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# Project Fukushima! Performativity and the Politics of Festival in Post-3/11 Japan

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## ABSTRACT

*This article describes the political performances of the annual Project Fukushima! festival that—only a few months after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster on 3/11/11, and each summer since—has brought thousands to sing, dance, and make music in Fukushima City. Why celebrate Fukushima in the midst of a meltdown? I argue that performance has taken on a vital critical dimension in the ambivalent pluralism that drives contemporary public protest movements. Music and dance—particularly in the festivals that have become deeply integrated into social activism in post-3/11 Japan—have become particularly expedient ways to enable broad critiques of technocultural capitalism and its silencing of marginal populations. The performativity of festival connotes but does not necessarily constitute public dialogue. Rather, it makes audible the dissonance of diverse political assemblies, who respond with ambivalence to demands to speak with a singular voice. I examine the ways in which the anthropology of social movements can attend to new performative assemblies that reframe narratives of disaster and displacement to describe emergent scenes of embodied interdependence in a global politics of survival. By blurring the lines between social expression and the disruptive noise of collective spectacle, Project Fukushima! builds the ambivalence of regional culture into a platform for amplifying the noise of political*

*community in the disaster zone.* [Keywords: Japan, Fukushima, politics of survival, antinuclear protest, music, performance]

On August 15, 2011, only a few months after the March 11 triple disaster of the tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi, a music festival brought audiences in the thousands to Fukushima City. Organized by experimental guitarist Otomo Yoshihide, Endo Michirō (of the infamous 1980s punk group, The Stalin) and poet Wago Ryoichi,<sup>1</sup> Project Fukushima! was celebrated with concerts, parades, and spontaneous bursts of sociality. Musicians conducted collective improvisations and marched through the streets, a children's orchestra played, and the crowd sat on a gigantic hand-sewn quilt designed to protect festivalgoers from the irradiated land. International performances were arranged in cities around the world to coincide with the festival, and the events in Fukushima City were streamed online, featured on television documentaries, and documented in books, magazines, and blogs.

Project Fukushima! stood apart from the wave of antinuclear activism that swept across Japan in the wake of 3/11/11. In an expression of public dissent unheard of in Japan since the anti-government ANPO resistance of the 1960s and 70s, crowds formed weekly protests in front of the Prime Minister's residence to demand an immediate end to nuclear power. In 2012, hundreds of thousands attended a *Sayonara Genpatsu* (Goodbye Nukes) concert and formed a human chain to surround the Diet building; massive crowds marched through the streets, as youthful crowds created flash protests and dance-based "sound demos" that jammed the streets of Shibuya and Shinjuku. But for Project Fukushima! organizer Otomo Yoshihide, antinuclear protests in Tokyo did little to change the situation for those in the disaster region; the scenario was akin to holding an anti-knife rally after a stabbing, instead of helping the wounded. He helplessly watched as Fukushima became labeled as a second Chernobyl:

I felt an indescribable feeling of opposition toward the fact that the anti-nuke movements grow by exaggerating the damages of Fukushima...when I saw demonstrators carrying signs that said "No More Fukushima"...I concluded that Fukushima badly needed festival—our kind of festival.

Otomo proposed a different tactic, based in regional productions of music and dance, which used the performativity of festival to celebrate local culture and “make Fukushima a positive word.”

As its symbolic power grows, there is more ambivalence about what exactly “Fukushima” means. While the word is now used as a broad reference for the meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi and its effects, it also names the city of Fukushima (*Fukushima-shi*), as well as the larger province of northern Honshu (*Fukushima-ken*). Fukushima City itself is 63 kilometers from the plant, far from the devastated coastal towns and well outside of the mandatory evacuation zone. The Japanese government has consistently claimed the city is safe, but public comprehension of environmental radiation remains elusive. Ongoing revelations of misreported measurements and cover-ups of the meltdown have made it difficult for many to trust the government. Meanwhile, national media have consistently under-reported antinuclear demonstrations and inhibited coverage of the meltdown and risks of environmental contamination.

In this context, Project Fukushima! presents a very different object of political identity. On its surface, a music and dance festival is less controversial to cover than a protest, allowing media reports to emerge and circulate. These inevitably involve restating the ongoing threat of radiation exposure, and revisiting the effects of evacuation, the continuing meltdown at the Daiichi plant, and the deep disruptions of everyday life in the still-accessible parts of the region. The festival has drawn national attention to the Tohoku region and the precarious lives that inhabit the center of a national crisis.

But the organizers insist that their event was not meant to solicit outside aid for the stricken region or provide any sleeves-rolled acts of material recovery. They specifically contest reports of the event as a project of humanitarian outreach. “Newspapers and TV are reporting about our project as aiming to ‘support Fukushima’,” Otomo said, “but our idea is absolutely not to invite a bunch of hip musicians to Fukushima to shout about renewal...there’s something *inhumane* going on, which is much more elusive to understand.” Their message, posted as a “manifesto” on the Project Fukushima! website, was neither

*No More Fukushima nor Stand Up Fukushima, but just Fukushima!*  
free of any adjectives. We want to start by looking at Fukushima in  
its current state, unvarnished by any words...*Fukushima!* with the

courage to face reality squarely without looking away. *Fukushima!* with the belief that the future can only be born there. (Endo, Otomo, and Wago 2011)

The celebratory tack of Project Fukushima! challenged those who insisted that Fukushima was dead and wanted to show the glowing body to the world. But what, if anything, could a local music performance *do*? What is at stake, and for whom, in bringing festival to Fukushima?

