Commodifiable Phantasm:
The Politicization of the Native Land after Fukushima

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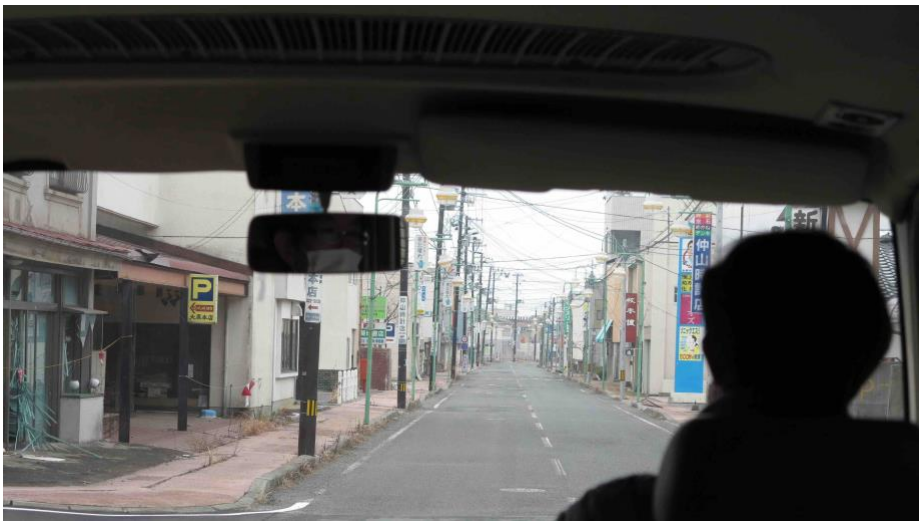
The electronic board on the highway highlights the level of radiation: 2 microsieverts per hour. With urban volunteers from Tokyo, I am driving to visit residents of a temporary housing complex. Right now, our group cross Tomioka, a small city situated within the former 20 km exclusion zone of the Fukushima Dai'ichi power plant. Five years after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, which happened in Japan, residents are still forbidden to return to Tomioka, excluding short trips to retrieve personal items. The place is a ghost town, with the most striking sight being the rust, as if the brittle skin of the town crumbles apart. With phantom-like eeriness, the storefront windows are stuck in time, exhibiting the same household items from five years ago —the tell-tale signs of a nuclear disaster. Tomioka used to be the hometown of citizens that volunteers and I are going to visit; evacuees who now live in a temporary housing complex. Yet, Tomioka is currently the specter of one's former native hometown, what the Japanese call *furusato*.

In this essay, I explore how nuclear disaster governance is inseparable from managing the imaginary of the *furusato*. I underscore how state performances, especially those associated with the Reconstruction Agency [Japan's main agency for post-Fukushima reconstruction] play on tropes of resilience and nostalgia for one's native land to promote a politics of revitalization. By focusing on the narratives of state officials and forced evacuees, I explore how different understandings of the *furusato* influence the interpretation of radioactive contamination. I argue that an engagement with the *furusato* is a political touchstone for speaking about recovery. For some, the phantasm of a place that was pure before, confronts the phantasm of a place that can become pure again and thus open for revitalization, repatriation, or economic commodification.

In describing this political touchstone, I introduce the concept of "commodifiable phantasm," which refers to the mobilization of nostalgia as the driver of a phantasm that has concrete effects in governing the idealized reconstruction paths of Japan. By resorting to this imaginary, the Japanese government is raising the specter of a precarious *furusato* affected by harmful rumors, and in ways that reinforce the trope of a strong, resilient, and unified nation-state. Instead of embracing the diverse realities of the *furusato*, I argue that the state phantasm of citizens' longing for their native homes convey commodified notions of the *furusato*, which have little to do with the lived realities of evacuees, and which end up being open to marketable practices and socioeconomic policies.

The city of Tomioka (photo by the author)



Brief Context about Fukushima

On 11 March 2011, a magnitude 9 earthquake off the coast of northeastern Japan caused a devastating tsunami that set in motion a chain of events leading to the meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Soon, Fukushima found its place alongside Three Mile Island and Chernobyl as an icon of nuclear disaster. As the reactors began to meltdown, pressure mounted in the power station's facilities, leading to explosions that released dangerous radionuclides into the air. These radionuclides, with lifespans ranging from days to centuries, blew across Fukushima and northeastern Japan. And as they accumulated, health risks increased, risks of cancers and ailments affecting the immune system. To protect the population, the Japanese state forced tens of thousands of citizens living near the reactors to evacuate. Since 2011, in the hope of recovering, Japan has embraced an official policy of revitalization at Fukushima. The policy has different features, which all converge into a discourse of minimizing radiation risk, decontaminating the region, promoting Fukushima's food products, re-arranging exclusion zones, and repatriating former evacuees.

The Marketing of Nostalgia

In the aftermath of the disaster, the Japanese state quickly mobilized the imaginary of the *furusato* to promote a policy of repatriation to Fukushima. In my interviews with government officials, the repatriation to former restricted areas was explained by the fact that evacuees were longing to return to their home as quickly as possible. In this, officials emphasized the psychological suffering of evacuees, induced by the separation from their native land. For instance, a technical advisor working for the Ministry of the Environment once explained to me that "People in Fukushima love their native land (*furusato*), their home sweet home."

