well controlled. Unfortunately.
A: They won’t let us form an organization, a group.
B: Yes. It’s divide and conquer.

Their criticism echoes a long-standing claim in the literature on social capital that, to quote van Deth and Zmerli, segmented networks weaken “the capacity of these structures (or their members) to engage in (formal and informal) associations that create the environment indispensable for developing process-based trust,” hindering “the production of collective goods.” (van Deth and Zmerli 2010, 634) In this case, the segmentation is both an artifact of pre-disaster sociospatial organization and a consequence of local government policy that deliberately restricts the flow of information between these units post-3.11. Particularly for divided relocators, to reproduce bounded communities is to replicate something already in serious decline. Comments about how “strong our local community is” would often be followed immediately by lamentations that “we have no successors,” as in the following discussion with one resident of Togura:

G: When we used to be in trouble, everyone thinks bonds (kizuna) are important, so we were really, very good at helping each.
AL: There was a strong sense of ‘being in this together?’
G: Very strong. But now…to be honest, of the 19 households here…only 5 have successors. The successors are leaving this town, and many households think they won’t come back.
Young people have long been flowing out of the town. This trend, however, has been dramatically worsened by both the tsunami and the slow process of reconstruction.

**Stopping the Flow**

In early 2015, I met with a man I’ll call K, who works for a local nonprofit that works to promote community development in the new housing estates and public housing complexes. He told me that:

The delays for higher-ground relocation keep dragging on, and people are dropping out. In October, in Masuzawa\textsuperscript{17} 3 of 59 households have withdrawn and chosen to rebuild [elsewhere] themselves. Information has spread that in Chūgakkō-ue Danchi, 5 households have given up on higher-ground relocation.

The longer higher-ground relocation is delayed, the more the population outflow will worsen. At this rate, the Reconstruction Plan itself will be messed up. Even in Utatsu, the number of households withdrawing from higher-ground relocation is beginning to stand out, and the biggest issue is how we can hold this back.

I wanted to check K and others’ claim that people were giving up on higher-ground relocation.

As a proxy, I tracked changes in the number of planned plots using data released by the Ministry of Recovery between March 2013 and November 2016, as well as the number of vacant plots advertised in the town’s reconstruction newsletter, Fukkō Machizukuri News, and on the Town’s official website. The Town regularly revised construction plans in response first to surveys, and later to fluctuations in the number of residents applying (or rescinding their applications) for plots.

The trend in the data is obvious. The number of households intending to relocate to higher-ground estates in Minamisanriku has fallen dramatically since 2013 (the earliest available figures), with the largest drop occurring between late 2013 and early 2014 (Figure 5-5.1).

\textsuperscript{17} His former and future home in Utatsu, site of the Masuzawa Estate.
Exactly a quarter of prospective residents dropped out between March 2013 and November 2016. The large estates show this trend most clearly. I found data on households intending to relocate to the three Shizugawa estates from late 2012 until the present day (Figure 5-5.2). Between the first survey in 2012 and September of 2013, there was a marked increase in the number of households intending to relocate (the large increase for the West Estate was likely due to the late decision by residents of Nakasemachi, a pre-disaster administrative district, to relocate there instead of to their own smaller site). However, there was a significant and sustained drop after late 2013, and although the numbers recovered slightly in mid-2016, the final number of occupied plots is 5.5% lower than originally planned in 2012, and 17.4% lower than peak demand in September 2013.

The number of people applying for public housing has followed a similar trajectory. In December 2012, Minamisanriku Town published plans to construct 930 units. The numbers were
subsequently revised down, however, with a final total of 738 units per the latest publically available figures. As of November 2015, 32 units were unoccupied in the 3 Shizugawa public housing complexes, (6.5% of their total). No data on occupancy is available for the other areas. Combining the figures for higher-ground plots and public housing, we can see that the total number of planned housing units has fallen by almost a quarter (23%) since 2013. Things look even worse when you include vacant plots. Per official advertisements, 14% of the higher-ground plots prepared by the town were untaken as of June 2016. If Shizugawa had the most plots, it also had the most dropouts: 52 spots were vacant, accounting for 15% of its total and 50% of all vacancies in the town.

The data above indicates that demand for relocation to both higher-ground estates and their attached public housing complexes has fallen dramatically since 2012. This trend holds across the disaster regions as a whole. Data from the Ministry of Reconstruction shows that planned higher-ground relocation plots have fallen in all three prefectures, although the number of public housing units has increased overall. This leads Miyazaki to speculate that people giving up on houses are choosing public housing instead (Miyazaki 2015). However, the increase in the latter has largely been driven by a growing number of Fukushima refugees choosing public housing. If one subtracts units built for “nuclear refugees” (genpatsu hinansha) from the total public housing figures, one can see that across the affected areas the number of units remains stable as higher-ground plots fall (Figure 5-6). Minamisanriku’s trend is, therefore, notably worse than the average.

There is a widespread perception amongst residents that recovery is late (osoi), or delayed (okurete iru). I heard this from residents repeatedly. Nothing is happening, they would say; “we see no signs of recovery, only delay after delay. We can’t see what the future
One consultant from Tokyo told me that, from his perspective, things were moving rather quickly; after all, it’s a pretty big job, restructuring the entire coastline. To understand residents’ perceptions, however, one must contrast what they were promised and what was delivered. The Town’s Master Reconstruction Plan projected that the construction of higher-ground plots would be complete within 2 years – by the middle of 2013 – with residents
constructing their houses from mid-2013-2014. Only 1 estate totaling 10 plots was completed on schedule. The majority – over 55% - were completed in 2016, a full 5 years after the tsunami and 3 years longer than estimated in the Reconstruction Plan (some 16.6% of plots were not completed until 2017). Correlation is not causation, but it is noteworthy that the largest drop in the number of residents intending to move to higher-ground (a fall of 15%) occurred at the same time they were due to be moving in according to the original schedule (Figures 5.1 & 5.2). Reconstruction was, indeed, late.

Some delays were due to unforeseen issues with the sites themselves, such as overly hard ground. Finding and agreeing on sites was also difficult. But perhaps the most proximate cause was land purchase. Most of the estates are on private land, which must be purchased by the local government before they can begin construction.18 In the summer of 2013 – when plots were due to be completed per the Master Reconstruction Plan – I met a surveyor who told me that not only was land purchase still ongoing, but proving extremely complicated. Firstly, most of the land had been handed down within families for generations, with the borders last surveyed in the Edo Period (1603-1868). The techniques used during this era were imprecise, he said, and in any case many people had lied when, hundreds of years ago, they first registered the land due to tax levels being determined by land area. He and numerous other surveyors were thus working round the clock to re-survey the plots, but the going was slow. The second problem was related to the first. In theory, when land is passed down the name on the deed should be changed to that of the new owner. Since this costs money and people never expected to sell the land, many never actually did this, meaning deeds still bear the names of long-deceased ancestors. In order to sell the land, each of their eligible descendants must give their seal (hankō) approving the transfer. This is

18 The Program for Promoting Group Relocation for Disaster Mitigation (Bōshū) funds the purchase of this land.
known as the sōzoku mondai, or ‘problem of inheritance,’ and is a major cause of delays in land procurement for local municipalities in the disaster regions. It is possible to speed up the process by expropriating land with no clear owner for public infrastructure like seawalls or roads under the Compulsory Purchase of Land Act (1951), but this does not apply to higher-ground estates or public housing under 50 plots. Procedures were not relaxed for higher-ground relocation until April 2014, three years after the disasters (Okamoto 2015).

The delays have led many residents to drop out. Even for those who want to relocate, however, things are far from simple. The drive to preserve a bounded, exclusive and rooted model of community comes (as we shall see in Chapter 6) at a severe cost: the future viability of the group itself. But to even get to that stage, one must first confront other forms of precarity that threaten people’s ability to move at all.

Money Problems

One afternoon, a shopkeeper in one of the temporary malls told me his story. Before the disaster, he had worked in a seafood processing plant, and like many residents also made money through seasonal fishing. “I had just bought a new boat,” he said. Its insurance was due to start on March 12. On March 11, it was washed away by the tsunami. When he told me this, in 2013, he had only just finished paying off the loan. He had given up the sea, opting to open a small shop where he sold local foods and craft goods to tourists. Like many shopkeepers, he now faced the dual pressure of finding a place to live and investing in a new store, most likely in the permanent shopping arcade scheduled for completion in 2017. He would have to pay for both himself.

Residents moving to the new estates had three options regarding housing. The first, and most common, was the option to rent or buy a plot and build one’s own house. The second
option was to rent Disaster Public Housing, or *saigai kōei jūtaku*. Two options are available for
the latter, but not equally: a small number of individual and terraced houses (a mere 12 % of the
total) and the far more numerous apartments which are, in most people’s minds, synonymous
with Public Housing post-3.11.

After the Kobe earthquake of 1995, when residents received no financial assistance in
rebuilding their homes, sustained social and political pressure led to passage in 1998 of The Act
Concerning Support for Reconstructing Livelihood of Disaster Victims. This mandated a small
degree of assistance. Initially set at 1 million yen, compensation was revised to 2 million in 2003
(only available for dismantling damaged buildings and clearing land), and 3 million in 2007,
with all usage restrictions finally lifted (Oguma 2013, 14). Although significantly better than
nothing, 3 million yen (approximately $39,000.00 equivalent on December 2011) falls well short
of the cost of purchasing land and building a new house.

After 3.11, a degree of public subsidy has been made available for rebuilding homes, but
it mainly consists of offsetting the interest on loans. Residents planning to relocate to the higher-
ground estates can offset the interest on their loans and receive a small amount of moving
assistance (802,000 yen, equivalent to $7072.96 as of February 2017). Those opting to rebuild
elsewhere with their own funds are eligible for direct support, capped at 1,500,000 yen (or
$13,500 dollars). Many residents must therefore take out loans to rebuild their houses, but
eligibility is not guaranteed. Those nearing the cutoff point for borrowing\(^\text{19}\) often have to make
‘parent-child loans’ (*oyako ro-n*), in which the child inherits the unpaid loan when the elder
becomes ineligible. Those already past the cutoff must rely entirely on their children to borrow
for them. These problems are compounded by the fact that many residents have outstanding
loans for the houses (and boats), washed away. Adding new ones creates so-called “2-layer

\(^{19}\) Many companies limit repayment to 65 years of age.
loans” (*nijū ro-n*), an issue that also occurred after Kōbe. The government does allow residents to rent rather than purchase land in the new estates, mitigating some of the initial outlay. An architect familiar with the situation told me that, in at least one of the Shizugawa estates, most prospective residents are planning to do so. This also means, however, that the land will return to the state on their death rather than pass to their descendants, marking a dramatic change from the pre-disaster state, where land had been passed down through many generations of residents forming enduring ties within and across areas.