### **Protest and Performativity**

In this Social Thought & Commentary piece, I raise questions for the anthropology of social movements by considering the role of festival in political assembly, the links between rituals and politics, and the performativity of embodying local culture in disaster zones (Turner 1969, Geertz 1981, Kertzer 1988, Guss 2000, Noyes 2003, Kapchan 2008, Sakakeeny 2013, Juris 2014, Manabe 2015). The reactive cultural politics of post-3/11 Fukushima create a fast-changing scene, which accelerates calls for “timely ethnography” (Rabinow and Marcus 2008) to scenarios of “urgent ethnography” (Slater 2013). How to relate the enormity of the situation without reducing its ongoing impacts to singular events—a disaster, a protest, a festival—which fold back into the cyclicity of crisis politics at the heart of neoliberal knowledge production and its critique (Roitman 2013)? To follow the tight relationship between protest and performance in Project Fukushima! means staying with the ambivalence of the situation, in the broader symbolic contradictions of festival and the particular double binds that configure victims in disaster zones as local “enunciatory communities” (Fortun 2001). How to represent their deep misgivings about the project of endorsing local culture, and the different risks of protest for Fukushima residents? How do these noisy performances push back against the perpetual reductions of political dialogue?

Part of my aim here is to recognize contemporary protest as a context of performativity. I am inspired here by the recent work of Judith Butler (2015), whose notion of performance diverges from pragmatic models of speech acts, through which private subjects actively verbalize expressive texts. Butler argues instead that performativity is a bodily act, oriented toward political interdependence. Rather than manifesting as a directed public communication, performance blurs the lines between public and

private spaces and between the inside and outside of expressive communities. Collective assembly, even when performed as an act of popular will, does not necessarily constitute public consensus. In festival, people may perform local identity without really identifying with the place, or identifying themselves as outsiders; they may dance to a song, but not listen to the words. Theirs are not voices that speak in unison, but different bodies that move together to enact a space of plurality between subjects, to “make manifest the understanding that a situation is shared” (Butler 2015:18).

Another goal of foregrounding performativity is to explore the accompaniment of the post-millennial surge in global street politics by a palpable affect of ambivalence, as resistance politics takes on the “nihilistic, thoroughly postmodern pessimism” of millennial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:27). Questions about the efficacy of protest invariably highlight the abstraction of grassroots populism and the barriers to articulating a collective public resistance. To “Give Peace a Chance” by putting flowers in the barrel of a gun; to “Act Up” in a “die-in” to generate public dialogue about HIV/AIDS; to stand and endure the pepper spray of militarized police in campus protests—the vitalizing power of these performances rested in their fantastic embodiment of political agency as a legible semiotic object. Protest appears as a form of personal speech that represents a “people’s voice” to be heard by a larger public.

But it is increasingly difficult to imagine a place for the dialogism of protest in the hardening structures of neoliberal capitalism, as “the insecurities of states and the uncertainties of civilian spaces and persons have become disturbingly intertwined” (Appadurai 2006:104). The shutdown of public communication is matched by the abdication of governmental authority—no one speaks; no one is there to listen. The political agency of the crowd is diffused into what Dilip Gaonkar (2014: section 7, paragraph 9) describes as its “fungability,” within which the “practices of people in the collective political mode are full of irony, skepticism, feigned humility and enthusiasm.” Contemporary street actions borrow the phenomenological aspect of “the people,” even as “people also know that they are being borrowed...one is simply lending one’s body and that body has been lent one too many times to bear the imprints of a legible ideology” (Gaonkar 2014). Embodying these ambivalences of protest means differentiating political claims from the claim to the political, in order to hear the noisy mix of subjectivities in performative assembly. In Butler’s terms, the

collectivity of “we” is broken off from “the people,” who “never really arrive as a collective presence that speaks as a verbal chorus” (2015:166).

In keeping with this noisy and nascent politics of performance, Project Fukushima! takes a deliberately contradictory approach to the performance of local cultural agency. The festival insists on the integrity of “Fukushima spirit,” but deflects the symbolic capital of a regionalism that might distract from the nuclear meltdown and its implications for the political multitude of the Japanese nation and the world. It advocates for the power of local place while refusing to reinstate modern relationships between center and periphery. Fukushima has its own problems: but we are all part of Fukushima. This is a risky approach that leaves the festival open to conflicting interpretations. On one hand, it advocates for an affected population by insisting on the materiality of a distinctive local community, demanding that this place “matters” and that its people be allowed to “go home.” On the other, the festival resonates with the broader messages of the antinuclear protest movement, in which the prospect of living in a disaster zone reveals the structural violence of a technocultural state.

By performing the persistence of threatened regional communities, Project Fukushima! highlights the long-term damage of depopulation, unregulated development, corporate exploitation, and postindustrial subversion of environmental and social interests. It is not a coincidence that these emptied-out places became sites for nuclear plants, or that their marginalized residents have little power to resist further displacement. Despite its focus on the attachments of local culture, then, the festival is more than a “feel-good” event for Fukushima residents. It is an ambivalent return to a long-devastated heartland (by exiles, returnees, residents, and strangers alike) and a critical engagement with the risks of daily life in a context of ongoing crisis.

### **Dancing with the Dead**

After marching in the massive, hopeful crowds of summer 2012 in Tokyo and Osaka, I traveled to Fukushima City to attend the Project Fukushima! festival in 2013, and again in 2014 and 2015. Knowing their lives well, I was intrigued that Otomo and Endo, who are internationally renowned for their abrasive punk and challenging experimentalism in the Tokyo underground scene, were returning to their hometown.<sup>2</sup> Like others, I wondered just what kind of cultural politics might emerge from this



**Figure 1: Human Chain Protest, Tokyo, June 29, 2012.**

PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

action, and how it would take place in Fukushima. A celebration of local hometown culture seemed to fly directly in the face of existing strategies of street protest in the Japanese antinuclear movement. Just as a radical transformation of the Japanese public sphere seemed to finally be taking hold, why drag a traditional festival—which, in the self-conscious political landscape of post-3/11 Japan, might seem to reek of reactionary nostalgia—back onto the stage?