Historically speaking, the term *furusato* has a rich tradition of political mobilization, since it is a cultural notion imbued with deep nostalgic feelings for one's native place. In talking about nostalgia, I refer to a feeling of yearning for an idealized past, while keeping in mind that nostalgia is always a "cultural practice, not a given content."[1] As many authors explain, cultural practices surrounding the nostalgia of the *furusato* evoke traditional images of a rural idyll, which are predominantly linked with agricultural labor or natural landscapes.[2] As such, the *furusato* does not represent "a specific location but rather a pervasive, nostalgia-driven ideal —one that represents whatever is felt to be lacking in contemporary industrialized society […]"[3] For instance, this perceived lack was successfully mobilized by the travel industry to offer "pseudotravel experiences for busy urbanites."[4] Yet, there is something deeper going on with this mobilization of nostalgia, especially regarding nation-state making and essentialist features of Japaneseness.[5] Indeed, by mobilizing tropes of "a pre-Western, preindustrialized, and nonurban past,"[6] the *furusato* asserts "a unique Japanese heritage in the face of an increasingly Westernized lifestyle [...],"[7] often at the detriment of social difference.[8]

it is difficult to conceptualize how we might meaningfully grapple with waste which remains extremely toxic for nearly 5 billion years.

In conceptualizing the *furusato* as a form of "commodifiable phantasm," it is important to define what I mean by both commodity and phantasm. First, while the *furusato* is not a thing *per se* it takes the characteristics of a Marxist commodity, that is, a good or a service that results from human activity and that is sold on a market.[9] Marx famously argued that a commodity encompasses a shift from the *use* value of a product (which satisfies a basic need) to the *exchange* value of a product (which can be traded for something else), hereby creating a process of

[1] Stewart, Kathleen. 1988. Nostalgia: A Polemic. Cultural Anthropology. 3(3): 227.
[2] See Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 494; Dusinberre, Martin and Daniel P. Aldrich. 2011. Hatoko Comes Home: Civil Society and Nuclear Power in Japan. The Journal of Asian Studies. 70(3): 696; Gill, Tom. 2013. This Spoiled Soil: Place, People and Community in an Irradiated Village in Fukushima Prefecture. In Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011, eds. Slater, David H., Brigitte Steger, and Tom Gill, 201. Bern: Peter Lang.
[3] Schnell, Scott. 2008. The Rural Imaginary: Landscape, Village, Tradition. In A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan, ed. Robertson, Jennifer, 213. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
[4] Creighton, Millie. 1997. Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry. Ethnology. 36(3): 239; see also Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 494.
[5] Dusinberre, Martin and Daniel P. Aldrich. 2011. Hatoko Comes Home: Civil Society and Nuclear Power in Japan. The Journal of Asian Studies. 70(3): 701.
[6] Creighton, Millie. 1997. Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry. Ethnology. 36(3): 239.
[7] Ibid: 242
[8] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 26
[9] Marx, Karl. 1992. Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy. New York: Penguin Classics.

alienation. In post-Fukushima Japan, similar processes of alienation are happening, as radioactive contamination forces social actors to drastically rethink what their native land stands for, while leading to a nostalgic fetishization of past ways of life.

Secondly, in talking about phantasm, I refer to "epistemological object whose presence or absence cannot be definitively located."[10] This definition echoes the understanding of the *furusato*, which can be regarded as a figment of imagination, a sought-after utopia, in brief, a product of fantasy. However, while phantasms are illusory things, anthropologists have argued that that they produce concrete social effects.[11] Similarly, the phantasm of the *furusato* is shaping the governance of post-Fukushima disaster recovery in specific ways. One of these effects is the creation of a nostalgic discourse about former ways of life, which is turned into commodifiable practices, best exemplified by expensive post-disaster policies, like decontamination procedures. In highlighting the role of yearning, I also draw from Tim Choy's comprehension of nostalgia, which denotes a "kind of painful homesickness."[12] As he argues: "If we remember this sense of nostalgia, we might see that nostalgic discourses of endangerment do not simply bemoan the passage of time, but are sick, instead, from the loss of specific, meaningful spaces."[13] For the *furusato*, this nostalgia only works if the native land is perceived as endangered by an impeding disappearance, such as in the cases of rural depopulation or, in this case, by the specter of radioactive contamination.

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Before Fukushima, nostalgia for the *furusato* was linked with the disappearance of Japanese tradition, as well as with efforts to maintain cultural homogeneity.[14] Yet, in post-Fukushima Japan, the vanishing of the *furusato* is not the result of foreign Western influences. Rather, it is the result of Japanese elites, who brought down a nuclear disaster that was never supposed to happen in the first place. As such, this phantasm does not long for a pre-Western archipelago (resulting in the marketing of tourism), but in a longing for a pre-Fukushima Japan, which can perhaps become uncontaminated again, either by technical fixes (e.g., decontamination) or by evacuation

[10] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 22.
[11] Masco, Joseph. 2006. The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 15.
[12] Choy, Tim. 2011. Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 48.
[13] Ibid: 49
[14] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

practices (for some evacuees). While the *furusato* was always depicted as something vanishing, radiation politics opens a novel phantasmagoric space for its commodification practices.

