“The Presence of Absence: Toward an Ethics of Exile as Resistance to Violence After Fukushima”

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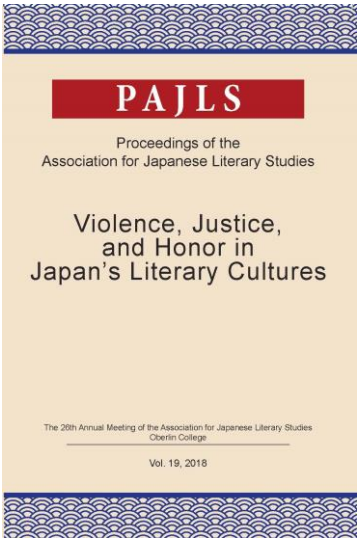

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THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF EXILE AS RESISTANCE TO VIOLENCE AFTER FUKUSHIMA

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The volatile nature of labor relations under apartheid—including issues such as white miners' anxieties about the color bar, the recognition of black trade unions, and shifting migration patterns—shaped how the mining industry responded to the presence of radon. With occasional help from state scientists, the industry muffled the political menace of the gas by making its physical presence difficult to see. Sometimes this invisibility resulted from deliberate decisions, sometimes from structural suppression, sometimes from the tangle of both.[2]

Growing up in Hiroshima, I have had many opportunities to see graphic images from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Among those visual memories, two images always stand out to me, as if they were imprinted in my mind: a photo of a 19-year-old soldier lying at a triage center whose face was covered with dark spots—a symptom of acute radiation sickness. He had entered the city after the atomic bombing in Hiroshima to rescue the people and succumbed to residue radiation. The other image is a shadow impressed on stone steps, whose body was presumably instantly incinerated by the intense heat of the atomic bomb. Both images invite me to think of in/visibility and absence. The former informs me that the soldier's physical absence at the time of the bombing did not spare him from invisible radiation while the latter illuminates the absence of the body's physical presence as a poignant testimony to the magnitude of this weaponry.

Those images returned to my mind after having read Kimura Yūsuke's *Seichi Cs* (聖地 Cs, *Sacred Cesium Ground*,[3] hereafter referred to as

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4960-779X
[2] Gabrielle Hecht, "The Work of Invisibility: Radiation Hazards and Occupational Health in South African Uranium Production" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 81, 2012: 95.
[3] Kimura Yūsuke, *Seichi Cs* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2014). Trans. by Doug Slaymaker as *Sacred Cesium Ground and Isa's Deluge: Two Novellas of Japan's 3/11 Disaster* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). First published 2018.

Seichi), as Kimura's novella evolves around the theme of invisible radiation, while dealing with resistance and absence. In a semi-fictional style, Kimura created a story based on an actual dairy farm in Fukushima where the farm owner, Sendō, resisted the injustices imposed upon them, their livestock, and the land on which invisible radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant rained down. As the satirical title *The Sacred Cesium Ground* suggests, the story reveals layers of contradictions in a complicated situation where efforts to alleviate suffering require further suffering. Under such circumstances, each character tries to do the "right" thing in seeking justice while no single viable answer is readily available, much less one leading to a "right" solution.

Building upon these key concepts of in/visibility and presence/absence, I propose a reading of Kimura's *Seichi* as attempts of resistance, and as an ethic of absence in post-Fukushima Japan. But how can absence be an ethical means of resistance? As Sendō says, "If the victims don't raise their voices, then no one knows that they even exist,"[4] commonly the lack of physical appearance invites erasure of one's existence. Regarding the importance of visibility, for example, Hannah Arendt discussed the ethical implications of appearing in public. Reflecting on the Holocaust, Arendt emphasized that making an appearance in the public realm prevents falling into what Marcel Proust called "the abyss of non-being"[5] or, in Japanese terms, *nakatta koto* (as if things had never happened).

It should be noted that an ethics of absence in *Sacred Cesium Ground* is different from "the abyss of non-being," but an act of resistance to social norms and expectations that forces sacrifice. To explain the differences, let us turn to Judith Butler who builds on Arendt's claim against the backdrop of Abu Ghraib and post-9-11 US aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguing that appearance does not suffice as society distributes recognition unevenly, justifying the precariousness of certain populations. Further, Butler explicates that while "precariousness" is a shared existential condition (we are all vulnerable in multitudinous ways, necessitating "food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing"),[6] "precarity" is the "politically induced condition that would

[4] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 70.
[5] Marcel Proust, "Swann's Way," *In Search of Lost Time,* vol. 1, quoted in Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). First published 1958.
[6] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 29.