In a country that had not witnessed significant oppositional politics in several decades, the sudden rise of a national protest movement was





**Figure 2: Festival Fukushima! 2013 dance rehearsal.**

PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

both unprecedented and spectacular. In addition to the sheer numbers of participants, antinuclear actions developed creative performative tactics to organize street protests, including “sound demos,” which had initially developed as a “reclaim-the-streets” tactic for gay and lesbian rights activists in the late 1990s, and rose to further prominence in anti-war and anti-globalization actions in the 2000s (Hayashi and McKnight 2005, Manabe 2015, Abe 2016). In sound demos like the August 2012 *Natsu Datsu Genpatsu* protests in Osaka, small trucks equipped with PA equipment blasted techno music, as marchers danced and chanted antinuclear slogans. Sound demos are also performed with instruments, particularly through improvisational drumming ensembles, brass bands and samba groups, which rallied the large crowds at weekly protests in

front of the Prime Minister's residence in Hibiya Park. Throughout the summer of 2012, the photogenic *Genpatsu Abunaeosoroshii* ("Nukes-are-dangerous-and-scary") *Marching Band* marched at several large antinuclear demonstrations, dressed in yellow biohazard suits and gas masks while pounding on steel barrels painted to resemble nuclear waste containers.

It is increasingly clear that these public performances were crucial for communicating the antinuclear message in a near blackout of media coverage.<sup>3</sup> While Japan's national television station NHK barely covered most antinuclear protests, audiovisual documentation began to circulate through social media, and crowds were organized via Twitter and the live-streaming channel Dommune.<sup>4</sup> But the election of pro-nuclear conservative Abe Shinzō in December 2012 took the wind out of Tokyo's street protests, and made it increasingly challenging to organize antinuclear actions. Although the Japanese public remains in favor of a nuclear phase-out, participation in large-scale demonstrations declined sharply as Abe moved to restart nuclear plants. While weekly protests continue, their numbers have dwindled radically, and the "precariat" youth that populated early street protests are markedly absent (Kindstrand 2011). Although there has been a surge of new cultural organizations working on the ground in Tohoku, the 2012 protests appear to represent the high-water mark of the public displays of antinuclear sentiment, when—to invoke Hunter S. Thompson's eulogy for the American counterculture at the end of the 1960s—"the wave broke and finally rolled back."

In this intensely uneasy political environment, the localism of Project Fukushima! tapped into a special cultural intimacy, which hinged on the symbolic force of a traditional festival in which the living return home to commune with the dead. Project Fukushima! is held on August 15 on the anniversary of the end of World War II, a national holiday and staging ground for Japanese pacifists to reiterate public dedication to a non-military state.<sup>5</sup> But this date also falls during the summer holiday of Obon, when Japanese families reunite in their hometowns, and eat, drink, and dance together in traditional *matsuri* (festivals). Obon is an intensely familial time for modern Japanese, who leave work and the city to return to their natal homes to remember the dead and celebrate their families and hometown communities. For three days, the spirits of the deceased, too, come home, returning to the earth as their descendants visit. Going home for Obon involves ritualized performances of

communion between the living and the dead, such as attending to family registries and cleaning graves. Fairs are held at local parks as the public gathers to feast in the presence of their ancestors, and then guide them back to their graves, singing and dancing around a tower decorated with lanterns displaying the crests of local clans.

Project Fukushima! had not initially stressed its coincidence with the Obon season, instead creating experimental guerilla performances which reflected the politics and art of the Tokyo underground. In 2011, musicians improvised freely in the “Fukushima Music Liberation Zone” at the center of the city, and gathered in local parks to perform pieces like “Meltdown Fukushima” and a “Mushroom Requiem” in honor of John Cage. At the 2012 festival, members of the infamous Noise group Hijōkaidan crammed their amps and gear onto a local train—and even into a public bath—to confront audiences with their extreme sounds.<sup>6</sup> But these interventionist tactics failed to draw in local communities, and participation was markedly composed of outside activists and artists, most of whom traveled in from Tokyo.

Otomo at first resisted linking Project Fukushima! to local cultural forms. Growing up in Fukushima, the Obon festival summoned an exclusionary social politics, coercing provincial citizens to celebrate a “hometown” that he rejected as a nostalgic fantasy. “I always used to hate the *bon* dance when I was a kid. *Dodon-ga-don, Dodon-ga-don...aargh, so cheesy!* I never felt good about the local community, and that *dodon-ga-don* beat never seemed like anything but tying me down.” Nonetheless, he agreed to experiment with Obon after co-organizer Endo described the passionate bon dancing of evacuees from devastated coastal towns. They had lost their hometowns to the tsunami and could not return home to commune with their dead, but danced to reassemble a sense of public belonging on the edge of the evacuation zone. Local populations were also growing weary with the obligation to represent the cultural impact of the disaster. Media teams rushed in to capture images of old couples returning to destroyed ancestral homes and children standing fearfully in a row for thyroid screenings. For an anxious nation, there was a mounting need to support Fukushima and reinforce the stoic nativism of the Japanese heartland. But the ideological significance of the *furusato*—“hometown” or “native place”—broke down in the ambivalence of “going home” to irradiated land (Gill 2013:203).

## **Safety, Survival, and Hometown Culture**

Zooming out from Fukushima City to the representations of “post-Fukushima” Japan reveals just how much 3/11/11 has moved the epistemological ground of Japanese society. The triple disaster seems to have sped the nation faster toward what Marc Abeles (2010) describes as a global departure from models of social cohesion toward an overarching focus on survival, rooted in the historically-stripped political ethos formed in the biopolitical violence of “bare life” (Agamben 1998). Public consciousness has shifted from “convivance”—“a focal reflection on the conditions of being together, on the means to put in place a harmonious society”—to a perspective centered in survival that “puts the preoccupation with living...at the heart of political action” (Abeles 2010:13). The uncertainty of survival, as Abeles puts it, “awakens an anxiety over the durability of a humanity perceived as precarious because of its self-produced dangers” and organizes “the political imaginary around the future conditions of preserving life” (2010:15, 16). Here, living is not just about staying alive; rather, survival is a cultural project to generate and institutionalize ambiguity about the future.

