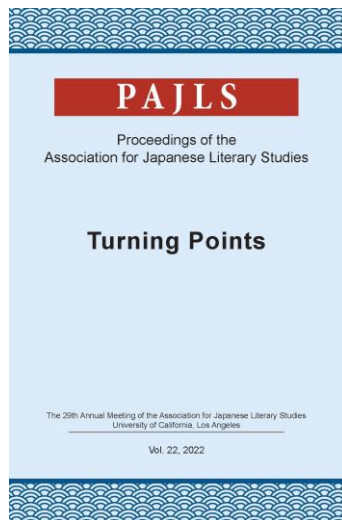


“Radioactive Aesthetics: Kobayashi Erika and the
Anti-sublime Craft”

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**RADIOACTIVE AESTHETICS: KOBAYASHI ERIKA
AND THE ANTI-SUBLIME CRAFT**

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How have modern and contemporary representations of nature inflected the relationship between humans and their environment—and vice versa? What are some of the apparatuses that, postulating a distinct separation between nature and culture, have consolidated this relationship in the forms that are most recognizable today? This paper proposes a consideration on epistemology and ethics that starts from aesthetics. It shares the broad questions above with other writings in ecocriticism, and it attempts to chart a path to alternative approaches and to more empathetic forms of praxis and care towards the environment, while endeavoring to explore potentially different forms of knowing the world we live in as well.

My partial response to the opening queries will focus on an important concept around which, historically, artistic representations of nature have coalesced: that of the ‘sublime.’ As I will hint in the course of this essay, the sublime constitutes not so much a “turning point” per se, but rather a recurring cultural pivot of sorts, whose reappearance in the discourse reaffirms certain chauvinistic understandings of human society, and of its aesthetic and affective relationship with nature. In this brief presentation, I plan to thus provide, together with a brief contextualization of the ‘sublime’ in modern history, a swift analysis of its epistemological heft and of its resonance within contemporary disaster narratives. I will, finally, contrast sublimity and its ‘domesticating’ approach towards nature with a reading of radiation and its history as figured in Kobayashi Erika’s *oeuvre*. My main aim is here, in fact, to introduce some of her peculiar ‘anti-sublime practices,’ selecting examples of her strategies in representing radiation from three among her works: her two main novels, *Madamu Kyurī to chōshoku o* マダムキュリーと朝食を (Breakfast with Madame Curie) and *Toriniti, toriniti, toriniti* トリニティ、トリニティ、トリニティ (Trinity, Trinity, Trinity); and, in particular, a novella titled *Hōseki* 宝石 (Precious Stones).²

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² Kobayashi Erika, *Madamu Kyurī to chōshoku o*; Kobayashi, *Toriniti, toriniti, toriniti*; *Hōseki* can be found in a 2017 story collection: Kobayashi, *Kanojo wa kagami no naka o nozokikomu*.

This reflection on aesthetics finds its place within a larger consideration regarding the manifold representation of the March 2011 triple disaster, and the gradual canonization of certain narrative and visual features of the catastrophe above others in the years following the events. Perhaps because of its scale and of its occurrence in a highly industrialized, ‘first world’ nation, ‘Fukushima’ immediately crossed the borders of Japan to infiltrate the global imagination, and it has thus conquered a place in the canon of great modern catastrophes. Real-time images of the destruction inflicted by the tsunami invaded Japanese homes and devices, almost at the same time as they reached screens in North America and Europe, calling forth a long-established affective response to these figures of fearsome natural might: the recoil and awe characteristic of the natural sublime. Such a response is as expected as it is widespread. See, for instance, how works by photographers documenting the destruction of the Eastern Tōhoku coast have been effortlessly defined as ‘sublime’ by their (Japanese) critics;³ or, how international art exhibitions such as *Sublime: The tremors of the world*, hosted in 2016 at the Pompidou-Metz in Paris, collect works ranging from volcanic explosions in Europe to many a room depicting in detail the destruction left in the wake of 3/11.⁴