It’s not only homes that residents must rebuild. The fishing industry accounts for nearly a quarter (23.4%) of employment in Minamisanriku (Minamisanriku-chō 2015). Those who lost their boats must buy new ones. They must also rebuild the portside workshops destroyed by the tsunami. Before the disasters, each fisherman was “CEO of a one-person company,” I was told, and a CEO must have their offices. In late 2014, I visited one such family in Togura District, near the southernmost end of the town. *Tane-hasami* had just begun: the inserting of *wakame* seeds, one-by-one, into the folds of long ropes, which will then be suspended in the sea to form an underwater farm. Down towards the bay, I could see the skeleton of the father’s new workshop. They had worried so much about whether to build it first, his wife told me, but in the end earning a living took precedence over leaving the temporary housing complex. The money they had borrowed for it had reduced what they could borrow for the house. “Money is what we need before anything else,” she said, “so everyone is obsessed with work.” Farmers, who account for 10% of the working population, face similar challenges. As one said to me, “if my livelihood isn’t restored, then how can I build a house? Unlike the sea, if you don’t prepare the earth (*tsuchi wo tsukuru*) you can’t return to 100%.”
The cost of each temporary housing unit, Ōguma writes, was around 7,440,000 yen (roughly $65,000 as of March 2017). When combined with the three million yen provided to each household under the revised Act Concerning Support for Reconstructing Livelihood of Disaster Victims [sic] and the additional two and a half million from municipal support funds, around 13 million yen (over $110,000 as of March 2017) was spent on each household.

If the government built a permanent residence or provided aid for refugees directly with the same funds, in the words of the mayor of Ōtsuchi Town in Iwate Prefecture, “that would have been the best kind of assistance.” The reason this was not done is due to the aforementioned path-dependent nature of disaster countermeasures. Japanese governmental aid must be used to construct public works, not to create private assets (Ōguma 2013).

The figures above do not even account for the cost of higher-ground relocation itself. In Miyagi Prefecture, the cost of preparing each plot is over 260,000 dollars (Harada 2012). Only a small portion of this will be recouped from selling or renting the land to residents. In the name of ‘not supporting individuals,’ the government is spending over 370,000 dollars per household just to get them to the starting gate.

All of this will worsen the town’s already strained finances. For Disaster Public Housing, the situation is just as bad. Although the Reconstruction Fund is providing some of their funding, as the town will receive rent money from occupants it must provide a portion of construction costs. If the current level of population outflow continues, many units may become vacant. Even those who have no intention of leaving will not be around for long: over half of the prospective residents of public housing are over 65, and 29% 75 or over. Many residents (26.3%) live alone.

---

20 30,570,000 yen per plot, or 266,206 dollars as of March 2017.

21 International comparison here is instructive. After the Indonesian tsunami of 2004, for example, the government, non-profits and community organizations pursued multiple models of housing reconstruction in Banda Aceh. Crucially, in all cases the new housing was provided to victims free of charge (Vale, Shamsuddin, and Goh 2014).
Miyazaki projects that within 20 years, more than half of all units could be vacant (Miyazaki 2015). The Town could theoretically revise entry conditions to allow non-victim residents. This might be possible to some degree in the larger estates near the town’s economic and administrative centers, but a town whose population is falling won’t have much demand for apartments. And the population continues to fall.

**Debating ‘Community’**

In Chapter 2, I described the history and function of machizukuri councils, or Machikyō: the consultative organs set up by local municipalities after the disaster to “gather the opinions of residents” regarding various aspects of reconstruction plans. In its initial phase, the Shizugawa Machikyō contained a section dedicated to discussing higher-ground relocation. In 2013, however, this section was phased out, and its consultative function transferred to three, new ‘discussion groups’ (kentōkai): one for each of the 3 estates being built in central Shizugawa (West, Center, and East). Meetings were held in the offices of the local administration itself, and run by one of the consultants hired by the town council to assist with the reconstruction of Shizugawa. Unlike the Machikyō, these meetings were open to the public, meaning that I could both attend regularly and interview a reasonable number of the kentōin, or ‘discussants.’ These were residents of the town intending (or who had initially intended) to relocate to the estate in question. Many of them had been personally invited to join the kentōkai by the consultants, due to their previous attendance at the Machikyō or their status within their respective communities. Their number was small, and the consultants regularly pleaded with them to invite more residents to join. None ever came.
Debate centered on several issues. Many discussants were disturbed by the number and location of roads into the new estates. Bōshū only provides funding for a single main road, and there was much fear of isolation and congestion. “There’s a risk that the number of isolated people will increase,” one local dignitary told me,

We need transport policies, regular public transport etc., to make a network that connects the estates…People will stop coming down (to the town center). We need to make these ‘separated spaces’ more human spaces; with the low-lying areas fulfilling a connective role [between them].

Another major issue was the size of the plots. Bōshū allows for a maximum of 100 tsubo (around 330 square meters) per plot. While this might seem large for a city, for farmers and fishermen – who often have a lot of equipment – it felt very cramped. Even the Mayor said as much, in a talk on reconstruction policy given at the Japan Academy for Municipal Personnel: “the reality is that in the countryside, many plots are larger than 100 tsubo.” (Satō 2012, 5) Demand for more than 100 tsubo was high among residents. In a 2013 survey 28% of the 3 Shizugawa estates’ prospective residents asked for more, with the modal area 120 (closely followed by 150) and the mean 145. Almost all the remainder opted for 100 (57%). Those asking for less than 100 tsubo numbered only 15% (Shizugawa-Chiku Machizukuri Kyōgikai 2013, 8). After much pressure, permission was granted by the national government to treat 100 tsubo as an average, allowing for a small degree of variation of plot size within estates. Two Kentōkai members described their reaction to the news:

A: In the end, they’ve been hiding the fact they could do it! We didn’t win.
B: The truth was they could totally do it!
A: First they say, “we can’t do it, we can’t do it.”
B: But if we hadn’t kept raising our voices, it probably would have stayed 100 tsubo.
One Kentōkai member told me that: “We also said it would be nice to have small shops, things like that…‘We can’t do that kind of thing, we can’t do it, we can’t do it,’ that’s what it was like. ‘That kind of thing isn’t in the plan.’” Tossani, in his appraisal of Onnagawa’s Master Reconstruction Plan, criticizes the separation of residence and workplace that will result from the new zoning: “This stratification propagates the need to commute between specific and disparate parts of the city, exacerbating traffic congestion, time wastage and social dislocation while eroding any sense of community and collective ownership.” (Tossani 2012, 269) Asserting that the traditional shop-house is the basic unit of community structure, Tossani also argues that post-3.11 zoning undermines the local “ecosystem” necessary for a functional “urban cultural agglomeration.” (Tossani 2012, 269-270) It is notable that the research on which he bases his argument concerning the shop-house was conducted in Tokyo, not Tōhoku. It is certainly true that some residents – mainly shopkeepers – were deeply concerned about the dissociation of home and retail space he details, as well as the broader separation of residence from work in the recovery plans, of which it is but one manifestation. Others, however, were more interested in supermarkets than local businesses, which were suffering economically before the disasters and have been heavily reliant on visiting construction workers and tourists since. There is no ‘basic unit’ of community structure, as I implied earlier. However, Tossani is correct in arguing that we must think of local society as an ecosystem, and ask how social, cultural and material flows – “exchanges” – will be affected not just by the brute fact of relocation, but also the way it is implemented. This is exactly what the kentōin were trying to do.

Residents had priorities other than ‘community’ in the strict sense, of course, but many of their concerns were related, in one way or another, to the location of new estates within the broader flows and exchanges constituting the town. This is consistent with the broader definition.
of community as ‘ecology’ I set out earlier. However, as these issues touched on hard reconstruction – which, as detailed in earlier chapters, was “all already decided” – the government instead restricted their input during kentōkai to a more limited issue: the position of houses within the next estates. After all the rejections, this restricted conception of community-building was all they were left with. A member of the Kentōkai for the Central District described this to me:

The first thing was, you could call it a business area, we talked about how those running a business within the estate, how they could connect to the estate, but in the end, like I said, the law got in the way you could say, “you can’t do that,” they said. After that it felt like, little by little, they decided to move the meetings forward by talking about how it could be made an estate that promoted community…How to allocate plots. After that, it felt just like a meeting aimed at that, it wasn’t really machizukuri.

Not that plots are unimportant. An interim report released by the Shizugawa Machikyō – a group that, as I outlined in Chapter 3, nominally represents residents – began its recommendations for how to implement relocation with:

A framework that respects both pre-and post-disaster communities is necessary. To that end, lotteries for entire areas should be avoided. In order to construct a framework that can fulfill both the desire for ‘relocation as an individual’ and ‘relocation as a group,’ firstly one should decide a block unit as one’s destination, and then allocate plots within each block through voluntary discussion (Takadai Iten Bukai 2013, 3).

In July 2015, I was invited to a meeting of the Isatomae Machizukuri Council’s Masuzawa Section, where plots would finally be decided for future residents of their new higher-ground estate. The meeting began at 7pm, and was very well attended: a quick headcount showed some 39 people present, not including the town council workers, consultants and construction industry representatives that lined the walls. After a brief opening speech by one of the organizers, there was an update on the construction works, which had been delayed due to “harder ground” than
expected. The next topic of discussion was the name of the new estate. Some residents wanted to change the name of the *aza* – the small postal district – from Minehata to Isatomae, thus bringing the name of their former residence from the coast to the hills with them. The consultant leading the meeting was skeptical this would be approved, as the estate fits neatly into an already-existing *aza*. One woman stood up and protested any attempt to change the *aza* name: “there are several people from Minehata here too!”

Finally, we reached the main event. The decisions tonight would not be final, the consultant leading the discussion emphasized, but for most people present, this was it: the moment when they would finally know where they will live. Prior to the meeting, they had asked people to officially apply for their plot of choice, and in the event of an overlap – of which there were six – the group had to decide on a resolution process. Despite repeated urging from the consultant to “go home and discuss things,” one resident’s suggestion that they push forward immediately was clearly favored by the group. “What’s all this blathering about? Get on with it!” shouted one older man, on whose land part of the estate was being built. Two women, one younger and one older, got up to settle the first disputed plot. They drew straws amidst much laughter and confusion, with the older lady victorious. One by one the plots were decided, and the losers, despite the consultant’s urging to go home and think about it, decided to try again there and then. Each wrote their new preferred plots on post-it notes and handed them to the consultant, who marked the results on a large map of the estate. Those who didn’t overlap left, their plot settled, while the rest began to draw straws again. Finally, all was settled. I asked one of the residents, who lost his initial choice, how he felt. “It’s a middling sort of happiness,” he replied.
Anomie in the Hisaichi

Residents had concerns about relocation that were not discussed at the Kentōkai. Firstly, many fishermen, who had previously lived almost on the waterfront, were worried about the distance between them and their boats/workshops. Part of the problem here is that fishermen – most of whom are self-employed – must continually monitor the conditions – or ‘face’ (unadara) – of the sea (Wilhelm 2004); they must feel the seascape using all their senses to accurately gauge fishing conditions (Bulian 2015). Some people I spoke to believed that previous efforts at higher-ground relocation had failed for precisely this reason and that, in the future, fishermen will likely relocate to the low-lying regions again. Secondly, there was a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about what the shift from “harbor life” (hama seikatsu) to “estate life” (danchi seikatsu) would feel like. People worry about ‘community’ and how to build it, but they are also afraid of how cramped the new estates will feel. This might appear paradoxical, but only if one mistakes ‘community’ for immediate proximity. Houses in the hama were not right next to each other, but occupied consistent locations in a known landscape. The greatest fears I heard, however, were not from those building houses (who are, in fact, the lucky ones). They were for those transitioning not from hama to danchi seikatsu, but from having their own houses to living, often alone, in small apartments: The Disaster Public Housing, or saigai kōei jūtaku. What, if any, sense of community could emerge in these places?

