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Heart of a heartless world: Compassion, alienation, and the formation of liberal
secularism in contemporary Japan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Michael David Berman

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Professor Martha Lampland
Professor David Pedersen
Professor Stefan Tanaka
Professor Kathryn Woolard

2019

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my grandparents, Mildred Lewis, Gertrude Berman, Sidney “Shep” Lewis, Aaron Berman, and Tanaka Misako, who always inspired me with curiosity, healthy skepticism, and a desire to put both to good purpose.

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PROLOGUE: APPROACHING REALITY, APPROACHING WRITING

A moment of alienation

I will never forget the first time I met my father-in-law, Mr. Eiichi Iguchi. It was the summer of 2004 and I had just finished my sophomore year of college. I had just arrived in Japan to participate in a six-week homestay and intensive language program in Tokyo. My homestay father would eventually turn into my father-in-law, and I wanted to impress him by showing off my Japanese language skills and knowledge of Japan. Of course, I accomplished the very opposite, ignorantly telling him how fascinating I thought it was that Japanese culture maintained a rich mixture of the traditional and the modern. He looked at me with a smirk and asked what I meant. I responded with a comment about temples in the midst of Tokyo, one of the most modern cities on the planet. Mr. Iguchi then replied, "I haven't been to a temple since the last funeral I went to, you have old churches, and I don't see anything traditional about my work as a lawyer." Over that summer, he did not talk to me much as he was always at work or out drinking with colleagues, but from our brief interactions, suffice it to say that I was humbled by Mr. Iguchi's knowledge of Japan and the United States and his refutation of any exoticization of Japan.

While my father-in-law certainly commanded my respect, it was my mother-in-law, Mrs. Teruko Iguchi, who perhaps taught me the most about Japan that summer. That education did not always come in exactly the way I had hoped or expected. We had many delightful conversations about the Japanese tea

ceremony, pottery, and literature. Many of them concluded with something like, “Michael, thank you for cleaning the dishes. And your room. And make sure you catch the train to get to class on time.” I am paraphrasing and exaggerating a bit, but as Mrs. Iguchi recently put it during a fun conversation we were having about that summer, “If you want to understand a place, you have to start with daily life.”

Together, my in-laws taught me the danger of the academic abstractions that I was using to understand Japan and, by comparison, myself. It is now quite clear to me that when I first went to Japan, I was saturated with ideas of the “West and the Rest,” as Stuart Hall (1996) famously put it, whereby Japan was inherently different and not fully up to the standards of the “West” or the “modern,” albeit in ways worth celebrating. At the very least, I did not place Japan fully in the same time period as the United States, despite me being right there when I made my comment!¹

Much later, I learned that the projection of others into the past and the self into the present is a way that the fields of history and anthropology, among others, contribute to colonial and capitalist exploitation of large portions of the world. After all, given the dominance of a progressive notion of time, the present has by definition succeeded the past. Whoever occupies the present is therefore thought to be at the peak of civilization and worthy of aspiration (Fabian 2002; Mitchell

¹ This experience of time, whereby multiple times can exist simultaneously in a way that allows them to be compared along a timeline of development is an inherent aspect of modern time and of anthropology (Fabian 2002; Koselleck 2004; see also Chakrabarty 2008; Fasolt 2004)

2000; Said 1979). In turn, anyone stuck in the past can either be disparaged as barbaric or treated as a noble, innocent savage who is somehow closer to nature or traditional ways of life — as if people who occupy the present are somehow free from nature or traditions.

As either barbaric or noble, the other who is not fully modern can be treated as a static object. That object can be plumbed for values, practices, and ideas worth reviving, salvaging, governing, or even reviling (Trouillot 2003). It is a way of looking at the self through a refracted mirror filled with one's fears and desires. In that mirror, the self never has to be directly dealt with because the "they" — "they" do it this way; "they" are both modern and not — takes its place. In that process, the complexities of what Mrs. Iguchi called "daily life" sometimes get ignored in the service of arguments to which she does not have access but which nonetheless affect all of us insofar as they shape the way we see and experience the world (Povinelli 2001). Meanwhile, as Mr. Iguchi pithily argued, using an other as a mirror frequently obscures ongoing shared histories between the West and the Rest (compare Coronil 1996).

A second moment

If the abstractions I brought with me from the U.S. proved dangerous, later experiences in Japan taught me that local conceptualizations of the world are not necessarily less conflicted. After the six-week intensive summer program in Tokyo, I participated in a one-year study-abroad program at Kanazawa University. Kanazawa is a mid-sized city on the West coast of Japan. It was the seat of a

wealthy and powerful samurai family that prospered from the sixteenth century until the abolition of feudal domains and the centralization of the national government of Japan in 1871. I was originally drawn to the city because of its two famous pottery styles, Ōhi-yaki and Kutani-yaki, and its many Buddhist temples dating to the 1600s and earlier. A few weeks after arriving, I decided to stay at one of those temples to do some participant observation and to escape what I understood at the time to be capitalism and selfishness.

My ideas about Buddhism were influenced just as much by the fictional works of authors like Jack Kerouac and Miyazawa Kenji as they were by texts by the Zen monk Shunryū Suzuki or the scholar D.T. Suzuki, who was originally from Kanazawa. I thought of Buddhism as austere, peaceful, and oriented toward becoming selfless. However, before choosing a temple to stay at, I decided to ask people in the city what they thought of Buddhist practice. Many of them had things to say about which temples were the most famous or had the most impressive bells, but very few were interested in what went on inside of those temples.

When I was persistent enough or met particularly talkative people, the most common response that people had was that Buddhist practice (*shugyō*) was strict and that staying at a temple would be a good Japanese experience for me. Ironically, very few Japanese people have ever had that Japanese experience. Their response, therefore, suggested that the “Japan” that people imagined was different from the Japan of Mrs. Iguchi’s “daily life.”

Neither Japan — the aestheticized Japan exemplified by a layperson practicing Zen in historical temples and the Japan of daily life — should be taken for granted. Mrs. Iguchi is a stay-at-home mom who did everything she could to make sure that Mr. Iguchi could go to work every day and make money to support the family up until the very moment of his passing. In other words, she devoted herself to cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and raising her children so that he could devote himself to work (compare Borovoy 2005). She did not always do so happily, but she did so without complaint. Mrs. Iguchi could be characterized as a “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*), a type of gendered person that first appeared in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Silverberg 2006; Ueno 2009; Uno 1999).

The repetitive nature of Mrs. Iguchi’s daily life and its orientation toward her husband’s work, the home, and school rather than toward the physical labor associated with agricultural cycles, for example, is not natural or timeless. It is historical. By “historical” I do not just mean that it can be dated roughly to the end of the nineteenth century. A daily orientation toward (re)producing labor power to make money also depends on and creates a sense of history. That sense is far too complex to cover here.² However, one aspect of it was expressed in people’s imagination of a Japan more clearly experienced in timeless Buddhist temples than in the work of a lawyer or university student; a division between the mythic,

² Entire volumes have been dedicated to this. See, for example, Benjamin 1968; Postone 1993; Tanaka 2004

timeless past and the homogeneous, measurable, and repetitive time of the work-oriented present.

While Mrs. Iguchi's life has been oriented toward work, it is not fully mechanized, dominated by quantity without a concern for quality, or without pleasure and creativity. Nonetheless, Georg Lukács's description of "daily life" does capture one aspect of how she feels about it. He writes that daily life, as an historically particular organization of time, arises from and gives rise to an opposition between an "objectification of labor-power" and a laborer's "total personality" (1971: 90). Which is to say, Mrs. Iguchi was not always happy to do her work and she was not fully expressed in that work, which felt like something that was simultaneously not her own and something that was wrenched from her. She felt that making sure that her husband and children could go to work and school, respectively, interfered with her ability to do things for herself (compare Allison 1991).

To more fully express her "total personality," she picked up the Japanese tea ceremony as a hobby. The tea ceremony, which practitioners, Japanese literature, and textbooks alike often present as an expression of a Japanese essence that was developed mostly by Buddhist monks, is closely linked to the temples where people said that I could have a real "Japanese experience." Both are popularly opposed to daily life. Neither the "space of tea" (*cha no ma*) nor temples are the space of business as usual for the vast majority of people in

Japan. Neither are they meant to be. As one Buddhist priest told me recently, “People don’t know how to talk to us. They don’t treat us as usual people. Even when I was a kid in school, people treated me different because I was the ‘temple boy’ (*o-tera-san*). Sometimes that was uncomfortable for me, but we [Buddhist priests] need it to be that way or else temples and rituals won’t feel special.” The opposition between daily life and temples or tea ceremony often makes the latter feel like expressions of something desirable and “real” — in this case, a real Japan and a real self manifest in people’s artful creations.

The separation between “reality” and what people really do every day is productive of more than just imaginations of purity. Marx wrote that alienated labor “does not belong to [the worker’s] essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself [sic]. ... As a result, therefore, man [sic] (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions — eating, drinking, procreating ...” (1988: 74). Sadly, to some degree, Marx’s analysis describes Mr. Iguchi, who found great pleasure in alcohol and drank himself to death. However, it does not explain Mrs. Iguchi’s interest in tea ceremony.

Just as factory labor is not the only kind of labor, things that animals can do as well as humans are not the only pleasures to arise out of the opposition between labor and a real self. As Harry Harootunian argues, the notion of “culture” also arose as a “real” or “essential” location outside of daily life — that is, outside

of the time of labor rather than outside of labor *per se* (2000: xxiii). I put quotations around “real” and “essential” because culture is not ahistorical, even though it is sometimes presented as if it were. On the contrary, ample evidence shows that so-called cultural essences have been invented in order to govern nation-states and, in the twenty and twenty-first centuries, to sell to people.³ Thus, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Mrs. Iguchi felt pleasure “just being herself” (*ari no mama de irareru*) while conducting tea ceremonies despite paying for lessons and the various instruments necessary to do so.⁴ The tea ceremony was a place partially outside of daily life that unified her true self with a cultural essence in a way that she found refreshing — refreshing enough that she was able to go back to daily life after her lessons.

For my part, I could perhaps “find myself” by escaping daily life to experience “Japan” at a temple that I paid to stay at for a couple of weeks. As I wrote above, I thought of Buddhist practice as austere and selfless. People I

³ Many such studies have been influenced by Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1992) useful but problematic notion of “invented traditions.” In Japan, scholars have shown that everything from neighborhoods (Bestor 1989) and hometowns (Robertson 1991; see also Ivy 1995) to taiko drumming (Bender 2012) relies on the invention of tradition (see also Vlastos 1998 for an edited volume on invented traditions in Japan). Importantly, not all traditions are most usefully characterized as “invented” in this way, even though they are dynamic and always formulating and responding to needs, desires, and questions of participants (Asad et al. 2013; MacIntyre 2007), and arguing that a tradition is invented is itself a political act that is not frequently welcomed by participants in those traditions (Briggs 1996).

⁴ Indeed, in her excellent, critical study of the tea ceremony, Surak writes, “Originally an accoutrement of power politics in a premodern society, *chanoyu* as it was known, was recast as a symbol of Japan as a modern state and employed to unify a national community. Transformed into a hobby, it retains enough of this past to project Japaneseness in ostensibly banal situations...” (2013: 9).

talked to when I was deciding what temple to practice at mostly had things to say about the age and beauty of temples. They suggested that staying at any temple would be a good Japanese experience for me. At the time, what surprised me more than either my own exoticizing tendencies or the gap between “Japan” and Japan — which I naively accepted as natural — was the answer people gave when I asked them what they thought about temples as a part of contemporary life rather than as beautiful remnants of the past. Like my father-in-law, who had not been to a temple since the last funeral he had attended, many people thought that temples were all about funerals. Moreover, they told me that monks were driving around in Mercedes-Benz’s after getting rich off of other people’s misfortunes.⁵

That image seemed almost the inverse of what I expected, so I went to a temple with an equal amount of excitement, curiosity, and skepticism. As it turns out, what is actually going on in any given place at any given time is quite diverse. It looks different when viewed from different perspectives. When I got to the temple, my expectations were met. I went during a period of intensive practice

⁵ The popular understanding of temples interjecting into contemporary life only to make money off of funerals, which is largely misleading, is clearly portrayed in Itami Jūzō’s 1987 film, *O-Sōshiki* [The Funeral]. About forty-five minutes into the film, which is about a funeral, the son-in-law of the deceased seeks consultation as to how to treat the Buddhist priest when he arrives, saying, “What should we do when the priest comes? People like us (*watashi-tachi nanka*) have no idea what to do.” When the undertaker starts to tell him, he runs to get his wife, the daughter of the deceased, to make sure that she gets the instructions, too. Those instructions include a bit about the “donation” (*ofuse*) that should be made to the priest for his services. When the priest shows up, he does so in what appears to be a white Rolls-Royce. Later, during the actual funeral, a strong wind blows money from attendees into the air, creating a comical image that nonetheless draws a strong association between money, funerals, and temples.

(*sesshin*) and was left almost unable to walk from all of the sitting meditation we did. What people had told me was also confirmed. The temple had a large, very well taken care of graveyard that provided most of their income. And, I kid you not, there was a Mercedes-Benz parked out front.

Talking to young monks who were there, however, revealed yet other realities of temple life. The realities revealed in talking to those monks upset the realities affirmed by the strict practice we were engaged in and the Mercedes out front. One of them mentioned the he had just come back from a skiing trip in Switzerland. He then generously asked if I liked skiing. I told him that I had never been skiing. The monk next to me nodded, so I asked him if he liked it. “I’ve never been either, but I would like to. I’d like to go abroad, too.” He could not do either because his father’s rural temple was struggling and they did not have any money. He did not even know if he would take over the temple from his father, which is standard practice, but he wanted to go through the training of his sect so that he could if the few parishioners of his father’s temple wanted him to — a pattern that I later learned is very common. Buddhism as practiced by monks, it turned out, was strict, sometimes selfless, and, for some, tied to luxuries like skiing trips. The people who engaged in and were formed by those practices — that is, the monks — were poor and rich, struggling in rural environments and driving Mercedes-Benz’s in some urban ones. In other words, reality in the temple was complex. It was certainly not a pure, ahistorical Japanese essence.

On the other hand, the social and personal conflicts experienced by the young monks were a crystallized expression of Japan. Though multiple and complex, the reality of the temple was, to some degree, unified under its roof. We were all together, experiencing long-term shifts in political-economic power that extended far beyond the temple walls. Most notably, the monks struggled with the depopulation and aging that challenge the viability of many temples and towns around Japan. They also felt the strain on traditions that resist commodification or direct subordination to the government.⁶ In that sense, I certainly did get a good Japanese experience in the temple — one that I have repeated many times since, albeit in different places.

A third moment

Eleven years after my first visit to Japan, I had the pleasure of translating a book written by Yuki Masami,⁷ one of my professors at Kanazawa University. With her book, *Foodscapes of Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* (2015), she tries to capture the complex, multi-perspectival nature of reality rather than simply writing about it in the way that I just did when describing the reality of the temple. To go beyond statements or descriptions of complexity, Yuki's book is organized into conversations rather than chapters. Each conversation takes place between Yuki and a different contemporary Japanese woman writer. Those conversations

⁶ I go into more detail regarding temples' struggles with commodification and the government in chapter 3.

⁷ From this point on, Japanese names are written in accordance with the Japanese convention of writing family names before given names.

are each followed by a commentary by Yuki. Due to that structure, close to half of the book consists of transcribed talk between people. Those people, in turn, are situated differently in relation to modernity and sometimes disagree with each other. The book is an earnest attempt to capture the tenuous, incomplete unity that arises in and out of disagreements and different, sometimes conflicting social positions. More specifically, combined, the conversations and Yuki's commentaries cohere into a conflicted, partially contradictory, multi-perspectival image of modernity.

A learned review of the book that came out two years after its publication criticized it harshly, saying it “lacks a solid argument and hence fails to be more than just a collection of engaging essays and interviews” (Kato 2017: 91). Using work by the British scholar Timothy Ingold and rightfully praising Harvard professor Karen Thornber for her work, the author of the review argued that Yuki “misses nearly every opportunity to connect her food themes to ... gender, travel and colonialism [for example]” (92). From a particular perspective — one likely shared by many readers of the U.K.-oriented journal in which the review was published — the review is not mistaken. Gender, travel, and colonialism are significant aspects of the conversations that Yuki used to compose her book, but she did not explicitly engage with English-language-based theory on its own terms.

The reviewer describes that lack of engagement as a failure of the book and explains it as “perhaps due to the proverbial Japanese need to avoid

controversy and confrontation at all costs” (92). Judging from the review, however, Yuki’s radically different form of argumentation and the ways that she portrays the whole of modernity sparked controversy and confrontation. Moreover, doing so was a conscious choice that Yuki made, apparently unable to fulfill her “Japanese need” to avoid controversy. As she put it, “It might be because I live my life very close to people who do not know the concepts of ‘coexistence with nature’ or ‘a sustainable society’ even though they practice them every day, but I think that in Japan there is a real resistance to theory that is not put into practice. While writing this book, I would often gaze out of my window and see people reading the clouds and the wind while working the fields. They were dripping with sweat and having a real conversation with the land. Sitting in front of my computer while watching them, I often asked myself, ‘What exactly is the refined logic of ecocriticism?’” (2015: viii).

Yuki’s argument was in her writing and the things that her “body moved” her to write about (ibid.). The writing did not only reference or talk about an argument. In other words, there was no separation between the form of the conversations and their content as a part of what she was saying about the world and about academic writing as a part of that world. Writing in that way was an attempt to contribute to an academic conversation in a way that would be recognizable to the people who provided the material or “data” for the book. By not alienating the subjects of her study — not making them unrecognizable to themselves, even

while presenting them from a different perspective than that given in their daily lives — she left open the possibility that the people outside her window would turn the critical mill with her rather than becoming its grist.⁸ Conversely, the review is evidence of the expectation that academic works should reduce multiple perspectives into one, and that the remaining perspective should use people's struggles as material to work out academic problems. Working out those academic problems is not often meant to solve the struggles of people who become evidence in academics' arguments. If it were, scholarly work would be more recognizable to the people who that work is ostensibly about. That is, there would be less of a gap between whom scholarship is about and whom it is for.

Toward less alienated writing

The three moments of alienation that I have laid out in this preface heavily influence much anthropological practice. Moment one showed that scholars such as myself are not immune to the categories or social conditions of the places that we come from. Those categories and conditions often privilege the imagined “West” while using the other as a foil, albeit one who can sometimes foil that very imagination, as Mr. Iguchi did for me. Likewise, moment two showed that popular categories in places where anthropologists study carry but do not directly convey the social relations out of which they arise. Both of these moments, then, show that understanding things in terms of categories without consideration of social

⁸ In her critique of Richard Rorty (1998) as an exemplar and proponent of liberalism, Elizabeth Povinelli (2001) points out that the “grist” of the “argumentative mill” of liberalism is “those multitudinous others whose pain we might be unintentionally causing” (328).

relations and practices can obscure the conditions by which those categories become convincing for so many people.

Scholarly and popular categories are often connected by linked histories rather than just by the ethnographer who experiences them. For example, Mrs. Iguchi's "daily life," people's idea that temples express a true or real Japanese essence, my original desire to go to those temples, and dominant ideas about the unequal distribution of modernity are all aspects of global capitalism. While capitalism neither explains nor fully captures any of these things, the relationship of each of them to work, a sense that the present is somehow separated from something more fundamental than commodified labor, the reproduction of labor power, and uneven development is clear. However, it only becomes clear with a critical linkage of concepts with practices.