The Phoenix of Fukushima

In this section, I examine how tropes of resilience (*rejiriensu*), hope (*kibō*), repatriation, and technological innovations are becoming key values in the post-Fukushima's *furusato* of the Japanese state, by focusing on the Reconstruction Agency. Through public performance and revitalization projects playing on affective tropes of nostalgia for one's native land, the Reconstruction Agency began to govern the understanding of Fukushima beyond scientific forms of expertise. In 2016, this approach was epitomized during a forum organized by the Reconstruction Agency, entitled "Great East Japan Earthquake 5 Anniversary Reconstruction Forum —Toward a new stage of the reconstruction/creation."[15] In the inaugural discourse, Tsuyoshi Takagi, the Minister for Reconstruction, emphasized the wonderful revitalization that followed Japan's Triple Disaster:

> Many people wondered if Japan would be able to return to its former self. But Japan is back, Japan is revived with an indomitable spirit and will lead the world again. [...] From then on, we will continue to decontaminate and restore the living infrastructure, to create an environment where people who want to return to their hometown (*furusato*) can do so.[16]

During the Forum, the need for repatriation was explained by the fact that forced evacuees were longing to return to their *furusato*. Because of the long-term evacuation, there was the fear that children might forget about their native land and that traditional heritage associated with local regions might disappear. As such, the Agency promoted local initiatives that aimed to restore the *furusato* culture, where children could learn about their hometown (*furusato o manabu kodomo-tachi*).[17] For instance, the Agency created a nationwide writing contest for school children, with themes such as "Our thoughts toward our hometown and the progress of our reconstruction" (*watashitachi no fukkō no ayumi to furusato e no omoi*).[18]

Accordingly, invited speakers were citizens who faced the potential disappearance of their *furusato*. These

[15] Higashinihon daishinsai 5-shūnen fukkō fōramu, aratana sutēji fukkō sōsei e [Great East Japan earthquake 5 anniversary reconstruction forum —Toward a new stage of the reconstruction/creation]. Iino Hall and Conference Center, Tokyo. 6 June, 2016.
[16] For a full Japanese transcript see: https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/s/2016/06/material/20160531_kaikenroku_5th-forum_jp.pdf (Accessed 9 May, 2022)
[17] NPO hōjin chiiki gakushū purattofōmu kenkyūkai. 2013. Furusato o manabu kodomo-tachi/furusato o tsutaeru kōrei-sha no deban-dzukuri [Children learning their hometown/Creating a turn for the elderly to convey their hometown]. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat1/sub-cat1-4/20131220_saku.pdf (Accesssed 2 April 2022)
[18] Reconstruction Agency. 2016. "Atarashī Tōhoku" –sakubun kontesuto– sakuhin bunshū [New Tōhoku –Composition contest– Collection of works]. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat1/sub-cat1-11/2016/20160613165312.html (Accessed 2 April, 2022)

included a famous musician, members of a women's association of traditional handicrafts, as well as representatives of the local workers and farmers of Fukushima. Many shared their post-disaster discourse of resilience, while being confident that their *furusato* would recover from the nuclear catastrophe. To contribute to the revitalization project, a TV anchor told the audience to enjoy the rich cultural tradition of Fukushima and to "spend your money, have fun, and buy souvenirs! That's the best thing you can do for the people of Fukushima!" Since tourism had sharply decreased after the disaster, the Reconstruction Agency promoted the cultural heritage of different *furusatos*, regularly doing profile on traditional foods, such as frozen rice cake (*shimi mochi*) or buckwheat noodles (*soba*).[19] In their print material, the Agency further highlighted the rich natural beauty (*utsukushī midori*) of Fukushima, praising the possibilities of ecotourism (*ekotsurizumu*),[20] as well as initiatives that encouraged the "regeneration of the *furusato*" (*furusato saisei*).[21]

Near the end of the Forum, a young woman shared her dream of getting married in Naraha, a small town situated within the exclusion zone of the power plant. While the disaster had led to numerous divorces, it now appeared that a resilient *furusato* could become the locus where marriage would, once again, become consumable. To make this revitalization possible, the Forum eulogized the need to lead a "normal life" (*futsū*) and invited a singer who praised reconstruction efforts. The song went like this: "We have rebuilt our homes to be as beautiful as in our memory!" By mobilizing specific understanding of the native land, the government framed the return of evacuees as a question of return to one's *furusato*, where nostalgia was seen as a form of collective loss, rather than an "individual experience."[22]

By framing nostalgia for the *furusato* as a form of communal loss —ironically performed for an audience of Tokyoites and foreign ambassadors— the Forum revealed much about the political potential of the native land. Jennifer Robertson has long demonstrated how the Japanese state successfully mobilized the *furusato* imaginary to reinforce nativist political value against a fear of Westernization.[23] Yet, in the context of Fukushima, it is the qualities of proper civic duties in post-disaster recovery that are reinterpreted, rather than nativistic meanings. In