All “sides” of the contemporary political sphere in post-3/11 Japan reflect this focus on survival. Survival informs the environmentalist discourse of sustainability, which charges the public with the task of arguing for an alternative model of future energy production that balances (and equates) social and environmental impacts with economic productivity and technological viability. Survival generates the ethics of solicitude that make it appear logical for NGOs and NPOs to take over disaster work from the government, and “support” stricken populations without demanding changes in administration or policy. Survival is invoked to demand an immediate end to nuclear power, but also to insist on the inevitability of the technocultural system that maintains the world as we know it: to speak in the voice of the present government, “Japan must have nuclear power to survive.”

Recent ethnographies have described the rise of volunteerism and the imbrication of NGOs, social organizers, and non-profits into post-3/11 life in northern Japan (Aldrich 2012; Allison 2013; Gill, Steger, and Slater 2013; Slater 2013; Samuels 2013; Toivonen 2013; Slater, Morioka, and Danzuka 2014). These affective projects rematerialize notions of home, land, and family across a deeply fragmented national landscape, where “Fukushima” comes into play as a mutable symbol of resilience and tragedy. In public town hall meetings, Japanese farmers and fishermen face

off against government and industry representatives, demanding restitution for their livelihood lost in the contamination of the land and sea. While Fukushima food products are scrupulously avoided by much of the population, some deliberately consume Fukushima meat, produce, and *sake* to demonstrate a fearless solidarity. Evacuees are simultaneously lionized for their suffering, and feared for having been irradiated.<sup>7</sup> Viewing television footage of a team of decontamination workers sifting through the rubble of a generations-old family home, some call for immediate reconstruction of the village; others shake their heads anxiously, mention the half-life of Cesium-137 (30 years), and sadly mutter “*shikata ga nai*” — “there’s nothing we can do about it.”

For local workers in a company town, hometown pride often boils down to identification with the nuclear industry, which bleeds into every aspect of daily life. According to sociologist Kainuma Hiroshi,

...the people in the area projected onto nuclear power illusions of the community’s longevity, its maintenance and development, and the promotion of technology during Japan’s brilliant post-war economic growth...In any town near a nuclear plant in Fukushima, one inevitably sees a bookstore named *Books Atom* or signboards advertising *Nuclear Power Beancake*, *Atomic Sushi*, and *Atomic Pinball*. These names are in no way the result of TEPCO’s coercion, but were created by individuals at their own discretion. In the 40 years since Unit 1 at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant started operation, nuclear plants have become a kind of “local tradition.” (2012:139)

Even as locals were shocked by the negligence of TEPCO and the Japanese government, many continue to identify with their role in building Japan’s “nuclear village” (*genshiryoku mura*). Some workers have moved to other power plants as “nuclear gypsies,” and their families cannot express direct opposition to nuclear power without some interpersonal conflict. Only three percent of the population in Fukushima City voluntarily left in 2011, and many of those forcibly evacuated from the coastal towns remain close by, hoping to rebuild their communities and preserve their lifeworlds despite the risks of radiation exposure (Kainuma 2012, Kingston 2012).

Meanwhile, in the broader antinuclear movement, it goes unchallenged when activists rhetorically describe the Fukushima region as an apocalyptic wasteland with no future. Some Tokyo-based visitors to *Festival*

*Fukushima!* confessed to me that they were expecting to arrive to an abandoned place; they were surprised to encounter a relatively normal scene with a busy train station, restaurants open for business, and people walking the streets as in many other small Japanese cities. Kainuma criticizes demonstrators who have labeled the region as irreparably contaminated: “They say they are protesting for Fukushima, but few have come to the prefecture to help. When people come with dosimeter in hand, just to say that nuclear power is dangerous, that means nothing, and it makes locals uncomfortable” (*Japan Times* 2013).

But for others, the festival generates a reactionary sense of regional identity, which downplays the dangers of radiation. The notion of a “proud Fukushima spirit” can align uncomfortably with the boosterism of government PR campaigns that encourage tourists to visit Fukushima, enjoy the beauty of the Northern scenery, and relish the region’s delicious local peaches (with slogans like “Delicious Fukushima”). The social critic Isobe Ryo has argued that heroic-sounding phrases like *Fukushima ni Ikiru* (To Live in Fukushima) and *Fukushima wo Ikiru* (Living Fukushima) may discourage residents from evacuating (Isobe 2011:114). Project Fukushima! ran the risk of generating a misguided “Fukushima nationalism,” pressuring local residents to stay put and get cancer, rather than leave their resigned hometown in the cesium-filled dust.

In this context, the very word for “safe”—actually, words, as there are two, *anzen* and *anshin*, in tension with one another—has become controversial. The term *anzen* implies quantifiable, tested standards of safety: below the threshold of danger, in the official terms of scientific assessment and government regulation. Throughout its post-war development, nuclear power was presented as *anzen*, despite a litany of plant failures and ignored standards. TEPCO officials were vilified for justifying their safety preparations as adequate, and describing the 9.0 magnitude earthquake as an event “beyond expectation” (*soteigai*). The entire society is now on guard against a false “myth of safety” (*anzen shinwa*), and any mention of *anzen* in relation to nuclear power is regarded with open distrust.<sup>8</sup> *Anshin*, on the other hand, is an affective term, connoting a sense of personal well-being, protection from danger, and the benevolent feeling that one’s community is out of harm’s way. The Japanese public demands *anshin* as a basic sensibility of daily life, and its lack in the Tōhoku region is a primary grievance among those seeking reparations from the government. Once lost, this affect cannot be easily recovered.