The third moment deals with the writing of academic texts that try to make that linkage. Ideally, they would be able to do so without reproducing the conditions of possibility for that which they critique — conditions which include the organization of knowledge. With few exceptions,⁹ anthropologists have not applied the epistemological critiques we make of the world to our own writing. For example, we are often happy to discuss the dangers and nuances of writing culture,¹⁰ and even to change some of the things that we write about. However,

⁹ For example, Pedersen 2013; Povinelli 2006; Stewart 2007; Taussig 1987

¹⁰ I am here referring to the multi-pronged conversation fomented by Clifford and Marcus (1986).

many ethnographies still start with a section on context that is separate from the text despite our knowledge that in the world beyond our texts, and what counts as text, context, and co-text is the result of often conflicted interaction.¹¹

There are consequences to exempting our writing from our own critiques. For example, in writing a context section, which is often broadly conceived of as sociological and/or historical, we separate generality and process from the ethnographic present and the particular examples we use to construct our texts. In turn, those separations reproduce the dominant understanding of time that undergirds the division between the West and the Rest. Namely, a tendency to place the past, present, and future in a simple, chronological order that facilitates a dissociation of the before and after of a now. In other words, by placing a single history at the beginning of a book rather than interspersing *histories* throughout a book, we make it look like the past came before the present, is unified, is not ongoing, and is necessary only to understand but not to analyze some present condition or phenomenon. As Johannes Fabian (2002) long ago argued, that chronologization allows for a sorting of places in a hierarchy along a timeline and a denial of time created together, which he calls “intersubjective time.” In other words, providing an historical context that stands separate from the substantive arguments of a book partially facilitated my ability to perform ignorance in front of my father-in-law by denying that we created time together.

¹¹ For more on contextualization, see, for example, Auer 1992; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Gumperz 1992; Hanks 1990

A context section is just one example of how our texts largely reproduce the epistemic and social conditions that they aspire to challenge or critique. If that example is about the organization of knowledge, then the example of Yuki and the reviewer of her text shows how that organization is political and situated. In that example, the use of academic categories such as “colonialism” and “feminism” ironically undermine the goal of their supposedly radical critiques, which is to overcome colonial epistemologies and techniques of oppression.¹² In practice, fealty to those categories was invoked to censor a woman reflexively writing in a way that partially used but also challenged the epistemology of “Western” scholarship.

That “Western” scholarship suppressed Yuki’s not-entirely-Western voice while partially blaming “Japanese” culture for that suppression. In doing so, it produced and protected the “West” for the author of the review and the U.K.-based journal that published it. As Takeuchi Yoshimi argued in 1948, “simply being Europe does not make Europe Europe. The various facts of history teach that Europe barely maintains itself through the tension of its incessant self-renewals. That fundamental thesis of the spirit of modernity that states that ‘the doubting self cannot be doubted’ is undeniably rooted in a psychology of people who are located (who have located themselves) in such a situation as this” (2005: 54). In

¹² This is an example of what Marx writes of as “the estranged mind of the world thinking within its self-estrangement” in his “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole” (1988[1844]: 146)

the case of the review, the “doubting self” of the reviewer — as historical actor rather than as biographical individual — was affirmed in its act of assuaging the doubt brought about by a real challenge to its dominance over the ways we perform doubt. In other words, the spirit of critique was opposed to an actual critique.

That does not mean, however, that academic critique is impossible or undesirable, only that any critique oriented toward upsetting a system has to organize knowledge differently than that system does. As Yuki’s book demonstrates, systems and knowledge are produced by people, so a reorganization of knowledge requires the formation of a different type of conversation than the one frequently had in academia. A critical conversation must not be one in which people’s practices and categories serve scholarly interests while scholarly interests at best bore those people or, as in the case of my conversation with my father-in-law, strike them as ignorant, nonsensical, patronizing, or exoticizing. And yet, as any engaging interlocutor should, it is still necessary for the anthropologist to say something.

This book is an attempt to engage in a conversation with the people that fill its pages. There are many different types of conversations to which anthropologists can and have contributed. For me, however, the most productive conversations have not involved me parroting things that my interlocutors have already told me or using them to figure out some obscure point of academic

interest. Rather than use them as fodder to solve some puzzle about “Japanese culture,” which does not challenge anyone’s view of the world, I set the bar of conversation higher. I try to tell my friends and interlocutors something about themselves and their predicaments that they do not already know. And I try to do so in a way that any learned person could understand, even if they do not have a degree in social sciences.¹³

To accomplish that, I break some conventions of anthropological writing. I do not provide a singular context or history that is supposed to apply equally to everyone who makes an appearance in this book. Instead, there are multiple, intertwined histories and contexts that become salient in relation to particular situations in which people find themselves. After all, as my mother-in-law said, “You have to start with daily life.”

Nor do I provide an account of any group’s culture if “culture” means their conceptual schema or life philosophies. They already know these things, even if they do not always consciously know them. If you want to know about how they see the world or what their values are, some of them have websites that you can visit and one group, Risshō Kōsei-kai, has centers located all over the world where you would be warmly welcomed in your own language. That said, I do use the categories that my friends in Japan use. If I did not, this book would not contribute

¹³ As Talal Asad (2018) has recently written, “Attention to ‘the native’s point of view’ as such is, after all, compatible with an entirely instrumental approach—with viewing the native’s form of life simply as information to be translated for a purpose entirely foreign to it” (9).

to their conversations. However, just as in this prologue, I do not leave those categories unquestioned. Instead, I link them to some scholarly ones that I see as equivalent. Doing so allows me to contribute to and bridge popular and academic conversations in a way that I hope offers thoughtful critique to both sides.

Simply bringing together popular and academic conversations in a way that both sides can understand is not unto itself sufficient to generate either critique or a perspective that can tell people things about themselves that they do not already know. In the introduction to the book, I discuss my methods for accomplishing that tall task in a bit more detail, but for now, suffice it to say that I focus on gaps rather than on what presents itself — the negative rather than the positive, the in-between rather than the apparently determined, and relations in process rather than things. For example, in this prologue, you could say that I looked at my development as a scholar and my relationship to Japan. However, rather than focus on just the places that I have been and the people I have met, I focused on three interactional moments of alienation that highlighted a gap between what people do and what they think is essentially real or important. If that gap and the difficulty of closing it is taken as the topic of this prologue, then it becomes possible to see that my search for Japan was similar to Mrs. Iguchi's practice of the tea ceremony and people saying that temples would provide a real Japanese experience. Likewise, people placing the essence of Japan in a past marked by temples denied temples' modern-ness in the same way as the comment on Japan

not being fully modern that I made to my father-in-law did. Finally, I gave an example of how academic writing that tries to address inequality and injustice by engaging in a conversation about “colonialism” and “feminism” can sometimes separate itself from practices — such as restructuring knowledge — that are meant to challenge colonialism and patriarchy.

In each of those moments, the “real” gets separated from actual practice. Actual practice becomes a nuisance interrupting a pursuit of the imagined real, which presents itself as a negation of daily life. Unto itself, that is not a problem. But in its separation from people’s daily practices, that particular pursuit of the real ironically cancels itself out: I could not understand Japan so long as I looked for it in temples or the past; my mother-in-law renews her energy by participating in the tea ceremony, but comes back to the daily life that often prevents her from doing things that she would rather be doing; and some scholarship creates the epistemic basis for the social systems that it hopes to critique or even undermine. Then, of course, there is my deceased father-in-law, who drank himself to death in the simultaneous pursuit of legal fairness and an escape from that very pursuit.

This dissertation tries to capture a portion of the system that creates those kinds of gaps: gaps that prevent people from accomplishing their own goals. It does so by delving into the social relations out of which those gaps arise and which those gaps produce. Sticking close to the relations that produce and arise out of gaps is my way of attempting to avoid reproducing an idealized version of

what is missing in our relationships to others and to ourselves. That is, I focus on the negative in order to help negate it, even if only to repeat the process again and again...

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If the lives of academics resemble the acknowledgements sections that they write, then it is clear that for many of them, work and family are considered as separate groups of people and the former takes precedence. At the very least, work always comes first and is followed by a short nod to family. In works that are critical of the organization of contemporary society, such a clear instantiation of the social division between work and home as sites of production and the reproduction of labor power, respectively, strikes me as somewhat ironic, if perhaps honest.

For my part, I could not have completed this dissertation without help from my partner, Reiko. She has provided me with daily insights that have made their way into the dissertation and, hopefully, into who I am. My son, Tenzin, has also provided great insights, albeit not in a particularly academic register. I can honestly say that his persistence in asking “why?” is inspiring and humbling. In the end, I really do not know the answer, but I am always loath to say, “because that’s how it is.”

In that sense, my committee members have been quite similar to my son; they have inspired me to always push further with my questions and my analyses. I truly appreciate the depth and breadth of the critique and models of scholarship that I have received from Joseph Hankins, Martha Lampland, David Pedersen, Stefan Tanaka, and Kit Woolard throughout my time at UC San Diego. In addition to my committee members, I have also had the great fortune to have Anne Allison,

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friendship has taught me much, some of which has made its way into these pages and some of which will remain between us. For all of it, I am thankful.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Heart of a heartless world: Compassion, alienation, and the formation of liberal
secularism in contemporary Japan

by

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This dissertation examines the relationship between compassion and alienation in contemporary Japan. That relationship is poignantly expressed in the experience of religious professionals working to "get close to the hearts of others." For those professionals, as for many scholars, sharing suffering is meant to overcome isolation in a society characterized by suicide, economic stagnation, and an aging population. However, after twenty-four months of intensive fieldwork with

religious people working to provide "care for the heart" in order to overcome the anomie and alienation that plague contemporary Japan, I have found that sharing suffering hurts on multiple scales. Hearing stories from disaster victims exhausts my informants. Working to empathize with the suffering of others ties compassionate workers to depopulated and aging areas, making it difficult to find marriage partners or friends, and my informants' religious organizations are strained as they bear the financial costs of this work without proselytizing. In this dissertation, then, I argue that the pain of sharing suffering isolates compassionate workers and exhausts the forms of belonging, such as religious organizations, that support them. Using the examples of a new religion working to maintain community, a training program for interfaith chaplains working with people facing death, and a Christian volunteer center in a city devastated by the 2011 tsunami in Tohoku, Japan, I argue that compassion spreads the pain of social suffering while breaking down non-liberal forms of belonging, thus ironically creating an alienated society of isolated individuals.

Introduction

“I really can’t stand the man sitting next to you.” Mr. Umibe smirked as he went on, “Mr. Gonda is so generous and kind that he makes me feel inadequate. Come to think of it, all of the members of Risshō Kōsei-kai (RK) who run their volunteer project here are like that. A tough group to work with.” At that, Mr. Umibe, the founder of Hope, a volunteer center working in the disaster-stricken city of Kamaishi in Northeastern Japan, took a slow drag on his cigarette. Mr. Gonda and I chuckled. We had been volunteering together for several days and this was a nice respite from listening to horror stories of the tsunami. That is not to say that the meeting was entirely casual, however. On the contrary, the stakes were somewhat high. Mr. Umibe was a highly respected figure in Kamaishi. He had an intimate knowledge of all of the things that people were trying to do to keep the city afloat after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Mr. Gonda was anxious to hear his estimation of RK’s work in the city and, based on that estimation, to make a report to headquarters. The meeting also called for a performance by Mr. Umibe as RK and RK-affiliated organizations provided the majority of his center’s funding.

Perform he did. Exhaling and blowing the smoke away from us, Mr. Umibe continued, “I probably shouldn’t say this as it isn’t really in line with the doctrine of my religion, but RK really seems to have it right. I don’t care what religion you believe in or if you don’t have any faith at all. RK is Buddhist, I’m Christian, and you’re Jewish. That doesn’t matter. It’s about doing your best to help people.” Mr. Gonda made a sound of approval.

The three of us finished our meal and were about to go our separate ways when Mr. Umibe spoke again. His words came out carefully and a bit slowly, as if he were taking a drag of his cigarette between every fifth word. “I always tell volunteers two things. The first is that they shouldn’t forget the people here. The second is homework. I tell them to think of how to express the fact that they haven’t forgotten. It’s not easy, and I don’t have a clear answer for them.” Mr. Gonda tightened his normally relaxed lips into a drawn-out smile, lowered his gaze, and nodded in forlorn agreement.

In a broad sense, this dissertation is about that difficulty: the difficulty of giving lasting expression to compassion and the feelings of frustration, isolation, and hopelessness that sometimes accompany that difficulty. In other words, it is about the relationship between compassion and alienation; the ways that attempts to share suffering ironically separate people from each other, the products of their affective labor, the institutional means to care for each other, and, at times, life aspirations such as having a family or children.

Take, for example, Mr. Umibe. I revisit him in more detail in chapter six, but for now, suffice it to say that he settled in Kamaishi because of his desire to serve others. He originally went there at the behest of the Christian sect that he belongs to, who funded his volunteer center, Hope, for two years after the tsunami. His girlfriend was unwilling to accompany him and there are few eligible bachelorettes in Kamaishi, where about a third of the population is over sixty-five years old.

Besides, he has told me, “I can’t get involved in that kind of thing because then people think I’m giving preference to someone or that I am just being friendly to someone because I want to start a romantic relationship with them.” Having lived nearly half a century (and always concealing his age), Mr. Umibe laments not having a spouse or children. Free of demanding kin relations, he first felt that he could devote himself to religious practice. However, his denomination’s unwillingness to provide funding for his center for any more than two years complicated his relationship with them. Mr. Umibe felt that a schism had arisen between his personal faith, which was deepened by his engagements with suffering, and institutionalized religion, which formerly provided the money and institutional means for him to establish caring relationships with other people.

Mr. Umibe’s compassion left him sharing the suffering of others in a way that he did not expect. Despite being surrounded by other people and having cultivated trusting relationships in Kamaishi and beyond, Mr. Umibe sometimes feels isolated.¹⁴ To a large degree, he has become the type of person that he originally set out to help — lonely, without close kin, poor, and without strong future prospects: not what proponents of empathy, sympathy, and compassion have in mind when they propose those things as solutions to contemporary social problems.

¹⁴ In this case, then, the separation between people is not due to a lack of trust, as scholars such as Francis Fukuyama (1995) Robert Putnam (2000) have sometimes framed the problem. Nor is he — or anyone, for that matter — so isolated that he exists in a vacuum or as a fully autonomous, self-sufficient individual.

When I mentioned the irony of the situation to him, he smiled, nodded, and slurped up his ramen. “They talk about ramen like it’s the devil. So much salt and fat. But there are worse things.” I did not debate his insight then and I will not do so now. Ramen definitely brought us comfort at times. More importantly, there was little that Mr. Umibe could do about his situation other than shrug it off or give up his compassionate connection to Kamaishi. Such, it seems, is the nature of the alienation that I engaged in Japan — easy to shrug off on most days and perhaps worth the sense of fulfillment that came with acting on compassion, but difficult to live with.

On a broader scale, the difficulty of living is taking a toll on many people in Japan. It is almost impossible to talk about Japan without talking about the burst of its bubble economy in the early 1990s, the increasing scarcity of life-long employment and the concomitant rise in the precarity of workers, the depopulation of all but the largest urban areas, the problem of aging, and the low birthrate and dwindling population. Indeed, as Anne Allison (2012) has poignantly argued, Japan has become a site where the very notion of the future, which is predicated upon heteronormative, capitalist reproduction, seems anachronistic.

People from across the political spectrum point to the demographic and political-economic shifts that characterize contemporary Japan as signs of the breakdown of the bonds of community, corporations, and kinship. However, other

than in extreme cases,¹⁵ people still relate to each other, just not as frequently in ways that support Japan's post-war social order, which was based on the school, the home, and the "iron triangle" of business, bureaucracy, and elected officials (Allison 2012; Kingston 2004). Not surprisingly, tweets, contract labor, and disillusionment with gender inequality and heterosexual marriage do not seem conducive to the creation of baby-making, overtime-working, tax-paying citizens.

Like Mr. Umibe, who works to build community but feels alone and doubts his future prospects, many people in Japan have expressed a feeling of having relations but feeling relation-less. Observers of Japan have given a name to Mr. Umibe's condition and the condition of people in worse situations than his. Many scholars and reporters have called Japan a "relationless society" (*muen shakai*; Allison 2013; NHK Muenshakai Purojekuto Shuzaihan 2012; Tsuchiya 1996), a turn of phrase that has become a part of the Japanese vernacular and has been picked up by politicians and social activists alike.

The phrase "relationless society" seems paradoxical. As Okuda Tomoshi (in Shimazono et al. 2012) has presciently noted, "Describing connections between humans, you can either use the word 'society' or 'relationless.' ... If you use the

¹⁵ By "extreme cases," I mean primarily the "lonely deaths" (*kodokushi*) of people who die alone and whose bodies lie undiscovered and often unclaimed for weeks or even months (see Danely 2019; Nakazawa 2008) and "hikikomori," people, usually males, who do not leave their rooms and are frequently seen as not fulfilling their normative social functions (Saito 2013). Even in those cases, people are not entirely isolated — bodies have to be cleaned up and even hikikomori are generally taken care of by someone else, but their relations are tenuous, few, and limited in scope.

word ‘relationless,’ then you should say that society has collapsed” (13). Yet regardless of how we understand “society” — as an historically particular organization of people and their work or as an imagination arising from and supporting a shared set of values and ideals — it is clear that it played a role in the creation of relationlessness. After all, the condition of relationlessness as a quality of existing relations did not arise from nowhere; not even lonely people live in a vacuum. Nor does a model of change that posits an external or outside force acting upon an isolated, static society or culture work here. In other words, post-World War II Japan was not a utopic society that was suddenly shaken by, say, American culture, and, in that striking, rendered relationless. But could it be the case that the relation between “society” and “relationlessness” is not only counterintuitive but also contradictory? That is, what if “society” and “relationlessness” create each other at the same time that they appear to be opposites of each other? In other words, could the relations of society lead to their own negation, which is felt as a new form of sociality that feels relationless?

The argument that social relations isolate people might seem difficult to make, particularly in Japan. For if Japan cannot be mentioned without talk of decline and stagnation, neither can it be mentioned without invoking the astonishing success of Japan’s modernization and a tendency among people there to prioritize relationships and group belonging over the individual. Long-term observers of Japan have written about how people there tend to form a “relational

self” (Kondo 1990). Rather than a sense of self based on ideals of autonomy and individuality, a relational self is based on interactions with other people. Scholars have written about how the emphasis on relations in the forming of the Japanese self is expressed in language, social relations, and cultural norms and ideals (Bachnik 1982; Bachnik and Quinn 1994; Doi 1973; Lebra 2004). Moreover, such cultural emphasis on relationships is not the only apparent challenge to my argument that social relations in Japan create a sense of isolation for many people there.