[19] Reconstruction Agency. 2019. Dentō no "shimimochi" o mamori, jisedai e [Protecting the traditional "frozen-mochi" and passing it to the next generation]. Reconstruction Agency Website. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/portal/chiiki/hukkoukyoku/fukusima/material/201903.katsurao.pdf (Accessed 3 April, 2022)
[20] Reconstruction Agency. 2016. Atarashii tōhoku: sendō moderu jireishū vol. 2 [New Tohoku Model Case Book vol. 2]. Reconstruction Agency, Comprehensive Policy Group. February 2016.
[21] Reconstruction Agency. 2019. Min'na de jitsugen! Omoshiro aidia [Realized by all. Interesting ideas!] March 2019: 16. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/portal/sangyou_nariwai/cf/material/h30_cf_jireisyu.pdf (Accessed 3 April 2022)
[22] Freeman, Lindsey A. 2015. Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 41.
[23]Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 494.

other words, "proper" Japanese citizens were individuals that were nostalgic for their hometown, that did not abandon their *furusato*, and that stuck with their community to revitalize their region.

The Reconstruction Agency restlessly encouraged this form of community-based resilience. For instance, it underscored the story of selected citizens who had revitalized their *furusato* by creating startup companies, moral support initiatives, and touristic improvements.[24] Moreover, it endorsed economic projects like donations (*kifu*) or citizen-based crowdfunding (*kuraudofandingu*) for *furusato*-related projects.[25] In this context, proper citizens were not necessarily victims that expected monetary indemnity from the state, but individuals who could economically support the revitalization of their own region, thanks to their love for the native land.

In the end, by emphasizing the affective connections that citizens maintained with their native land, and by raising the specter of a *furusato* affected by harmful rumors around radiation, the Reconstruction Agency reinforced images of a pure and unified Fukushima, rather than focusing on the saturated tensions of spaces exacerbated by contamination. The series of speaker present during the Forum only included individuals who felt saddened for their beloved *furusato*, while hoping for its prompt recovery. A utopian future was modeled through the figure of a carefully selected "imagined community."[26]

Consuming the Furusato

Beyond the Forum, the state deployed efforts to revitalize regions affected by the disaster. For instance, in the Tokyoite district of Chiyoda, the Reconstuction Agency arranged food fairs, cultural workshops, and art exhibitions that enabled urban citizens to enjoy the "flavor of furusato."[27] In the train station of Fukushima City, *Kibitan* —the yellowish mascot of the prefecture— welcomed visitors and the charms of the native land were presented under colorful kiosks and interactive stands that made use of pictures and art projects. All these exhibits promoted the food terroir, traditional hotels, cherry blossom viewing, hot springs, and historic festivals of the region. A new baseball team had even been created after the disaster under the well-thought name of *Fukushima Hopes*. An enormous signboard at the station read of the promises of happiness: "Toward Fukushima future! Fukushima is

[24] See Reconstruction Agency. N.D. Sutātoappu kigyō [Start-up business.] Reconstruction Agency Website. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat4/sub-cat4-1/2016fukko-05.pdf (Accessed 4 April 2022)
[25] Reconstruction Agency. 2019. Min'na de jitsugen! Omoshiro aidia [Realized by all. Interesting ideas!] March 2019: 15. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/portal/sangyou_nariwai/cf/material/R1_CFjireisyu.pdf (Accessed 11 April 2022)
[26] Anderson, Benedict. 2006. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso books.
[27] Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 496.

also happy, everybody is happy!" (*Fukushima no mirai ni mukatte! Happy Fukushima, Fukushima mo happy, min'na happy!*). Nor far from the signboard a Renewable Energy Information Center (*saiseikanō enerugī jōhōkan*) underscored the use of clean energy in the region. By turning a nuclear-stricken region into a pioneer of renewable energy people could rest assured that a disaster like Fukushima, would never happen again —at least not in their native land. Part of these activities felt under an important project called the "Innovation Coast Framework" (*Fukushima inobēshon kōsuto kōsō*), which is a "national project designed to build a new industrial infrastructure in the coastal region of Fukushima."[28]

Consequently, events such as "Robot Festa Fukushima" were held to increase interest in robots amongst returnees and citizens. During these events, one could learn about snake-like robots that wiggle through complex pipe structures for inspection purposes of the power plant, hereby leading the robotic industrial revolution of Japan.[29] The subtext was clear: Fukushima was a leading place to live, with traditional charm and soon-to-be blooming industries standing at the cutting edge of technology. The Innovation Coast demonstrates that one's *furusato* does not need to be an archaic place, a trope that younger generations often associated with their hometown. Indeed, one of the main aims of the Reconstruction Agency during their Forum was to make "Fukushima attractive to young people" (*wakamono ni totte miryoku aru Fukushima o mezashite*).

The wolf celling of Yamatsumi Shrine (photo by the author)

[28] Fukushima Innovation Coast Promotion Organization. N.D. Fukushima Innovation Coast Framework. Website. https://www.fipo.or.jp/en (Accessed 11 April 2022)
[29] Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. 2015. Fukushima de, hajimatte iru koto [What is happening in Fukushima]. METI Journal. February/March 2015. Tokyo: Japan Cabinet Office, 12.