For those entering the blocks, the dislocations are even more profound than for regular relocation: no choice of who to live next to (however subject to confirmation by lottery), no say in one’s living conditions, no ownership of property. A future that ends with the occupant’s departure. For the most part, one chooses public housing because one lacks the means – or the family – to secure a loan (residents of public housing are overwhelmingly elderly, with a quarter
of them living alone). In other words, these are the people most in need of the support provided by social networks (Aldrich 2015), and yet, they are entering spaces least likely to provide them with it. All of this is compounded by the paucity of locations. 8 Kōei jūtaku are only being constructed in the town (most of them attached to the large estates), meaning that residents from smaller hamlets must move to new areas. For city-dwellers, used to changing apartments (and lack of community) this probably seems like no big deal. But for those used to relatively settled socio-spatial relations, the transition leaves them feeling, literally, displaced. This is compounded by the cleavage between residents of new public housing and extant communities, as well as the geographical location of the buildings. In Iriya, for example, the housing is at the top of an extremely steep hill, not well suited to the legs of the elderly and infirm.

One group working to overcome these issues is Fukkō Minasankai, a nonprofit set up by residents of all four districts of the town to promote soft machizukuri and build community among residents of both the new higher-ground estates and public housing complexes. In early 2015, I joined them in a mapping workshop for occupants of Iriya’s new kōei jūtaku. Long-time residents of the area and new residents of the housing block had been invited, with the idea that the latter would ask the former for information about the area. This would be used to produce a map distributed among residents of the new public housing, most of whom had arrived from Shizugawa and Togura, and, in Kudō’s words, “moved in without knowing anything about the place.” “We don’t know their faces yet,” said one new arrival of the people of Iriya 2-Gyōseiku, the administrative district housing the block. By bringing together the new residents and locals familiar with the surroundings, the organizers hoped to (1) get people to know each other, and (2) begin integrating people in the area’s networks and rhythms. But how can you build community, when people will not leave their rooms?
The workshop was held in the meeting room of the recently completed public housing block. By 10am, when the event was supposed to start, only a handful of people had arrived: enough to half-fill one of the 4 tables. One of the organizers joined the table, joking that as an Iriya native he counted as a “half-resident” today. Another, after knocking on a few doors, reported that people were feeling shy, and they should just get on with it. A few more residents filtered in during the introductions; enough that, when combined with organizers, two of the four tables could be filled. But as one of the organizers noted, residents of the housing were still outnumbered by staff. I hovered between the tables, listening to the conversation (and the silences). The session began with organizers asking residents what they would like to know, but since their numbers were few staff members and guests also chimed in. The elderly residents were largely silent; several didn’t even raise their hands when, at the end, Kudō asked them to vote on what kind of map they would prefer.

This was not an isolated event. One community worker told me of a Disaster Public Housing block in Chūetsu (site of a major earthquake in 2004) where “they had a communal space, but nobody used it…I heard that most days all the doors were locked.” Can people whose entire lives have been lived in the rhythms of a taskscape – or, if they themselves were not working, in a place that swayed to its rhythms – form relations in these new apartment blocks where there is, literally, nothing to do? Those of working age will at least have jobs to go to, but not the elderly. Requests for communal gardens and other spaces for collective production were normally refused by the government as ‘outside of the program’s scope;’ whether they will be built in the future using different money is unclear. If regular relocation involves preserving community at the possible expense of the future (Chapter 6), the new apartments offer neither community nor future.
Conclusion

Official relocation aims, as far as possible, to preserve hamlets (shūraku) at the expense of other possible groupings. However, it restricts resident’s input to issues of site location and plot allocation; a narrow definition of ‘community’ that excludes their concerns over the ecologies of circulation and exchange integral to their place-based identities. However, for all the differences between chiiki-based notions of communal life and government frameworks, many residents – particularly the elders – also see their places as hermetic: pockets to be carved out and defended within the broader ecology of the town. As we shall see in the next chapter, the strength of these groupings – their high levels of ‘bonding social capital’ (van Deth and Zmerli 2010) – has a light and a dark side: whilst it allowed for high levels of cooperation during and after the disasters, it also threatens their long-term viability. Meanwhile, those most in need of community – the isolated, elderly residents of the Disaster Public Housing – have been offered a form of relocation least likely to produce it. There are many groups pushing against the anomie of public housing, but whether they will be successful is unclear.

In 2015, I joined Fukkō Minasankai for the second of their mapping workshops in Iriya. This meeting was livelier, although the number of residents was about the same. The organizers had brought a draft of the map, based on last meeting’s suggestions: bold, colorful and, as one elderly lady said, easy to understand. In the center was a lantern-shaped box with the heading “festivals,” currently empty. A copy was placed on each of the two tables for people to discuss and augment (Figure 5-7). On my table, three elderly ladies were discussing matsuri and where they occur: The Autumn Festival, Harvest Meeting, and Silk Festa. “Here, you can find apples,” one said, pointing to a blank space on the map, “and over there, persimmons.” One of the old
men piped up that autumn is good for mushrooms, but when asked where one can pick them, refused to disclose his secrets. After discussion had finished, a representative from each table presented their contributions to the group, and we broke for tea.

One of the organizers that I’ll call H pulled up a chair next to him and asked me to sit down. To my left was an elderly resident of the public housing, newly returned from Yamagata Prefecture, where he had evacuated after the tsunami. On my right was an old lady from Shiomi, one of the waterfront districts of central Shizugawa. H mentioned how the hardest thing post-disaster is the dispersal of communities. Yes, the lady concurred, “we just disbanded, and that was it.” After living with the same people for decades, she feels lonely not seeing them. H talked again about the importance of festivals: in Iriya, he said, there is a festival held jointly by four
different hamlets, binding them together once a year. When he mentioned the Shizugawa
Summer Festival and its firework display, the old lady flinched. I don’t want to go to that, she
said, although she might find her old neighbors by the waterfront, watching the rockets fly. She
doesn’t want to see the sea, she said, or remember that down by the waterfront she used to have a
home.
Uncertain Futures

The sea, the mountains, the hamlets, the forests, the water, the stars, all are beautiful; you can have urchins, and sea pineapples, and salmon, and scallops, and seaweed, and rice, and cows, and beans. Such abundance, such luxury.
- Ueda Yumika

All there is here is the sea. If we didn’t have the sea, nobody would think much of this place.
- Unknown

Introduction

Fukkō machizukuri, as I argued in the Introduction, is conceived as dichotomous (though not dialectical): on the one hand, you have the ‘hardware,’ or physical infrastructure, and on the other, the ‘software,’ a term encompassing manifold notions of social, economic and cultural life. While residents have been mostly excluded from decisions concerning the former, local citizen’s organizations and non-profits have been heavily involved in rebuilding the latter: an ongoing process of restructuring communal life within an infrastructural space only gradually emerging. There is a widespread understanding in Minamisanriku that while the municipal government will build the ‘hard,’ soft machizukuri is the provenance of non-profit citizen’s groups, at least for the present.

By mid-2016, when I last visited, parts of the new town were finally beginning to take shape. They had finished preparing most of the higher-ground estates, and the larger ones (including those in Shizugawa) were due for completion later that year and early the next. Many residents had rebuilt their houses, an act that seems to mark a dividing line. We’re entering a new phase, people said to me, and “the real reconstruction starts now.” (hontō no fukkō wa kore kara) Even as many experienced profound relief, new anxieties (or older, buried ones) were surfacing.
Although Minamisanriku’s Reconstruction Plan projects a period of development from 2014-2020 in which new industries are stimulated (particularly ‘green’ and ‘blue tourism’ and ‘sixth-sector industrialization’\(^1\)) there is pervasive doubt over whether the populace can sustain its current form, let alone give birth to something new. Minamisanriku, like other stricken municipalities, has long suffered from economic and population decline (both of which were dramatically accelerated by the disasters and their aftermath). Local government projections show that the population will fall from 14,333 in 2014 to as low as 4,361 by 2060 (Figure 6-1) (Privately, some officials and many townspeople I spoke to expect it to be even lower). The decline in raw numbers parallels the growing proportion of residents over 65 (Figure 6-2).

---

\(^1\) Ken Nagano defines sixth-sector industrialization as projects that “increase agricultural income by combining secondary industry and tertiary industry with primary industry” (Nakano 2014, 315). In the United States, farm-to-table operations (or bean-to-bar in the chocolate industry) have a similar logic.
Across rural Japan, hamlets in similar circumstances are moving, one death at a time, towards extinction, lacking both the tax base to sustain administrative capacity and a population capable of maintaining the “ritual functions” of community life (Love 2013, 115). Such sites are called *genkai shūraku*, or “hamlets at their limits,” (a term coined by the sociologist Ōno Akira), and their number is increasing. Although Minamisanriku is not yet a *genkai shūraku*, the limit is within sight. As one local government worker told me, “We must confront [this] now. These next 10 years.”

The consequences of doing nothing are severe. In 2011, the NLI Research Institute in Tokyo projected that economic growth in the northeast would average 0.2% over the period 2010-2020 (which covers Minamisanriku’s ‘development phase’), down from 0.4% in the decade preceding and significantly below the metropolitan areas, at the top of which sits Tokyo with an average projected growth of 1.1% for the same period (Kuwahata 2011). It is worth
Figure 6-3. Minamisanriku’s reported GDP 2003-2012. Source: Minamisanriku-chō. There are some discrepancies in the Town's data, with consecutive reports giving different figures for previous years. I have used the most recent numbers available for each year.

noting that the northeast includes several medium-sized cities, most notably Sendai, which will account for the lion’s share of growth. Many of its smaller rural municipalities are already in recession – or, since the downsizing is likely permanent, what we might call degrowth (Kallis, Kerschner, and Martinez-Alier 2012). In Minamisanriku’s case, my own calculations show an average economic contraction of 1.2% per year between 2003-2011 (see Figure 6-3). Despite the local government’s optimistic predictions regarding growth, for those tasked with ameliorating the decline the best-case scenario probably does not involve ‘development’ in economic terms, but rather slowing the rate of contraction in the hope of reaching, and maintaining, a more ‘sustainable’ level of population. Efforts to achieve this, however, are currently constrained by the unfinished state of ‘hard’ reconstruction. As one local government worker told me,
If you don’t have a foundation you can’t build…until we have that our activities are constrained. The longer this period goes on, how can I put it…People will keep leaving one after another, because they’ll have no choice but to work somewhere else…So in this interim, how can we connect. How we can connect communities, connect activities; these have become the issues.