Critics of a view of Japanese society as troubled point to its material wealth as a sign of broader social health. They argue that its low unemployment rate, high GDP, and one of the highest average life expectancies in the world clearly show that Japanese society is robust rather than deteriorating. While a strong economy is not the same as a strong sense of community or belonging, for many commentators, even generally critical ones, people like Mr. Umibe exemplify the strength of the social fabric of Japan — a strength tested and revealed by the aftermath of the 2011 disasters. Mr. Umibe’s compassion serves for many people, including those around him, as sign that social bonds still exist in Japan and that they are strong enough to overcome individual isolation and selfishness. Some observers, such as Sakurai Yoshihide and Inaba Keishin (2012) have been more nuanced, arguing that religious professionals like Mr. Umibe are uniquely situated to help people care for each other in Japan, maintaining a form of communal care

that arose after the disasters. As they put it in the editor's forward of the 2012-2013 book series *Religion and Social Capital*:

Now, one and a half years after the 2011 earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Tōhoku, ... the government has not shown initiative or provided a clear image of recovery. Regardless, since right after the disasters, the community in Tōhoku came together and NPOs and NGOs from Japan and abroad to support the disaster areas. In our post-welfare nation (*posuto fukushi kokka*), those events made clear the importance of social support, which relies on social capital ... However, where does social capital lie in contemporary society, in which the bonds of kinship, community, and the workplace are so thin that it has even been called a "relationless society?" We would like to suggest that a possibility for those types of relations could exist in religious reasoning and activities by religious organizations, which brew reciprocity and human/social trust. (2012: 3-4)

Abroad, too, reporters frequently commented on the lack of looting after the earthquake and tsunami,¹⁶ thus reinforcing a general image of Japan as collectivist, well-behaved, and orderly.

The simultaneous portrayal of Japan as orderly and as relationless again raises the possibility that social order creates social breakdown on a broad scale. It is just as easy to paint a picture of Japan as an exemplar of social health as it is to see it as an example of *anomie*, a condition that Durkheim describes as a breakdown in society that leaves people with no moral regulation (2006: 276-278). The difference is partially one of attention.

For example, looking at Mr. Umibe, his compassion certainly stands out and

¹⁶ Several of my interlocutors have told me that people cooperated well immediately after the disasters but some "fireflies," people with flashlights, did roam the ruins at night, taking valuables when they could find them.

could be celebrated. It would be difficult to argue that he had no moral regulation. From a Durkheimian perspective or that of Okuda, who noted the apparent paradox in the phrase “relationless society,” Mr. Umibe’s clear and passionate sense of purpose should indicate that society is functioning well, creating a meaningful collective for people. For Sakurai and Inaba, work such as his carries the promise of a better future for Japanese society. Yet, spending more time with Mr. Umibe, it was apparent that in many ways he did not feel fulfilled and was often lonely. And from a heteronormative functionalist perspective, his lack of a marriage partner and children suggests that society is not reproducing itself. A lack of reproduction, in turn, is often taken as a sign of disfunction.

The case of Mr. Umibe clearly shows that “society” and “relationlessness” are not mutually exclusive. That is, this is not an either/or situation and cannot be adequately analyzed using a structural-functionalist perspective. Rather, it is a both/and situation in a logical and causal sense. Logically, society can exist at the same time as it is breaking down, so long as society is not seen as a self-same, closed, and coherent whole. Causally, the very relations that Mr. Umibe had caused his isolation and vice versa. One of the reasons that he went to Kamaishi in the first place was his dissatisfaction with his work elsewhere, which left him feeling like he was only “going through the motions of life mechanically” (*mannerika shiteiru*). In a sense, then, his compassion arose from dissatisfaction. His compassion, in turn, bound him to people in a way that challenged the

relations that he had with the church and old acquaintances and made it nearly impossible for him to marry.

In general terms, then, compassion can arise from and fuel separations between people even as it brings them together. Moreover, it can do so in a way that breaks down forms of long-term belonging such as the atomic family or institutionalized religion, thus creating people who feel like individuals rather than like members of a social unit greater than the individual. Such a complex relation between compassion and society cannot be understood in terms of *anomie*. It was, after all, Mr. Umibe's feeling of purpose and of finding a meaningful role in society that led to his isolation and, arguably, a lack of social reproduction. This situation can, however, tell us something about the nature of alienation in contemporary Japan, a place simultaneously used as a sign of isolation and celebrated for a strong sense of group belonging.

Alienation 1: Coming together, coming apart

In 2016, I met Hachi-san,¹⁷ a good friend of mine, in a Thai restaurant in a trendy neighborhood in Tokyo. He is a young leader in RK, the lay Buddhist organization that funded a portion of Mr. Umibe's work in Kamaishi. RK strives to help its members become compassionate people who can help others to better deal with suffering in their lives. Over the last thirty years, RK has found it increasingly difficult to attract new members.

¹⁷ I use the Japanese "san" here rather than "Mr." to signal the different type of relationship, which is less hierarchical or formal, that I have with him than some other people who populate this book.

Hachi-san and I were talking about that difficulty. Knowing about my project, he described that difficulty in terms of Japan's relationless society. "In a sense, this is exactly what you are researching. It's not that people don't want to do good things for each other, it's that they don't know how to do that. There is no structure that lets them be kind to each other without a lot of sacrifice on their own part. They don't want to make all of the effort to join RK. They feel that is difficult and it is strange to them. But they also don't know how to behave on a train. They see an elderly person standing and they want to give up their seat, but they are afraid of offending the elderly person and don't know how to approach them even though all they have to do is just offer! That's a version of the 'relationless society' in daily life."

I saw something akin to Hachi-san's insights in practice during a large festival that I went to with my wife and son, who are Japanese, in a small city outside of Tokyo in 2016. RK was participating in the festival parade and had invited us to watch. We had a great time walking alongside RK, taking pictures, and cheering my friends on. As always, the members of RK were very gracious hosts and treated us to lunch — delicious rice balls that we ate with members who had participated in the parade. The next day, I asked my wife if she had enjoyed the parade. "Yes," she responded, "it was fun, but everyone was too nice. I didn't know exactly how to respond and sometimes I felt a bit uncomfortable." She then emphasized her reasoning, "They were all so friendly, so it's a good thing, but I

couldn't simply enjoy myself.”

There is a lot to analyze in why my wife could not simply enjoy herself with RK at the festival, but for now, suffice it to say that I think that Hachi-san's insight is correct. Relationlessness can entail a lack of coordination between givers and receivers of kindness, as it did at the parade. Or, as in the case of people on a train, it can also entail a perceived inability to do things that one wants to do despite knowing that those things, like giving up a seat, are possible. Either way, there is a relationship between people that pushes them away from each other and, to some degree, makes them feel somehow inadequate or rejected.

In chapters one and two, I offer a detailed analysis of relationlessness in RK's relations and the development of compassion as an ethical imperative in Japan. Here, I would like to point out the ease with which Hachi-san called upon the concept of the relationless society to explain large-scale problems like RK's diminishing membership and problems that arise in interactions between individuals. While Hachi-san is certainly a learned, highly intelligent person and a keen social theorist, he is not an academic or a social scientist. His ability to employ the concept of relationlessness and to place specific relations into a category of “relationless” points to the social salience and pervasiveness of the category itself.

Knowledge of the “relationless society” was first spread by a television special aired on NHK, Japan's national broadcasting company, in 2010. The

special was about the increasing number of “lonely deaths” — sometimes unidentifiable people who die alone and whose corpses are undiscovered for long periods of time — and suicides in Japan. The producers stumbled upon the phrase “relationless society,” which plays off an old Buddhist term for “disconnected (and uncared for) spirits” (*muenbotoke*) and sounded catchy (Muenshakai Purojekuto Shuzaihan NHK 2012).¹⁸ However, Hachi-san’s comment is an example of how the referent of the phrase and the types of relations that fall under the social category of “relationless” have broadened in popular use. I have heard it uttered by people ranging from social scientists to housewives contemplating their children’s futures and hospice workers who care for people whose earthly futures have already played out. And when I talk about “the relationlessness of contemporary society” (*gendai shakai no muensei*) with various people — not only scholars and religious professionals, but also snowboarders and bartenders, for example — it generally clicks and triggers long discussions about loneliness, changes in the family, and social malaise. In one conversation about relationlessness that I was having with a group of IT engineers, one of them even went so far as to remark, “Amazing. In a way, that [relationlessness] really captures the heart of Japan right now.”

The degree to which such a wide variety of my Japanese interlocutors are

¹⁸ Many *muenbotoke* in contemporary Japan were homeless before passing away. How to take care of those *muenbotoke* has itself become an issue of social concern (see Kim 2016).

able to recognize and feel relationlessness in their own lives suggests that it is not merely a psychological phenomenon. Nor is it limited to cases of maladaptation to an otherwise smoothly-functioning system. As Bertell Ollman has argued in his reading of Marx's concept of alienation, "the categories of ... society 'serve as the expression of its conditions and the comprehension of its own organization'. That is to say, they express the real conditions necessary for their application, but as meaningful, systematized and understood conditions" (1976: 12). In other words, relationlessness is a constitutive part of society that also reflects society, an immanent category. It is a way that people grasp the conditions in which they live. For an analyst, then, it is a useful way to critically approach something so general as "society" without resorting to empty speculative or ideal categories.

When I presented this argument to colleagues during a seminar at the University of Tokyo, one student meekly asked, "Is what you are talking about unique to Japan?" I did not hear the question at first, so Satoko Fujiwara, one of the professors in attendance, jumped in, "No. He is looking at contemporary society as it can be seen in the works of religious groups in Japan." As usual, she was exactly right.

"Relationlessness" is not an immanent category only in Japan, even if the word itself does not roll off the tongue in English. Recently, Rahel Jaeggi defined alienation as "a relation of relationlessness" (2014: 1). She continues, writing, "alienation does not indicate the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, if a

deficient one” (ibid.). I can think of no better description of the particular sense of relationlessness felt by Mr. Umibe, who is respected, trusted, and depended upon but feels isolated. A “relation of relationlessness” also aptly captures some aspects of RK’s efforts to organize in a way that allows them to alleviate other people’s suffering, but which winds up taking so much effort that it pushes some people away. After all, without a relation there is no effort, attraction, repulsion, or, ironically, a sense of being unable to meaningfully connect.

As in the case of either Mr. Umibe and his volunteer center or RK, which is a bigger social unit consisting of several million members, the particular relations that make people feel separate or isolated from each other need not be primordial or timeless aspects of human nature. In other words, alienation should not be considered to be a secularized version of the biblical “fall from grace” or a loss of something basic to human existence (see Yinger 1973).¹⁹ Nor should contemporary relationlessness be considered the breakdown of a formerly stable set of relations in Japan, even though such an imagination is a part of Japanese discourse on the “relationless society” (Nozawa 2015).

It is perhaps easy to believe that Japan was formerly a place where

¹⁹ For the theological history of the concept of alienation, see Lichtheim 1968. Ironically, some earlier uses of the Marxian notion of alienation, such as István Mészáros’ (2005[1970]) work on the subject, present religion as a particular historical mode of alienation. Arguably, such work started before Marx, with Feuerbach’s (2008[1841]) *The Essence of Christianity* and Marx does at times makes statements that support such a view. My work does not take this perspective, except insofar as “religion” *per se* as currently practiced in Japan can be alienated from the practices of particular religious traditions, which I argue in detail in chapters three and four.

everyone felt a strong sense of belonging, especially during its long post-WWII period of economic growth lasting until the early 1990s. However, that sense of belonging, which came with lifetime employment and the imagined thriving of the atomic family, was limited to only a portion of the population. While access to such “dream” employment since the 1990s has certainly been more limited than it was in the 1960s and 70s, social stratification and inequality did not start with the collapse of the bubble economy. Even if we limit our analysis to the post-war period, the ability to identify with a “mainstream” or “middle-class consciousness” (*chūryū ishiki*) until the 1990s “took place in spite of, and not in terms of, objective differentials that sociologists and economists continued to recognize and register as those of social class” (Kelly 2002: 234; see also Gordon 2002). For example, nearly twenty percent of the workforce was not regularly employed even at the peak of the bubble economy, meaning that the “dream of stable employment” was already not realized by many in the 1980s, which other analysts have shown to be a period of increasing social inequality, though the reasons for that inequality are a matter of contention (Tachibanaki 1998; Ōtake 2005; Ishida and Slater 2010). Moreover, if we take “stable employment” to mean salaried, white-collar labor, this “dream” was only realized by approximately thirty percent of working men and approximately five to ten percent of working women at any point in post-war Japan.

Even for the portion of the population for whom post-WWII economic

prosperity brought material comfort and relative stability, work and family came with their own problems. For example, many people were overworked and suicide rates rose slowly but steadily from 1965 to 1985, particularly among males. Gender relations were strained and the birthrate fell below the 2.08 births per female necessary to replenish the population. The latter happened not with the spread of neoliberalism or the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in 1992, but rather in 1974, near the height of Japan's economic growth and prosperity.²⁰

In other words, the forms of social belonging that are thought to be the opposite of alienation are both cause and, as imagination, effect of contemporary relationlessness. The ways that forms of social belonging such as communities and organized religions cause relationlessness can only be seen if alienation is analyzed as a process. Jaeggi has provided, in her own words, a wonderful "formal account" (1) of processes of alienation: ways in which people become separated from the selves, others, and worlds that they strive to produce. In

²⁰ An enormous amount of scholarship has looked at neoliberalism and its largely harmful affects. I mention the word several times throughout this dissertation. Here, suffice it to say that by the logic of this theory, the free pursuit of individual interests with minimal state intervention provides the best alternative for maximizing social good through an increase in wealth, efficiency, and overall quality of life as competition drives innovation, which in turn responds to the needs of the market. In theory and practice, this has led to a retraction of the state from the social (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Harvey 2005). Rather than ensuring employment, healthcare, welfare benefits, and other common goods for its citizens, the neoliberal state focuses instead on guaranteeing individual rights and freedoms and facilitating profitable competition. The standards of neoliberal rationality – namely, effectiveness and efficiency as determined by the market – have largely displaced legitimacy and right as the terms by which government is judged. In the words of Foucault (2008), the market has become a "naturalized...site of verification-falsification for governmental practice" (32)

remarkably lucid language, she draws out the conceptual relations between meaning, power, appropriation, and freedom in a way that shows the emancipatory potential of alienation as an analytical concept. But such conceptual or formal definitions mean little if they are not applied and tested against the experienced world from which they have been abstracted. That is, philosophy requires anthropology if it is to fulfill its potential. In turn, there can be no anthropology of alienation without history as alienation is an open-ended, ongoing process.

In a passage elaborating on the definition of alienation as a “relation of relationlessness,” Jaeggi writes that alienation is “a detachment or separation from something that in fact belongs together ... Being alienated from something means having become distanced from something in which one is in fact involved or to which one is in fact related — or in any case ought to be” (25). In this dissertation, I examine the historical formation of different types of relations in different forms, such as RK as a “community” and Mr. Umibe’s volunteer center as “hope.” I do so in order to understand how relations themselves give rise to separation. In other words, I look at how social forms come together, the differences that those forms obscure and produce, and the tensions that arise in trying to hold a form together in the face of differences produced by that very form. This is the only way to understand why relations remain despite detachments and, conversely, why forms do not keep reproducing themselves. It is also the only way to explain alienation

without engaging in a practice of alienation by positing some external, greater power such as “society,” “modernity,” or “neoliberalism” as a *Sui generis* actor separate from people’s practices and social change.

Alienation 2: Compassion

As any of my Buddhist friends at RK could tell you, people have attachments that they are loath to give up. When things are changing, attachment can cause suffering because it entails a feeling of loss or yearning that cannot be fulfilled. That sense can be more intense when it feels like it should be possible to reconnect with the thing imagined to be lost. Members of RK explicitly expressed that sense of loss and possibility when talking about their own organization. Many of them, from people in their twenties to those in their late eighties, told me that they “no longer felt the joy of membership, the joy of the Buddha’s law (*hō no yorokobi*).” Losing that joy meant different things for people of different ages. Younger members who felt that way tended to tell me how belonging to RK had “started to feel like work,” whereas older members reflected more on what had been lost than what they were currently feeling. For example, when I asked her to flesh out what she meant by “not feeling the joy” of belonging to RK, Mrs. Hikari, a member in her late seventies, reflected for a moment and responded, “We used to ride our bikes through the neighborhood. We would stop by everyone’s house to try to spread the teachings of the Buddha. It was so much fun! And we would stop and have a rice ball or something small for lunch together. We still visit members’ houses, but we don’t ride our bikes anymore and we don’t try to spread the faith in

the same way. ... It's not completely impossible, though. We could do it again.”

For Mrs. Hikari, the possibility of having fun again, which echoed the possibility of doing something nice that Hachi-san talked about, was a part of her frustration that things were not going well for RK at the time. She could not understand exactly why the head minister at her dharma center (church) did not encourage people to proselytize more aggressively. By chance, that very minister had told me about another member who had a similar complaint and was putting pressure on him to spread the teachings. He wanted to, but felt that “things aren't like they used to be. She has seen those proselytization methods work, so she knows they can, but they wouldn't right now. If you approach people so directly or are pushy they pull back. The best way is to help people and to build up community while being open to new relationships. It's a real challenge, but we are trying things. The government asked us to make this dharma center an evacuation spot during disaster, and we are going to have a mini-festival out front that is open to anyone who wants to come, not just to members of RK.”

RK has taken up the challenge of spreading the joy of the faith in a wide variety of ways, all of which build on lasting relationships that they have built up quietly and steadily over the years with local governments, NPOs and NGOs, and other religious organizations in Japan and abroad. They are all also based on compassion (*jih*), which means that they are about voluntarily sharing suffering in order to alleviate it. That compassion takes many forms, including, for example, an

interfaith chaplaincy program funded partially by RK, which I look at in chapters three and four, volunteer activities in disaster areas, which I explore in chapter five, and Mr. Umibe's volunteer center, "Hope," which I revisit in chapter six. But as I mentioned earlier, these new types of compassionate relations, while certainly helping some people alleviate suffering, also sometimes create suffering and have not led to a revitalization of RK. Often, these new projects even appear to conflict with older ways of connecting people to each other. After all, Mrs. Hikari would not be able to ride her bike the 350 or so miles between her home and Kamaishi, where RK sent many of its volunteers, and Mr. Umibe's center does not bring RK any new members, even though it makes them some new friends.

No one that I know in Japan or the U.S. would say that compassion *per se* holds together families, businesses, or local communities, which tend to be associated with relations like obligation, shared interests, reciprocity, and, sometimes, love. Nonetheless, compassion is not usually thought of as conflicting with stable, long-term relationships or forms of social belonging as it seems to be in the cases that I present in this dissertation. On the contrary, like members of RK do, people tend to think of compassion as reinforcing or creating social relations in general.

One long-term form of belonging that compassion does not seem to interfere with is the nation-state, even if that form of belonging does not necessarily provide for compassionate people or the recipients of their

compassion. In other words, compassion can contribute to a form of social belonging that is, to some degree, alienated from compassionate work. For example, much of RK's compassionate work and the work of people whose projects they fund could be accurately described as a part of what Jennifer Robertson (2012) has described as a new "culture of volunteering" and "donating" (*kifu suru*) in Japan.²¹ As she argues, there has been much volunteer activity since the 2011 earthquake and tsunami — though not as much as after the 1995 Hanshin Earthquake— and some of that volunteering has allowed local governments to cut back on social welfare and spending related to recovery efforts.²² The costs that are passed on to RK hurt, as they have fewer members overall and the aged members living on social security cannot donate as much as they used to. Participating in Japan's government-pushed and sponsored "culture of volunteering" directly and significantly challenges RK's future even while lending substance to the imagined community that is the nation-state²³ — a dynamic that I address in more detail in chapter two.