During my trips to Fukushima, I observed other revitalization practices in the village of Iitate. Of particular interest was a newly constructed roadside station called *Michinoeki Madeikan*. In this station, I found souvenir kiosks that sold locally produced goods and memorabilia, while being greeted by *Ītane-chan*, the big plant fairy mascot of Iitate village. In talking about the commodification of Japanese travel, scholars have underscored the importance of "local dialect" within the *furusato*.[30] Similarly, it was possible to purchase different products of Iitate and to enjoy the specificity of their *furusato*, which was known as *madei*, a term that implies a slow and joyful life movement.[31] In Iitate, I also visited the Yamatsumi Shrine, an impressive Shinto shrine famed for its 240 paintings of Japanese wolves. While much of the shrine was destroyed during a fire, many of the paintings were reproduced by Tokyo University art students, notably as part of a revitalization project.[32] Still, despite much of these revitalization efforts, few tourists flocked toward these regions. By looking at the many pictures of wolves present in the Shrine, I could not help but to think about the Japanese subspecies of wolf (*Canis lupus hodophilax*) that became extinct due to the same capitalist practices responsible for the nuclear disaster. What else had become extinct in Fukushima? Many of the ghost towns and abandoned houses that I saw seemed to point toward its former citizens. For a town that had roughly 6000 living souls before the disaster only 400 people —mostly all elderly men— had come back to Iitate in 2017. The state phantasm of the *furusato* appeared disembodied from its social means of production. A *furusato* alienated from its former people. Within a specter of radiation and without those 6000 souls, would the *furusato* of Iitate still be able to function as a touristic attraction?

Decontaminating the Furusato

An incredible number of financial subsidies is injected in the revitalization of Fukushima by promoting a nostalgia for the *furusato*. As Marilyn Ivy once said: "Dominant ideologies in Japan still depend on a politics of nostalgia suitable for an advanced capitalist polity: a nostalgia for a Japan that is kept on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for commodifiable desire)."[33] The commodifiable desire that Ivy highlights is exactly what is at stake in the state-sponsored revival of Fukushima's *furusato*, be they in terms of tourism, jobs, R&D, or reconstruction policies. An extremely lucrative market is available for the actors that pretend to make

[30] Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 500.
[31] For more on madei see Gill, Tom. 2013. This Spoiled Soil: Place, People and Community in an Irradiated Village in Fukushima Prefecture. In Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011, eds. Slater, David H., Brigitte Steger, and Tom Gill, 209. Bern: Peter Lang.
[32] Japan Times. 2016. Gutted Fukushima shrine's famed wolf paintings reproduced. The Japan Times. November 8. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/11/08/national/gutted-fukushima-shrines-famed-wolf-paintings-reproduced/ (Accessed 13 April 2022)
[33] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 65.

contaminated areas into habitable zones. In 2014, the national government budget for radioactive decontamination was of an astonishing 1.9 trillion yen (or 19 billions in US$).[34] Decontaminating the *furusato* becomes interesting for industrial companies, but profit shares rarely come back to the people living in Fukushima. Decontamination contracts exemplify this, as local contractors cannot compete with the major contractors of Tokyo.[35] In his study of climate change, Erik Swyngedouw argues that CO^2 functions as a commodity that inserts itself within a "complex governance regime organized around a set of technologies of governance […]"[36] Similarly, the commodification of the *furusato* is inseparable from technologies of governance that surround post-disaster revitalization, successfully commodifying the imaginary of the native land into something that is tangible and open to marketable practices. Furthermore, in heavily contaminated areas where the *furusato* as a touristic commodity no longer work, the native land is becoming the driver of a phantasm that has consequences in terms of "disaster capitalism," which refers to how elites profit from catastrophes.[37] The Innovation Coast framework, decontamination contracts, and decommission projects demonstrate that Fukushima becomes re-commodified as a place of high-tech resilience.

In this commodifiable phantasm, lucrative post-disaster measures are gaining exchange values by highlighting the vision of a homogeneous and resilient nation-state. In talking about nuclear arsenal, Masco argues that the atomic bomb is not a commodity in the strict Marxist sense.[38] Yet, as a "national fetish," the bomb maintains a "magical hold on people's thinking, and in doing so, energize very specific national-cultural imaginaries."[39] In post-Fukushima Japan, the governmental practices of reconstruction articulate the *furusato* in a reified notion of the native land based on spatiality, thereby opening it to commodifiable gains, but also to a specific phantasmagoric vision of the nation-state. Alf Hornborg states that "Marx's seminal insight was that objects such as money tokens and commodities are incorrectly understood as autonomous sources of productivity and agency, whereas they in fact signify social relations of exchange."[40] What is being exchanged after this disaster is the phantasm of a contaminated place that can become pure again, or if not radiation-free, then, at least, worry free for consumption.