When Otomo, Endo, and Wago began discussing the possibility of organizing a festival in April 2011, it was barely thinkable to perform in Fukushima City, much less to bring an outside audience into the region. While many antinuclear activists support Project Fukushima!, some have critiqued the festival for downplaying the risks of contamination—a sentiment shared by commenters on websites, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter feeds, where many of the most open antinuclear dialogues have taken place. The announcement of the festival was immediately met with skepticism across the political spectrum. Was this merely cynical agitprop, to deliberately expose people to radiation as an oppositional public sacrifice—a micro-scale self-immolation in slow motion? Geologist Hayakawa Yukio tweeted “don’t expose [audiences] to radiation meaninglessly... why are children playing [in Otomo’s Children’s Orchestra] there?...this is criminal” (cf. Isobe 2011:222). Otomo responded that the festival did not imply “that Fukushima is fine and all right”; rather, “we just want people to see the reality” (2011:123).

The reality of low-dosage radiation exposure, of course, is very hard to see, and even harder to feel. Even when contamination data is accurately reported, there is little agreement among environmental and nuclear scientists, governmental agencies, NGOs, and regulatory commissions about allowable levels of exposure, which contributes to a high level of public mistrust. Everyday language in Japan now includes terms like microsievert and Becquerel; many citizens carry homemade Geiger counters and SoftBank’s Pantone 5 phone, released in 2012, includes a hardware radiation meter module; thousands contribute to Safecast, a website that gathers crowd-sourced measurement data to post geo-located contamination maps on the web, updated in real time. To assess the risks of radiation exposure, the organizers consulted with nuclear scientist Kimura Shinzo to measure radiation levels in the festival site at Four Seasons Park and determined that the results (0.51  $\mu\text{Sv/h}$  at 1 meter from the ground and 0.64  $\mu\text{Sv/h}$  at 10 centimeters) were low enough to present no significant threat. During the festival, measurements were disclosed at regular intervals, partly to reassure festivalgoers that they were not in danger. At the same time, the ambient radiation displays also served as a constant reminder that this was a place of environmental contamination.

Otomo aired his own anxiety and confusion on his blog *JamJam Diary*. In a May 22, 2011 post entitled “How could I not worry?” he wondered “is it really okay to gather people here?” noting that over 10,000 people were

expected to attend. "What I can say at this point," he continued, "is just 'We're having a festival, but don't go out of your way to attend.'" Otomo acknowledged that this was "a pretty strange conclusion for the festival organizer to come to," but went on to clarify the complex affective conditions behind his ambivalent position:

I know some people wonder why the people living in Fukushima haven't gotten out...[but] there are a lot of people who can't leave that easily. I don't mean to voice support for the decision to keep living in the middle of this situation. But if there are a lot of people who've decided to stay no matter what, I think it's necessary to create a space where we can think along with them about how to go on living here, without running away...So when I write "don't go out of your way to come," I'm contradicting myself; but I do want people from outside Fukushima to come and see how things are, and think with us.

Commenters reacted to this equivocal stance, accusing the festival of disingenuously absolving itself from responsibility. One, posting under the name "Well, one does worry," argued:

As long as you're thinking "We're having a festival, but don't go out of your way to attend..." then I think you'd be better off not doing it at all...why don't you make it so you can say "we've judged that this situation should be safe, we can have fun, we want to have fun with everybody, please come"?

Festival organizers responded that the radiation measurements were not meant to guarantee safety, but instead to circulate the recognition of living in Fukushima to a broader public:

We will not use the word "safe" [anzen]...if people fear something, they feel fearful whatever they are told by others, and it is only natural for them to try to decrease risks. We don't think the most important issue is whether to come to Fukushima or not...we wish for a circle of people that will expand beyond the physical place of Fukushima.

From the first, *Festival Fukushima!* struggled to express the core ambivalences of representing local culture within a space of national anxiety.



It was difficult for many locals to imagine joining a street performance with antinuclear themes; indeed, most of the audience for the first two festivals traveled in from the South. One volunteer expressed her concern that older people, who constitute much of the local population, would not relate to experimental performances, even if they were otherwise inclined to join. The festival's turn to the traditional context of Obon in 2013, then, re-framed communal space within a conflicted performance of local identity, while using the noise of festival to disrupt the national silence surrounding the ongoing meltdown.

### **“It’s All Right! Who Cares!”**

The centerpiece of the 2013 and 2014 festivals was a traditional *bon odori* dance, set to an *ondo* song co-written by Otomo and Endo. The song's title and refrain, “*Ee ja nai ka*,” translates as something between “It’s All Right!” and “Who Cares!” In post-3/11 Fukushima, this could easily be interpreted as pure irony. But the phrase is common at Japanese festivals, where it is shouted to reflect a spirit of collective abandon—“right on!,” “what the hell!,” “whatever!” Watching *Ee ja nai ka Ondo* performed, I was struck at how political commentary snuck into an ordinary bon dance, and how the dance and call-and-response chants brought the public into complicity with the song's ambivalent message. In the main stanzas, poetic one-liners alternate with the collective chants of *ee ja nai ka* (“It’s all right!/Who cares!”) by the crowd:

This country quakes with self-confidence!  
*Dodon-ga-don. Dodon-ga-don.*  
We got rocked off our feet.  
But whatcha gonna do? No night is endless.  
Still, all stomachs get empty...  
*(It’s all right! Who cares!)*  
Home is where you make it— who cares!  
*(It’s all right! Who cares!)*  
It’s all home to me, whatever!  
Dance on to *Ee ja nai ka Ondo!*

The crowd snakes around in a line, following a simple sequence of simple and funny dance moves: waving their arms like birds, making mountains



**Figure 3: Safecast monitor posted outside of Koriyama Station for Project Fukushima event, August 2014.**

PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

over their heads, stomping like giants, and shaking their whole bodies with girlish excitement (*huri huri*). But as the crowd chants *ee ja nai ka*—“who cares, it’s all right!”—the song leader begins to slip in a doubtful counterpart, referencing the cover-up of radiation exposure by TEPCO and the Japanese government, and plaintively asking “is it *really* all right?” (*hontoni ii no ka?*):

The most beautiful rose has its thorns.