“Connect,” (tsunaide iku) in this statement, has a temporal dimension: the activities he mentioned must relate to, and construct, a future. As I argued in Chapter 2, in official discourse the future of the hisaichi – the resilience and sustainability of its municipalities – is often tied to bōsai, or disaster prevention. I want to suggest, however, that it is not vulnerability to disasters that threatens the viability of rural communities in Tōhoku; the real work of resilience-building, and sustainability-building, lies elsewhere.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the various dislocations and disruptions caused by the tsunami – the “cracks in the landscape” (Chapter 1) – have both exacerbated existing trends (like depopulation) and opened space, however temporarily, for novel reconfigurations. They have also created profound anxiety concerning the future viability of the town – and of Tōhoku in general – through accelerating processes of decline and disrupting relatively stable biographies and their role in composing places (Pred 1984). As the ‘hardware’ is gradually completed, for some residents the problem of reconstruction – whether they call it fukkyū or fukkō – is receding, replaced by the following concern: how can we harness this moment of change to reform the town and give it a future?

The problem towns like Minamisanriku face, according to one visiting consultant, is how to balance improving or maintaining the well-being of those who remain against stimulating inflows of people and, by extension, capital. These two things are, of course, deeply intertwined; at the same time, they exhibit considerable friction. The population is falling, according to
Figure 6-4. A simple, multi-axis model illustrating the two axes along which many of the new nonprofits in Tōhoku can be plotted. The Left-Right axis moves from "keep people from leaving" to "bring new people in." The other axis moves from "reattach people to things in the town" to "reform things in the town."

official theory, for two clusters of reasons, which they label “natural” and “social” phenomena: the former includes birth and death rates, the later the surplus or deficit of those leaving versus those moving to the town (Minamisanriku-chō 2016). Reducing population outflow requires, firstly, making people want to stay in the town, which raises the question of how one can deepen (or revive) place attachment whilst simultaneously reforming place. Secondly, one must bring in new people, but new people cannot (as we saw in the previous chapter), simply be absorbed into existing community structures, not least due to their hermeticity. The influx of people from the cities is adding new layers to rural life, reworking it and, in the process, creating tensions,

2 It goes without saying that neither of these is really ‘natural’ or ‘social.’ Birth rates are declining for eminently social reasons, and the outflow of young people is, in fact, a predictable and ‘natural’ consequence of the spatial distribution of Japanese educational and economic institutions and gendered norms of work and home life.
including with those who view it as more important to re-kindle lost place attachment through what I will describe below as ‘rediscovery.’ (saihakken) The positions taken by many of the new groups involved in ‘soft’ reconstruction can thus be plotted along two broad axes, as seen in Figure 6-4.

The trends described above – which are not confined to Minamisanriku – are also shifting the place of the ‘rural’ in broader imaginaries, however marginally. The renowned ‘starchitect’ Kuma Kengo, commissioned in May of 2014 to produce a ‘Grand Design’ for the eviscerated town center of Shizugawa, described the future of Japan’s archetypal village – the sato – as follows:

At the same time as being the site of intimate dwellings, the village of the future will have a magnetic field that gathers together the most cutting-edge sensibilities and networks. It will not be the ‘village’ of the past, but a new community incorporating a global filter (Maganuma 2011).

Many of those arriving in Tōhoku from the cities argue, against prevalent depictions of the rural as empty backwater, that the disaster areas are the cutting edge of Japanese society: a laboratory whose experiments will provide models not just for the revitalization or “activation” (kasseika) (Love 2013) of rural economies, but for the future of ‘Japan’ itself. This is partly because, as Akasaka and Ōguma argue, processes occurring all over rural Japan have “suddenly been sped up 20 years by the tsunami” (Oguma and Akasaka 2015, 261). ‘Japan,’ in these formulations, refers to a certain scale (the kuni, or highest level of the nested hierarchy forming Japan’s spatial imaginary) (Yamashita 2012); while the changes envisioned will primarily affect rural places, by extension the urban too must change. But there is also another reason: the tsunami and nuclear meltdown, as I described in the introduction, produced profound anxieties at the national level; they were as much cultural as physical disasters. For some, the shockwaves they sent through
Japan have prompted (or accelerated) a rethinking of Japanese capitalism and its associated spatial imaginaries. The long-term (and even short-term) impact of these trends is uncertain, and further research will be needed to parse out their effects. In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce and contextualize some examples from Minamisanriku and its environs.

**Post-Capitalism in the Post-‘Disaster Regions’**

There are hints for a new society here in Minamisanriku. Even in a place with nothing, there is something. Maybe before, in the Edo Period, we had a good society. But we have forgotten. We had the industrial revolution...We fought wars for energy, food, metal. We forgot the good society. But in Minamisanriku there are hints for the future. Not capitalism, not energy, not metal. We want to be happy.

From the late 19th century to the present day, the growth of Japanese cities has come at the direct expense of rural economies and ‘regional society,’ in both the economic (share of GDP) and physical (population and surface area) senses. From the 1980s onwards, huge growth in urban industry and a concomitant expansion of the labor force accelerated these trends. The ‘traditional’ agricultural sector was increasingly unable to compete, and by the turn of the 20th century, as Penelope Francks describes, “agricultural policy-makers and rural interest groups were well aware of the problems that industrial growth was posing for the rural economy (...) whose interests no longer coincided with those of the urban one.” (Francks 2006, 108-109) These trends continued throughout the 20th century, culminating in the neoliberal reforms of the Koizumi administration (2001-2006). These led to increasing decentralization, including the abolition of a redistributive system that transferred tax revenue from the cities to the regions. While pitched as an opportunity for self-reliance and autonomy, Love reports how its critics saw this as “a final “cutting off and throwing away” of rural regions” (Love 2013, 114); the end of a longue durée of neglect, beyond which there was, literally, no future.
After 3.11, however, something appears to be changing (if only a little). In Chapters 2 and 3, I described how pre-existing citizen’s groups (such as keiyaku-kai) and new pressure groups have worked to influence ‘hard’ reconstruction. Responsibility for ‘soft’ reconstruction, however, has been devolved to residents from the start, and while existing organizations have been very active in re-suturing fragmented communities, new groups have also taken up much of the work. During an interview, one local government described to me the changing balance between the town and non-profits, with a large drop in capacity of the former around the time of the tsunami and, later, its excessive workload once reactivated. “It’s against this,” he continued,

That NPOs and things like that, a lot of support has come in, it’s exploded…There is a limit to what the administration can do. We have no money: when you divide up the national funding,3 we’re only left with some tens of millions of yen. Since that’s all we have, we must figure out what we can do together…the administration can be the engine, but afterwards the wheels must run on their own.

The wheels appear to be running, at least for the moment. The tsunami brought a sudden influx of people, mainly volunteers, into the disaster areas. Many of them stayed, and some founded new organizations (primarily non-profits) to aid in the recovery effort. These have been sprouting all over the disaster regions. In 2015, some 38 non-profits were (or had, until recently been) active in Minamisanriku, of which 29 (76%) were established after 3.11. While there are many differences between these groups (see Figure 6-5 for a breakdown of their activities), the new non-profits can be broadly split into two categories: those established by ‘locals’ and those set up by ‘outsiders’ (yosomono). There is a lot of overlap between these two categories, and some organizations do not fall neatly into either. Some groups set up by former volunteers have mainly local staff (or have since been taken over by local leadership), and many ‘local’ groups

3 He is referring here to money made available by the national government for local government programs to increase their population.
employ both I and U-Turners. The distinction is relevant, however. Former volunteers have set up most of the nonprofits active in Minamisanriku and nearby municipalities. Unlike ‘local’ groups, which focus primarily in increasing quality of life and rebuilding community, these organizations are mostly concerned with two issues: the ‘rediscovery’ (saihakken) and marketing of local culture, and bringing new people, primarily urbanites, into their municipalities. I do not know for certain if this pattern holds for the disaster regions as a whole, but think it highly likely.

The growth of these groups has been funded, at least initially, by a number of central government and prefectural programs established to promote ‘soft’ reconstruction. These include the Fukkō Ōentai or ‘Reconstruction Support Group’ program, which pays the salary of

---

4 ‘I-Turner’ is short for ‘rural turner’ (inaka ta-n): somebody who moves from the city to the countryside. A ‘U-Turner’ is someone born in a rural area who, having moved to the city, decides to return.
individual nonprofit workers for 3 years and was used extensively in the town. With the reduction in local governments’ capacities post-disaster (due to both the damage they sustained and the exponentially increased workload they face during rebuilding), work that would normally be done in-house had also been outsourced to non-profits. Some of the organs active in the ‘reconstruction period’ (fukkō-ki) – such as machizukuri councils (see Chapter 3) are being run by such groups, providing them with much needed income. The dissolution of these bodies when “reconstruction is over” may bring an end to these revenue streams, however. One nonprofit worker told me that national funding has created what some are calling a “disaster bubble.” With the money about to run out, it is expected to soon burst. “The government can’t go on giving out money forever,” a municipal employee told me:

You need to think about what to do next…For any non-profit it’s the same. A way of making your own money. Whether they continue, or whether their numbers fall, I think, this is the difficult thing. They’ve grown, but the ones that came in from outside are diminishing, and the ones that emerged within here are also, they’re being weeded out. The reason they’re reducing is, of course, one of them is that money is no longer coming in from outside. On top of that, if you don’t figure out, if those organizations don’t think about how to make money for themselves, they’ll be eliminated.

Concurrent with the rise in nonprofits, many residents (many of them U or I-Turners) have set up new businesses after the disasters. In Minamisanriku, these include online stores such as Minamisanriku de Okaimono (http://www.odette-shop.com/) and Tamiko no Umi Pakku (https://www.tamipack.jp/), both of which specialize in seafood; craft workshops like Yes Kōbō (http://ms-octopus.jp/) which produces the well-known Fukkō Octopus; and new products like Ora Sake (https://www.373net.org/), a sake made from rice grown in abandoned paddies. These should not be thought of as a distinct from the nonprofit boom. Some of their staff had previously worked for or continue to run nonprofits on the side, and many of the new NPOs,
particularly those started or heavily staffed by ‘outsiders,’ see encouraging entrepreneurship as a major part of their mission.

The new nonprofits and entrepreneurial ventures have been subject to a great deal of media and academic coverage. As well as frequent newspaper articles (particularly in regional press), their activities are publicized and supported by specialized web magazines such as Innovation Tōhoku (a Google-supported initiative). There is also an entire cottage industry of academics specializing in regional economies, ‘region-building’ (chiiki-zukuri), machizukuri, entrepreneurialism, and other related areas. The constant flow of groups and initiatives across the disaster regions provide ample grist for these academic mills, much of whose work is descriptive rather than analytic. This is understandable to a degree. It’s hard to measure the success, especially in the short-term, of such activities (and there is also the difficulty of how to define ‘success,’ or for that matter ‘failure’). This trend is not confined to Japan; there is even a course at Harvard University, taught by Professor Hirotaka Takeuchi, that describes Tōhoku as “the world’s test market for authentic entrepreneurship.” “Regions previously impacted by natural disasters,” its blurb claims, “provide a unique opportunity by which to foster entrepreneurial activity in highly dynamic situations.” (Harvard Business School 2017)

This might appear very capitalist, even ‘neoliberal.’ But there is another side we must also consider: the claims, by certain non-profits, that the disaster regions can be sites for moving beyond capitalism. Paul Mason, in his widely read Postcapitalism (2015), argues that the beginnings of a postcapitalist future – or futures – are already discernable within the increasingly hyperconnected societies of the advanced industrial economies. Mason, and other Left proponents of a postcapitalist technology-driven utopia (cf. Srnicek and Williams 2015), have been criticized as out of touch with the realities of Silicon Valley, which the critic Evgeny
Morozov calls, convincingly, the heart of a new feudalism (Morozov 2016). In Japan, however, we see a similar move to Mason’s among many of the new nonprofits: insisting, in this case, that the seeds of a future society are to be found not in the urban, but in the rural. Minamisanriku, for example, contracted in 2016 with an organization called Next Commons Lab, described by its founders as an “infrastructure company working for the realization of a post-capitalist society.”