[34] Ministry of the Environment. N.D. Measures for Decontamination of Radioactive Materials Discharged by TEPCO'S Fukushima Daiichi NPS Accident. Off-site Decontamination Measures.
http://josen.env.go.jp/en/ (accessed 22 February, 2016)
[35] Fukushima Booklet Publication Committee. 2015. 10 Lessons from Fukushima: Reducing Risk and Protecting Communities from Nuclear Disasters, 40
[36] Swyngedouw, Erik. 2010. Apocalypse Forever? Post-political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change. Theory, Culture & Society. 27(2-3): 220.
[37] Klein, Naomi. 2007. The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. New York: Metropolitan Books.
[38] Masco, Joseph. 2006. The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 22.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Hornborg, Alf. 2021. Objects Don't Have Desires: Toward an Anthropology of Technology beyond Anthropomorphism. American Anthropologist. 123(4): 761.

In the end, tropes of nostalgia for one's *furusato* are supposed to provide an environment prompt for return —but one should ask for *whom* exactly? In Tomioka, I witnessed giant incinerators burning irradiated debris. On its front, the logo of Kajima Corporation, Mitsubishi, and the MOE were inscribed. Under those logos one could read "*ganbarō tomioka machi*," or "Let's do our best, city of Tomioka!" This *ganbarō*, which can be translated as "perseverance" and which is a common term for effort used in government slogans seemed to be highly profitable for Mitsubishi, the conglomerate that provides nuclear services and reactors, as well as for Kajima Corporation, a Tokyo-based super-general contractors. But for former residents, could one really come back to a place where radioactive waste was being burned and called that their *furusato*?

A Paper Rice Cake

Between 2016 and 2017, I visited the same temporary housing complex, which was situated in the southern part of Fukushima. Residents of this temporary housing complex were composed of young families, as well as elderly individuals whose houses were still situated in the exclusion zones. I first went there with a group of volunteers who provided moral supports for the evacuees.

As I came to gradually know the residents of this housing complex, especially a group of elderly women, many talked about how much they missed their original hometown, while complaining about how their current life was deprived of the joys of their former *furusato*. After the disaster, few elderly women believed that the evacuation order would have lasted for so long. Three months after March 2011, some evacuees were able to briefly return to their houses to retrieve important personal belongings. In their farms, they discovered starved pigs eating away the flesh of their dead horses. This was a harsh welcome, in which the original *furusato* was inseparable from such haunting images.

Life in Temporary Housings

By their infrastructure, temporary housings were deprived of individual expression. As opposed to city dwellers, residents of the complex were born in the countryside and are used to live in spacious environments. As one volunteer explains to me: "Living in a cramped space is even harder for those evacuees; nights are long and they feel trapped." Many regularly complained about the lack of privacy in the complex. Barracks were constructed right next to each other to save on construction and heating costs. Unfortunately, this resulted in paper-thin walls. Additionally, the barracks were badly insulated. One day, our group of volunteers tried to make a batch of miso soup only to realize that pipes were frozen. "It happens every winter," explains an elderly woman. In summer, the situation was no better, as the heat and humidity became intolerable without air conditioning. Many spoke

negatively about life in the complex, arguing that there was nothing to do, except drinking every day. The police often came because of alcohol-related problems, as well as to take care of domestic abuse.

These kinds of problems made evacuees particularly nostalgic about life in their former *furusato*. Usually, the main subject of conversation gravitated around radioactive contamination. For example, I repeatedly heard elderly women criticize the state, as well as TEPCO. In opposition to the enthusiasm of state officials, forced evacuees were harshly critical of the decontamination processes supposed to provide a clean *furusato* for their return. "They don't tell us the before and after difference of radiation levels when they do the decontamination! We had to do this by ourselves," claimed a resident of the center. "I don't know how to do this!" she pursued. As her nearby companion added: "They spray our roofs with water to get rid of the radioactive pollutants, but the water just falls right down near the house with all the contaminants in it…" Other evacuees explained how decontamination works was subcontracted to local mobsters (*yakuza*), which made them anxious of a potential return. As a woman commented: "They were bending over and we could see their tattoos on their backs and on their arms." Residents further claimed that they found people squatting in their former homes and that burglary was a recurrent problem in their village.

In March 2016, when I first visited the housing complex, evacuees could still not come back to their original hometowns. This was either because radiation levels were too high or because their houses had crumbled down due to the passage of time. In the former house of one of evacuee, Setsuko Yamaguchi, everything had broken down: "Rain has passed through the roof, the house is falling apart… I didn't have any other choice but to start building a new one." On the other hand, life elsewhere was made impossible from a lack of proper financial support. Indeed, some evacuees were facing problems in receiving compensation for their losses. As one evacuee states: "We have never been paid, but they [the government] keep saying that they have done so… How can we trust them after that!? All they want is to cut all potential links with us as soon as possible…"

Gradually, the notion of one's hometown is no longer a concept upon which evacuees have a strong hold. It is replaced by what Anne Allison calls "social precarity," that is, a "sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected (*fuan*, *fuantei*, *ibasho ga nai*)."[41] Amidst these hardships, evacuees were getting accustomed to a supposedly temporary home by individualizing their barracks and by making the complex feel more like their former *furusato*. For example, evacuees were particularly happy when we made gelatinous rice cake (*mochi*) in a traditional manner. On a cold day of January 2017, our group brought a batch of fresh rice with the intention of

[41] Allison, Anne. 2013. Precarious Japan. Durham: Duke University Press, 14.

making *mochi*. To enable the glutinous appearance of the rice cake one must continuously pound the rice with a big wooden sledgehammer. A few seconds after the hammer pounded the rice an old lady expertly tossed it upside down before the hammer stroke again. After a few good poundings we molded the pummeled rice into small cakes and dipped them in various sugary coatings. In rural Japan, making *mochi* in this manner is a form of work that reinforces the community —a performative act of what the *furusato* used to be about. On that day residents appeared nostalgic of the time they could do such activities in their own hometown.