A reason for this collective affective resonance might be found at the point of correlation among sublimity, its intellectual history, and disasters. While Marjorie Hope Nicolson argues, in fact, that the sublime arose in a response to the expansion of scientific horizons that coincided with the Enlightenment, and thus to a world suddenly perceived as “incomprehensibly vast,”⁵ others indicate different possible origins for the concept. The temporal vicinity of the Lisbon earthquake (1755) to the publication of the two texts responsible for the formulation of the sublime as we know it—Edmund Burke’s 1757 *A Philosophical Inquiry in the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790)—is impossible to ignore.⁶ Yet, this connection does not completely account for the longevity of this form of aesthetic, especially considering the specific historical context it rose to prominence within. One simple, possible explanation for its endurance might be its stalwart defense by academics: in the last three decades, for every article taking issue with sublimity’s limitations and obsolescence, two books have

³ Hayashi, Michio, “Reframing the Tragedy: Lessons from Post-3/11 Japan,” 175.

⁴ For more on the exhibition and its works, see Kimura, *Sonogo no shinsaigo bungakuron*, 197–98.

⁵ Cited in Bilbro, “Sublime Failure: Why We’d Better Start Seeing Our World as Beautiful,” 134.

⁶ Meek, *Biopolitical Media*, 13–14.

come out defending or ‘reclaiming’ the concept.⁷ A second, even more germane reason might be, however, another development coeval to Romanticism and the heyday of the literary and artistic sublime: the rise of movements focused on the independence of ethno-linguistic communities, and the foundation of the first modern nation-states.

Even while its purported origins date back to Imperial Rome, sublimity is, in fact, a very ‘modern’ aesthetics, betrayed by its obsession with borders and limits.⁸ The romantic sublime indicates, partly, a system failure; a recognition of a realm outside of humanity’s (and the state’s) control: a threat to order and reason. Kant’s achievement in the *Critique of Judgement* is to manage the impossible: maintaining the distinction between reason and this external danger (formless, unruly ‘nature’) while reaffirming reason’s primacy over it, reabsorbing its menace and domesticating it. This is particularly true of the second of the taxonomies that Kant explores in the *Critique*: the dynamical sublime. Both dynamical and mathematical sublime involve a similar diachronic experience. First, the subject will feel the apprehension of a fearsome object in the case of the former, and of an incommensurable, endless one for the latter. Later, he will realize his own capacity to reasonably overcome the incomprehension and the terror—and thus, recognize his own moral superiority to the brute object. As Paul Crowther aptly puts it, Kant claims that the dynamic sublime consists of the experience that “nature is might that has no dominion over us”. The dynamical sublime gives us direct proof of humanity’s superior moral existence, since “[w]hen beholding mighty natural objects from a position of safety, we recognize them to be fearful, but this challenges us to imagine situations where we would remain unflinching and courageous, even in the face of possible destruction by the mighty object.”⁹

It thus becomes apparent that the experience of the sublime inevitably rests on a physical, affective, and ethical separation between subject and object. It presupposes a world where humans and ‘nature’ inhabit removed territories, and it assigns all the agency and mobility to the human subject,

⁷ Among the material more critical of the sublime consulted for this essay see Elkins, “Against the Sublime”; Bilbro, “Sublime Failure: Why We’d Better Start Seeing Our World as Beautiful”; and Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Among the projects of ‘recovery’ of the concept, see Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*; Hitt, “Toward an Ecological Sublime;” and Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism*.

⁸ The first formulation of the sublime dates back to Pseudo-Longinus’s *Peri Hypsous* (On the Sublime, 1st century CE).

⁹ Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, 108–10.

who can move closer to or further away from the object at its own convenience: close enough to dominate nature, far enough to retreat when it becomes harmful.