In an interview with the Nippon Foundation’s Social Innovation Forum, one of its founders elaborated:

> Not just the national, not just the global, we can systematically make our own unique economy, if there are people who can put this into practice, countless hypothetical countries will be built. If that happens, in the place of the former ‘big family’ of regional society, a community based on a common value system, that ‘family’ will be born. It might even cross borders. (Abe 2016)

The neoliberal and tech-utopianist color many of these organizations is clear, although a thorough analysis of their discourse, practice and actual impact is beyond the current scope of my dissertation. What is interesting, however, is not so much the economic ideology as the re-imagining of the nation they gesture towards. For such groups, ‘Postcapitalism’ does not, paradoxically, imply the transition to a fundamentally non-capitalistic mode of production. Instead, it marks a move away from a particular ideology of capitalist modernity: one structured around a nested hierarchy of social and economic relations modeled on the pre-war family, at the apex of which is the Emperor: the supreme father figure (Doi 1973). Such efforts indicate a shift is occurring within parts of Japanese society: one that both draws on and modifies the long-standing fetishism of rural ‘traditions’ that Ivy calls pushback against the fragmenting process of modernization and Westernization (Ivy 1995, 20). Here, the rural is not where some pre-modern cultural unity – the wellspring of Japanese selfhood – is to be found. Rather, it is a site of endless
multiplicities – ‘unique’ objects, histories, spaces – and a frontier for the realization of oneself not as ‘Japanese,’ but as a creative individual. This is only one vision of the rural, however; other, less optimistic ones hold as much (or more) sway.

Empty or Full

Ah, sometimes I want to go back To that place where there is nothing - Yamashita Ayumi, Inaka no Uta (Song of the Countryside)

In Japanese ethnology and philosophy, rural areas have long been viewed as an archive of alternative (including ‘traditional’) ways of life. The Japanese philosopher and prominent advocate of ‘localism,’ Uchiyama Takashi, for example, describes ‘the village/rural’ (sato) as a place in which ‘history’ is continually reproduced in a (presumably) ahistorical present:

History becomes stories (monogatari). Stories that are re-created in the present moment. This ‘history’ I call ‘historicity’…Separating history and historicity is meaningless. Surely, to recuperate historicity, one most have a place that makes this possible (emphasis added). A place where one can see how nature worked in the past. A place where one can see how people worked in the past. These places reproduce history within the present.

One can call these kinds of places fūdo. One can also call them sato.

Sato can be translated, firstly, as ‘village’ or ‘hamlet.’ But it also refers to the countryside as a whole; a move in which the rural and the village are explicitly conflated. Shogakukan’s Daijisen explains it as both “a small hamlet where houses are gathered, in mountainous, agricultural or other areas,” and “the rural, as opposed to the city.” This ‘opposition’ is important: the rural can only be produced as a discursive category though juxtaposition with that which it is ‘not’ (even

______________________________
5 While the term literally means ‘climate,’ in Japanese philosophy it is associated with the environmental determinism of the prominent philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro, who promoted a “theory of climate” (fūdō-ron).
as the logics that produce ‘the city’ gradually restructure ‘the hinterlands’ through the extension of previously urban forms and processes) (Brenner and Schmid 2015).

Western ethnographers of Japan, under the influence of prevalent theories of development, long saw rural areas as containing Uchiyama’s ‘history’: a traditional cultural foundation supposedly common to pre-modern Japan. According to Norbeck, for example, Japan had a homogenous national culture that was everywhere much the same, changing only through contact with “the West.” To disentangle the indigenous from the foreign, one had to go to small, “sufficiently isolated” rural communities, preferably with “no distinctive features.” (Norbeck 1954) Westernization and urbanization represented a loss close to the fall of man (Smith 1978; Dore 1978). In Shinohata: A Portrait of a Japanese Village, Dore writes:

Not everyone’s contact with growing things is entirely mediated through noisy smelly machines. Some people still have the feel of that tenderness and intimacy with living things that one glimpses if one watches an old lady handling her silkworms, or a man opening up a bundle of rice seedlings with an appraising eye before he bends down back again to resume the rapid work of pushing them into the soft mud in a carefully arranged pattern (Dore 1978, 251).

The ethnographers of Village Japan thus located ‘Japaneseness’ at the margins of an imposed modernity. The rural, here, was a reservoir of cultural values and social structures that were gradually disassembling, transforming, and perhaps vanishing under the onslaught of modernization, industrialization, and Westernization. This view – which as Ivy argues is very much a product of, not just a reaction to, modernity (Ivy 1995)\(^6\) – still exists in writing like Uchiyama’s and the corpus of ethno-nationalist propaganda known as *nihonjinron* (‘theories of

\(^6\) “It is arguable that there was no discursively unified notion of the “Japanese” before the eighteenth century, and that the articulation of a unified Japanese ethos with the “nation” to produce “Japanese culture” is entirely *modern.*” (Ivy 1995, 4)
the Japanese’). However, another less flattering depiction exits, offsetting the image of rural Japan as a locus of vanishing traditions: Japan’s peripheries, it goes, contain “nothing at all.”

One morning, as I was helping Satō – a middle-aged fisherman from a small hamlet in the far South of the town – to core recently landed wakame (shin-nuki), I asked him about his three sons. Two of them, he said, currently live in the prefectural capital, Sendai, and the third, while currently living at home, would probably leave for the city soon. Since all the young women leave, he said, the men must follow if they want to find a partner. In any case, job options in the town are too limited for the young. You can become a fisherman, or a farmer, and that’s about it, he said. An elderly woman I met outside Hayashi, a large hamlet just outside the former center of Shizugawa, echoed this negative vision: “all there is here is the sea. If there wasn’t the sea, nobody would think much of this place.”

There is a pervasive characterization of rural areas in Japanese popular discourse as empty: places where “there is nothing there” (nani mo nai). I heard this from locals as much as urbanites. At dinner one night, some young farmers from Shizugawa were challenging each other to find something they liked in the town, and when one couldn’t answer his friend ribbed him with “see, even locals can’t find anything here!” Go to any major Japanese city – where the “things” are – and this perspective feels understandable. To walk through the city is to traverse a forest of signs. Adverts, signboards, TV screens: The urban is dense with textual fragments that layer, one on top of the other: sometimes decaying, becoming retro or obsolete; at other times vanishing, to be replaced by yet more signs. To leave the city is, on first impression, to experience a lessening of density: fewer people, texts or images (moving or still); no music blaring over the streets; space that seems not to layer, but expand. As one young non-profit
worker told me, “in the countryside as I imagine it, it takes you 30 minutes by car to reach the nearest convenience store.”

Not all who leave for the city stay there, of course. Those who, having once left, return to their hometown, are referred to as ‘U-Turners,’ and I met many of them in Minamisanriku. Almost all the young men I met had lived outside the town at some point, either for university or work. In the aftermath of the disaster, some older residents also ‘U-Turned,’ having lived briefly with relatives in the city. One described her reasons for returning to me like this:

After the disaster, I found refuge for 6 months at my daughter’s house in Tokyo… At this age, I couldn’t find it in my heart to live [there]. Even when my daughter said, “if you went back you’d have no house to live in, stay in Tokyo”, I’d say, “I’m bored.” Even if you go to the riverbed, you don’t find fuki [bog rhubarb] poking out…with Shizugawa if you dig you can find clams, can’t you? There’s nothing to do, is there, in the city…

[Minamisanriku] has a humanity. You can’t communicate with people from foreign towns (yoso mo machi). Even when you’re in difficult times yourself, you think about other people. Go to a foreign town, and there’s nobody who’ll think about you.

In her account, it is the city that is empty, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. The emptiness of the city seems to parallel its inhuman scaling: where there are things to do, there are also helping hands. Perhaps it the contrast with the density of urban space that leads to the common response when you ask an urban dweller in Japan about their rural birthplace: “there is nothing there”. But for those that can read the landscape – at times a literal, as well as figurative, forest of signs – the rural is far from un-semiotic. As I argued in Chapter 5, it is also dense with social relations; so dense that, for young people (particularly young women) it can be stifling. The battle to both retain residents and bring new people in hinges on making rural content visible. First, however, you must rediscover it.
Realizations

“Andrew, come look at this,” said Abe (a pseudonym), shortly after I arrived at the office of his nonprofit in central Shizugawa. Gesturing to a hand-drawn graph on a large sheet of paper (Figure 6-6), he told me that he’d just had a breakthrough concerning their ‘concept’ for the coming year. The left axis, he explained, represents “realizations” (kizuki), measured on a scale from nothing to “to have, to be, or, being.” The right axis proceeds from “to take from each other” (ubaiau) on the far left to ‘sharing/dividing’ (wakeru) on the far right. “Our stock are our realizations,” he explained. “I have been meditating on this for a long time. When you meditate, you focus on your breathing: in, out, my chest is rising, my chest is falling. You become aware of these things…This is a kind of realization. We are here, being, and this becomes our stock. The point is not to judge whether the thing realized is good or bad, but simply to recognize that it
is (emphasis added). In capitalism, when you realize something you protect it” he continued, but here, instead of trying to protect our own realizations and, when necessary, steal those of others, it is necessary to share (or to realize together).

Abe’s rhetoric echoes that of “locality studies” (jimotogaku), a form of community mapping that has become increasingly popular since the turn of the millennium, at the tail end of “lost decade” following the collapse of economic growth in 1990s (Love 2013). I do not know if Abe had read the work of Yoshimoto Tetsuro – locality studies’ alleged founder – who described it, in Bridget Love’s translation, as “a “search for what is there” (aru mono no sagashi) (Love 2013, 113), but the parallels are clear. Locality studies, Love summarizes, promotes “a vision of renewal…through resident initiatives to awaken dormant sources of vitality”; what Tsurumi Kazuko calls “internally propelled development” (naihatsuteki hatten) (Love 2013, 113-117). Instead of acknowledging rural decline as the product of longer-term processes (and political decisions), she argues that the focus on “rediscovery” is part of a long-term trend of shifting the blame for degrowth onto residents themselves. This may well be true. However, for residents of Tōhoku after the disasters, the precipitous drop in population has made “rediscovery” a popular trope; not for ‘development,’ but for cultivating some sense of place attachment among children who, in this digitally-connected age, are already peri-urban subjects.