In front of her barrack, Yamaguchi even made her own little garden amidst the hard rock pebble of the housing complex. "I've scrapped all the pebbles by myself and filled the hole with soil. It took 17 bags!' she proudly said, while showing me tiny vegetables. In many ways, this garden is the reflection of a nostalgia for a former way of life that some hope to recover. Many evacuees have lived in this complex for more than six years —a very long time. Children were even born in this center. Under such conditions, one could not help, but to ponder at the meanings that the term "temporary" embodies. Radioactive contamination is altering the very conception of time, producing a sense of homelessness that goes beyond the loss of a physical *furusato*.

This specter of an uncertain future provoked the image of a past *furusato* that was pure and untouched, as echoed by the lamentation of evacuees, such as "What happened to our *furusato*…" Still, scholars have argued that pre-2011 Fukushima was never an idyllic *furusato*, since it was caught in multiple forms of precarity, like poor economy, aging population, and rural exodus.[42] The small garden of Yamaguchi can thus be seen as what Robertson calls a "nostalgia for a nostalgia," which is "a state of being provoked by a dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of a remembered, or imagined, past plenitude."[43] Still, this small garden is a phantasm that provides a commodified notion of the *furusato* —monetary deprived in this case— but with tangible values to hold on to, as a "form of bargaining with what is overwhelming about the present […]"[44]

Coming Back?

One day evacuees learned that their temporary housing complex would close in March 2017, hereby enabling them to return to their *furusato*. While some residents were happy about this news, others were also critical of the revitalization process. As one volunteer from our group told me: "The government wants to repatriate them as

[42] See Dusinberre, Martin and Daniel P. Aldrich. 2011. Hatoko Comes Home: Civil Society and Nuclear Power in Japan. The Journal of Asian Studies. 70(3): 696; Kainuma, Hiroshi. 2011. Fukushimaron: genshiryoku mura wa naze umareta no ka [Essay on Fukushima: Why Did Nuclear Villages were Born]. Tokyo: Seidosha.
[43]Robertson, Jennifer. 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society. 1(4): 495.
[44] Berlant, Lauren. 2011. Cruel Optimism. Durham: Duke University Press, 180.

quickly as possible to show that Japan is safe for the 2020 Olympics." Yamaguchi pursued in a similar manner: "People keep talking about the upcoming Olympics… what's the link with us and our village? The country and the *furusato* needs to be clean so that they can go on with their Olympics, but we surely don't see that revitalization money…"

In Hirono, the former hometown where some evacuees will move back, they are still places with low radiation levels and other places with higher levels. Therefore, not all evacuees will be able to go back to their former areas of residence, and crucially, to their original *furusato*. In the end, many will return, but to a *furusato* that now has little meaning (*imi*) for them. The former connections and human relationships (*ningen kankei*) that used to be a part of their former *furusato* are no more. One man who oversaw the temporary housing wondered how citizens could come back to a town that was falling apart, especially without a strong workforce of carpenters and artisans. Others complained that electricity was still not available everywhere, that there were no doctors, no services, and no public transportation whatsoever. "What kind of health condition will we have in this context?" asked a resident. At Hirono there are many problems to be taken care of. "When I need to go to the hospital, I have to take a taxi," said Yamaguchi. In Japan, taxis are especially expensive, further adding to the financial difficulties of returnees.

The garden of Mme. Yamaguchi (photo by the author)

Citizens like Yamaguchi wondered about the kind of *furusato* they would come back to. In some parts of their hometown, many cannot grow rice, pick forest mushrooms, or eat wild boars; the contamination levels are too

high, they told me. Yet, a self-sufficient life, exemplified by the picking of wild foods and the sale of vegetables, was an important part of their *furusato* culture, which might no longer exist because of residual radioactivity. In this context, I couldn't help but to remember Yamaguchi's saying: "This revitalization is like a painted rice cake (*e ni kaita mochi*), you can't eat it." By this, she meant that revitalization policies had no substance and that they were merely performative acts. As emphasized by the Reconstruction Agency, many residents were longing to come back to their *furusato* —which was indeed true. Still, their longing was not for a place *per se*, but for a temporal locus found *before* the disaster. A *furusato* that could only live in their memory, echoing the "impossibility of return that rests at the painful core of contemporary nostalgia."[45]

Losing Home, Once Again

In the housing complex, a lot of residents are evacuees from different parts of Fukushima. In talking about catastrophe, Kim Fortun argues that once socio-geographical boundaries are destabilized, it can be complex to "discern what a community is and who is part of it?"[46] While this was initially the case after the disaster, evacuees have also created a new community for themselves. "We are all from different regions," said an elderly woman, "At first, we did not know each other, but now we are friends (*nakama*)." When the center closes, this new community will dissolve itself and home will once again break apart. These evacuees are constantly deprived of an *ibasho*, "a space where one feels comfortable and at home."[47] The pre-disaster nostalgia imbued in the concept of the *furusato* now confronts the nostalgia of a future disrupted environment, as the new social relations that evacuees created are about to disappear.