Adding the cartesian axes of space (e.g. geography) and time (e.g. history) to the mathematical inequality above might help us make sense of this irreducible gap between subject and object. Like the sublime itself, the subject postulated here, while undoubtedly a product of its time, is also an enduring one. Grace Lavery hints as much when she describes the “subjective universal” character of taste in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* as, on the one hand, “the crack between the bounded exocentric position of the subject and the regime of objects... to which the subject appeals for concurrence and affirmation;”¹⁰ and, on the other, as an origin point of a long history of Euro-American Orientalism. It is through the longing for the ‘exquisite’ qualities of Japan—the Far (East) territory set to become, at the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘Other’, racialized, ‘empire’ *par excellence*—that Victorian rule recognizes its own political and cultural might.

The relationship envisioned by Lavery is thus one of projected supremacy. The Kantian “universal subject” depends (as does, Lavery notes in her work, the Victorian Empire and its aesthetic identity) on the taming of the object to confirm its boundaries, its integrity and superiority: through its longing for a phantasmatic, exotic other in the case of the ‘exquisite,’ and of a frightful, unfathomable one in that of the sublime.

The conception of the sublime, therefore, not only implies the sort of universal, ‘transparent’ and ‘historical’¹¹ subjectivity that both Lavery and Denise Ferreira da Silva designate as the *locus* of racialization; but also, a domestication of the object itself through artistic figuration.¹² The sublime negotiates with the ineffable, and captures it within language as such, thus designing it as the horizon of collective human imagination. The sublime object or event can, in fact, only be expressed as *sōteigai* (“unforeseeable,” “beyond expectations”) and nothing else.¹³ This operation of banishment

¹⁰ Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite*, 11.

¹¹ In the course of this essay, I will make an important distinction between two different conceptions of history: a first, universal understanding of it as the canonical ‘history’ of textbooks and chronicles, moved along by a universal subject (or what Hegel would refer to as “world-historical individuals”); and a second, granular and often obscured, conception of history of those human and non-human existences that become the unavoidable object of exploitation, the soil upon which the first ‘history’ is built.

¹² Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

¹³ For an in-depth discussion of the emergence and significance of the term *sōteigai* in post-3.11 discourse, see Samuels, 3.11, 35–38.

can be accompanied or replaced by one of containment: in Rob Wilson's formulation, the sublime in general and the *nuclear sublime* in particular is an operation of control of the disaster of nuclear annihilation within language.¹⁴

It should be clearer, at this point, where the representational politics of the sublime and those prevalent in the wake of 3.11 overlap. While popular media and political speeches might have generally resisted the temptation to overtly aestheticize the catastrophe and the pain of the victims, the figuration of the triple disaster—and more explicitly, of the nuclear explosion and spillage of Fukushima Daiichi—often falls into the temptation to reproduce the spatiotemporal coordinates of sublime subjects and objects, and perpetuates the rationale of the modern nation-state casting out from speech that which it cannot control. Nonetheless, nuclear power and its byproduct, radiation, notoriously defeat the logic and boundaries imposed by, in Da Silva's words, the "transparent" subjectivity envisioned through and by the nation. From both an ontological and a historical perspective, radiation always exceeds its assigned functions and assigned spaces. Its nature is evident even in non-disastrous times, as nuclear plants defy their designated role of producers of clean energy for the nation through the often-forgotten byproduct of nuclear waste, most commonly disposed of very far from the site of production. Radiation's ambivalence and its history of ungovernability are nonetheless erased under the regime of sublimity and transparent subjectivity: under the calls for *kizuna* and the government claims of *fuhyō higai*.

However, does the ineffable have to stay such? Is there any way to close the distance between subject and object, nature and culture that the sublime postulates? The second half of this essay will offer a tentative answer to such questions through an exploration of Kobayashi Erika's *oeuvre*. Her works of fiction, as I will argue, offer in fact more than one solution to these quandaries through her figurative experiments/

¹⁴ See Wilson, "Towards the Nuclear Sublime," esp. 419–20: "Paul Boyer and Jonathan Schell have both observed that this emerging attempt by writers 'to represent the unrepresentable' and 'say the unsayable' in the discourse of the 1980s, however, suggests a collective effort to bypass the Cold War repression of technological monsters and 'subversive demons' of race, class, and history from the American political unconscious by imagining nuclear images and affects, in the limited efficacy of a symbolic praxis." The dealing with ineffability as such thus contributes to contain much more than the imagination of the disaster; it also manages to silence kindred discourses of racialization and subordination in view of the total annihilation on the horizon.

entanglements with radiation, and her proposal of an alternative, less divisive notion of history.