One initiative in this vein is Warasuko Tankentai,7 a program run by the Minamisanriku Fukkō Suishin Network (the Minamisanriku Reconstruction Promotion Network), a nonprofit established after 3.11. Warasuko asked local people to act as ‘sensei’ (teachers), instructing the children in various aspects of local nature, culture, and industry. Most visits would follow the same structure: the children would be divided into small groups, or han, each with an attached

---

7 Warasu means ‘children’ in the local dialect, and tankentai translate roughly as ‘exploration group.’
volunteer to look after them (and ensure they behaved themselves). After formally greeting the sensei and anyone else present, we would proceed with the day’s events, split up into discrete chunks between which we could rest and eat. For example, on visiting an oyster-processing facility, we viewed the tanks where the oysters are internally purified; observed the elderly men and women shucking them; trying our hands at shucking them ourselves; listened to a short lecture on oyster-rearing; ate a large oyster stew; and, as with every visit, ended by writing our thoughts on the day on large pieces of paper, to be photographed and preserved.

The most memorable events were not the visits, however, but the yearly camp. In 2014, this took place around the time of the rice harvest, which the children also tried their hand at. The ‘sensei’ talked about how, when people used to plant and harvest by hand, their backs became
permanently bent, and “it’s thanks to them that we can enjoy this delicious rice.” The children were, as one would expect, a bit rowdy, and often had to be warned against throwing the rice. “Be careful,” the sensei chided them, “there is a deity (kami-sama) in each rice grain.” After the harvest, we moved to the camping grounds at Kamiwarizaki (see Chapter 1). A night hike had been planned, in which the children would walk in the hills carrying only handmade lanterns. One of the organizers had disguised himself as a Tengu⁸ and hidden in the hills, where he would wait until nightfall. The whole thing appears an exercise in re-enchantment: in the deliberate production of a dark broken not by electric light, but by the uncertain flickering of candles, and of dimly glimpsed figures, mythic and monstrous. To not just teach children about place, but intoxicate them with it. The organizer of Warasuko, described what it meant for him this way:

---

Community is, an energy, paying attention [to something]. Faces, hands, rocks, anything. You feel inclined towards something, for a long time. When I was working in the rice paddy, I experienced this. The way the local people would pay attention, come and ask questions and offer me advice. You see it in the ordinary, the taken-for-granted, the things that are always there, the old small things, not the new. [Things that] aren’t interesting, that haven’t changed, that you know well enough. It’s because you have these that you can become a community. Because traditions have been carried on as if taken-for-granted, they command a majority, people don’t oppose them. They only take a little energy.

---

In Love’s study, the desire of locality study activists and their allies in local and regional governments to derive economic benefits from community mapping (mainly through tourism), was unrealized: “locality studies,” one of her interlocutors states, “is just a treasure hunt…there’s nothing in it as far as thinking that you can start this or that industry out of it.” (Love 2013, 121) In post-3.11 Tōhoku, however, there is an increasingly widespread drive to transform “realizations,” as Abe put it, into capital: to mine the local for something – anything – that, by

---

⁸ A supernatural being that lives in the mountains.
itself or in combination, can stimulate the inflow of people. Bring them in, the logic goes, and maybe some of them will decide to stay.

**Bringing In**

In late 2016, Katō Takuma (I-Turner and founder of the Kesennuma-based *machizukuri* circle Karakuwa Maru and nonprofit Maru Office), wrote the following on his blog:

> It is the middle of the night, and two of us are ‘at home’ in the small prefab hut where the Karakuwa Maru club is based. The young, local man that is currently director of Karakuwa Maru had answered our late-night call. He opened a graduation album on the table. The 2001 graduation album from Karakuwa Municipal Middle School. ‘Tokyo, Sendai, Tokyo, Sendai, here, Sendai,’ he traces with his fingers…Next, we opened our laptops and started putting the numbers into Excel. (Katō 2016)

The figures did not look good. Of the 68 children in the class of 2001, only 20 currently lived in the town. Most of them – 62, or 91% – had left Karakuwa on turning 18. Of this 62, 14 came back to Kesennuma City, with only 5 returning to Karakuwa itself. Without young people coming back, Katō extrapolated, the number of children, and thus schoolchildren, would shrink, threatening the viability of schools themselves. Having schools, he concluded, is “an essential condition for the sustainability of the town.” Lose them and you lose any possibility of bringing in the I-Turners of childbearing age necessary for even a minimum chance of survival. The day after this post, on October 1, 2016, Katō and Maru Office opened ‘Minato,’ The Kesennuma City Relocation Support Center, funded by the city government. A little earlier, in August Minamisanriku had opened a similar institution: the Minamisanriku Town General Relocation Support Office (Ijū Sōgō Madoguchi), run by an HR company called Intelligence.
In the discourse of locality studies, all regions have “unique resources that include history, culture and human resources.” (Ministry of Environment, cited in Love 2013, 120) Some locals are skeptical of this. One I-Turner who settled in Minamisanriku post-disaster said that:

When people talk about tourism in Minamisanriku, the things they say, it’s always the same staples: there’s a beautiful ocean, bountiful nature and delicious seafood, that kind of thing. But if we’re talking about seafood, next door you have Kesennuma, and in Ishinomaki there’s the No. 1 port in Japan, and then if you head further South from there, there are the famous oysters of Matsushima, so whichever way you look at it, we’re losing when it comes to produce, losing when it comes to products. The things this town can break through and win with, well maybe there are things like silver salmon that hold some possibility, but however much I think about it, I don’t think we can win. There are views anywhere you go…if you want views and oysters to eat, you go to Matsushima.

If ‘resources’ are not unique, they can still be combined in novel ways: packaged through what – drawing on the in-vogue rhetoric of architecture – members of the new nonprofits call “design.” One described the meaning of design to me this way:

*Machizukuri* is not a process where you produce something new in a place where there is nothing…The ‘new things’ that will make the region stronger result from the crossing of things that are with other things that are (*aru mono to aru mono*).

In other words, it involves taking pre-existing phenomena and combining them in novel ways. In May 2015, I attended an event for brainstorming such ideas at K-Port, a trendy café that opened after the disasters in Kesennuma. The city has several groups that epitomize the ‘locality studies + design’ approach, most notably Maru Office (Katō’s group) and Sokoage, who are also very active in Minamisanriku. The audience was young, with a relatively even gender balance. After the opening address, the organizers split us into teams, or *han*: mine included one I-Turner living in Kesennuma, one visitor from Iwate (a young woman working in a café/event space), a young, local-born man working in the polystyrene industry, a middle-aged local-born man who works in
the clothing industry, and a male official from the city administration. It wasn’t entirely clear to everyone at first, but as our group moderator (who works for Sokoage) quickly made clear, the object of the workshop was to come up with ideas for tourism programs. To this end, we had to ‘throw out’ ‘things’ that could become content: ‘unique’ objects or spaces, local foods, even feelings (like my impression that fishermen are ‘cool,’ or kakkō ii). These were noted down on sticky notes and arranged into potential tourist programs. While the process was the same as those recorded by Love, the end goal was not just ‘treasure-hunting,’ but the creation of opportunities for entrepreneurially-minded participants (and the non-profits whose members were scattered throughout the room).

Whether any of the ‘programs’ came to fruition, I don’t know. We are some years away from being able to judge the success of such programs – of ‘aru mono’ – at bringing new people into the towns and cities of Tōhoku. “We must target”, said one local guide, “those people looking for relief from city life. Then those local people who think this is a “place with nothing” will have their consciousness changed by those who come. To make them realize that they were lucky to be born here.” Many of those born here – and those that have recently moved – understand that the rural is not an empty space. However, what fills it is not necessarily positive.

Revive or Reform?

Love, in her critique of locality studies and its associated community mapping exercises, notes that although their (normally unstated) aim is to promote greater civic awareness and mobilization, they do not “aim to reform (emphasis added) social politics that organize community participation in rural districts and are often underpinned by hierarchical kin and gender relations.” (Love 2013, 120)
In early 2015, I carried out a series of interviews with women in the town. One young woman involved with a non-profit (who I’ll call Satō-san) that came as a volunteer and married a local told me of her difficulty adjusting to the expectations of rural society, particularly the role of oyome-san, or bride: “There’s more of the old rural culture left than I thought…If I did something seen as strange, people would say ‘the bride of the Satō house did this…’ The pressure is incredibly strong…and that’s why it’s hard for women to stay…and hard for them to move [here].” Her husband explained:

if someone from a family does something bad, it is seen as the responsibility of the family…But it’s precisely because of this that as a district, we can work well together to get things done. it’s difficult, isn’t it?

This ‘difficulty’ is where ‘sustainability’ is being negotiated. Reconstructing community is essential, but ‘community’ is also what drives young people (particularly young women) away from towns like Minamisanriku. Firstly, there is a tension between efforts to reconstruct and to reform communities (which are, of course, often intertwined). Much effort has been expended by residents, for example, to ensure that pre-existing communities remain together in the new higher-ground residential areas. As Satō-san’s comments implied, however, reforming these communities is also essential for the future viability of Minamisanriku; without it, she continued, these newly built areas risk, in 10 or 20 years, becoming ghost towns. Secondly, there are tensions between ‘locals’ and ‘outsiders,’ including those that have made the town their home: newcomers often find it difficult to be accepted, although combatting depopulation requires more of them. Thirdly, there are generational tensions that cross-cut the insider/outsider dichotomy. Many young people leave the town for work or education, and those that come back often struggle to find a place in the patriarchal and hierarchical society they return to.
How residents of the stricken municipalities navigate these tensions is key to their survival and, accordingly, their ‘resilience’ in the face of long-term change; without improving gender equity, for example, young people will continue to leave at the present rate. It is in these tricky negotiations that the task of building a sustainable and resilient society is taking place, and while the government has not been uninvolved, it is community groups and non-profits that have taken the lead. Time, however, is not on their side.

**Conclusion**

In the summer of 2016, I visited Abe at his office in upper Shizugawa. We sat outside and talked about the changing landscape of the town, and the shifting relationship between ‘hard’ and ‘soft.’ Using his hands to trace the outlines of a graph, he spoke about how the ‘heart’ and the ‘hardware’ had been in alignment pre-disaster. When the tsunami hit, both fell together; since then, he continued, “the heart is returning to normal,” but the hardware is lagging, leaving a “strange feeling of unease…as if reality isn’t keeping up.” People have more time now, and can do more things. Like entrepreneurs, for whom the first three years are the hardest, they are downshifting into the “second stage” of recovery. One of his staff, who had stepped outside to smoke with us, felt a little different. The hard seems to get all the attention, he said, while the heart – and its healing – is still ignored. The town had changed, for sure, and all would be well if they were the changes residents wanted or had been involved with; if things were being expressed, he analogized, in their own words. But most of it was “decided without their permission,” and is “not [expressed] in their own words.” Abe talked about a writer called Niita Shinya, a “minor figure” in Japanese psychoanalysis, who added to the five stages of grief a

---

9 *kokoro*, commonly referring to one’s psychological condition but also used as a synonym for ‘soft.’
sixth: future vision, the grasping for symbols that represent a future, against which the powers that be put up resistance. I said my goodbyes and left to pay my respects at the nearby shrine, among the silvery, granular voices of the cicadas.