This distribution of unremunerated, caring labor and the imagination,

²¹ Robertson has translated this a culture of "giving," but "giving" does not capture the difference between "*kifu suru*," which is donation, and gift giving, for example. For more on civil society in relation to volunteering and various types of giving in Japan, see Avenell 2010a and Ogawa 2009.

²² Cuts to social welfare have been taking place since the late 1970s and accelerated in the 80s during the neoliberal Nakasone administration, which worked to privatize public industries, deregulate trade and land use, and decrease social security spending (see Igami 2005; Itoh 2005). For more on neoliberalism in Japan, see Reitan 2012; Sakai and Iwanaga 2011.

²³ This conceptualization of the nation-state comes from Benedict Anderson's (2006) work *Imagined Communities*

whereby compassion is extended to the downtrodden but in some ways serves vested interests, is not unique to Japan. For example, Andrea Muehlebach (2012) has argued that in Italy, volunteer “relational labor” allows the government to retract from the social. Catholic institutions and deep feelings of dissatisfaction with market capitalism and the breakdown of twentieth-century welfarism have combined to create a new sense of citizenship that is based on compassionate volunteering. There, as in Japan, that compassion is often thought of as being beyond the reaches of (neoliberal) capitalism, but actually winds up supporting it by giving a sense of purpose to cheap or completely unremunerated labor and by maintaining a sense of community that allows people to endure their precarity. In other words, compassion ironically serves as the glue holding together a society that renders its members so precarious that it reproduces a need for compassion.

Similarly, in the United States, Lauren Berlant (2004) has pointed out that “compassionate conservatism,” a catchphrase describing a political platform of the Republican Party in the 2000s, changed the target of compassion. It expressed its compassion by having working people pay less taxes, which are an obligatory contribution to a collective, if fragmented, whole. This, in turn, ideally allowed people to connect in more voluntary ways. Faith and charity, both seen as voluntary and, therefore, meaningful, became the paradigm for compassion rather than a social safety-net. Rather than structurally disadvantaged people struggling through poverty, then, the state focused its compassion on people with jobs. As

Berlant puts it, “By insisting that society’s poorest members can achieve the good life through work, family, community participation, and faith, compassionate conservatives rephrase the embodied indignities of structural inequality as opportunities for individuals to reach out to each other, to build concrete human relations” (3-4).

Of course, compassion is not always conservative in nature, and even when it is, it can be an important part of creative social movements. Just as in the United States and Italy, compassion and “affective ties” (*kizuna*) have served as the basis for conservative political projects in Japan. As Morris-Suzuki (2017) points out, affective ties started to become a keyword in Japanese politics in 2006. In that year, Tanigaki Sadakazu, a candidate for leadership of Japan’s right-leaning Liberal Democratic Party, made the case that strengthening the bonds of the family, community, and nation had to be an integral part of Japan’s economic liberalization (Morris-Suzuki: 181). In other words, compassion would be the glue holding together a society threatened by economic rationality and inequality, thus allowing for an intensification of the policies that caused some of that inequality in the first place. In turn, inequality and the effort to simultaneously sustain and overcome the economic and social policies that exacerbate it foment social change.

For example, changes in the tax code in 1998 and 2011 that made it easier for individuals and corporations to write off donations have helped sustain various

social projects run by Japanese NGOs and NPOs, particularly in disaster-stricken regions. Those projects aim to alleviate the worst effects of poverty. Some of them seek to create broad social changes that appear to be at odds with conservative images of the government and community. Most notable in this regard are perhaps the many ongoing efforts to stop power plants and figure out ways to minimize the harm done to people who have neither the means nor the desire to move away from contaminated areas. Many of those groups have taken an explicit stance against the Japanese government and the capitalist pursuit of economic value at the expense of human life. As Vivian Shaw (2017) has argued, some of the activism associated with the more radical of those groups even goes so far as to present an alternative vision of the nation that is based on “living together,” which entails “obligation, mutual protection, and struggle” (73).

I do not at all deny that those activists are producing something that is, to some degree, new. However, “obligation, mutual protection, and struggle” have long been aspects of local Japanese communities. In a way, then, even radical efforts to produce something new hearken upon familiar affective aspects of community formation. And, as in the case of Umibe, compassionate attempts to establish community by struggling together can produce, rather than overcome, relations of relationlessness. Tellingly, when writing of an ethnically Japanese activist voluntarily working with minorities, Shaw notes that “it is the very attempts to subvert ... order that exacerbates the affective load shouldered by activists ...

while also producing feelings of isolation. ... Such activities carry the likelihood of surveillance, if not also a proximity to social and financial precarity” (72).

It seems, then, that compassion — voluntarily struggling together in order to alleviate suffering — is imagined to be a way to hold people and communities together. It can be invoked in service of old or new kinds of community since it is a means to achieving that community rather than a specific form of community. In that sense, right-leaning politicians, neutral religious practitioners like Mr. Umibe, and radical activists are the same as Mrs. Hikari, who felt that RK could bring back the joy of belonging. They are also like the head minister at her dharma center, who was “trying new things,” and Hachi-san, who felt that people could connect if only they could figure out how to give up their seats on trains. Despite differences among them, which could loosely be called “conservative” or “progressive,” each of these people felt that compassion could tie people together. However, the notion that compassion creates social relations in general obscures the ways that it can also work as a social solvent, as it partially did for the activist attempting to subvert order and for Mr. Umibe, who is trying to create order out of relative chaos.

In other words, popular discourse on compassion suggests that people have an attachment to attachment, which makes it difficult to see how bonds between people could push them apart. That is, a focus on connection *per se* and compassion as a way of connecting directs attention away from the forms that connection takes. Without considering those forms, it is difficult to see how and

why compassion isolates people just as easily as it brings them together.

Alienation 3: Liberal secularism

When scholars write about “social forms” such as “the atomic family” or “religious organizations” like RK, they generally define them in terms of reproduction. In chapter one, I argue that forms also break down relationships and can even self-destruct. Either way, it is necessary to look at the relations that forms emerge from and that they influence if we do not wish to simply repeat popular imaginations of what those forms are in the first place. To explore forms of compassion, then, it is important to look at what people are connecting to when they are trying to be compassionate. Logically, if compassion is a voluntary sharing of suffering in order to reduce it, then people need to connect with suffering in order to be compassionate.

In theory, that suffering could be anywhere. Plenty of people suffer, experiencing pain mixed with an unfulfilled desire for something else. It would seem, then, that people could be compassionate at almost any time and any place. Some are, but in practice, compassion tends to be invoked when suffering is distant.²⁴ For example, Mr. Umibe, like many other people, left the city where he was from in order to help people in Northeastern Japan after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. Many compassionate members of RK, such as Mr. Gonda, have done the same, albeit for shorter periods of time. And, as I discuss in chapter two,

²⁴ This has been a topic of much academic discussion, much of it related to humanitarianism. See, for example, Barnett 2011; Boltanski 1999; Fassin and Rechtman 2009.

RK has long practiced compassion in parts of Africa, parts of Asia formerly colonized by Japan, and the Middle-East.

While hierarchical, compassion does not always separate people from each other. The limits to the ways that compassion can separate people become particularly clear when acts of compassion are looked at individually — when distant suffering is engaged up-close and personal. For example, on one of my trips to Kamaishi with volunteers from RK, I had the privilege of staying with Mr. Intai, a man in his sixties who had just retired after working for the same company for many years. Volunteering gave him a sense of purpose and made him feel like a good citizen.²⁵ In his words, “Since retiring, I don’t know what to do with myself every day. I want to make myself useful [to other people]. Thankfully, I also have time now, so I was able to come here as a volunteer.”

Mr. Intai was popular among the older women in the temporary housing units and a pleasure to volunteer with. He did get tired over the several days he was in Kamaishi, but it is not that very slight compassion fatigue that I am interested in here. Rather, what I would like to point out is that he came all the way to Kamaishi to make himself useful instead of, say, cooking food every day for his wife. When I asked why he wanted to help strangers who lived far away from him, he responded, “I never even thought about that. Of course I want to help here.

²⁵ This, too, is similar to many of the elderly people observed by Muehlebach (2012) in her research. It is also similar to the NGO workers interviewed by Liisa Malkki (2015), who did humanitarian work out of their own deep need to feel connected to other people.

They are in a really tough situation. I can't do much, but I want to help as much as possible.”

I discuss such short-term volunteering in more detail in chapter five, but for now, suffice it to say that Mr. Intai felt more connected to RK and the people of Northeastern Japan after his visit than he did before it. Like I wrote in the prologue, he escaped from his daily life to find meaning. In his interactions with the older women living in the temporary housing units, the hierarchy that brought him to Kamaishi in the first place was partially inverted. Mr. Intai was still the one with a house and a happy, healthy family, but in the temporary housing units, he was the one being helped. Interspersed between small talk and giggles, the women there obligingly shared their pain with him in the form of stories. That is, they let him be compassionate and, in so doing, made him feel meaningful.

In a way, Mr. Intai's experience is a personal example of what Muehlebach argued — namely, that compassion cleans up after capitalism so that capitalism can keep extracting everything that it can from people. Mr. Intai did not know what to do with himself after retiring. He did not want to lounge around. Rather, he wanted to be useful, a desire that he felt came from RK's teachings and from his many years of work. In coming to Kamaishi, he was able to do just that by providing a social service that neither the government nor a profit-seeking corporation paid for. His service made him feel good about himself and his expenditure of feelings, time, and the money it took to get to and stay in Kamaishi.

Not all of the money that it took to get Mr. Intai to Kamaishi was his own. A portion of his expenses were covered by the RK dharma center (church) to which he belongs. In a less direct way, his trip was also funded by RK's centralized headquarters, which has donated millions of dollars to recovery efforts in Northeastern Japan, including large amounts to the local welfare council in Kamaishi that facilitated RK's continued presence there. They also maintained staff to accompany and train volunteers, attend meetings at the welfare council, schedule times for activities at various temporary housing complexes, visit the local dharma center in Kamaishi, and maintain the house where all of RK's volunteers to the city stayed. Always considerate of their members, RK also provides counseling sessions for people who volunteer in the disaster areas to ensure their emotional well-being. In other words, getting Mr. Intai to Kamaishi cost a lot more time, emotional and logistic labor, and money than just his train tickets.

As is often the case for religious groups' social work in Japan, the returns to RK for their compassionate expenditure were quite low. They were not allowed to proselytize at the temporary housing complexes lest they be forbidden entry, something I explain in more detail in chapters three through five. Members were also instructed not to exchange contact information with the people that they met during their volunteer activities — a prohibition that the welfare councils and some of the people managing the meeting rooms at the housing complexes likely placed

on religious groups when they first started coming to volunteer, though no one could remember exactly who started it. Moreover, whereas some long-term volunteer programs charge nominal fees for participation, RK did not. They probably would not have been able to even if they wanted to since their volunteers, while often good listeners, did not usually offer specialized events, such as exercise classes or traditional arts and crafts, for residents. Regardless, for reasons beyond their full control, RK did not increase their membership or fill their coffers in Kamaishi.

To some extent, then, RK was separated from what they worked to create vis-a-vis their members' volunteer activities. Mr. Intai had a meaningful experience in Kamaishi and the people whose stories he listened to appreciated him coming, but they would not become members of RK and do not know any more about the teachings of RK than they did before the tsunami. As an organization, rather than as a collection of individuals, what RK has gained from their activities is a degree of social legitimacy.

For example, when I later asked some of the women living in the housing that Mr. Intai had visited how they felt about RK, they agreed that, "At first we didn't even know what group was doing what. But it's been five years now and RK still comes. They don't come as much as they used to, but they still come. ... We are really thankful [for that]." Similarly, an employee of the welfare council told me, "At first I was a bit suspicious about religious groups coming here. I didn't know

what they really wanted. But they haven't tried to convert anyone and they keep coming. And people seem to like them, so it's ok [that RK is here]." In other words, continuing to use resources without asking for anything in return was a condition of possibility for RK's gaining trust or, at least, ceasing to be suspicious.

Selfless compassion is a key tenet of RK's practice. To be able to help people in Kamaishi without asking anything in return gives them pleasure, partially because doing so is a practical actualization of their goal-oriented religious teachings. For volunteering members and RK's leaders alike, voluntarily sharing suffering with survivors of the tsunami helps to keep "the joy of Buddha's law" alive. However, the cost of such compassion is unsustainable. Leaders of RK frequently debate whether to continue projects like the one in Kamaishi, which had been reduced greatly the last time I visited with RK in 2018.

Unlike profit-seeking corporations, then, RK is in a position where their success comes at their expense. In order to bring joy to members, RK must sometimes forego benefitting itself as an organization. However, if RK ceases to exist — which some of its leaders think is a real possibility — then members will find it much more difficult to participate in compassionate activities like the one that Mr. Intai did. This conundrum means that they experience a conflict between the perpetuation of RK as a collective entity and of the activities that make RK worth perpetuating. Their current relations with other organizations, such as the welfare council and other groups in Kamaishi, threaten to create relationless-ness in the

relatively near future. In more general terms, to some degree, the success of the organization is in conflict with the joy of members, and meaningful short-term relations come at the cost of RK's long-term viability.

This is an important way that the legal and social separation of church and state works to delimit something called "religion" and, based on that category, limit particular religions' political and economic influence in Japan. In chapters three and four I discuss how such secularism produces what Talal Asad (2003) and others have called "the secular," "a variety of concepts, sensibilities, and practices" that undergird and are strengthened by secularism (16). For now, suffice it to say that a co-constituting yet destructive relationship between compassion and alienation produces the positive category of "religion," which prevents members of RK from talking about their faith or trying to spiritually save people through the Buddha's teaching while volunteering, for example. And as the cases of RK and Mr. Umibe clearly show, working as a representative of "religion" can strain particular religious traditions' ability to enact their ideals in the present without potentially vitiating their respective futures in various ways.

In other words, compassion is indeed a social glue of sorts, but it can bind people to systems that do not serve them. In this dissertation, I show how it motivates religious organizations to form something called "religion" in order to gain social legitimacy. The form of "religion" that they contribute to is an alienated one, meaning that it is based on and creates relations of relationlessness. In

practical terms, that means that the category of religion depletes resources from particular religions like RK, which compassionately sends volunteers to Kamaishi to do anything but proselytize or sustain RK's long-term operations.

Ironically, such seemingly altruistic expenditure has generated positive attention for religion *per se* in Japan while vitiating particular religious traditions to some extent. For example, a series of books on "religion and social capital," which I quoted from above, came out in 2012-2013 and some prominent newspapers and television channels have publicized stories about social work carried out by religious professionals, something that some of my religious friends have accurately told me was unthinkable thirty years ago in Japan. Many of those stories celebrate Buddhist priests whose personal sacrifices have left them exhausted and with temples in financial dire straits. Those priests, like RK as a collective whole, are tied by compassion to a form of religion that simultaneously validates and threatens their very existence.

Method and outline

In Japan, like in the United States, compassion is often presented as the solution to a range of social problems ranging from loneliness and depression to various forms of social inequality. However, as I have argued, compassion can sometimes drive people apart from each other and contribute to the demise of institutions of belonging such as organized religions. A recognition of such a complicated relationship between relationlessness and compassion was a part of

Hachi-san's insight that "It's not that people don't want to do good things for each other, it's that they don't know how to do that. There is no structure that lets them be kind to each other without a lot of sacrifice on their own part. They don't want to make all of the effort to join RK. They feel that is difficult and it is strange to them."

The gap that Hachi-san noticed and that I have expounded upon is one way that Rahel Jaeggi (2018) defines a "problem" in her book *Critique of Forms of Life*. She writes, "A problem is ... an obstacle to be overcome that is presented for solution. A problem arises when certain courses of action falter, when interpretations go wrong, when our actions and desires no longer meet with success, or when what we thought we understood turns out to be incomprehensible or inconsistent" (134). As in the case of RK or Japan's "relationless society" more generally, Jaeggi argues, "When dealing with problems in the sense of tasks, forms of life always encounter problems in the sense of difficulties" (135).

This book is organized around tasks and difficulties faced by religious people in Japan who are trying to meaningfully connect with other people but have difficulty doing so. In it, I follow the flow of compassion as it moves from RK's headquarters in Tokyo all the way to Kamaishi. There were three major stops on my journey, each of which composes a section of this book. The first stop was RK's headquarters in Tokyo and several of their dharma centers, the second was a chaplaincy training program where people learn listening techniques for

engaging suffering people, and the third was Kamaishi, where some of the listening techniques taught at the training program were put into practice.

I followed compassion as it transformed from a sense of community in RK to a sense of hope in Mr. Umibe's volunteer center in Kamaishi. I did so as an attempt to shed light on the form of life — that is, the sociocultural organization of human activity — that has created the relations of relationlessness shared by Mr. Umibe and RK. Here, as in my many conversations with my friends and interlocutors in Japan, I recount my journey and the way of life that I saw in that journey critically — after all, if I were not critical, I would not be able to tell my friends anything that they did not already know about their own situation. That is, I would be unable to influence the interpretation of the conditions by which relationlessness came into being. As interpretation is an integral part of the way that we live our lives, an inability to influence it would be an inability to contribute to anything but an academic discussion. In other words, I would be a rather poor interlocutor to my friends in Japan.

Constructing such a critique based on a careful consideration of evidence is no small task. After all, the people who populate this book know more about their own lives than I do. And just like in the United States, most (but not all) of them start to nod off (albeit with a smile on their face) if I talk at length about Marx or Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semeiotics. Moreover, my ability to move among the three primary sites that make up this book was not sufficient to say

something interesting to the people I met who were working to alleviate the suffering of others. In my case, some of my interlocutors were just as mobile as I was, moving between Tokyo and Kamaishi on a regular basis as a part of their work and, in some cases, their personal lives. Finally, none of my interlocutors, who included brilliant professors running the chaplaincy program and Ph.D.-holding leaders of a religion with millions of members worldwide, was an automaton reduced to purely instrumental thinking. They were, for the most part, highly self-critical and able to think about their work from multiple perspectives. Their breadth of thought meant that my relative lack of vested interest in their projects — my livelihood relies on this dissertation rather than on the alleviation of suffering in Japan — was also an insufficient source of insight.

Mobility and a different orientation toward the world alone were insufficient to create meaningful critique, but they were perhaps necessary. They allowed me to adhere to a method of critique that accepts nothing as given and exempts nothing from some degree of complicity in making social problems such as relationlessness. Simply stated, my method consisted primarily of a refusal to separate causes and effects or, to use Jaeggi's words, problems and solutions. After all, as she argues, the identification and framing of a problem imposes limits on its possible solutions. And the persistence of problems means that those solutions are, at the least, missing out on something, often because they arise from the same social and epistemological framework as the problem itself. In my

case, that meant rejecting explanations of relationlessness based on a lack of compassion, an empathy deficit, or unfair distributions of hope — all of which are as common in Japan as they are in the United States.

My view, based on what Bertell Ollman (2003) has called the “interpenetration of opposites,” was neither *a priori* nor simply a matter of empirical fact. Rather, it came from my interpretation of Mr. Umibe’s and RK’s conundrum. Namely, that framing social problems as “relationlessness” suggested compassion as a solution, but practicing compassion isolated them and threatened their long-term existence. In turn, the way that alienation and compassion produced each other created the contradiction that they and the chaplains that I discuss in part two faced: practicing compassion simultaneously validated and threatened their existence as religious professionals.