deny equal exposure [to material and other means for flourishing] through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence."[7]

Just as Butler indicated that the rhetoric of national security has justified the torture of prisoners, the banner of *fukkō* (restoration) was used in Fukushima in relation to Japan's economic force. The Olympic Games, originally scheduled for Tokyo in 2020, were part of this scheme to legitimize the exposure of a certain population, including pregnant women and children, to high radiation.[8] The national government issued a state of emergency allowing Fukushima residents to receive 20 mSv of radiation per year, 20 times higher than the national standard. The danger of radiation was normalized even though this shift in safety measurement is what Butler would call the precarity (politically induced condition) allowing the government to deprive people of their right to lead a healthy life. Given the fact that not everyone in Fukushima can afford evacuation and relocation, the restoration should not invite the Olympic Games, but rather address the residents' health concerns to protect their lives, instead of avoiding them all together.[9]

Rather than condemning or condoning individual decisions and actions, Kimura empathetically illustrates efforts to address multifaceted suffering in situations where multilayered contradictions intertwine. Under such circumstances, however, those challenges and contradictions are delineated while Kimura suggests, in my reading, an alternative mode of resistance: a better answer displayed by the protagonist, Nishino Hiromi. While volunteering in a highly radioactive land, Hiromi comes to a realization that she has internalized the voices of her abusers—her father and her husband, Kazumasa—that constantly belittle her as a "quitter." The experiences at the ranch finally enables her to resist and she decides to quit—the very action that the voices reproach. But her quitting is not to resign, but to move forward, to free herself from an abusive relationship. Juxtaposing the act of failing to quit with resistance that endangers the

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[7] Butler, *Frames of War*, 28.

[8] Norma Field, "Introduction" to "This will Still Be True Tomorrow: 'Fukushima Ain't Got the Time for Olympic Games': Two Texts on Nuclear Disaster and Pandemic," *Asia-Pacific Journal/Japan Focus*, 18, no. 13 (2000). https://apjjf.org/-Muto-Ruiko--Norma-Field/5410/article

[9] Aihara Hiroko, "Follow Up on Thyroid Cancer! Patient Group Voices Opposition to Scaling Down the Fukushima Prefectural Health Survey" trans. by Yuki Miyamoto, *Asia-Pacific Journal/Japan Focus*, vol. 15, issue 2, no. 3 (2017). https://apjjf.org/2017/02/Aihara.html

lives of humans and animals, Hiromi finds a new meaning for quitting: another form of resistance. By leaving her marriage, she makes the resulting absence visible where her existence was taken for granted.

THE FORTRESS OF HOPE IN THE SACRED LAND OF CS

The titular "Cs" is the symbol for the chemical element Cesium—once a strictly scientific term, now it is in everyday Japanese vocabulary following the explosion of the Fukushima nuclear reactors. Kimura's semi-fictional story, *Seichi Cs*, is based on the real-life dairy farmer Yoshizawa Masami and his farm, *kibō no bokujō* (Ranch of Hope) in Namie, Fukushima. Yoshizawa continued to feed his livestock despite the government's order to destroy all irradiated animals in the area where the ranch stands. In Kimura's account, he is given a pseudonym of Sendō, a character who runs a ranch called *kibō no toride* (Fortress of Hope). The protagonist and narrator of the story, Hiromi, is a married woman from Nakano Ward in Tokyo and volunteers to work at Sendō's ranch for three days.

The story begins with Hiromi's arrival on the ranch and depicts each character in the ranch and their rather complicated relations. Between the episodes set at the ranch, the story reveals Hiromi's life before her decision to come to the ranch—having left her uncomfortable workplace, her husband Kazumasa's verbal harassment, and her upbringing with her abusive father. On the first day, the task of feeding the cows—the weak ones in particular—reminds her of why she quit her job. Working as a temp, she saw one colleague after another quitting their jobs, burnt out by the demands of long hours of work and an excessive workload. When Hiromi suggested addressing the issue of overwork in the company's newsletter, she was surprised to find that the very colleagues Hiromi intended to protect began to shun her, calling her "*sayoku*" ("the leftie liberal") behind her back. The psychological damage took its toll on her body; she became ill and eventually left her job. Simply making a suggestion to ameliorate the work environment, believing that it would help her colleagues, cost both her health and her job. The social pressure to conform to the status quo that treats workers as expendable and invisible essentially forced Hiromi to disappear from the social milieu.