Five and half years after the disasters, the brief flowering of civil society in the disaster regions may be shifting into a new phase. Reconstruction funding comes with a time limit: many of the programs on which non-profits rely are ending in 2017. If disaster opened a window of opportunity for reform, one of the many tragedies of reconstruction is that the window appears to be closing. Some of the new organizations will survive, of course, mainly through alliances with big companies (like Google). But many are disappearing or may soon disappear. The future of Abe’s organization too is unclear, largely dependent on the success of their efforts to market new food products in tandem with their nonprofit work.

Reconstructing homes, roads, and infrastructures is, of course, incredibly important. But the ‘software’ of society is equally important. Across Japan, rural areas are depopulating. The causes are both local and, to a greater degree, systemic: the longue durée of economic and social change. One can build a seawall to stop a tsunami, but what use if there is nobody left behind it? You “don’t get any bodies from a ghost town,” as Oguma says. A ‘resilient’ community must, in the first place, continue to exist: to be resilient against both the literal waves and, figuratively, the deep currents of history. It is in rebuilding and reforming civil society that this existential work is carried out, in the face of a reconstruction process that actively undermines it. The challenge going forward is how – and if – this momentum can be maintained in the new, post-post-disaster (post-hisai) era.
Chapter 7
I last visited Minamisanriku in the summer of 2016. Much had changed since the previous year. The raising of central Shizugawa had proceeded apace. New roads (some of them temporary) had been constructed and old ones disassembled, completely altering the flow of traffic through the shifting landscape. “Even local people don’t know where they are anymore,” one taxi driver told me as we drove through Shizugawa, a complaint I heard again and again. People can’t tell from the works what the future town will look like, and many are uneasy. Occasionally, we would see pieces of new infrastructure scattered across the wide expanses like soviet-era monuments (Figure 7-1). How they would connect to each other was not yet clear. If negative space involves the inversion of positive forms, these unfinished structures also felt like ruins in...
reverse: parts of a future structure latent in the space, but not yet fully materialized. As we passed into Togura, the driver asked if I’d heard of ghosts getting in taxis.\(^1\) Apparently, over Ishinomaki way, “a dead person had gotten into the back” of his colleague’s car, only to vanish some way into the journey. He wasn’t sure whether to believe it or not. Later, when I repeated this story to someone else, they nodded immediately in recognition. “The people who died in the tsunami want to go home,” they said. There is a vanished world in Minamisanriku, behind the earth and the roads; a world negated by both disaster and reconstruction, yet still eerily, spectrally present. The ghosts that ride in taxis – or the stories about them – bridge the gap between these worlds (ano yo to kono yo wo tsunagu, as one headline went). Driving through the town, I felt like the protagonist of Abe Kobo’s Ruined Map, confronted by a place simultaneously absent and present: “the four wheels of the car were certainly turning on the ground and there was no doubt I was experiencing vibrations. Nevertheless, my town had vanished.” (Abe 1969, 294) These transformations in the space of the town parallel furious attempts by residents to maintain it as a particular place: to preserve, among other things, fragments of its history and relationship to nature. During my 2016 visit, a resident of Togura made me write down a Buddhist phrase: seizan jōunpo 青山常運歩, the blue mountains are constantly walking. That which appears unmoving on the outside is, in fact, constantly in flux. “The town’s borderline doesn’t move,” he explained, “but the inside is changing.”

In Utatsu, the temporary shopping arcade had moved from its previous spot to what shopkeepers called the temporary-temporary site (kasetsu no kasetsu), which they would occupy

---

\(^1\) Kudō Yūka a student at Tōhoku Gakuin University wrote her undergraduate thesis on such apparitions, which was published in 2016 as part of an edited volume on ghosts in the disaster regions (Kanebishi 2016). Her work was widely reported on in Japanese, American and British media outlets.
while the ground was prepared for a long-term arcade in their previous location (Figure 7-2). The entrance to the mall was now twinned with that of a construction site. The prefab units faced the waterfront with their back to Route 45, to the great annoyance of Yamauchi-san, head of the shopkeeper’s association. The administration said they were going to temporarily redirect Route 45 in front of the new arcade, he told me, but after the shops had already moved changes to the plans were announced. “We’re turning our backs on our customers,” he said. Things are not looking up for shopkeepers in the town. In Shizugawa’s San San temporary shopping mall – one of the most successful in the disaster areas – one shopkeeper told me as far back as 2014 that visitor numbers were falling significantly. But there was also hope, and entertainment. The Utatsu arcade was full of schoolchildren roaming around, cellphone in hand, trying to catch
Pokémon,² though the game’s inbuilt map, I was told, was failing to keep pace with the constant changes to the town’s landscape.

At a nature workshop for local children, I caught up with Kudō, the founder of Kamome (Chapter 3). She told me that the group is still going strong, and its membership has increased. She was at the workshop to collect drawings for an art contest run yearly by Kamome, in which children (and their parents) are invited to send in pictures based on Minamisanriku’s

---

² Pokémon Go had just been released in Japan.
Townspeople Constitution (Chōmin Kenpō) (A picture from last year’s competition can be seen in Figure 7-3). Kudō is also a member of Fukkō Minasankai, a local nonprofit working to build communities in the new higher-ground estates. The smaller of these had all been completed when I visited Hatakeyama, another member of Fukkō Minasankai and a former machizukuri suishin-in (see Chapter 1), at his new house in Utatsu. People are continuing to drop out of the large estates, he said, due to delays in their construction. Some are building their own houses elsewhere, some purchasing old houses. Others are leaving the town entirely. The problem of vacant plots (discussed in Chapter 5) will only get worse moving forward, he said, as elderly residents begin to die off. The rules regarding who can purchase land in the estates will need to be relaxed at some point, lest they become “hamlets at their limits” (genkai shūraku) or, in Akasaka and Ōguma’s words, ghost towns (Oguma and Akasaka 2015). We talked about loneliness in the public housing, where as I detailed in Chapter 5 his organization has been trying to create a sense of community. They’d tried to do tea parties (ochakai) in 2 of the new complexes, but due to the government’s refusal to give out private information “we had no list of names of people living there,” making it difficult to form a self-governing organization (jichikai). Someone had died alone recently, and he was worried about more deaths going forward. “Once you bang the door shut, as long as nobody comes to help you, you’re alone.” We’re worried, he told me, of “losing the sense of this place as a town.” With seawalls dividing the land from the sea, the ecology will change. This is not “real machizukuri,” he said.

---

3 With heart as big as the sea (umi no yō ni hiroi kokoro de)
Let’s swim as lively as a fish (sakana no yō ni ikiki oyogō)
With a love as full as the mountains (yama no yō ni yutaka na ai de)
Let’s embrace everyone like a cocoon (mayu no yō ni minna wo tsutsumō)
With eyes as clear as the sky (sora no yō ni sunda hitomi de)
Let’s maintain lives like a river (kawa no yō ni inochi wo tsunagō)
The town held in the palm of nature (ōkina shizen no te no hira ni idakarete iru machi)
Minamisanriku
“Preserving the true nature, that’s the real *machizukuri*.” His wife chimed in, “will making them this high really protect us?”

Across the disaster regions, the seawalls are going up. I visited several construction sites in Togura, Shizugawa and Utatsu (Figure 7-4). Further north, in Ōya, I met with Miura Tomoyuki (Chapter 2) to hear about their success in moving the seawall and preserving Ōya beach. The Prefecture had accepted the plan painstakingly drafted by the Ōya Satoumi-zukuri Kentōinkai (Chapter 2). While they still had to work out some of the finer details, the beach was saved. On the way to his house for an interview, we stopped briefly at the Maehama Marine Center, a wooden community hall built after the disasters with funding from an American Lutheran organization, whose flyers were on display in the entrance. The hall was crammed with young parents and children practicing for Hamarainya, an event during the Kesennuma Port
Festival (Minato Matsuri) in which large teams dance through the streets of central Kesennuma. As we drove from the Center to his house, Miura told me that events like this are as vital for citizen-led machizukuri as assemblies like the Machikyō. If it’s not fun, he said, people soon drop out. With the success of the resident’s plans for Ōya, he is shifting his attention to the “next disaster region” – places where disasters are predicted in the near future – with the aim of preparing residents for the structural issues that beset Tōhoku. For example, in the Miura Peninsula in Kanagawa, which has a 6-11% chance of a major earthquake in the next 30 years (Kanagawa-ken 2016), he helped organize the Miura Summit, a meeting between the heads of 4 cities and 1 town to begin discussing future reconstruction policy.

Miura’s aim is to ensure that, when the next disaster comes, residents are ready to fight. But disaster has already come for some parts of Japan. On April 14 and 16, two large earthquakes (6.4 and 7.1 magnitudes respectively) struck Kumamoto in the Kyūshū region of Southern Japan. At least 50 people died and tens of thousands were evacuated. In Minamiasō, a village of 12,000 residents, landslides and bridge collapses left roads impassable, cutting them off temporarily from the outside world (Yamaguchi and Wang 2016). There was much talk about Kumamoto in Minamisanriku. I heard similar stories about the supposed weakness of local democracy, about the tendency of local people to “wait for the administration to do something for them.” “They’ll wait 20 hours for a single ball of rice!” one shopkeeper in contact with recovery workers there declared. People need to be more self-sufficient, he said. One Kumamoto-based activist visiting Minamisanriku told me that, like in Tōhoku, the local government of Minamiasō sees the earthquake as an opportunity for “development,” and is prioritizing large public works. He had been working since May to organize residents, holding 12 meetings in the 2 months since the earthquakes. A few meetings in, they had decided to establish
a citizen’s group, the Fukkō wo Honki de Kangaeru Kai (Society for the Serious Consideration of Reconstruction). After petitioning the municipality for more information on recovery plans, they’ll at last have their first information session in August. But there are also problems. There are “lots of loud old men” in the group, and young people are beginning to drop out as a result (see Chapter 6). Just like in Minamisanriku, efforts to strengthen ‘social capital’ must consider the dark side of community: the structures of power, however micro-level, that render some voices audible and others silent.

Much remains uncertain in Minamisanriku, and across the disaster regions as a whole. Many residents are, finally, returning to their ‘daily lives,’ even if the town is still far, far away from ‘normalcy.’ Perhaps, due to the activities of the more engaged citizens, when a future disaster occurs people will be ready to fight for their own visions (in Harvey’s formulation, their right to shape themselves by shaping the space they live in) (Harvey 2008). Or, perhaps, the terms of recovery will again be dictated from the center. A small but vocal number of citizens will push back, and perhaps (if they are organized enough), win a few concessions. Just as the prospect of ‘no future’ spurs future-oriented thinking, it is often only once citizens have already lost that they begin to mobilize, however tentatively. In the context of post-disaster reconstruction, we are always already too late to act. But act we must, for disasters are watershed moments in our lives and the lives of places.