Rather than suggesting that alienation and compassion are always and necessarily co-producing, which would ignore the example of Mr. Intai’s meaningful experience in Kamaishi and others like it, I looked at how such a contradictory relationship came into being.²⁶ In part one, I propose a history of RK that shows how alienation and compassion came into relation with each other.

²⁶ As Ollman puts it, “The notion of the interpenetration of opposites helps Marx to understand that nothing—no event, institution, person or process—is simply and solely what it seems to be at a particular place and time, that is situated within a certain set of conditions. Viewed in another way, or by other people or viewing them under drastically changed conditions may produce not only a different but the exact opposite conclusion or effect” (2003: 16). Readers more familiar with texts within the discipline of anthropology narrowly defined will find a similar argument in Nancy Munn’s (1986) discussion of the expansion of social spacetime and its negation in witchcraft in Gawa.

Chapter one explores the development of RK as a community and the difficulty of maintaining the organization internally. Chapter two looks at roughly the same timespan as chapter one, but it focuses on the social reasons for RK's emphasis on compassion for others and the difficulty of showing that compassion. Together, these chapters show the development of the problem of relationlessness in existing relations.

Part two interrogates proposed solutions to that problem and looks more closely at the formation of the category of "religion" in contemporary Japan. The setting of this portion of the dissertation is a training program for interfaith chaplains that was conducted at Tohoku University, a prestigious national university located in the region where the 2011 tsunami and earthquake struck. As of 2018, seventeen members of RK had taken the course, which was also partially funded by RK and the World Conference of Religions for Peace, which is headquartered within RK's main offices and staffed by many members of RK.

Compassion looked different at the chaplaincy course than it did at RK. It took the form of "active listening" (*keichō*), a technique used widely in the disaster-stricken areas of Japan. In chapter three, I show how and why chaplains' engagement with suffering in public spaces after the 2011 disasters led them to create a generalized form of religion that is at odds with particular religious traditions. The chapter also provides a history of institutionalized Buddhist engagements with suffering that differs greatly from RK's history. Those histories

nonetheless come together in the form of religion that tries to solve the problem of a relationless society. Chapter four takes a closer look at the practice of active listening itself. In it, I argue that listening to people to share their suffering renders the listener a universalized “human” separated from the institutions that raised and supported them, thus creating a sense of self-alienation in order to alleviate another person’s suffering. Together, these chapters show how uniting compassion as listening with suffering culminates in a form of religion that overcomes religions, as when RK bolsters the social legitimacy of religion in general through compassionate activities that ironically vitiate RK. That, in turn, leads to a situation in which religious professionals must suppress signs of their own respective religions in order to actualize compassion. In other words, the formation of the general category of religion leads to another expression of the contradiction of compassion, whereby compassion allows religious people to validate their existence but threatens it at the same time.

Part three brings parts one and two together. It takes place in Kamaishi, where listening techniques are used by RK’s volunteers and Mr. Umibe to try to create community and hope in a disaster-stricken city. Chapter five looks at the listening as a way to empathize. Sharing suffering hurts. This chapter shows who shares pain with whom and the ways that sharing pushes some people apart while bringing others together. Chapter six looks at how space and time are transformed in such compassionate practices in order to create a form of hope that is based on

safe spaces in Kamaishi but visions of the future in Tokyo. Those two aspects of hope conflict with each other in ways that challenge Mr. Umibe's volunteer center's ability to continue its operations. This section, then, shows not only how compassion looks very different in Kamaishi than it does in either Tokyo or the training program, but also that it is internally conflicted, undermining efforts that people make to connect to each other even while bringing them into contact with each other.

Collectively, these sections show that each of the proposed solutions to relationlessness — compassion as community, charity and volunteerism, listening, empathy, and hope — were also a cause of it. To look at one as independent of the other is to obscure the organization of social activity that brings them together in the first place. The popular notion of relationlessness captures an important aspect of that social organization, but it does so in a way that ignores a broader whole. That is, it isolates relationlessness as the problem to be addressed rather than the form of life that the problem developed as a part of. The interpenetration of the apparent opposites that are alienation and compassion composes that form of life. Rather than give it a name — it has several — let me show you what it looks like.

Part I

Chapter 1: Forming community

The woman, now in her 80s and a leader in her dharma center (church), lamented, “We always used to know how much rice our neighbors had. If they didn’t have enough, we’d give them some. Well, we would give them some if we had enough for ourselves, but there’s nothing like that now.” Using an English loan word that stood out against the Japanese, she continued, “There’s no community anymore” (*mō, komyuniti ga nai*).

I had heard the same lament countless times before from members of Rissho Kosei-kai (RK). The woman’s comment about not knowing how much rice neighbors had at any given time and RK’s broader reflections on the weakening of “community” were not unique. They echoed prescriptive papers by Japanese scholars (Shimazono et al. 2012; Tachibanaki 2011), essays written by reporters (Asahi 2012; NHK 2012), and, occasionally, diatribes from politicians who saw community and “affective bonds” (*kizuna*) as a corrective to contemporary forms of “individualism,” anomie, and alienation.

Of course, praise for community and concern regarding its demise is not unique to Japan either. For example, in his 1976 book *Keywords* Raymond Williams argued that the word “community ... seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing ... term” (2014[1976]: 76). Indeed, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels, after drawing a distinction between illusory and real community, oppose the latter to particular class interests and claim that “only within the community has each individual the means of cultivating

his [sic] gifts in all directions” (1998: 86). Elsewhere, Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, wrote that “the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits” is the basis for the concept of reality (1992: 52, capitalization in the original) and is opposed to “subjectivism,” individualized risk, and selfishness. More recently, to use some examples from anthropology, James Holston has described the city as the “primary political *community*” (2008: 23, emphasis added) through which people demand equal rights, and David Graeber, describing the goal of his political project, has written that “temporary bubbles of autonomy must gradually turn into permanent, free *communities*” (2009: 239, emphasis added).

So, putting aside differences in what each of the above people means by “community,” perhaps Williams was right when he said that the word “community” seems not to have any positive opposing terms. However, conceptual or logical terms, including “community,” have limits. For example, in practice, communities sometimes oppose each other, even when they share the same members. Additionally, depending on the commitments demanded by a community, communities can become opposed to friends and family – two “terms” that tend to be positively evaluated. In opposing friends and family, communities can ironically create isolated individuals in addition to sometimes providing a sense of belonging. In a broader sense, the work to produce and maintain general abstractions – such as “communities” – can eventually undermine the ability of

those generals to thrive. In other words, sometimes communities alienate people from the types of relations that are often thought to sustain a community, such as friends and family. That potentially self-destructive aspect of community presented a conundrum for RK. That conundrum was poignantly expressed by members like the woman above, who felt that there is “no community anymore” among members of RK despite being surrounded by fellow members in a dharma center (church) nearly every day.

RK was founded in Tokyo in 1938 as a way for people to connect with each other during a time of displacement caused by urbanization and war. They emphasized ancestor worship and the teachings of the Lotus Sutra as practical ways to improve oneself and to solve all of life’s problems. Their approach worked, particularly after Japan’s loss in WWII. While the early postwar period is sometimes called a “boom” time for religious growth or, in McFarland’s (1967; see also Takagi 1959; Thomsen 1963) formulation, a “rush hour of the gods,” RK was particularly successful. Their membership more than doubled in size for five consecutive years after the war, and the group had more than 400,000 members by the end of the 1950s. In the words of Morioka Kiyomi, a prominent Japanese sociologist who has researched RK extensively and participated in the writing of their official history, “RK existed before the war and was active during the war ... so they were able to use the *anomie* after the loss of the war as an opportunity to actively proselytize. Their teaching of ancestor worship in particular appealed to

people who no longer had any core identity [or home] to return to after the war” (1989: 36; see also Inoue et al. 1994; Kisala 1999; Stalker 2007).

Like other new religions in Japan, RK promised members practical benefits such as improvements to health, wealth, and happiness (Guthrie 1988; see also Hardacre 1984; 1986). Unlike more established Buddhist sects or Shinto shrines, who offered practical benefits in exchange for the purchase of talismans and appeasement of deities (Reader and Tanabe 1998), RK’s practical benefits came with the help of a faith community (*sangha*). With more than a little assistance from Japan’s rapid post-war economic and technological development, RK delivered on their promise of practical benefits earned through communal practice. As one member, now in her 70s, told me, “When I joined, everything got better! I got a husband and he got a job. We didn’t get along so well in the beginning, but then RK helped me change my perspective and I was happier. The more responsibility I took with our local district (*shibu*) and the more help I got from the head minister (*kyōkai-chō*) and other members of our faith community, the better things got.” That member’s case was not unusual. At their peak in the 1970s and 80s, RK had approximately 6.5 million members worldwide. By 2012, however, their membership had fallen to half of that, with 3.3 million members, and as of the end of 2017, RK counted approximately two million people as members in their community.

This precipitous fall in membership numbers and the financial difficulties

that come along with it have led RK's leadership to question whether the community will be able to survive another fifteen years. Even head ministers at some dharma centers have begun to think that RK's future might be limited. Over a lunch provided by members, one of those ministers told me, "I can see it. Our membership here is having trouble in some ways. People aren't bringing people in like they used to. The older members know it, too, and they put a bit of pressure on me to grow the dharma center like in the old days, but it's difficult." Half jokingly, he continued, "We might not be able to offer you a nice lunch and tea the next time you come!" Scholars such as Shimada Hiromi, a prolific writer and frequent commentator on religion, agree with them, though Shimada (2017) suggests that "new religions" such as RK may only have ten, rather than fifteen, years left.

The feeling that things might be coming to an end arises from and has influenced members' orientation toward the religious community that is RK. Several members have told me that they "no longer feel the joy of membership" or of "Buddha's law" (*hō no yorokobi*). Others, like the woman mentioned above and my friend Hachi-san, emphasize a lack of intimacy among current members – a lack of intimacy that feels like a lack of community.

Members are aware of that lack. They feel it, are somewhat perturbed by it, and sometimes get together to talk about why things have become this way. Along with many scholars, such as those writing about Japan's relationless society, they

blame the vitiation of their community on a wide variety of causes ranging from “individualism,” “secularism,” and “neoliberalism” to Japan’s “aging society” and other demographic problems such as depopulation of all but the largest cities in Japan.²⁷ Their claims are evidence-based and often stem from personal engagements with aspects of each of those large scale abstractions. Neoliberal economic theory has indeed permeated the upper-echelons of government and policy-making in Japan (Igami 2005; Itoh 2005; Reitan 2012; Sakai and Iwanaga 2011; compare Harvey 2005), and the logic of neoliberalism, including the importance of the self-responsible, efficient individual has become an a more prevalent aspect of work and self-formation in Japan than it previously was (Arai 2013; Inoue 2013; compare Foucault 2008). Additionally, though there is a fair degree of disagreement as to what “secularization” means in Japan, scholars of religion there mostly agree that it has affected Japan, even if secularization is understood simply as a weakening of organized religions.²⁸ They also agree that the fading influence of organized religion — and the projected continuation of its demise — are closely related to demographic shifts that I discuss in chapter three. RK in particular has been facing issues of depopulation, working to redistribute money and knowledgeable social workers from urban areas to depopulated rural ones where elderly members are struggling to maintain their daily lives (Watanabe

²⁷ For a particularly well-argued and researched example of scholarship relating these issues to the continuation of a “new religion,” see Inose 2012.

²⁸ I discuss this in detail in chapter three.

2016).

I do not deny the impact that neoliberalism and demographic change have had on RK and on community more broadly in Japan. However, granting such shifts efficacy seems to me to beg the question: Why have communities failed to reproduce in terms of both labor power and social relations in the first place, such that people would abandon them? The answer to this question could go many directions, but here, I adhere to the method of immanent critique that I laid out in the introduction. I take RK's own concerns, practices, values, and standards seriously. Taking them seriously means treating them as containing and affecting their own conditions of existence and, in turn, pointing out contradictions that have arisen in RK's very attempts to actualize and maintain their tradition (Jaeggi 2018; Ollman 2003). More broadly, I argue that the decline of a community — a real abstraction that partially negates its members *qua* particular people — can stem from contradictions that arise in the formation and maintenance of that community.²⁹ In other words, that devotion to a community can break down that community in the long run. More specifically, I argue that RK's current exhaustion comes from a practical impasse between faith community (*sangha*), local, proximity-based community (*chiiki*), friends (*yūjin*), and family (*kazoku*). That impasse cannot be seen from a mere snapshot of RK, which would reveal a

²⁹ Note here the contrast to Simmel's so-called "dialectical" understanding of social change as arising in a tension between what he writes of as two distinct "layers" "of all sociation ... relation and form" (1971: 351).

structure dependent on those different types of community. Rather, in order to see the contradictions that have developed within RK as an organization, it is necessary to look more closely at the process of RK's formation.

Expansion and the potential for contraction

When RK was founded in 1938, most of its members were people who came to Tokyo from rural areas. One of those members, Inaka-san, a woman now in her mid-90s, told me a bit about where she came from, saying, "I came from a really rural place. We were farmers. All the kids had to work from the time we were three. We would take turns going to each house to pick crops when it was time and we used to rotate which house we would bathe at. Everyone did everything together because you couldn't do anything yourself." Her description exemplifies the Japanese notion of "*kyōdōtai*," which is often translated as "community" and is written with the characters for "together," "same," and "body." As John Embree argued in his classic ethnography of a small village in pre-war Japan, "For co-operative work there must be some motive, some compelling cause other than an altruistic common good, some hard fact such as economic necessity. ... This joint working of the community not only gets the work done, but keeps the people together by uniting them in a common task and afterward in a common drinking party" (1939: 112).

Many people left villages hoping to avoid some of those "common tasks" while enjoying the equivalent of the "drinking party" in cities (compare Harootunian 2000). Inaka-san, for example, moved to Tokyo after the war to escape the

communal body because she did not want to do the body-breaking work required of a farmer. Once in Tokyo, she was surprised by how different it was. “I didn’t even know how to talk! I didn’t have the right clothes either!” Any feelings of alienation or displacement that she felt, however, were displaced by the joy she felt when she joined RK. “The founder was so kind. He had such an aura and good things were happening for everyone. People even got cured of sicknesses! We had such a good time. I used to really love riding my bike with other members and stopping by all of the houses to spread the faith.”

In a sense, early members got to enjoy the affects and emotions of *kyōdōtai* without the back-breaking labor of farming. They also got to reproduce some of the social relations of villages, including strong, if extended and “fictitious” kinship ties (compare Bestor 1989). Members like Inaka-san generated many “faith children” (*michibiki no ko*), people whom they would be responsible for teaching and guiding in the faith, and spent a lot of time in each other’s homes, which were the primary meeting places for RK. Many of their biological children, who got to know members quite well and saw firsthand the benefits of membership, such as good health, business opportunities, small loans, and access to good marriage partners, also joined (compare White 1970).

Many of those benefits came to members through connections made during *hōza*, or “dharma circle,” sessions. The *hōza* is a group confessional session (Dale 1975; Guthrie 1988). In *hōza*, members talk about their problems and receive

guidance and critique from a minister and from other members. This guidance often includes practical advice that is informed by the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. By sharing problems and finding similar solutions to those problems in the Lotus Sutra, members were also able to develop a sense of being a faith community (*sangha*) united by more than just economic necessity. That is one of the reasons that members and RK's official documentation describe the hōza practice as the "heart of RK."

Hōza is still considered to be the heart of RK, but the practice was even more central to RK during its earlier years. One of the practice's benefits, in addition to providing members a way to share their daily struggles with each other, was that it could be held anywhere. Unlike the larger rituals that sometimes involved hundreds of people and create a sense of community in a large city like Tokyo (Bestor 1989), it could be held with any number of people. The practice caught on, and people would sometimes hold impromptu hōza sessions. Those sessions took place mostly in members' private homes. Non-members would sometimes join in during sessions with their neighbors and they often saw the benefits of joining RK when members worked out problems together in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

With the help of hōza, RK was able to form a close-knit community that was open to non-members. Non-members were seen as "potential members" (*mi-kaiin*) or "friends" (*yokitomo*). The growth of RK validated members' treatment of non-

members as potential members. Membership went from 1,277 people in 1945, the year the war ended and religious freedom was legally guaranteed in Japan, to 60,620 in 1950 and 320,847 in 1955 (Morioka 1989: 37). Mirroring the Japanese government census and tax code, RK eventually started counting membership by “household” (*setai*) rather than by individual, and by the 1960s, RK’s membership had skyrocketed to around 600,000 households. Though still concentrated in Tokyo, RK’s members were scattered throughout Japan. Leaders no longer had personal relationships with all of the members and they did not always know what was going on in the *hōza* being held throughout the country. Though many older members remember this time period as a time of great joy, RK’s rapid growth led to some problems for the leadership of the group. Most notable was an attack on RK by a major newspaper in the mid-1950s called the “Yomiuri Affair,” which I address in the next chapter. However, there were also a number of smaller issues associated with RK’s spread that started to create problems for the group as a whole.

For example, some *hōza* leaders started to provide small loans to members, which members could not always pay back. That occasionally created friction in *hōza* groups and presented the risk of people abusing the trust formed in RK to exploit other members. In other situations, romantic relationships sprang up between members. Usually, that was desirable for the involved parties and for RK alike as matchmaking was an important part of forming and maintaining the

community. However, in rare occasions, those relationships threatened pre-existing marriages or generated jealousy and fighting among members. At the level of the leadership of the community, and echoing Weber's (1968) discussion about the routinization of charismatic authority in religious groups, there was some concern about how to balance growth based on the founder and co-founder's charisma against the desire to standardize RK's practice in ways that clearly articulated with Buddhist teachings. To some degree, that tension also pit the charismatic co-founder of the group, a woman who members knew as someone with abilities beyond those attainable through lay-Buddhist practice, against the founder, a man with an immense "aura" whose passion was helping people through the teaching and spread of Buddhism rather than through seemingly supernatural powers.

Concerns about personal loyalties, the stability of the group in the face of a growing number of large and small conflicts, bad publicity in the 1950s, and the death of the co-founder of the group in 1957 convinced the leaders of RK that major changes needed to be made to ensure RK's continued growth and prosperity. In other words, the openness and lack of institutional structure that had allowed RK to grow so rapidly now challenged its ability to continue to expand (compare Weber 1968: 243). As RK and its charismatic leader were still fulfilling the needs of members and membership numbers were still growing, its leadership sought ways to maintain a sense of local community for members accustomed to

visiting each other's homes. However, they also wanted to create a more robust institutional structure to guarantee the group's legitimacy by creating and maintaining standards that would protect the group from external threats from the government and media and internal threats such as the ones posed by small, unreturned loans and rogue hōza leaders. Their solution came with a series of changes starting in 1960, each meant to transform the goal and organization of RK as a whole rather than as interconnected but separate parts.

The Block System: Dividing the community to bring it together

Mr. Koishi, a man in his early forties who was a second-generation member of RK, had a very clear explanation of RK's main purpose and the reason that he was still a member. He told me, "RK is about becoming a better person. In becoming a better person, you make society and the world better. I became a member just because my parents were members, and I didn't like it for a while and I left. But then I came back because I was having trouble with work, didn't have friends, and was a bit depressed. Coming back to a dharma center felt like being with family again."