Still, many residents of the temporary complex are tired of living here. "There is always one problem after the other," mumbled a woman. Children are often the trigger of such difficulties. As one lady told our group one day: "There was some big altercation with kids playing around and making noise… That bothers people and everybody gets angry at each other." In this environment, children cannot play in the nature, something that was a crucial aspect of *furusato* life. Evacuation caused by radioactive contamination brought more than a physical displacement; it also brought a displacement of their essence. In their new home, children are taught to stay put and to act like adults. Upon leaving the complex our group stumbles across three children, who had put rubber bands around broken chopsticks, imitating a gun and firing imaginary shots at each other.

[45] Freeman, Lindsey A. 2015. Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 39.
[46] Fortun, Kim. 2001. Advocacy after Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 10.
[47] Allison, Anne. 2013. Precarious Japan. Durham: Duke University Press, 174.

Children kept on playing, as if everything had always been this way. This new environment is becoming normalized to a point where they simply regarded it as their hometown. For these children, the *furusato* will remain a phantasm. It is a concept that they did not experience nor recall through the nostalgia of a place *per se*. How can they yearn for something upon which they do not know of? Ivy states that "The furusato resides in the memory, but is linked to tangible reminders of the past; when the material, palpable reminders of one's childhood home no longer exist, then the furusato is in danger of vanishing."[48] Our group is left aghast by the eeriness of this place, a feeling that crept beyond normalcy. This is precisely what home had become for those people: uncanny. As Ivy argued, uncanny is "the strangeness of that which is most familiar: the uncanny as place out of place."[49]

A Political Touchstone

An engagement with the *furusato* is a political touchstone that remains trap in a double bind; the phantasm of a place that was pure before, confronts the phantasm of a place that can become pure again. Both phantasms are differentially articulated and remain important windows toward the political sensibilities of Japanese elites and citizens.

For the state, the *furusato* acts as a return to normality. This *furusato* is understood as a delimited physical space and via tropes of economic commodities, such as a decrease of tourism. Within the politics of revitalization, the *furusato* becomes a commodity imbued with particular social meaning: a place of resilience, hope, and prompt recovery. In *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Ivy argues that the notion of modern Japan was inseparable from the mourning of the loss of its rurality, perceived ethnic homogeneity, and so-called millennium traditions.[50] The nuclear disaster interrupts these narratives of vanishing to create novel fears of disappearance. From the perspective of the state, the *furusatos* of Fukushima appear in need of revitalization, so that they can continue to vanish in expected ways, rather than from the specter of radiation.[51] By revitalizing contaminated regions, everything is done to engineer a form of future nostalgia, so that children who have ironically never known Fukushima will one day be able to experience their own yearning.

Yet, for many evacuees, state-sponsored performances do not acknowledge the fact that the *furusato* is also a sociocultural conceptualization live and experience in ways that are no more possible since 2011. If some evacuees are nostalgic for a return, it is for a locus that now only exists in the realm of their memories. As the

[48] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 104.
[49] Ibid: 23.
[50] Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
[51] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of the journal Ethnos for underlying this important point.

evacuees of this chapter highlight, the state *furusato* is a mimicry devoid of the meaning that supported their former *furusato*. A *furusato* that does not have use value for them anymore. Against this, the nostalgia of a former *furusato* is exchanged for the new social relationships and imaginaries that one finds in temporary housing complexes.

Against these hardships, the notion of *furusato* is being re-imagined, sometimes for the best, and sometimes for the strict betterment of polluters. Between the state narrative and the evacuees' viewpoints, political resistance to the specter of radiation hazards is inscribed in the same term, but nonetheless referred to different politics of harm and recovery. On the one hand, a utopian future is modeled through a resilient and unified *furusato* —as the nation-state itself. On the other hand, a contaminated *furusato* articulates one's political standpoint toward the perceived inequalities of revitalization practices, as well as the risks of radioactive contamination.

The *furusato* is thus a form of powerful national imaginaries, alongside the tropes of the frontier and the wilderness, which drastically shaped American cultural identities, creating specific representations of nature and the Other. In studies surrounding technological disaster (and nuclear catastrophes), much was written about the strategic mobilization of science to suit specific understandings of risk or recovery. Yet, managing the cultural imaginary of a place is sometimes as powerful as science —if not more. This forces a set of questions such as: Whose imaginary counts and how are different forms of nostalgia governed, legitimized, or contested after disasters? The native land opens different notions of political imaginaries for governing what matters after Fukushima. As an archaic word, *furusato* once meant "ruins, historic remains." In any case, the post-Fukushima *furusato* is being built on the ruins of a former *furusato*, constantly vanishing away, be there from westernization practices or from the specter of radiation.

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