“There are no thorns,” they say, deceiving and deceived.

Whatcha gonna do? Sweep it under the rug!

You’d as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb...

Is it *really* all right? (*Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!*)

Is it *really* all right? (*No! No! No! No!*)



Figure 4: Ee ja nai ka Ondo crowd.

PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

Following this, Endo launches into a loping chant backed by screeching guitar noises, as the dancers turn into zombies, stretching their bodies back and dangling their arms, staggering and swaying around the circle:

Party in Fukushima! Noise Train and *Kudarana Shosuke*.<sup>9</sup>  
¥100 stores everywhere you look.  
Deflation, Inflation, ssssSpiral.  
Economic effects, revitalizations of towns.  
Crunchy crackers, sticky cookies.  
Atomic energy, solar power.  
Up and down an emergency staircase.<sup>10</sup>  
Earning ¥780 an hour.<sup>11</sup>  
Overtime, guaranteed pay—downsized temp workers getting down!

Punk, rap, and modern classical—making up genres like safety zones!  
It's an ill wind that blows no good, industry booms when the government moves!

At the Styx, dance *bon odori!*  
At a shuttered arcade, dance *bon odori!*  
Measuring radiation, dance *bon odori!*  
Unfolding cloth, dance *bon odori!*  
Building towers, dance *bon odori!*  
Back in your hometown, dance *bon odori!*  
Home is where you make it, so dance *bon odori!*  
Whatever the hell, dance *bon odori!*

Immediately after Endo's devastating litany, the band launches into an instrumental melody, which abruptly shifts the dance's sentiment toward social renewal. The crowd leaps up, joining hands in whirling circles, gracefully raising and lowering their clasped hands, then breaking into smaller circles, and separating to dance freely, joyfully waving arms in the air. As the song returns to the ee ja nai ka theme, the dancers return to the line dance as the concluding verses sound out the ambivalent takeaway:

Around a station, convenience stores and shuttered arcades.  
The local towns look all alike. Come what may, the moon still rises.  
The sake we drink in my hometown is: *Dodon-ga-don*.  
The sake they drink in his hometown is: *Deden-ga-den*.  
Sake's all the same. Drink, or be drunk up — it's all the same.  
Home is where you make it, and it's all right!  
*(It's all right! Who cares!)*  
It's all home to me, and it's all right!  
*(It's all right! Who cares!)*

“Ee ja nai ka Ondo” played over and over again, looping into the night. But for most of the attendees, the emphasis was on the dance, and the fun of the simple shared motions, circling around with strangers and chanting together and trying not to step on anyone's toes. Even in the “zombie” section of the dance, a sense of goofiness and fun prevailed, and most didn't seem to be listening closely to the lyrics. I asked one young woman what she thought of the song: “You know, ee ja nai ka, ee ja nai ka! It's

exciting, right? Like—party time! We can all get together and have a good time, even in Fukushima.”

### The Noisiness of Festival

How are the ambivalences of political agency performed in “Ee ja nai ka Ondo?” Although the lyrics are grimly ironic, the words are delivered lightly in performance, with humor and energy, so that their political resonance seems to slip in the course of the dance. And while the festival highlights hometown culture, the song questions the notion of “home” so central to Obon, with its symbolic return to native place. By the end of the dance, the song has radically reframed identifications with Fukushima away from the nuclear industry, and from any distinct local culture, gesturing instead toward the life politics of a national disaster zone.

The subversive slipperiness of ee ja nai ka has particularly deep historical roots. The phrase emerged from an abstract social movement that swept Japan in 1867 and 1868, at the start of the modern Meiji era, as drunken parties spread across the nation in a moment of massive cultural change. As Japan was forced open to the West by warships, its religious, economic, and social orders fell apart. Thousands joined round-the-clock parties, paralyzing the cities of central Japan with a frenzy of hysterical dancing that extended to violence and destruction of property, overturning the norms of everyday life. Political blocs fell apart, men dressed as women, religious symbols were replaced by sake labels, sacred objects were reported to rain down from the sky; people filled the streets with noise, shouting “Ee ja nai ka!” “Whatever, it’s all good!”

Historian George M. Wilson has argued that the rise of ee ja nai ka dancing and singing was a form of millenarian protest that signaled the advent of deep social transformations. The texts of ee ja nai ka chants poeticized a populist mix of hope and irony in the face of widespread collapse:

The gods will descend to Japan  
While rocks fall on the foreigners in their residencies.  
*Ee ja nai ka, ee ja nai ka!*  
But, then, it was a frightfully bad year and best forgotten.  
Thanks to the gods we shall dance, right? *Right, right on!*  
Remaking the world of Japan is right, too, no? *Yes, go for it!*  
(cf. Wilson 1992:98)

On one hand, *ee ja nai ka* was a playful cultural performance without an explicit political agenda. On the other, it was the noise of a de facto refusal of traditional social orders by an increasingly rebellious Japanese public. The phrase *ee ja nai ka*, then, reverberates with the affective overlaps between culturalist reassertions of local identity (“it’s all right!”) and the helpless abandon of political alienation (“who cares!”).