RK radically transformed itself in the late 1950s and 1960s. During that time, it took the form that it has today — a form that most people who are even slightly familiar with RK take for granted. Those transformations started in 1957, the year that the co-founder, Naganuma Myōko passed away. Though she was arguably more influential in terms of gathering members and a devout following than the founder of RK in RK's early years and members deeply mourned her passing, her death facilitated the founder's unification of the religion under the precepts of Buddhism. To mark the transition between the earliest years of RK and

the years after the co-founder's death, RK designated 1957 the start of a "new era" for the community. They called the years between 1938 and 1957 the "Era of Skillful Means" (*Hōben no Jidai*) and the new era starting in 1957 "The Era of the Manifestation/Revelation of Truth" (*Shinjitsukengen no Jidai*). These names are highly suggestive of how RK's leadership envisioned the change that they were working to implement at that time. "Skillful Means" is a Buddhist word that accounts for the many apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in Buddhist doctrine. It is said that the historical Buddha used "skillful means" to adjust his teachings to the needs of his followers, just like a doctor uses different treatments to treat patients with different ailments. The principles of medicine stay the same but their application must change to help someone with their specific problem. Likewise, the earliest period of RK's development could be considered a time when RK adjusted to suit the needs of people, but did so in a way that did not always appear consistent. The "Manifestation/Revelation of Truth," on the other hand, suggests that the principles that ostensibly undergirded RK's practice came to fruition after 1945, hearkening a new period of standardization.

Niwano Nikkyo, the founder of RK, presented those principles as "Reverence of the Eternal Buddha Great Benevolent Teacher" (*kuon jitsujō daion kyōshu shamuni seson*). In practice, this meant emphasizing aspects of "Fundamental" (or Nikaya) Buddhism (*konpon Bukkyō*)³⁰ and the teachings of the

³⁰ This was formerly called Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism, but those labels are pejorative and historically inaccurate.

Threefold Lotus Sutra. Members were introduced to both of those strains of Buddhism through books, pamphlets, and study sessions run by leaders of RK. The application of those teachings to daily life was summed up in RK's "Membership Pledge," which members recite every time they come to a dharma center and which was written in 1962. The pledge reads:

Members Pledge

We members of Rissho Kosei-kai
Take refuge in the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni
And recognize in Buddhism a true way of liberation,
Under the guidance of our revered founder, Nikkyo Niwano.
In the spirit of lay Buddhists, we vow to perfect ourselves through
personal discipline and leading others
And by improving our knowledge and practice of the faith, we
pledge ourselves to follow the bodhisattva way to bring peace to
our families, communities, countries, and to the world.

That pledge marked a notable shift of attention away from curing ailments and improving economic standing. Instead, members were to focus on work toward "self-improvement." That is not to say that health and money were completely ignored. Rather, the means to accomplishing a better life now came through strict, Buddhist work to improve the self. That work, in turn, was explicitly tied to family, community, country, and world. As Mr. Koishi, the man from the blurb above said, "RK is about becoming a better person. In becoming a better person, you make society and the world better." Note that he, just like members of Kurozumikyō, a "new religion" researched by Helen Hardacre (1986), emphasized that making oneself better works to improve society and the world because the self

is an integral part of society. Internally related but not equivalent, the self, families, communities, countries, and the world, in that order, were considered to be nested units differing in scale (compare Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Povinelli 2006; see also Carr and Lempert 2016).

RK's leadership organized the group in a way that articulated neatly with the nested units expressed in their pledge and emphasized in their practice. From 1958 to 1961, RK worked to implement a "block system" of organization to centralize control over members' religious activities throughout Japan. This system replaced the previous system of relying on "faith parent-child" relationships, which generated a sense of community in RK and spurred its growth but were difficult to regulate. RK's national headquarters in Tokyo, which was organized in-line with business practices of the time to include sections such as "finance," "administration," "social activities," and "religious teachings," was at the top of the nested hierarchy. Paid, trained member-employees of RK staffed the headquarters. Those employees created standardized teaching and proselytization materials, including a newspaper, to distribute to all member households throughout Japan. Members from all over came to the headquarters to listen to sermons by the founder when he was there and to participate in training programs ranging from advanced study of the Lotus Sutra to how to be a good housewife.

Many members resisted this new framing of RK. Some of those members,

who had built up a practical understanding of RK as a community built on affective proximity and economic necessity, did not like this new generalization of RK as a different type of community based on spatial, hierarchical, nested units. Some even threatened to leave. However, according to RK's official history and talks by the founder at the time, all of the administrative changes were necessary and were meant to "bring everyone onto the same, big boat" or, at other times, "the same vehicle," a Buddhist expression that emphasizes the karmic connections between all living beings.

From the perspective of the headquarters, now housed partially in an ornate building completed in 1964 at a cost of approximately 11 million dollars (or approximately 90 million 2018 dollars), the unity of members at the time corresponded to the unity of Japan. The country was divided into five administrative regions called *kyōku*. *Kyōku* were further broken down into units that corresponded with Japan's prefectures. Those administrative units partially determined how resources were distributed to members and how work was divided for employees at the headquarters, but they did not greatly affect average members.

The unit that had the greatest effect on members was the dharma center (church, *kyōkai*). RK kept the previous unit of the district (*shibu*), but all district leaders and district activities were placed under the supervision and guidance of head ministers of dharma centers. The head ministers were trained, paid

employees of RK who were not always from the places where they served as ministers. Ministers were often strangers granted authority that overrode the authority formerly given to the “faith parent-child relationship.” That shift in authority corresponded to a shift in the primary locus of members’ practice. Rather than practice primarily in members’ homes, RK’s leaders instructed everyone to meet in dharma centers.

As with the costly, impressive headquarters, RK built impressive buildings to “manifest” or give form to the creation of the unit of the dharma center. The number of dharma centers increased from ten in 1960 to twenty-one in 1965, and, as of 2018, had risen to 238 dharma centers in Japan and 65 dharma centers or smaller equivalents (*dōjo*) in 20 different countries around the world.

Despite initial resistance by members, and after much explanation offered by the founder through RK’s newspaper and in talks with members, the dharma centers proved popular, particularly among women. As more men who belonged to RK found jobs with reasonable salaries and gendered divisions in labor became more prevalent during Japan’s “rapid growth period,” which lasted until the early 1990s, more women started to actively use the centers to organize their own lives. The women, who compose approximately 70% of RK’s active membership, spent large portions of their day at the centers. A portion of those women became volunteer staff who managed things like local newsletters and budgets. Others took on morning prayer and cleaning duties. And, in-line with Holston (2008) and

Graeber's (2009) hopes for community more broadly, the women gathered to accomplish political, collective ends. Since 1958, the founder had encouraged members to mobilize "rather than sitting and practicing ancestor worship alone in your house." For many of these women, doing so much for RK at the centers provided a sense of purpose in their lives. Even now, many members are proud of participating in religious, political, and social welfare activities.

The re-organization of lives into the block system and dharma centers was a strategic response to changing conditions of possibility for community. It brought members of RK together around common goals other than survival and economic production. In other words, the block system created a different type of community than the *kyōdōtai* experienced by early members when they were still farmers or when they were struggling to survive after WWII. The creation of this new type of community divided members according to spatial units and rendered the relation between "faith parents and children" largely obsolete. Ironically, this new way of generalizing RK brought a higher degree of unity to it as a faith community. That unity or form had many benefits. Members enjoyed a greater sense of belonging, the organization increased its potential income by centralizing its finances, the standardization of teachings and practices minimized the potential for trouble among members or negative attention from the government, and the correspondence of RK's administrative units with governmental units made it easier for members to mobilize to affect local electoral politics. However, the new

form that RK took also brought new contradictions into members' lives — contradictions that now threaten RK's very existence.

Conflicts in devotion and unity

The shift in goals from survival to political and social service was arguably a part of RK's transformation from a displaced and reinvented *kyōdōtai* into what the woman whose commentary I started this chapter with called "community." That transition, while temporarily strengthening RK, created tensions for members. Take, for example, Mrs. Takagi, a devout practitioner in her fifties. Mrs. Takagi volunteers at her dharma center several times a week. Sometimes she prepares food or ornamentation for the altar at the center. Other times she helps to distribute the newsletter and, at the same time, check on other members to see if they are alright. She also always takes on a role during larger group events at the dharma center and tries to come for daily *hōza* sessions as much as possible. She told me that even though she "still has a long way to go" she "has become a better person because of RK." However, her husband does not appreciate all of the time that she spends at the dharma center. "He gets angry sometimes and I can't talk about RK with him," she told me. Many women echoed Mrs. Takagi's marital strife during *hōza* sessions. It was not unusual even for members with relatively high status to talk about how their devotion to RK made it more difficult for them to relate to their husbands and their in-laws. In many instances, it also had an effect on how those members' children felt about RK.

I was able to talk to their children during homestays with various members

and at some large events. Those conversations, mostly with children of second and third generation members, yielded a challenging picture for the future of RK. Many of the children were already in their twenties and some already in their thirties. They tended to respect their parents for doing meaningful work for society, but they did not want to join RK themselves. For example, one young woman in her twenties told me, “My mom spent all of her time at the dharma center. For a long time, I resented her for that and I missed her when other kids had their moms around. I don’t resent her anymore. Actually, I respect her, but it was hard for me and I don’t want to join.” In conversations with members of RK and even their leadership, I have been able to confirm that this is a widespread problem. The problem stems partially from devotion and how members spend their time to fulfill obligations to RK, but it also stems from the fact that those obligations are largely fulfilled outside of members’ homes. The split between a place of religious activity and a place of domestic activities has alienated women from their families. Many families, in turn, have been partially alienated from from RK.

In order to overcome the problem that alienated families pose to RK’s existence, RK recently started re-emphasizing the need to proselytize outside of the family. However, many current members have spent much of their time in the dharma centers and with other members. They do not have as much experience visiting people’s houses and spreading the faith to friends who do not already belong to the religion. Moreover, most of them do not have the experience of being

a “faith parent” who guides “faith children” into the faith since guiding roles were relegated to ministers in dharma centers and to district heads (*shibu-chō*). Other members have their hands full taking care of elderly parents, members, spouses and children. Many of them see the dharma centers as places of refuge where they can focus on improving themselves and gaining the fortitude and wisdom to deal with the difficulties in their lives, thus improving society without necessarily proselytizing.

While the dharma centers are perhaps too welcoming for members, non-members did not feel the same way. Talking to people walking near the centers, the one thing that they all had in common was that they did not have a desire to enter. The centers are large, have gates and signs forbidding parking for people who are not visiting the center, and often have two sets of doors. Members frequently sit at a service window directly facing the doors – a setup that is much less approachable than a couple of women riding bikes or friends who happen to be members. While all of the dharma centers are open to anyone, it hardly looks that way. In order to overcome their closed image and establish cooperative relations with neighbors and the “local community” (*chiiki shakai*), some dharma centers have held small events outdoors or participated in large local festivals. However, at any such activities that I attended most of the people who came to the events or approached RK were already members. It seemed that the very dharma centers that allowed RK to organize politically and form a space-based community

had sometimes isolated them from their families. The dharma centers had also partially isolated RK from the local, proximity-based community from which they had previously drawn their members. They made RK seem more closed and slightly mysterious, and while I always felt extremely welcomed and comfortable with members of RK, many of whom I count among my close friends and teachers, some people even warned me to not get too involved with RK during my research.

Members were aware of the common perception of their group as slightly suspicious, which I explain in the next chapter. They hesitated to approach others for fear of seeming aggressive or of affirming negative stereotypes about them. The sense that sharing their faith might make them look like a cult rather than garner new friends or members sometimes made them feel isolated from the local communities surrounding their dharma centers and even from “society” in general. Though members still felt closely related to RK, their feelings of isolation from other parts of society and what they saw as dim prospects for RK’s future changed the way they felt about some of their activities in the dharma centers. As Watanabe (2015) recently found and as several members have told me, being called on to contribute so much at dharma centers sometimes made membership feel like “work” (*shigoto*) or like an obligation that had to be fulfilled (*giri*) rather than something that members simply wanted to do. Most of the members that I talked to did not feel that way, but there were quite a few that did. Even though those members still usually showed up at the centers, they had started to resent

the group to some degree and feel less of the “joy of membership.”

Struggling with routinization: Joy, expertise, and communal bonds

In 1989, Morioka Kiyomi, the sociologist that I mentioned earlier, argued that RK’s transformation up to that time had felt like a “revolution” for members and therefore had escaped the dangers of rationalization and routinization (307-309). As of the time of writing this dissertation, however, the decrease in joy and increase in feelings of alienation from “work” associated with RK extended to many of the younger staff members at RK’s headquarters that I worked with during my time in Japan. One staff member, for example, told me about how they never felt the reports that they prepared made a difference in the world, even though they knew that RK as a whole was working toward great things. Another told me, “Work just feels really mechanical. I don’t have to think about it anymore and I just do it, so it’s not something that can excite me or bring me joy. Even saying that, though, I don’t know if I would want to switch jobs within RK.”

That member mentioned perhaps not wanting to switch jobs within RK because such internal transfers at headquarters were quite common. Those job transfers were a way for RK’s employees to continue learning and improving themselves over the course of their careers. They were also an attempt by RK to avoid having staff feel like their lives were stagnant and their work mechanical. In many cases, staff members told me that they appreciated being transferred every three years or so. They felt like they were seeing different aspects of the

organization and developing in ways that made them more knowledgeable and capable people.

However, an equal number of members told me that the frequent transfers made them feel like no one in RK ever becomes an expert at anything, therefore hurting RK's future prospects. Moreover, some of the members who did not particularly like transfers told me that it was sometimes difficult for them to feel attached to their jobs since they knew they would likely be leaving them within a couple of years, though they frequently said that their degree of attachment and motivation depended heavily on who their boss happened to be in any given department. Yet others, those most dissatisfied with frequent transfers, were people who had previously been in positions that they enjoyed but were now doing jobs that did not provide them as much fulfillment.

Perhaps the most sensitive position for transfers was that of head minister at a dharma center. Head ministers were the most important link between dharma centers and headquarters as they were involved in nearly every aspect of members' lives. The most talented of RK's staff often become ministers in their 50s after they have worked in numerous positions in the headquarters. However, what they face "on the ground" (*genba*) at dharma centers often differs greatly from what they were doing at headquarters, which could include everything from finance to dealing with politicians or international aid organizations. That gap and being put in a leadership position among strangers, many of whom have been

members longer than the new minister and know the local congregation much better than that minister, sometimes makes it difficult for ministers to adjust. One of them told me directly, “I sometimes feel alienated being out front” (*minna no mae ni tatteiru to, toki doki sōgaikan ha aru*.)”

Just around the time that those ministers became fully adjusted to their new job and all of the people at the dharma center where they had been stationed, they were at risk of being transferred. Like the transfer of any RK employee, the transfer of head ministers was meant to broaden the experience of the minister themselves. It was also meant to provide members at dharma centers access to different members of RK’s talented, caring staff. Finally, the frequent transfer of head ministers was meant to avoid the problematic personal relations that had developed between district and hōza leaders with members, such as loans and romance, that had created problems for RK in an earlier era. While this technique had been successful up to the time of writing, it did weaken the bonds between leaders of RK and non-staff members at dharma centers. And non-staff members and staff alike told me that the congregants of dharma centers often wind up leading head ministers just as much as head ministers lead them.

The block system, then, which was based primarily on centralization of RK’s community in headquarters and in dharma centers, did solve problems associated with RK’s early growth. That system could even be said to have brought members closer to each other in some ways as they became more organized and unified

around clear principles, teachings, and goals. However, the particular way that they became unified made those members feel separated from local community, non-members, and, in some ways, even from head ministers of dharma centers. Ironically, the focus on RK as a community rather than as a sprawling collection of dharma parent-child relationships organized loosely into districts also made some members feel more distant from RK itself. When arranged in blocks, some members of RK started to feel like their activities at dharma centers and headquarters were impersonal, repetitive, obligatory work. That, along with the devotion of some members — particularly women — left an impression on members' children such that they did not wish to join the community. In other words, the form that RK took in order to stabilize and reproduce itself wound up undermining its ability to garner new members. In some cases, the organization of work, gender relations, and child care for employees at RK's headquarters, like work elsewhere, also discouraged those members from having children in the first place, thus further limiting RK's potential to reproduce itself.

Conflicts in reproduction: Work and family for RK's employees at headquarters

As I mentioned before, Japan's dwindling and aging population and the concomitant depopulation of rural areas present existential challenges to its economy and society. Such demographic shifts, which are often tied to people living alone and a sense of relationlessness,³¹ also pose an existential challenge

³¹ See Fujimori 2011 for a careful statistical and survey-based analysis of the links between large-scale demographic shifts and the "rapid growth of a society of single

to forms of belonging such as RK. For example, older members have difficulty making it to dharma centers and do not have as much money to donate to the group, and dharma centers in depopulated areas drain RK's resources without providing much in return (Watanabe 2016).

It is tempting to also attribute RK's dwindling membership to the passing away of older members and the low birth rate of younger members. It could be argued that some younger male members of RK are "herbivore boys" who do not want to have sex or get married (Chen 2012; Steger and Koch 2013). That tendency among males, one could claim, overlaps with female members desire to put off marriage in order to enjoy personal freedoms associated with being single (Kameoka 2011). Alternatively, it would be possible, following thinkers as different as Franco Berardi (2009) and Robert Putnam (2000), to identify behaviors among members that support the thesis that the development of technologies such as the television and smart phone, combined with "individualism," have made people less interested in joining communities like RK's. However, it would also be possible to provide counterexamples for each of those arguments. There is also something more fundamentally problematic about those arguments than the examples or sample size of the populations used to make them; namely, they posit a clear division between causes and effects, which obscures the ways that the organization of society influences the phenomena, such as women not wanting to

people" in Japan.

get married, that challenge some forms of social relation.

On face, RK has been doing their best to help members overcome the challenges of loneliness, aging, and depopulation — often successfully, I might add. However, the current form of RK, which mirrors the organization of labor more broadly in Japan and other capitalist societies, also produces the challenges of the relationless society. The separation of the “workplace” from “domestic spaces” where the gendered reproduction of labor power is supposed to occur has made it difficult and, sometimes, undesirable for female employees at RK’s headquarters to have children (compare Anderson 1994).³²

In order to show how widespread the organization of relations that simultaneously sustain and undermine RK’s ability to reproduce itself, allow me to start with the start of one family and the destruction of another. That is, with a newlywed couple. I sat down with this newlywed couple, Mariko and Daisuke, in the living area of their humble one-bedroom apartment near the center of Tokyo. They had just “tied the knot” (*en musubi*) three months earlier, and, in so doing, “created a relationship” (*en dzukuri*). When the wedding celebration finished, the 80 or so attendees filed out of the room. The bride and groom, standing next to their parents, waited just outside the door. Bowing deeply, they generously

³² For a broader history of the process of gender arising from divisions of labor and space in Japan, see Silverberg 2006; Tsurumi 1992; Ueno 2009. For how gender has related to total war, the formation of a population, and making children in modern Japan, see also Bernstein 1991; Takeda 2004; and Ueno 2009 for this history in Japan and the essays in Di Leonardo 1991 for an introduction to anthropological work on the topic.

thanked each of us for attending as we left. Amidst the joy being formally expressed, the tears and slightly smudged makeup on the faces of the proud mothers of the newlyweds seemed to fit perfectly in place.