Kobayashi Erika was already an affirmed manga and multimedia artist before publishing in 2014 the novel that garnered her domestic and international attention, and made her a candidate for two important Japanese literary prizes.¹⁵ *Breakfast with Madam Curie* (hereafter *Breakfast*), a family saga and a technological history detailing the vicissitudes of multiple generations of women and cats across the US and Japan, shares many of its themes with Kobayashi's contemporaneous and subsequent works, such as the manga *Children of Light* (*Hikari no kodomo* 光の子ども)¹⁶ and her 2019 novel, *Trinity Trinity Trinity* (hence *Trinity*). Hereon, I will explore her strategies to materialize radiation in some of her works of literary fiction, using her 2016 novella, *Precious Stones* as a point of entrance and a guide.¹⁷

As is true of *Breakfast* and *Trinity*, the chronological scope of *Precious Stones* is vast for its limited number of pages, as it spans three generations of women whose biographical details at least in part overlap with those of Kobayashi and her own relatives. The main plot consists of a family trip to the *onsen*, involving the nameless narrator, her nephew, three older sisters, and their mother, to celebrate the mother's recovery from cancer. To this journey, the novella juxtaposes another to the same radium hot springs, *Nekonaki onsen* in Ishikawa, Fukushima Prefecture, made by their paternal grandmother with their ailing young father in the early Shōwa period. What looks deceptively like another meditation on the cyclicities of postwar Japan, in Kobayashi's expert hands becomes a complex reflection on how we conceive of 'history' in and of itself. Kobayashi's conception of the term is in fact long-span, granular and hybrid; embodied but *un-specific*;¹⁸ and chthonic rather than sublime. Following in the steps of her father, a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast, Kobayashi takes upon herself the task of a detective, by sifting through the muddled traces of a forgotten history of the invisible; or better, of the complex exchanges between radiation, humans, and animals. She is particularly invested in the retrieval of those interactions predating the

¹⁵ Most notably, the Mishima and Akutagawa prizes.

¹⁶ For more on *Hikari no kodomo* and its commonalities with *Madame Curie*, see Harada, "Visible Matters; Radiation in Kobayashi Erika's Multimedia Project in Post-Fukushima Japan."

¹⁷ Anthologized in her 2017 short story collection, *Kanojo wa kagami no naka o nozokikomu* 彼女は鏡の中を覗き込む, and translated in 2021 by Brian Bergstrom.

¹⁸ In other words, "not specific to any species" (if you are generous enough to pardon the clumsy neologism).

invention of the atomic bomb and of nuclear technology, thus casting into doubt the conventional point of origin of ‘nuclear history’: August 6, 1945.¹⁹ In *Breakfast*, this historical interrogation is made possible by her introduction of the points of intersection between Edison industries development of electricity in the US, and Clarence Dally’s own experiments with X-Rays in Edison’s laboratories in West Orange, New Jersey. In *Precious Stones*, on the other hand, Kobayashi’s wanderings do not stray from Japan, and explore the Ni-Gō project, the top-secret program started in 1941 under the auspices of Nishina Yoshio. The project’s aim was to develop a uranium bomb from the refined minerals excavated from under Ishikawa, the same location of the narrator’s family’s trip.