Japanese festivals (*matsuri*) have been historically recognized for their potential to fluidly transmute social politics into public rituals. Performances of “disordered craziness” might deliver political retribution, with massive drums “‘inadvertently’ crashing into the homes of greedy landlords, usurious merchants, or meddling administrative officials...one of the more notable targets for such assaults was the local police headquarters” (Sonoda 1988, Schnell 1999:3). *Matsuri* typically display the symbolic kinship of family clans and sacred places, but in contemporary urban contexts, festivals reshape local space for new projects of political identity (Robertson 1991, Schnell 1999, Sonoda 1975). Post-war student protest movements, for example, drew from *matsuri* to generate oppositional public affect: “the style of the parade, the raised voices, the *wasshoi* [shouts] yelled by demonstrators” contributed to the “creation of a kind of liberated space” in street protest (Yanagawa 1988:4). Similarly, Otomo claims that the nonsensical chants of “*Ee ja nai ka Ondo*” create an “uproar” (*sawagi*) of “common folks’ shouts.”<sup>12</sup> Yet this cacophony is less a form of collective speech than a space for noisemaking, for improvising with the terms of survival. Even if festival doesn’t speak for a specific community, its noisiness can still enable people to register the different sounds of their own social performances, even when they do not line up together.

Certainly, the voices of the “common folks” I listened to at *Festival Fukushima!* did not form a politically consonant chorus. Most told me that they were just happy for an excuse to celebrate. Many did not know the organizers, and simply came to dance and enjoy a summer evening under the lanterns. If some had arrived to partake in an antinuclear activity or align with the minor countercultural celebrity of Otomo or Endo, for others, the oppositional aspects of the festival weren’t detectable or important. One 40-something man, on his way home from work as a security guard at a local bank, said that he hadn’t heard about the festival, but stopped to drink a beer and clap along for a while. “I didn’t know about it. My coworker said ‘Hey, there’s a bon dance down the road.’ ‘Great!’” He mentioned

how much livelier the town had become since 2011, and I reported that some of my friends had told me it still wasn't safe to come to Fukushima at all. Even just for the day of the festival, they said, it wasn't worth it to go. He dismissed this with a grimace. "But, you know," he replied, "we have to live here. We are still here. So this is for us Fukushima people. Everybody here just wants to relax and have a happy spirit. We don't have to think about the disaster every day."

Although Fukushima City locals represented the bulk of the crowd, a sizable fraction of the audience came from other places around Japan. These visitors were more likely to invoke the potential for social change, if in more or less veiled terms. Several explicitly praised the festival for its nuanced sensibility, describing it as a "loose" (*yurui*) form of antinuclear protest that was effective precisely for its lack of overt politics. "There aren't any signs saying 'NO NUKES' or people handing out flyers," said one attendee from Tokyo, adding "the event doesn't seem to have a particular purpose. We are just here...you know, it doesn't *do* anything for Fukushima to be here." Others were more pointed in their identification with Fukushima's population. I spoke with one couple in their late 20s who had come from nearby Sendai with their 2-year-old toddler, the three of them dressed in new (and vaguely artsy) patterned summer robes: "We wanted to come all together, you know? Because we have a child, we're thinking of the other families in this area, and how we need to stand together to protect the children." Like many other attendees, they did not directly reference the nuclear meltdown, TEPCO, or the government response to the disaster. A young punk rocker from neighboring Koriyama, on the other hand, explicitly identified with antinuclear and anticapitalist movements. But even here, the resources of punk rock were used to express a complicated mix of political alienation and local pride. He pointed to his homemade silk-screened shirt featuring an aerial shot of the Daiichi reactor, emblazoned with the logo "Fuck You: We're From Fukushima."

Project Fukushima! returns to a hometown radically reoriented toward its interdependence with outside forces. As amateur musicians marched around banging pots and pans, and crowds of revelers spun past the stages, Otomo emotionally recalled a whirl of dance: "A bon dance where no one knows what's going on: ok, right, this is what it looks like...anybody from anywhere might be able to join in — evacuees, people who had stayed, people with nothing to do with anything." But even in this euphoria, when a television interviewer pressed Otomo to respond to the theme



**Figure 5: Ito Chie of Strange Mushroom Dance Troupe.**

PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

of “local culture” (*jimoto*), he replied bluntly, still dressed in his indigo-blue summer *yukata* robes: “it’s an illusion—it doesn’t exist.”

### **“Doing Festival” as Political Performance**

Project Fukushima! points to some of the ways that political anthropology can recognize the growing significance of performativity in the study of contemporary social movements. Performativity is a crucial context for intersectionality as a form of public experience, which pushes back against the powerful reductions of local community to the expediciencies of disaster politics. Through festival, people glimpse the ethical slippages of invoking a “post-Fukushima” Japan to mobilize resistance politics. Challenging these formulations draws attention to the networks of “biological citizenship” through which, as in Chernobyl, the damaged bodies





PHOTO BY DAVID NOVAK

Figure 6: “Fuck You: We’re From Fukushima” T-shirt.

of an irradiated population have become political currency (Petryna 2003). To dance for the dead in Fukushima is not just about the renewal of local cultural symbolism. This performance attaches to the newness of life on the insecure ground of a nation, and a world, exposed.

But the performativity of protest cannot be reduced to a form of collective speech. If “doing festival” in Fukushima can be understood as contemporary social protest—as I argue it should be—it becomes so partly by diverging from techniques of assembly in which songs and chants speak the singular “voice of the people.” Here, music and dance generate a complex intertextuality, which, as Noriko Manabe (2015) points out, frames political participation as a networked improvisation that extends across multiple spaces of social identification. Project Fukushima! has further enabled this movement by reenacting the festival as a touring series of bon dances staged in Tokyo, Nagoya, Tajimi, and other cities where new populations have joined in the “Ee ja nai ka Ondo.” The festival’s *ōburoshiki* quilt is “installed” in each new site, no longer protecting people from radioactive ground, but now itself an irradiated artifact from Fukushima, distributing its noisy energy to the world.<sup>13</sup>

Project Fukushima! does not occupy a particular place; rather, it is a particular place that occupies Japan. Bringing Fukushima “on tour” contests the enactment of neoliberal “lethality” in contemporary Japan, which amounts to the “letting die” of an emptied-out, and now contaminated, rural North (Povinelli 2011). The bon dance conjures an alternative form of social belonging, which emphasizes endurance over abandonment. Endurance, as Elizabeth Povinelli argues, generates a public consciousness of durative life that lays out affective conditions for social action. “If we hear someone has been abandoned,” she argues, “we might ask how she is doing. But if we are told that someone is enduring a tragedy, we do not usually ask how she is doing but how we might help” (2011:32). Working this precarious territory means extending the hometown into the world, moving around contamination zones and incursions of outside “support,” in order to stay put “in the mud” of post-3/11 Japan (Allison 2013).