The mothers' tears were the only tears that would be made visible to the attendees of the wedding, but they were not the only ones shed in relation to this celebrated occasion. Mariko too, now not only a woman, but a wife, cried after the ceremony. In front of her husband, she told me about her experience, saying, "When I got home, after it was all done, I just burst into tears. I couldn't stop crying. Thinking about it afterwards, I think that I cried because I couldn't be with my family anymore. I'm happy to join my husband's family (*ie*), really happy, but I still feel quite strongly the sadness of not being able to be with my original family."

In order to make a new family and perpetuate the form of the family, it was necessary for Mariko to sever, to some degree, her ties to her natal family. Granted, as of the time of writing, she still goes to visit them once a year or so, which is only slightly less than the two times that they visit Daisuke's family every year, partly because his father is sick. But every time they go to visit Daisuke's family, Mariko gets tired. Her exhaustion stems not from a dislike for her in-laws, but rather from her desire to be a good daughter-in-law. Whenever they go to visit Daisuke's parents, she helps to clean and cook, and is extra careful with her language use. That, to her own regret, makes her want to go less often and sometimes creates pangs of guilt.

She and Daisuke both realized, however, that “having a child for their parents” was even more important than visiting a certain number of times a year. While Mariko is “probably willing to have a kid now,” she feels like this would mean “throwing out all of the hard work and studying that she has done, and giving up on her goal to contribute to the betterment of the world.” Her boss at RK’s headquarters agrees. He told me, “It would be a waste for her to turn into a housewife, and we really need her here.” Moreover, Mariko and Daisuke need the money that comes from a dual-income in order to maintain the possibility of having a child. But money is not the biggest impediment to their having a child. That would be the fact that Daisuke is currently in the U.S. and will be for another 7 years or so for the work he is doing for RK, and Mariko might be going to India, also for RK. At the time of our extended interview, they were not sure yet where they would wind up and whether they would have a child or not. Daisuke has told me that he is getting a bit lonely, but he does not want to ask Mariko to give up her work, work that she is proud of and that gives her a sense of meaning as a person.

Of course, getting married and having children does not necessarily mean that a woman has to give up her job. There are women who continue to work at RK’s headquarters after having children. Take for example, my friend Hiroko. At first, Hiroko did not want children because her “husband was just like a baby. So it was like I already had a kid who I had to take care of. Even though we were both working, when we got home, he didn’t do anything and I had to cook dinner and

clean up and whatever.” Her husband, she told me, has gotten a bit better since they had their first child, but she found that some of her relations at work have changed in ways that she is not entirely comfortable with. She felt that people expect her to quit at some point, and they also want to help her out so that she can go home early every day to take care of her five-month-old child. In practice, this means that they do not give her any work that requires a long-term commitment or contact with people outside of RK. She felt a bit isolated and did not care about work as much as she used to — not because of the child, but because of the effort that her coworkers and bosses made to ensure that she could spend more time with her child. But she and her husband, like Daisuke and Mariko, still need her income to get by comfortably. And Hiroko thought that things at work might change once she starts sending her child to preschool, like her co-worker Yuka did.

When I talked to Yuka, she was fairly happy working at RK’s headquarters, and was quite satisfied with the state-run preschool where she sends her child. Having her child in pre-school let her and her husband continue to work full time. Fortunately, and unlike some of RK’s workforce, they were able to work in the same city, though her husband’s schedule was odd due to the particular work he did at the docks. Yuka did not get to spend much time with him at home, but she was not worried about their relationship. Pushing her a bit on the daycare issue, I asked whether sending her child to daycare meant that neither her parents nor neighbors were taking care of the child as they would have been doing even thirty

years ago — an arrangement that used to be organized by local governments in the 1950s and 60s.³³ She confirmed this and made a bit of a face, “Yeah, you know, I haven’t talked to my parents in quite some time, and they haven’t seen their granddaughter recently. It’s just because I don’t want to be dependent on them and I don’t want to burden them, but they probably want to see us, huh.” “How long has it been?” I asked. “Yeah, almost two months,” she responded. Having recently read a story about the “lonely death” of someone whose death was not discovered for months, I thought to myself that two months is long enough for a body to start decaying and appear in the news.

Other women that I talked to were well aware of the types of situations faced by Mariko, Hiroko, and Yuka. One thirty-year-old woman that I talked to at RK’s headquarters, for example, was a bit concerned that she was not yet married and had no children. But even though she was concerned about her future, she did not really want to get married or have kids. “Why not?” I asked. “Well,” she paused, “I don’t want to sever my relations.” In other words, she didn’t want children because she did not want to become isolated from her friends and

³³ In Japan, it should be noted that preschool has served as a state technique to squelch civil unrest and support women’s role as “mothers” since the late 1800s. Daycare simultaneously brought feminists into the patriarchy of the nationalist fold and helped provide them with the economic and political means to challenge that hierarchy, particularly during the late 1930s and ‘40s, when Japan was at “total war” and the state could not balance the needs of “production” and “reproduction.” See Uno 1999 and Miyake 1991. In contemporary Japan, the increase of state-run and private daycare centers has been an important part of Prime Minister Abe’s “Abenomics.” More specifically they are a part of his efforts to incorporate more women in the workplace while at the same time encouraging more women to have children.

coworkers at RK, most of whom were also still single at the time. Ironically, her devotion to the community of RK and the joy that she still took in that community have thus far led her to avoid marriage and having a child. While not getting married or having a child was, for her, a pleasure rather than a failure, in the long term, that pleasure denies RK an opportunity to gain a member through its most reliable means to do so. Here, then, devotion to a form of community, rather than “individualism,” ironically leads to the long-term breakdown of that community.

Conclusion: On community, alienation, and generals

In summary, then, the growth and maintenance of RK’s community – as distinct from *kyōdōtai* – has made some of its members feel isolated from the organization for asking them to “work” too much, from their families with whom they spend less time than they could, and from people living nearby. For other members, belonging to the community feels more important than getting married or having children; they would rather be single so that they can continue to work for and with RK’s community, even though doing so arguably puts RK’s future at risk. While any number of arguments could be made from these findings, I would like to point out two, each of which works at a different level of generalization.

First, community, depending on its form, can produce the very type of individual to which it is often posited in binary opposition. In the case of RK, at least, community is not always an aggregate of pre-existing individuals and the individual does not logically precede the community. In a sense, then, the particular historical form of “community” has produced, rather than solved the

problem of, individualization. Far from being the positive antidote to the individual and being built upon kin relations and friendships, here, community arguably breaks apart those other types of relations, thus producing isolated individuals. Even when not producing isolated individuals, the particular form that RK's community has taken challenges its very ability to reproduce itself.

In a different, more Japan-focused idiom, it is important to note that RK is in many ways a prototypical Japanese organization — so much so that it has been described as taking “the popular ethic developed in early modern Japan and deliver[ing] it intact as a pattern for life in the postwar period” (Kisala 1999: 138). Its organization mirrors the state-centered interdependence that characterized early modern Japan (Sakai 1997; Reitan 2010; compare Hardacre 1986). It could be accurately characterized as a form of group belonging maintained by hierarchy, reciprocity, and a strong sense of social obligation (Benedict 1946; Nakane 1970). And, as has often been argued of Japan more broadly, RK certainly considers relationships between people as prior to and more important than the individual. However, it is precisely those so-called “group-oriented values,” materialized and created in RK's organization and practices, that have broken down RK and other forms of belonging — such as the family — over time. Thus, RK, as a group ideologically opposed to the breakdown of social bonds, arguably produces or contributes to Japan's relationless society insofar as such a society is one where people have difficulty maintaining longstanding institutions of belonging or lose the

desire to do so.

Second, if the general here is “community,” then it is clear that the general is not simply an aggregate of particulars or an empty abstraction. It is not reducible to any single practice, person, or even set of interactions. Rather, the general itself is an abstraction that produces effects and, in a very tangible sense for members of RK, the particulars out of which it arises. However, unlike in Durkheim’s (1997[1893]; 1964[1895]) formulation of society and other collective representations as existing *sui generis*, or, more recently, Eduardo Kohn’s (2013) argument that “form” is “a strange but worldly process of pattern production and propagation” (20; see also Deacon 2012), forms can also be self-destructive. That process of self-destruction can only be seen if we look at the social processes of abstraction that create forms and the contradictions that arise in those processes (Pedersen 2013). The process whereby generals, such as communities, create the particulars out of which they arise, such as RK’s social relations, is not one of perfect reproduction. At least in the case of community, it is clear that generals can sometimes produce and consist of particulars that undermine the whole.

Importantly, the whole or self that is undermined here is not a closed or complete system. On the contrary, it is always being produced in tensions that exceed its ideological and practical boundaries. In the case of RK, its current self-destruction could also be framed as altruism toward society and the world at large. Framing RK’s current struggles that way instead of as problems of institutional

grown changes the way that RK's history could be drawn out and sheds different light on the relation of compassion to alienation more generally.

Chapter 2: Moved to selfless compassion: Altruism and the long-term weakening of social institutions

Mr. Chishiki, an employee of RK nearing retirement age who has an encyclopedic knowledge of the organization and an incredibly sharp mind, was in a particularly talkative and reflective mood. The numerous drinks we had consumed probably contributed to that, but the topic of conversation was what really got him going. We were discussing RK's future, which nearly everyone working at headquarters acknowledges is uncertain. I was arguing some of the things that I wrote about in the previous chapter — namely, that the form or organization of RK was ironically creating divisions that made it difficult for the group to perpetuate itself. He responded in a way that made a lasting impression on me, saying, “The way you say ‘proselytization’ (*fukyō*) in Japanese has the same character in it as the word for ‘religion’ (*shūkyō*), but, as you know, when it's by itself, that character means ‘teachings’ (*oshie*). For us ‘proselytization’ means to spread the teachings, which doesn't necessarily mean spreading the religion. If we don't exist anymore, that's ok, so long as the teachings don't perish. Like it says in the member's pledge, if we can help people to be compassionate and to help others as a way to become fuller, more developed and fulfilled humans (*jinkaku kansei*), then we have done our job.”

His message struck me so deeply that I have repeated what he said to some non-members who receive money from RK for their social projects. Several of them were just as impressed as I was. For example, Mr. Umibe in Kamaishi,

who I mentioned in the introduction, raised an eyebrow and let out a brief chuckle when I told him what Mr. Chishiki had said. Smiling, Mr. Umibe expressed doubt, which he later said came from his experience with the Christian denomination that he belonged to, and admiration, “If that’s true, then they are the real deal (*honmono*). Either way, I appreciate them, but that’s the real deal.”

RK’s social situation suggests that Mr. Chishiki was expressing more than just a personal opinion when he said that spreading the teachings would be worth sacrificing RK’s organized religion. They fund many social projects and organizations, such as Mr. Umibe’s volunteer center, that are oriented toward spreading compassion. That unto itself is perhaps not surprising, given the social definition of religion in liberal capitalist societies as that which provides people with more than a pursuit of monetary profit. What is surprising is that the vast majority of those programs are not recognizable as being associated with RK. In other words, a participant in or direct beneficiary of any of those programs would not know that RK funded or provided the labor that made that program possible.

In the cases of Mr. Umibe’s volunteer center, “Hope,” and the chaplaincy program that I discuss in the next section of this book, RK provides money for programs run by people of religious traditions other than their own. Though there are very few signs of any particular religious tradition present in either Hope or the chaplaincy, the ones that are visible, such as a small image of Jesus in Mr. Umibe’s office or the old temples where portions of the chaplaincy training take

place, are not relatable to RK. On the contrary, historically, they have often been opposed to RK and other “new religions” founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Members of RK take pride in funding activities that sometimes allow other religions to improve their respective images. One leader in their organization expressed this pride as a tactic, saying, “We are like backstage workers. We support others so that they can do well. By doing this for many years and without asking anything in return, you can generate good, trusting relationships. And, by helping someone else, you are helping yourself to be a better person or group.”

In some ways, that strategy has worked remarkably well. RK has generated trusting relationships with many organizations, including local governments, the United Nations, and religious groups worldwide. A portion of that trust has undoubtedly stemmed from their generosity, which members see as an important part of their daily practice and of RK’s significance as a social institution. However, while all of this is laudable and has met with certain kinds of success, it is not sustainable. As Mr. Chishiki’s comment suggests, the generous way that RK often works to spread and actualize the teaching of compassion has put them in a state of financial uncertainty. Despite the distinction that Mr. Chishiki drew between RK as teachings and RK as an organization, less money means that it is sometimes difficult to be generous and compassionate. That, combined with the threat of no longer existing as an organization, brings the tenability of spreading the teachings

into question.

This self-undermining situation, whereby one must undermine a potential future in order to actualize the self in the present, is neither ideal nor necessary. In the case of RK, it is perhaps tempting to attribute such giving behavior to their teaching of compassion, which matches their broad categorization as a “religious” group. There is, after all, a long history of religions worldwide providing charity and care for the needy.³⁴ Such an explanation, however, would have to ignore counterexamples such as the group Caritas, which describes itself as “the helping hand of the [Catholic] church.” Caritas, like RK, is active in Northeastern Japan and does not actively proselytize. However, thanks to the solid backing of the Catholic Church and its historically accumulated wealth, they are not put into peril by their compassionate activity. They do not have to sacrifice a future to try to live out their ideals.

In addition to ignoring counterexamples, explanations of RK’s largely selfless giving that would rely on RK’s cultural proclivity toward compassion or their categorization as a religion would also elide several important questions about how compassion works in contemporary Japan. Namely, why would a

³⁴ Most academic work on the topic focuses on the relation of humanitarianism to Christianity (e.g. Barnett 2011; Calhoun 2008; Pupavac 2010; See also Moyn 2015). See Redfield and Bornstein (2011) for a succinct description of Christianity and other religions in relation to contemporary humanitarianism. For a detailed analysis of how Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism have affected the work of a large Japanese NGO working in Myanmar that started as the “nonreligious” branch of a new religion in 1949, see Watanabe 2019.

religious group would continuously engage in activities that they knew threatened their future existence? And what are the conditions by which their giving activities, unlike those of Caritas or some older Buddhist traditions in Japan, became a sacrifice? In broader terms, ignoring the history of what now appears as selfless activity threatens to sneak in normative ideas about religion as a category and make an opposition between giving and receiving look natural — the starting point of an investigation rather than that which needs to be explained.

In the next chapter, I give an explanation of how religion in general became a category related to suffering and compassion in Japan. Here, rather than look at the formation of that general category, I provide the specific example of RK, which has a different history than either religion *per se* or some of the older traditions, such as Zen or Tendai Buddhism,³⁵ which get lumped into that category. Looking at how RK's practice of compassion came to be relatively selfless reveals a story of why there was a partial separation and opposition between RK as an organization and RK as teachings when I conducted my research. More generally, an examination of RK also reveals a history of how compassion became an ethical imperative in Japan, for whom, and to what effect. In other words, this chapter questions neither whether altruism is better for society than selfishness nor whether it is inherent in human nature. Rather it looks at the conditions by which

³⁵ RK places themselves in the lineage of Tendai Buddhism, but they are not incorporated into the organization of Tendai and did not originally stem from formal relations with Tendai.

compassion becomes altruistic. It looks at how a self is divided from an other in the first place. It then looks at how that separation sometimes occurs in such a way that actions for an other are not also actions that sustain a self and why specific selves, such as RK, would be motivated to engage in such actions. As it turns out, the answer is closely related to historical threats made against RK by the Japanese government and mass-media outlets. Ironically, then, selfless action started out as a means of self-preservation for RK.

Governance, freedom, and constraint in the formation of compassion

Critical thinkers have noted that compassion tends to benefit governments.

In cases of charity and voluntarism, particularly within a given nation-state, such activities reduce government costs associated with social welfare. In other cases, such as the recovery effort after Hurricane Katrina, volunteerism fills in holes left when private corporations accept government contracts to help people but instead try to minimize their own costs in order to generate profits (Adams 2013). Scholars tend to trace that relationship between compassion and governments to neoliberalism, an economic theory that became popular in the 1970 that emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility and the freedom of markets rather than state regulation. In Japan, too, government records, public speeches by politicians, and tax policy make it clear that the government has cultivated volunteerism as a way to create “self-responsible” individuals who engage in apolitical “social activities” in ways that reduce public spending on welfare services (Avenell 2010a, 2010b, 2012).

Despite the clear overlap between neoliberal policies and voluntarism, however, as the philosopher Brian Massumi argues, “the State can help induce ... smoothly patterned social functioning in State-friendly forms,” but “caring cannot be legislated” (2002: 82). RK’s willingness and desire to use its resources without expecting financial returns, an increase in membership, or even social recognition to a degree proportional to their effort cannot be explained by neoliberal policies. Neither can it be explained by support for a neoliberal model of governance. On the contrary, RK has decried the “individualism” and lack of social responsibility entailed by neoliberalism. At times, they have published articles in their newspaper and magazine that explicitly name and renounce neoliberalism. Any explanation of their activity must therefore look beyond the elective affinity between neoliberalism and compassion.

The forms of RK’s compassion, such as their relationship with Mr. Umibe and the chaplains, can be traced back further than the 2011 disasters in Northeastern Japan, the 1995 Hanshin earthquake that spurred the development of voluntarism in Japan, or the advent of neoliberalism. It would be possible to trace the control of Japanese religions by the government back as far as “government” and “religion” or religious traditions have existed in Japan,³⁶ but most of that history was oriented toward preventing religions from spreading their influence in any way not directly beneficial to governance. Governments have

³⁶ For a detailed history of how governments in Japan have regulated “new religions,” the category under which RK usually falls, see Inoue et al. 1994 section VII.

continued to try to limit the influence of religions on Japanese society to this day. That process certainly affects RK and other religions that are trying to contribute to the public good. In the next chapter, I show how that process works in contemporary Japan. However, a historical perspective on the freedom and constraint of religion in Japan is necessary to understand RK's practice of other-oriented compassion.

Other-oriented compassion cannot take place without some degree of freedom to engage with other organizations, religious or not, and to provide resources for things other than war. When a part of a money-based society, such compassion also requires financial means. Freedom and financial means came for RK after Japan's loss of World War II, when the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers issued a legal directive for "Removal of Restrictions on Political, Civil, and Religious Liberties." That directive mandated that:

In order to remove restrictions on political, civil and religious liberties and discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, creed or political opinion, the Japanese Imperial Government will:

a. Abrogate and immediately suspend the operation of all provisions of all laws, decrees, orders, ordinances and regulations which:

(1) Establish or maintain restrictions on freedom of thought, of religion, of assembly and of speech, including the unrestricted discussion of the Emperor, the Imperial Institution and the Imperial Japanese Government.

The 1889 Meiji Constitution of Japan had guaranteed some modicum of

religious freedom,³⁷ but prior to the issuance of the post-World War II directive, leaders of many small movements that could be called religions were arrested on various charges related to threatening the imperial order.³⁸ Despite having served in the Imperial Navy for three years from 1926,³⁹ RK's founder was no exception. He and the co-founder of the religion, Naganuma Myōkō, were arrested in 1943 for violating the "Peace Preservation Law" that the directive was explicitly meant to dismantle.⁴⁰ Though the founder was released from police custody after two weeks and the co-founder after three, the arrest was enough to temporarily disrupt the operation and spread of RK — all but two of RK's chapter heads resigned, as did the acting General Director of the organization.

Such legal impediments to RK's growth were removed after the war and RK's membership grew from 1,277 people to 320,847 between 1945 and 1955

³⁷ See Isomae 2003; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014; and Thomas 2019 for detailed explications of the relation of the Meiji Constitution to religion.