This *longue-durée* approach to time is accompanied by a granular attention to frictions among scales: ‘historical’ events such as the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893) and the death of the Showa emperor (1989) are recorded in *Breakfast* and *Precious Stones*, but the writer shows more interest in the plethora of contingent lives and deaths – human and animal – that fail to be recorded in any official chronicle.²⁰

Kobayashi, however, takes her polemic with ‘history’ even further than what I have heretofore suggested. Her investment in a long-term analysis of humans’ relationship to nuclear power not only questions and enlarges the scope of its history as a technology, but also aims to demonstrate the enmeshed existence of radiation with all living and non-living things. She shows that radiation precedes the human attempt to tame its powers: to make it the nexus of life and death, of creation and destruction that we are all familiar with. This prehistory of nuclear technology (a term encompassing uses of radiation including and beyond nuclear power, such as its deployments in the medical field: X-rays, radiation therapy, etc.) manifests in *Precious stones* through the two trips to Ishikawa’s radium springs. The springs’ popularity, in fact, predates modernity; they are said to owe their name (in English, “Cat’s Cry Hot Springs”) to Izumi Shikibu’s cat, which came back to life after having attempted to drown itself, as its owner left it behind. Albeit the narrator herself shows a certain skepticism toward the Izumi Shikibu legend, it is

¹⁹ The date when the Enola Gay dropped the A-bomb dubbed ‘Little Boy’ on Hiroshima.

²⁰ An example of this tendency is her description of the death of an unnamed neighbor, a woman living by herself, which happened to coincide with the national mourning on the occasion of the Shōwa emperor’s death, and which threatened to be otherwise engulfed and erased within this bigger wave of ‘history.’ See Kobayashi Erika, “Precious Stones,” 29–30.

an undeniable fact that the *onsen* itself preexists both the radium springs fad of the Taishō period that originally made Ishikawa into a desirable destination, *and* the Ni-Gō project's experimentation with radioactive ore. It is its permanence and peaceful 'premodern' ubiquity that deny radioactivity its postwar status as a perilous object to be domesticated and exploited, and that also defy the very idea of a split between subject and object postulated by sublime aesthetics and epistemology.

In fact, rather than seeking separation from it, the characters in *Precious Stones* seem to relish a sensuous abandonment to radiation: both to its benign and more malign aspects. However, to develop this point, I am going to need to take a few steps back and share a few more details of the plot.

The 'stones' the title refers to are the jewels that Fumiyo left to her granddaughters after her death. Well into the novella we discover that the one encased in the pendant bequeathed to the narrator, rather than being an authentic diamond (that the grandmother would have gotten from her parents, jewelers in Mikawa) is instead an artificial one. All of the gems originally in Fumiyo's possession had in fact been seized by the government during the war. Those that she passes onto her four grandchildren are all man-made replacements, purchased after the end of the war, made in a laboratory from the same radioactive ore that had been mined for the Ni-Gō project. Although of low monetary value, the jewel represents a more significant kind of inheritance, as it becomes the source of the narrator's vivid dreams of her grandmother.

This connection, we discover, is made possible by a mysterious character, appearing both in the nameless narrator's and in the grandmother's timeline: a seemingly immortal man who claims to be named 'Quartz.' The narrator's sisters jokingly reminisce about him while soaking in the hot spring, as an urban legend of the neighborhood where they grew up.

"Do you remember that urban legend we heard in Hikari-ga-oka?
About the man who couldn't die?"

My other sister snorted scornfully from where she sat beside her.

"No—I don't remember at all!"

My eldest sister was fastidiously tucking stray hairs back into the towel around her head as she went on.

“I forgot what his name was, but people said there was a man who’d hang around IMA—he was immortal, and if you slept with him, it would cure you of any disease!”...

“You really don’t remember?” murmured my eldest sister, already stirring the surface of the water with her fingernails. “I can’t believe you don’t remember. There was that friend of a friend whose grandmother got cancer, she slept with him and then poof—the cancer went away! People talked about it...”