**Decisive Moments**

In popular discourse, disasters are turning points: moments when life changes irrevocably. But in much contemporary research in the social sciences, they mark not shifts but intensifications; moments of space-time compression within *longue durée* of historical change (Oliver-Smith et
al. 2016). I do not necessarily disagree with such accounts. 3.11 has dramatically accelerated several long-standing trends in Tōhoku, including the shrinking and aging of the population due to outmigration and declining birth rates (Oguma and Akasaka 2015). All levels of government are aware that the aging population and increasing unprofitability of ‘traditional,’ primary industries threaten the future of rural communities. Despite this, they rarely if ever acknowledge that both are the outcome of decades of national policy and the meta-context of globalization.

To ask what or why is a disaster, is, in the relational view, a genealogical or endeavor: a practice of retracing whatever aspects of social, cultural, political-economic and environmental relations made catastrophe possible (Faas and Barrios 2015). In many ways, reconstruction in Tōhoku resembles what Mauss called a ‘total social fact,’ “an activity that has implications throughout society, in the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres.” (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999, 64) Unraveling its complexities leads one to questions of democracy and governance at a nation-wide scale (Slater 2015). Acknowledging fukkō machizukuri to be a hierarchical and technocratic process (albeit one in which spaces for citizen participation, however fraught and ineffective, are emerging) requires that we question the entire legal and political architecture of governance in Japan, particularly the mechanisms by which central decisions articulate with local realities. We must also recognize that to define and implement appropriate ‘recovery’ policy, we must understand how these longer-term political-economic contexts have shaped the objects (‘the town’) and subjects (the ‘townspeople’) impacted by disaster.

Relational approaches to disaster are therefore very useful. But they do not tell us the whole story. I have two objections to contemporary theorizations of disaster in anthropology. Firstly, disasters, we are told, cannot be reduced to the triggering events – the geophysical
phenomena – and this is certainly true. But we also need a theory that can account for how different trigger(s) impact the relationships between all the other elements comprising the socio-environmental field. Latour’s actor-network theory, which has clear parallels with relational approaches to disaster, fails as ecology, Ingold argues, because it focuses on the “mutual, interactive effects in a network of effects that comprises the overall field of action” at the expense of the “trails of movement and growth, or of perception and response” by which things actually interact. (Ingold 2012, 436) In other words, it tells you what agents form the network, but says little about the materiality of the relations – or processes – between them (Ingold 2008). Similarly, social scientific work on disasters has moved too far away from studying the physical processes at work in disasters and how these impact bodies and spaces.

Secondly, the pendulum has swung too far towards the genealogical approach, in which the goal is less to understand ‘disaster’ itself than to reveal the processes creating its conditions of possibility. Events like disasters, as Kapferer argues, should not be simply “reduced to terms of orders, structures, and relations that can be understood only through a connection to a past or a reality that can be completely grasped on its own terms.” (Kapferer 2010, 15) In our effort to combat the persistent fallacy of ‘natural’ disasters, we have lost sight of how the agents of disaster – be they particles, waves, or hurricanes – move through socio-environmental fields, disrupting the relations that comprise them in ways that sometimes lead to novel and unexpected reconfigurations.4 The Manhattan Project, Masco tells us, “reinvented [...emphasis added...] the biosphere as a nuclear space” (Masco 2004, 540); in Ukraine, the release of radioactive particles into environments and bodies has led to new claims of ‘biological citizenship,’ where “the

4 Not all research on disasters informed by these perspectives fall into this trap, of course. Mitchell’s account of the malaria epidemic that killed 200,000 in Egypt, for example, shows how a Latourian perspective can still take into account the ways in which qualitatively different things act and interact (Mitchell 2002).
damaged biology of a population has become...the grounds for social membership and the basis for staking claims” against the government (Petryna 2013, 5). Similar processes can be observed in the wake of the Bhopal disaster (Das 2004), or the slow poisoning of Minamata in Japan (George 2002; Ishimure and Monnet 2003). The release of new agents into the environment and the body destabilizes assumptions about the relations between and within both, as well as between bodies (individual and collective) and the state. The perceived integrity of bodies – human and non-human – and the nature of space itself became subject to question; things that were ‘matters of fact’ become ‘matters of concern.’

The Scale of Recovery

The triple disaster has led to an intensification of many already existing processes: social, cultural, economic, and spatial. The response to it has, from the start, been couched in the discourse and followed the entrenched procedures of Japan’s legal and administrative frameworks for disaster recovery. But, as I have shown, the disaster region itself is also profoundly changed, and where it today appears ‘the same,’ or similar, this is in fact the outcome of strenuous efforts to reconstruct some semblance or appearance of what was ‘normal’ before (cf. Morimoto 2012) So where do we go from here? Following 3.11, the sociologist Yamashita Yūsuke wrote:

Japanese society so far has been eager to only build an overarching and hierarchical system. Will it still continue in this direction? Or will it nurture a multiple system of local governments?...

Kuni indicates not only that Japan is a nation state, but also that it operates at other levels of society. Han denoted the feudal domain in the Tokugawa period, but at the same time, han were also known as kuni. Thus the kuni of Japan were comprised of many smaller kuni.

How does the Great East Japan Earthquake require us to examine the meaning of kuni in recent Japanese society? Japanese society needs to restore the original concept of
kuni. At first, kuni as the Japanese nation state must reflect on this disaster and study the terrible results from this tragedy. Japanese society also needs to restore kuni as a local society, in order to revive the concept of kuni as the Japanese nation state (Yamashita 2012, 10-11).

Yamashita is not just calling for a more meaningful form of decentralization, but a rethinking of the spatial imaginary of Japanese society and its implicit topography of power (Ferguson 2007). But whatever its discursive construction, the kuni is not simply an umbrella cast over Japan, the expansive apex of a nested hierarchy. It is a localized phenomenon, enacting its strategies from a particular place (De Certeau 2013), namely, the city of Tokyo. If central political institutions remain unchanged after 3.11, perhaps it is because the disaster remained remote from their base of operations, its effects confined to the margins, real and imagined, of the nation-state. But disaster is coming for the center too. The odds of a magnitude 8.0-plus earthquake hitting the Nankai Trough are estimated at 50% within 20 years, 70% within 30 years, and 90% in the coming half century (Harding and Bernard 2016). The Tōkai section, which borders on Tokyo, has been silent since the 8.4 Ansei Tōkai earthquake of 1854, and experts have been predicting a major Tokyo earthquake for decades. Some scientists are skeptical of these predictions, noting that methods for accurately predicting earthquake locations have not been established, or at least are not universally agreed upon (Kyodo 2017). But it remains thinkable, even probable, that Japan’s industrial heartlands, and perhaps even the heart of Japanese politics itself, will be struck this century. Whether the structure of recovery provision – of fukkō – remains unchanged when catastrophe comes to Tokyo remains to be seen.

Fukkō is a big word. It suggests large-scale processes of development – “building back better” – and the drive to produce new things. But it also refers to intimate happenings: rebuilding homes, livelihoods, and even ‘hearts’ (the three of which go together). The most
memorable definition of fukkō I heard one evening in June 2012, as I was walking from Shizugawa to Iriya, following the river that winds from the deep interior down to the coast. I could see bats wheeling in the half-light, and the long shadows of trees falling on fields of newly planted rice. After walking for some time, I came across a man standing on the verge of a large rice paddy. He seemed surprised to see me. I stepped onto the verge next to him to talk, swatting at the mosquitos circling my uncovered flesh. Rubbing my hands together, I felt one come apart, and looking down saw my fingers streaked with blood. Caught in the act.

He told me he was checking the paddy’s water levels. It had been wrecked by the tsunami, but the waves had left no glass in the earth. The waters had curved across the other side of the valley, he said, depositing broken glass and debris in the other paddies, rendering them unusable. It would take until August for his plants to look like rice, and October for the mi – the grain itself – to develop. He worried about the future: whether things would proceed as normal after the flood. He alluded to unknown deposits, something done to the land by the tsunami, the gears out of alignment. But so far, things were going normally, and he was happy. He pointed to the tiny green shoots. “Looking at this, I think fukkō.”
References


2014 Nendo Kenkyūsei Bōchōteihan. 2014. “‘Umi to ikiru’ no kachi - kōfukudo kara kangaeru bōchōei no arikata (The Value of Living with the Sea: Considering Seawalls from the Perspective of Happiness).” *Keizai Hyakuyōsō Bangaihen*.


Ministry of Reconstruction. 2013. “Shinsai ikō no hozon ni taisuru shien ni tsuite (Regarding Support for Preserving Ruins of the Tsunami).”


Imakawa, Satoru. 2015. “Shitsumon” Saigai kiken kuiki wo shitei sureba bōchōtei wa fuyō na no? (Question: If We Establish a Disaster Danger Zone Aren’t Seawalls Unnecessary?) July 6.


Kahoku Shimpō. 2014. “Minamisanriku Bōsai Chōsha: Kaitai motome izoku kai kessei (Minamisanriku’s Disaster Prevention Center: Group of Relatives Calling for Demolition Established).” Kahoku Shimpō, November 29.


———. 2015c. “Minamisanriku Bōsai Chōsha: Kaitai, hozon, horyū…kōsaku (Minamisanriku’s Disaster Prevention Center: Demolish, Preserve, Defer…or a Mix).” Kahoku Shimpō, March 10.


Katō, Hironori. 2015. “Minamisanriku no Bōsai Chōsha, kenyūka e machi ga dōi (Minamisanriku’s Disaster Prevention Center: The Town Agrees to Hand Control to the Prefecture).” Asahi Shimbun, July 1.

Katō, Shūshi. 2014. 3 nen-me no 3.11 (3 Years after 3.11). Tokyo: Eikyūdō.


Minamisanriku Town. 2011. Dai 1-Kai Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Minamisanriku-chō shinsai fukkō keikaku sakutei kaigi gijiroku (Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the Committee for Drafting a Reconstruction Plan for Minamisanriku Town Following the Great East Japan Earthquake).


———. 2013b. “‘Takadai iten’ wa ayamari da - hontō ni genchi no shiten ni tatta fukkō kōsō wo (Higher-Relocation is a Mistake: Towards a Concept of Reconstruction Based on Local Perspectives).” *Saigai Fukkō Kenkyū* 5: 93–101.


Oikawa, Ichiro, and Kōji Haga. 2015. Ōya Kaigan no seibi keikaku ni kansuru yōseisho (Request Regarding Ōya Coast’s Development Plans).


Kesennuma City Industrial Division Fisheries Infrastructure Development Department, Construction Division Planning Department and Construction Division Civil Engineering Department. 2014. *Bōchōtei no seibi keikaku ni tsuite* (Regarding Seawall Development Plans). Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Tokubetsu Iinkai Shiryō.

Satō, Jin. 2012. “Miyagi-Ken Minamisanriku-chō no higai jittai to fukkō e no chōsen (Minamisanriku Town in Miyagi Prefecture’s Damage Situation and Efforts to Reconstruct).” *Academia* 103 (October): 2–5.


Science Council of Japan. 2014. *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai kara no fukkō taisaku no kaizen ni tsuite no teigen* (Suggestions for Improving Reconstruction Policies Following the Great East Japan Earthquake).


Walsh, John, and Steven High. 1999. “Rethinking the Concept of Community.” *Social History* 32 (64): 256–73.