After she quit her job, Kazumasa, who was struggling to meet expectations at a well-established insurance company, began to direct harsh words at her: "My God, you can't do a damned thing." His words resonated in Hiromi's mind with her abusive father's voice: "You're useless, no good for anything. You're hopeless as a wife. Why are you even alive?" "You should just quit, this living business. What if you just

gave it up. Not as though you get any pleasure out of life right?"[10] She was hurt, but she had no language to defend herself in the real world nor in her own mind. Then, one day, she stumbled on images of the cows at Sendō's ranch on the Internet. She immediately identified with those cows that were *allowed to live* thanks to Sendō's care. One day, she consulted with Kazumasa about her desire to go to Sendō's ranch as a volunteer worker. Kazumasa denied her request by saying that she should not risk exposing herself to such high levels of radiation for at least another 10 years while she was still capable of conceiving a child. To Hiromi's ears, Kazumasa's reasoning was chilling, as he did not care for her overall health; instead, he reduced Hiromi's worth to a mere bodily function to serve him by carrying his offspring. That was the last straw, and she decided to leave for the Fortress of Hope without telling him.

The novella traces the ways in which Hiromi lowered her guard against radiation over time. On first arriving at the ranch, Hiromi was shocked to see the Geiger counter's needle rising to a level 40 times higher than Tokyo—enough to panic metropolitan residents. When she begins her first task of feeding the cows, she soon takes off the protective mask because she feels that it is suffocating her. After the day's work, however, her sense of caution was not all gone. Instead of bringing her work clothes up to her hotel room, she leaves everything in the car—in part because the clothes and gloves smell like feces, but also because she is aware that they are now radioactive. Her relationship with radiation is one of the contradictions of the ranch—even clothes are unsafe after a day's work, and yet people have to work outside to keep the cows alive. This story also shows a process of normalization that takes place rather quickly.

Everyone on the ranch lives with this contradiction and acknowledges it. During a break, Hiromi is invited to warm herself up by sitting around a wood-burning stove with Sendō, his sister Sonoda, and Yasuda, who has been helping at the ranch from its beginning. As they chat, Sonoda adds more logs to the stove, saying to herself, "Stuff burns well, anyway, this cesium wood."[11] By the second day, Hiromi has admitted to herself the contradictions of the place and of her own motives for coming to the ranch: "It seems now that I had this image in my head of Fortress of Hope being a sort of utopia. But the reality was not so simple. Contradiction piled upon contradiction; this was a place summarily cut loose and left to its own devices."[12]

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[10] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 28.
[11] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 20.
[12] Kimura. *Sacred Ceisum Ground,* 25.

Along with Hiromi, the other workers include Mikako and Jun Matsuo, a middle-aged couple from Yokohama, who had worked for the ranch previously. While grappling with the hay roll to feed the cows, Mikako asks Hiromi: "So, what do you think of this stuff?" "It's been irradiated, don't you think? Then these cows eat it up. Don't you wonder what's going to happen to them? There are calves in here too."[13] The ranch does not hide its dependence on the contaminated feed; supported only by donations, they simply cannot afford to buy safer food without government subsidies. Before Hiromi can respond, Mikako murmurs, "Not sure if we are keeping them alive, or just slowly killing them."[14]

Yet, for Sendō, keeping the cows alive for as long as possible is his way of resisting the government that had ordered him to slaughter his livestock because of the contamination. Aware of the contradictions of his own actions, Sendō says, "Ever since I said I should keep these cattle alive, it's been nuts, impossible. But once I said I was in, too late to back out. Nothing but to keep going forward." Hearing him, Hiromi catches herself saying, "Me too, I think so too. This has got to keep going. Otherwise, well, all of this…" Her utterance trails off, which is picked up by Sendō. He looks straight into Hiromi's eyes and finishes her words: "Will be like it never even happened [*nakatta koto*]"[15] He continues:

> The fact that our town has disappeared; the fact that a huge number of living beings have starved to death—like everything wiped up, wiped clean, the end. I mean, all the rice fields are slowly turning into willow woods, and the result of that will be that it can never be turned again back to agriculture, nor will there be any more husbandry here. Even if we could transport things out of here, no one will bury it. All the young people whom we expected to keep this town going—none can come back, even if they wanted to. The whole thing is something that everyone, the country, all the people in charge, all of them, want to banish from their sight. I mean, who else tells us to dispose of all the cattle? That way they can have all of this, all this proof, have all of it wiped clean away. I mean, what are they gonna do? Turn all the ground bottom side up, transform it? Into what? A park?[16]

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[13] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 16.
[14] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 16.
[15] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 37–38.
[16] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 39.