“Go, grandma!” my other sister said jokingly, then added, “We should have had Mom visit him, she could have bounced back faster.”²¹

Even while there is a definite levity and immateriality to Quartz’s introduction to the story, that is not the case with the narrator’s own encounter with this phantasmatic character. She first meets him, as a child, while wandering down the staircase of the (then recently opened) Hikari-ga-oka station of the Ōedo line: a hairless, pale young man of unidentifiable age weighed down by the body of woman embracing him. He appears in two more occasions in the story: once, when the narrator and protagonist decides to give into temptation, gifting him her birthstone in exchange for his promise of intimacy and immortality; and once more, in Fumiyo’s memory, as she, a few decades before her grandchild, exchanges with a younger Quartz the same words and same vows that her granddaughter unknowingly will.

“Stone never dies, and never forgets. It remembers everything that happens to it—every little thing, down to the smallest detail—and preserves it all inside itself.”

I looked deep into Quartz’s eyes. His lashless eyes, with their clear irises—they were so beautiful.

“So that means, let’s say if I were to become a stone myself, then that stone will remember me forever too, right? [...] Even if I never become great?”

²¹ Kobayashi Erika, 25–26.

“Even if you never become great.”²²

Is it perhaps this alchemic operation that allows for Fumiyo’s memories and life to be imbued in the radioactive gem dangling from her granddaughter’s neck? The story leaves many questions open. What is notable, however, is the way in which it depicts and takes advantage of Quartz’s hybridity and ambivalence. Is he a human, or a stone: alive, or dead? The truth is that—especially in the irradiated world the characters and we live in—the distinction does not matter. He, who claims to be one hundred and to have been made immortal after being exposed to “fairy light,”²³ has torn down with his own sheer existence any difference among species and taxonomic tier; between animate and inanimate. Neither has more agency; neither is object *nor* subject. Remembrance of the dead and mineral memory become facets of one and the same painful, embodied history in the novella. Such are the traces of cancer, of radiation therapy, and the deep grooves dug by the rings on the fingers of the narrator’s mother. Radiation and jewels meld to the body and change its biological and physical conformation.

Quartz’s hybridity is also marked within the text by the space he inhabits: the narrator meets him on a stair landing leading to the platforms of the Oedo line in Hikarigaoka: the most recent and the deepest addition to the subway map of Tokyo. The protagonist knows well this limbo between heaven and earth since young, because it was the site of a game she played with her sisters: a test of courage challenging each other to go as deep as possible underground, to the land of Yomi. While in *Breakfast* radiation was visible to its characters as a suffused light, in fact, in *Precious Stones* (as it is the case with *Trinity Trinity Trinity*, where radiation appears as emanating from radioactive rocks called “accursed stones”) it emanates from below. Its original, secret history, Kobayashi implies, is chthonic; it has to be excavated, or perhaps encountered flowing out of a geothermic spring. Her representational strategy in the novella then resists the established, loftier catalog of imagery that radioactivity is associated with: aerial pictures of nuclear mushrooms, birds-eye-views of contaminated plants, *et similia*. Sublime nature is often atmospheric; the sublime subject is caught peering at the horizon. The representation of sublimity seems often tied to its linguistic roots of elevation and yearning for the limit (*sub-limen*).

²² Kobayashi Erika, 68–69. The same exchange is reproduced almost word-by-word on pp. 77–78, this time between Fumiyo and Quartz.

²³ Kobayashi Erika, 48.

Kobayashi reminds us instead of a history predating such images, and the exploitative imagination of an imperialist nation-state, set on domesticating every possible resource (even the unruliest kinds) with technology. She proposes instead cooperative forms of what Donna Haraway would call *sym-poiesis*:²⁴ forms of production unrelated to large-scale industry, but kindred with more collaborative crafts to which organic and inorganic beings can take equal part. Crafts are productive endeavors often discounted as ‘feminine,’ and second-tier, the domain of second-class citizens and subjects. In *Breakfast*, such a craft is ‘cooking’: cats and humans cook ‘together’ with radiation, creating dishes that will allow them to see its light and travel back in time. In *Trinity*, a mother knits away doilies while listening to the voice of radiation. In *Precious Stones*, I claim that the craft imagined is that of history itself: the process of shaping and remembering through the body, and its mineral accessories and prosthetics, the voices of past human, animal and mineral lives.

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²⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

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