Otomo describes festival as a process of “forgetting without forgetting” (here he uses the word *bōkyaku*, “oblivion,” to describe something like “existence in/despite oblivion”) (2012:106). To “forget” the meltdown and the possible effects of radiation in this place—especially via the self-essentializing cultural nationalisms of “festival,” “hometown,” and “tradition”—and instead to imagine a “positive future” in Fukushima could be a radically naive project, at best a “paradise built in hell,” as Rebecca Solnit (2010) describes the moral communities that emerge in times of disaster. But from another view, its dialogic performance actively deconstructs the “cruel optimism” of rebuilding local culture in a contaminated place, and

reflects “the difficulty of detaching from life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work” (Berlant 2010:97). The anthropology of social movements should follow suit by recognizing the shift toward performativity as a formal reorientation of crucial “weapons of the weak” toward public celebrations of local culture, which simultaneously dissolve the logic of collective regional identity (Scott 1985). As mass assembly becomes increasingly risky and non-dialogic, festival holds out conditions of possibility for social opposition; but only in dispersed and ambivalent formats that allow citizens to mutably shift their status, from participant to passerby.

These are the politics of survival, in which every aspect of life—the power of culture, the makeup of community, the safety of the natural environment, even the possibility of a human future—must be held in permanent question. The performativity of festival in Project Fukushima! creates new ways to stay in place; to listen to, and make, noise; to dance and keep one’s body in motion; to fill the streets with life in the presence of unseen ghosts of radiation; to sing together for a day and go home; to experience the concentrated moment of the disaster and then endure its ongoing mediation of public sociality; to spin into oblivion, and continue to live. ■

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>All Japanese names in this article are printed in Japanese style, surname first.

<sup>2</sup>On Otomo’s experimental music history, see Novak (2010, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Japanese media networks inhibited reports of the meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi, arguing that it was not in the public interest to divulge the possible spread of radioactivity. In one widely publicized case, NHK radio critic Nakakita Toru resigned, claiming he was instructed not to discuss nuclear power (*Asahi Shimbun*, Jan. 30, 2014). See McNeill (2014) and Manabe (2015) on media reportage of antinuclear protests.

<sup>4</sup>Numbers of protest crowds were consistently underreported in mainstream media. For example, while the organizers of the June 29 *Sayonara Genpatsu* concert reported between 150,000 and 180,000 participants, the police numbered the crowd at 17,000. For the Human Chain event on July 29, protest organizers Metropolitan Coalition against Nukes (*Shutoken Hanganpatsu Rengō*) hired a private helicopter to produce aerial photographs of the enormous crowd surrounding the Diet Building, which were widely circulated online.

<sup>5</sup>In July 2014, Abe's administration reinterpreted Article 9 of the Japanese constitution to allow Japanese military forces to intervene in foreign conflicts for the first time since World War II, again sparking massive nationwide protests.

<sup>6</sup>A video of this performance is available online at [http://youtu.be/gNbgIOu\\_luY](http://youtu.be/gNbgIOu_luY). Last accessed on February 8, 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Without active social mediation, Fukushima natives may face future discrimination as *hibakusha* (a term for survivors of nuclear blasts), which can complicate future resettlements, the marriage of children, and so forth (Dudden 2012).

<sup>8</sup>See Sternsdorff-Cisterna (2015) for a discussion of food safety and affective discourses of *anzen/anshin* in the production of "scientific citizenship" in post-3/11 Japan.

<sup>9</sup>Another local festival held in Fukushima.

<sup>10</sup>*Hijōkaidan*, a double entendre with the Noise group of the same name.

<sup>11</sup>About \$7.50 USD.

<sup>12</sup>Otomo Yoshihide, "'Nōryō! Bon-odori!'" Accessed from [http://www.pj-fukushima.jp/page/bon\\_message01.php](http://www.pj-fukushima.jp/page/bon_message01.php) on July 21, 2013.

<sup>13</sup>In succeeding years, the quilt material has been further recirculated, being cut up into flags and banners, and sewn into *yukata* (summer robes) to be worn by festivalgoers.

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#### Foreign Language Translations:

Project Fukushima! Performativity and the Politics of Festival in Post-3.11 Japan

[**Keywords:** Japan, Fukushima, politics of survival, antinuclear protest, music, performance]

プロジェクト福島！ポスト3・11の日本における祝祭のパフォーマンス・ヴィジュアル・ポリティクス。

[キーワード: 音楽, パフォーマンス・ヴィジュアル, 抗議, 福島, 反核運動]

福島计划！论日本后三一一时代节庆的政治以及表演性

[关键词: 日本, 福島, 生存的政治, 反核能抗争, 音乐, 表演]

Проект «Фукусима»! Выступаемость и политика празднования в Японии после 11.03.

[**Ключевые слова:** Япония, Фукусима, политика выживания, антиядерные протесты, музыка, выступление, перформанс]

Projeto Fukushima! Performatividade e a Política do Festival no Pós-11 de Março Japão

[**Palavras-chave:** Japão, Fukushima, política de sobrevivência, protesto anti-nuclear, música, performance]

مشروع فوكوشيميا! التادية وسياسات المهرجان فيما بعد يابان ١١-٣

كلمات البحث: اليابان، فوكوشيميا، سياسات البقاء على قيد الحياة، احتجاج ضد النووي، الموسيقى، التادية