Following Sendō, a veterinarian named Takizawa responds, "Nothing to worry about! Look how we have recovered (*fukkō*)! It's all fine! Just forget all that stuff. The Olympics are coming! It's all great!" Mulling over the regrets of those who had to evacuate, had to abandon their livestock and now are living in temporary housing, Sendo adds, "And that's why, that's the reason I cannot give this up. I am not gonna allow it to be as though this never was. This farm right here? To the government, to that power plant over there, we're gonna be like a thorn in their side." Then Jun cuts in: "Yes if the killing of cattle is an entirely arbitrary act on their side, isn't keeping cattle alive in a place where they are being contaminated by such high levels of radiation an equally arbitrary act on ours? With things they way they are, I don't know, are the cattle really happy?"[17]

Responding to Jun's question, Sendō replies: "You're right. No matter how you look at it, the cattle are being used. No way around that. As far as 'use' goes, well, it's us that's keeping them alive. But still, even so, here's what I think: To say 'Since we have no more use for them it is okay to just kill them off' shows a real lack of respect for life. It is precisely because there is no more use value, we who have been using them all this time have a responsibility to look after them now."[18] Sendō's resistance against the governmental policies proclaiming that humans, cows, and lands alike should be abandoned when they are of no use appears admirable, but also requires some degree of sacrifice; this resistance endangers the health of himself, the volunteers, and animals.

This time, it is Mikako who challenges Sendō. "What if the road back to the ranch were completely closed off and no more foodstuffs, none, could get through. Then what? … no supplies can be dropped in from the sky. In that situation would you eat these cattle, Sendō-san?" It is not Sendō but Takizawa who responds, with a smile on his face, "I'd eat 'em." Then Sendō replies, "Yeah, me too, probably." Sendō immediately goes on to say "let's be clear: if the cause of that blockade was the prefecture, was the country of Japan, then everything changes. I wouldn't touch the cattle. I would starve to death first."[19]

That afternoon, Hiromi and Mikako get ready to give the cows a shot of anthelminthic and immune system booster. Hiromi wants the cows to live longer, but Mikako rather coldly says to her, "Well, it's something I thought about when we here before, but given what they are doing here, it doesn't seem that their highest priority is the welfare of the cows. Too

[17] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 39.
[18] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 40.
[19] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 40–42.

much is unsanitary; too many mishaps. But the biggest issue is that they have abandoned all measures to protect the animals from radiation." Hiromi understands what Mikako is saying, but also points to the reality that the ranch has very limited resources. Listening to Hiromi's response, Mikako says, "It's true for people, and even more so for animals: no creature should be in this area. Think about it: he [Sendō] even calls them his 'project.' It's just wrong for Sendō to drag these cows into his resistance activity. That's what my husband has been saying too: 'He's the kind of guy who would be okay if it all went to ruin' he says."[20]

The tension between the Matsuos and the other people on the ranch reaches its highest point when Takizawa, the Matsuos, and Hiromi are about to give the cows a needle shot. Due to the fear of needles, the cows go out of control, Takizawa orders Jun to give one cow a shot while he holds it, much to Jun's disgust. "Where do you get off treating animals this way? Really, you think you can do whatever you want just because they're animals?" "Of course I can't do whatever I want," replies Takizawa rather cheerfully, "but we have a field hospital here. One has to respond to conditions on the ground."[21] Glaring at Takizawa, Jun throws down the cylinder and walks away.

After this tense episode, Hiromi asks Yasuda to take her to the graveyard for dead cows, knowing that how they died was beyond horrific. Left behind, those cows had starved to death, covered in their own excrement. The first cows were buried, but the three new cadavers had been left in the open. Looking at the decomposing bodies and imagining their suffering, Hiromi begins to wonder: "What if they were to throw off all the yokes that had been placed around their necks by the humans, what if they awoke to all the anger around them? What if they chose to run amok, to fight for their own right to live and for their own dignity?"[22] Pondering why expressing anger must take the form of madness, she realizes that, in fact, long-suppressed anger can only express itself as madness. Alternatively, perhaps the madness is on the side of the perpetrators, which Hiromi finally sees. Deep in contemplation, she suddenly falls and finds herself in the mud. At that moment, she identifies with the cows; she *is* one of those cows waiting for death while covered in their own feces. Possessed by the cow's spirit, she hears a voice—the voice of her deceased father, who would beat her when he got drunk: "You

[20] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 43.
[21] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 46.
[22] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 64.

worthless little shit, nothing but worthless."[23] Without realizing, Hiromi scoops a handful of mud, and walks over to Mikuni Mari, "the twentysomething celebrity-politician"[24] who happens to be visiting the ranch on that day. "Look at this! Take a good look at this! You see this? This is evidence of life. It is proof of life… "[25] It is certainly madness, but that is the only outlet for her long-suppressed anger—toward her drunken father, abusive Kazumasa, and the colleagues who ostracized her. Thus she explodes into madness with the realization of violence done to her long rendered invisible, even to herself.

That night, Sendō tells her that people like himself must continue to work, because otherwise, violence done to them will not be recognized. "Here I am," continues Sendō, "in this area with especially high levels of radiation, like a subject in my own radiation experiments. I'm gonna die sometime, no matter what. And whether that is on account of radiation, or the stress of running this place, or whatever I don't see a long life ahead of me. Whatever, it's all fine, as long as a legacy continues. As long as there is someone to continue what I have done here, a legacy."[26] Then, they talk about a missing cadaver; one of the three dead cows is gone, and everyone is puzzled. Laughing, Sendō says, "what if someone carted [the cows' cadaver] off and then, say, right in front of the prime minister's residence or maybe on the front steps of that electric company, what if they just plopped it on the ground there? Nothin' better!" He continues to laugh, but Mitani says, bitterly, "And if anyone did such a stupid thing, they'd come for you first." "Think about it," he replies, "discarded stuff, that's the reality of it, same as here."[27]

As Hiromi is leaving the ranch for her hotel on the night before her scheduled return to Tokyo, Kazumasa calls. She picks up this time after having ignored numerous phone calls from him since her departure. Kazumasa asks her for her whereabouts and tells her about what people are calling "carcass terror,"[28] as the bodies of dead animals from the warning zone had been delivered to the residences of the prime minister and the CEO of an electric power company, as well as to the offices of the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. The dead animals came with a note demanding that all animals should be removed from the zones. Listening to Kazumasa,

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[23] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 64.
[24] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 49.
[25] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 65.
[26] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 68–70.
[27] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 71–72.
[28] Kimura, *Sacred Cesium Ground,* 76.

Hiromi, who is determined not to return to him, thinks of those animals that are still utilized for a political agenda and the possible implications of this terrorism for the ranch. Even then, she cannot help laughing aloud. At this moment, her name is revealed to the reader, as though she finds herself for the first time through this act of resistance.

AN ETHICS OF RESISTANCE—THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

At the press conference marking the inauguration of the 311 Thyroid Cancer Family Association in 2016, only a lawyer and a medical doctor (no family members) were physically present at the conference, while fathers whose children had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer did appear onscreen via Skype: from the neck down, with their voices altered, and being referred to by their shirt color, such as "person in white" and "person in black."[29] Their peculiar presence and the absence of their faces was a result of coercive power reprimanding those speaking against political power, seeking to minimize the damage caused by radiation exposure. Such collective coercive power, referred to *kūki* in colloquial Japanese, is so intense that one cannot discuss health concerns of oneself or others. Consequently, it functions as a form of peer pressure, using the prevailing mood to silence people. In a society where conforming to *kūki,* and thereby maintaining community harmony, is highly valued as a civic virtue, disturbing the public by stirring anxiety among people—however true it may be—is not regarded well and thus discouraged. Inevitably, it is exploited as a powerful political apparatus to manipulate the populace, diverting their attention from bad policies, as seen during WWII. Collective coercive power prioritizes upholding the status quo over personal health concerns, even to the extent of altering safety measures.

The absence of the full bodies of the fathers at the press conference discussed above served to expose how thyroid cancer in post-Fukushima Japan has become a disturbance of the *fukkō* (restoration/recovery) narrative and various projects surrounding it. Thus, the partial presence and partial absence of their images did constitute resistance by disrupting a familiar, convenient, and even comfortable narrative. Just as the shadow of the stone steps now preserved at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, the fathers' torsos at the press conference spoke of the presence of their absence—a successful act of resistance. In order to avoid sacrificing the health of humans and non-humans and to avoid leaving any lives in precarity, the presence of absence can be a form of resistance to disrupt

[29] Norma Field, "From Fukushima: To Despair Properly, To Find the Next Step," *Asia Pacific Journal,* 14, no. 17 (2016).

public life and the social norms that support the status quo. Instead of scornful labels such as “quitter” that Hiromi’s father and husband threw at her, we can value quitting, leaving, and deserting a place because such actions can serve as an impactful form of resistance against the allure of “disaster capitalism,” and more importantly liberation from harmful conditions. As Hiromi chooses not to restore her relationship with Kazumasa in the end of the story, the story can be read as a suggestion not to participate in restoration and recovery in Fukushima especially when participation expects one’s sacrifice, while the demonstration of absence in such restorative efforts constitutes an ethical task to protect oneself and others.