³⁸ There are countless cases legal charges being brought against "new religions" prior to the end of the war. As there was no law unifying religious organizations, multiple cases were sometime brought against different branches of the same organization. For short descriptions of many of those cases, see Inoue et al. 1994: 490-506. For more details on some of these cases and an analysis of how they fit into larger strategies and techniques of governance in interwar Japan, see Garon 1997, chapter 2.

³⁹ This was a formative experience for the founder (Niwano 1989), and a story of how his earnest cleaning of urinals during this time led to his success is somewhat frequently recounted among members.

⁴⁰ A short account of the arrest and the case can be found in Niwano's autobiography, *Lifetime Beginner* (1989). Like with many such cases, the arrest stemmed originally from a personal disagreement rather than directly from the government. In this case, a leader of a different religious organization got people living in the neighborhood where Niwano was most active to sign a petition expressing discontent with his activities. Niwano himself relates the arrest to his own wife's discontent with his neglect of his family for RK, but the link to the eventual arrest is vague.

(Morioka 1989: 37). RK was not the only group that was growing quickly. On the contrary, more than 170 groups increased their membership during what has been called the post-war “Rush Hour of the Gods” (McFarland 1967).

Those groups, which collectively had millions of members, were not completely under the control of the government or of profit-seeking corporations. Neither did they fit nicely into what Jason Ānanda Josephson has rightly identified as a “trinary formation” of the secular, superstition, and religion that is “woven into the fabric of modernity ... to increase state power and to reconfigure entire cultural systems” (2012: 4-5). Though they often drew from the teachings and practices of long-standing Buddhist and/or Shintō traditions, these groups did not formally belong to those traditions, share their wealth and resources, or have the same historical connections to regional and national government bodies. And though many of those traditions accused newer groups of being “superstitious,” the larger among them were far more organized than so-called “folk” or “popular” practices more frequently associated with superstition.

The organization of the groups formed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was one major distinction between them and the Buddhist, Shintō, and, to a lesser extent, Christian traditions that came to be known as “established religions” (*kisei shūkyō*) in Japan. RK, for example, is a lay-Buddhist organization and has “members” rather than parishioners. It asks these members to orient their entire lives to the teachings and the improvement of society, frequently mobilizing

for political and humanitarian projects. That is quite different from “established religions,” which ask primarily for patronage and occasional participation on holidays or days of remembrance for one’s own kin.

Jolyon Thomas (2019) has recently argued that religious freedom in Japan and elsewhere necessarily entails constraints based on how “religion” is defined, and that such definition and constraint did not simply disappear with the arrival of the Occupation Government in 1945. As he thoroughly demonstrates, that definition is neither timeless nor made in isolation from social conditions. Rather, it is made “through collaborations between bureaucrats and academics, journalists and legal experts, Americans and their Japanese interlocutors” (144). The Occupation worked on dismantling what they saw as oppressive, totalitarian “State Shinto” and (unsuccessfully) replacing it with Christianity, which was thought to go hand-in-hand with democracy.⁴¹ The government did not want to appear as if they were working to limit or control religion, however, so much of that work was carried out by journalists.

Those journalists published material in mainstream newspapers that were read by many people, including government officials. As Benjamin Dorman (2012) has pointed out in his detailed examination of the press’s engagement with new religions, the press took on a “watchdog function” in postwar Japan and was attracted to “salacious tales concerning various groups of money laundering, drug

⁴¹ See also Woodard 1972 for a detailed record of the Occupation Government’s interactions with Japanese religions.

use, sexual deviance, blind faith, and perverted beliefs” (117). Some of the stories that they reported on resulted in legal cases being brought against religious groups that mobilized people and that were not recognized as “established.” Even when legal charges were not raised, reporters hurt the reputations of several groups and, continuing with language from wartime Japan, frequently referred to them as “fad,” “new,” “fake” or “quasi” religions, and sometimes even “cults,” usually with negative connotations.

In the mid-1950’s, RK’s widespread success and rapid growth attracted that kind of negative attention. They were targeted by the right-leaning Yomiuri Shimbun, one of the most widely-circulated newspapers in the world and one of the “big three” most influential papers in Japan. The Yomiuri Shimbun focused on new religious movements at the time and “raised its circulation with a series of exposés on Omoto, Tenrikyō, Sekai Kyūsei Kyō, and the Reiyūkai” (Dorman 2012: 216; see also Dorman 2004; Morioka 1994: 289). Their attack on RK came to be known as the “Yomiuri Affair” (*Yomiuri Jiken*).

As the renowned sociologist Morioka Kiyomi (1989, 1994) has documented in great detail, the attack started with a broadcast on NHK, Japan’s government-sponsored public broadcasting company.⁴² In that broadcast, which aired in February 1952, NHK accused RK of false fortunetelling that led to the suicide of one of its members and her son. Despite protestations from RK and the police

⁴² RK’s own archival materials corroborate Morioka’s account and people within RK pointed me toward Morioka’s work whenever I asked about the Yomiuri Affair.

report on the suicides not containing any mention of RK and finding other causes/motives for the suicides, several newspapers published stories based on the NHK broadcast.

The husband of the deceased had asked Japan's National Bar Association (The Japan Federation of Bar Associations) to investigate RK. After six months of investigation, based almost entirely on testimony from the husband, "the committee's report not only cited the Kōseikai for violations of human rights, but directed them to refrain in the future from all irregularities in its proselytization activities and from all physical and psychological violations of its believers' rights" (Morioka 1994: 284). I address the issue of "human rights" as a means to discipline RK in the next section. Here, suffice it to say that the report was submitted to the Ministry of Education, which oversaw religious organizations, and was subsequently dismissed for lack of evidence. Nonetheless, the press picked up on the report and continued to publish articles disparaging RK. In 1953 alone, Morioka reports that there were ninety-eight newspaper articles and eleven magazine articles published on the incident (ibid.: 284).

Attacks against RK continued, including legal charges brought against the organization in 1954 by a former employee of Yomiuri Shimbun. The person who made the charges had joined RK and filed the lawsuit after only two months as a member. Following the NHK storyline, the accuser stated that RK "employs prophesy and fortune-telling to influence or coerce its believers, causing them

confusion and disrupting the public welfare.” Mirroring claims made against other organizations,⁴³ the accuser also stated that RK took money and labor from its members in a way not befitting a religious organization (ibid.: 285). Shortly after, in 1955, landholders in the area where RK was building portions of their headquarters accused RK of falsifying signatures to make illegal land acquisitions two years earlier. Those landowners brought criminal charges against the organization. Those charges, in addition to all of the negative press and the charges brought by the former Yomiuri employee, garnered attention from the Yomiuri Shimbun, who put together a team of “about ten reporters” to report on RK (ibid. 289).

That team published a long stream of articles against RK from late January to May of 1956. The articles claimed that RK was involved in illegal activities and that they were extreme in their daily practices and proselytization efforts. Following these articles, several committees in the House of Representatives started investigations into RK and related institutions, such as RK’s hospital. They looked into issues of land acquisition, public health, and human rights violations.

RK and its leaders were never convicted of wrongdoing or directly penalized.⁴⁴ One of the Yomiuri reporters assigned to the case even offered a confession, writing, “Although the Risshō Kōseikai campaign should logically have

⁴³ For details, see Inoue et al. 1994: 506-515

⁴⁴ They did, however, settle the charge brought by the former Yomiuri employee outside of court. The settlement stipulated that that person got a governing role within RK.

commenced only after we had investi-gated the organization from the inside, we were sent in as spies when things were already under way,” and, “Frankly speaking, the anti-Risshō Kōseikai campaign was unable either to reveal it as a bogus religion or to weaken it and cause its collapse” (qtd. in Morioka 1994: 291).⁴⁵

However, several of the committees ambiguously stated that they had found evidence of superstitious and inappropriate activities among “new religions” and, in some instances, RK specifically. Though unable to prove their charges, they threatened RK. Using language reminiscent of wartime religious suppression, the committees reported that the government could disband RK or other “new religions” if they violated human rights or disrupted public welfare. The Committee on Judicial Affairs even passed a resolution saying that “new religions” should be more closely monitored in order to protect the human rights of citizens (Morioka 1994: 296-300). RK arguably took that resolution more seriously than other branches of the government, eventually becoming a champion of human rights worldwide.

Human rights as a source of separation

When I was talking to a current staff member at RK’s research institute about the Yomiuri Affair, he smiled. “The founder used to refer to Yomiuri Shimbun as ‘Yomiuri Bodhisattva,’ [which is a compassionate, enlightened being]. He was

⁴⁵ After review, the reporters connected with the case were demoted (Morioka 1994: 300).

thankful to them for teaching us various things and making us even better.”

Another member was sitting with us and added, “But be careful with your theory.

That’s not where our compassion came from even though it was a big event for us.

But compassion is our teaching and we try to actualize it in our lives.”

There is no doubt that members of RK had been devoted to compassion before the Yomiuri Affair, and the founder’s response to the affair is a sign of that.

However, the numerous attacks on the organization drew a clearer line between self and other than had previously existed. The attacks also shifted the emphasis

and, to some degree, meaning of compassion. RK still worked hard to offering solutions for members’ life problems, but on an institutional scale, more activity

became oriented toward selfless giving without any expectation of directly

expanding membership. The importance of compassion and small shifts in the

practice of that compassion are clearly expressed in the founder’s written

message to members after the Yomiuri Affair:

1 Members seem to be taking the recent criticism of the society quite seriously, but if we constantly devote our attention to achieving true faith then there is no need for worry.

2 Giving rise to anger over unfounded news reports is not a response worthy of a bodhisattva. Times of trouble are the best occasion to examine oneself and determine whether or not one is truly free of selfish desire. Proselytization for the sake of helping others is fine, but are we certain our activities are not motivated in part by a desire to promote the growth of the organization to which we belong?

3 When the financial accounts of the Risshō Kōseikai have been thoroughly examined and it becomes known that we have engaged

in no wrongdoing, then the true worth of the society will come to the attention of a large number of nonmembers. This is a wonderful opportunity to have just now, with the Great Sacred Hall project before us.

{Kosei [April] 1956: 6-12 qtd. in Morioka 1994: 294)

It is clear that the large-scale attacks on RK and the continued threat of legal action for any “human rights violation” motivated RK to emphasize “helping others” over “a desire to promote the growth of the organization.” That emphasis was not focused only on intentions, but also on finances. Even in that early response, then, it is possible to see the kernel of Mr. Chishiki’s comment that RK’s proselytization works to spread teachings rather than the organization and that even if RK perishes as an organized religion, their efforts will have been worth it so long as the teachings endure.

Significantly, the separation between self and other that eventually led to a separation between RK as an organization and RK as teachings occurred as the result of threats brought under the name of “human rights” and RK’s desire to protect human rights. Recall, for example, that the National Bar Federation’s warning to RK and report to the Ministry of Education explicitly demanded restraint in RK’s proselytization efforts, which were tied to “physical and psychological violations of its believers’ rights.” While it is not clear what exactly those “rights” were, they served to limit RK’s practice and to define “believers” as physical and psychological entities separate from the group. The limits and demands placed on RK also revolved closely around the social definition of religion. After all, neither

profit-seeking corporations nor so-called “established religions,” some of which made and still make millions of tax-free dollars from tourism and the sale of talismans, were asked to ensure that their social activities were not self-serving and did not violate the rights of consumers, as opposed to “believers,” for example. As critical scholars such as Wendy Brown (2004), Robert Meister (2012), Sally Engle Merry (2003), and Samuel Moyn (2010) have argued, then, human rights discourse is always particular and situated despite its universal aspirations. Its figuration of personhood, religion, independence, and responsibility were used against RK in a way that encouraged RK to turn toward selfless compassion as a source of social legitimacy or, as RK’s founder put it, “true worth.”

Proving “true worth” partially meant being more careful with proselytization and standardizing the understanding that members had of the organization and what they stood for. 1957 marked a new era for RK, which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, was called “The Era of the Manifestation of the Truth” and followed a less organized period called the “Era of Skillful Means.” In addition to the organizational shifts that came with that shift, RK created a newspaper and started publishing more documents that were circulated among all registered member families. They also appointed a director of proselytization activities. The director moved back and forth between the headquarters and the local chapters of RK to make sure that all activities were in-line with RK’s policies and practices. There was also even more of an effort than there had been to study and interpret

the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddhist text that is the primary source of RK's teachings. In addition to providing a rich basis for reflecting upon their own practices, a deep understanding of that text could also be used to authorize their group as a religion and defend it from more accusations of being "superstitious" and "cultish."

Bringing together discourses about "human rights" with the circulation of the *Lotus Sutra*, a text that is clearly linked to ongoing Buddhist traditions, RK demonstrated their ability to unify teachings with socially salient issues in-line with governmental interests.⁴⁶ Issuing a regular newspaper unified members' understandings of RK's collective activities and showed them how to make practical connections between RK's texts and political discourses.⁴⁷ However, texts, including newspapers, can be interpreted in many ways, so circulation unto itself was not sufficient to produce an authoritative understanding that could increase RK's social legitimacy. Besides creating more opportunities for ministers and regular members to study together, RK's practice of "running proposals through the organization" (*otooshi*) became more important. Members and employees were still encouraged to take initiative and act on the teachings, but

⁴⁶ In more technical terms, they were able to decontextualize and recontextualize the *Lotus Sutra* and combine it with political discourse, which increased their authority and legitimacy (see Bauman and Briggs 1990; Briggs and Bauman 1992).

⁴⁷ For more on how the circulation of texts contributes to the formation of a public, see Gal 2003; Habermas 1991; Silverstein 2005; Spitulnik 1996; Warner 2005. For insight on how that circulation in a way forms the texts that are circulated, see also Silverstein and Urban 1996.

any proposals for collective action that could reflect on the organization had to be cleared with superiors in the organization before being put into practice. Judging from what people at RK's headquarters have told me, "running proposals through the organization" has become stricter over time and there are more intermediaries between the top ranks of the organization and regular members. The practice does standardize teachings and make people feel like they are a part of the organization, but it also sometimes feels like a barrier to action. It is a barrier, however, that is meant to protect RK and enable RK to be compassionate in a way that respects others while staying true to the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*.

A religious spirit: Creating legitimacy in cooperation

RK's standardization marked a clearer distinction between self and other. To some degree, it also changed the way that the group practiced compassion. The circulation of texts was limited to member households and only members — particularly staff members — had to "pass things through the organization." People who were not included in that circulation of texts, words, and ideas were still considered "not-yet members." However, they were also recognized as "non-members" whose differences needed to be respected, particularly when they were already practicing members of some other religious tradition.

On an individual scale, that respect was extended to me during my research. There were several occasions when regular members at local dharma centers would subtly and kindly try to get me to join the group. When they did, however, head ministers or staff members from headquarters would sometimes

step in, telling them that it was important that I remain a non-member so as to provide a different perspective on their activities. My perspective in the majority of those situations was that of a critical scholar and of a secular American Jew, which I was frequently told was highly appreciated.

In turn, I have greatly appreciated their stance and have always enjoyed working with them. In that sense, their strategy has certainly worked. Even on this small scale, however, it is not clear that their practice is sustainable. RK has at times purchased meals for me and given me small gifts, such as a beautiful fountain pen from the current president, who is the son of the founder. In the course of my research I have been of some use to them, doing some work as a translator, interpreter, editor, and critic. I have also made some good friends there, trust the organization, and in some contexts might lend them an appearance of credibility. Additionally, my academic publications might bring them a minimal amount of attention. However, I am not a member, do not contribute any money to the group, and do not proselytize for them.

On a grander scale, since the late 1960s, many of RK's relations have worked similarly to their relationship with me. That is when they turned their attention to largely anonymous work to help "society" (*shaka*). Their view of "society" was not limited to the nation-state of Japan. Much of RK's social work is international, which has been an important aspect of overcoming their categorization as a "new religion" to achieve social legitimacy.

RK's turn outside of Japan started in 1958, when the founder and co-founder took a two-and-a-half-month-long trip through South and North America. Their first stop was Brazil, where they went with other cultural representatives of Japan to attend a festival co-organized by the Brazilian and Japanese governments to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of Japanese immigrants there (Niwano 1989: 94). There, the founder noted the ethnic and cultural diversity of Brazil, took note of aspects of Catholic churches and practice that he wanted to incorporate into RK's new building at headquarters, and commented on how a general lack of religious diversity there meant that "people therefore must often yield to Catholic authority, and many of the ceremonies of the church have become excessively formalized" (ibid. 96). That was contrasted with RK's situation, which Niwano likened to the experience of immigrants, writing:

It took the Japanese immigrants fifty years to establish a reputation for industry and good faith. It remains to be seen how long it will take Kosei-kai to be properly understood by society and the world. But my knowledge of the experiences of the immigrants made me deeply aware of the need for us to believe that the day will come when we are understood and that we must neither hurry nor be slow, but must walk together boldly and in a spirit of unity. (ibid. 95)

Seeing such diversity and the influence of the Catholic Church while also being struck by a sense of unity underlying vast economic and historical differences between people in Brazil, the founder noted that, "The only thing that crosses all boundaries of nation and race to bind the hearts of human beings together is religion" (ibid. 96). He held on to that thought as he travelled through

Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, and the United States.

The trip was not only a matter of the world influencing RK or, more broadly, the Americas influencing Japan. On the way to Brazil and on the way back to Japan from the United States, the founder and co-founder stopped in Hawaii. There, they met with Oozaki Tomoko, a woman who had been introduced to RK by a teacher in Japan when she was young and who now lived in Hawaii. That meeting set the stage for the establishment of an official RK branch in Hawaii. Upon arriving back in Japan, the founder showed video from Hawaii to members there (Morioka 1989: 326), and RK's extension into foreign countries became an exciting prospect for the group. The combination of taking elements of Christianity and spreading the organization to other countries embodied what RK saw as the universal nature of religion and of Buddhist teachings.

However, the ways that universality could be expressed were limited, as was the practicality of spreading RK. As it says in a section on the founder's work toward world peace through religious cooperation during the 1960s and '70s in RK's official history:

We are all one ... and more people are recognizing that the spirit of Buddhism can save humanity (*saishūteki ni ha jinrui wo sukū mono ha Bukkyō seishin de aru*) ... The previous way of saving people was to save individuals. If all individuals were saved, then the world would naturally be saved. However, as a practical matter, saving the more than three billion people of the world one-by-one is impossible. So, in order to truly live out the Buddhist Way ... it is necessary to develop our faith on the level of society [as distinct

from a collective of individuals]⁴⁸ and for our members to be active in society (*dōshitemo shinkō no shakaiteki tenkai to shinkōsha no shakai katsudō ga hitsuyō fukaketsu to naru*). (RK 1983: 357-358)

In other words, not direct proselytization but rather religious cooperation could best accomplish RK's actualization of Buddhist teachings. Within Japan, RK had been cooperating with other "new religions" since 1951, when they became a founding member of the Union of New Religious Organizations in Japan (*Kōekizaidanhōjin Shin nihon shūkyō dantai rengō kai*). That Union gave voice to a category of groups that were facing social and legal difficulties, such as those that RK faced with the Yomiuri Affair, despite often wanting to contribute meaningfully to the lives of their members and Japanese society.

The relationships that RK built within the Union later helped them to establish relationships with "established religions." In 1952, the Union became a part of the Japan Religions League, which was primarily composed of the "established religions" belonging to Buddhist, Shintō, and Christian traditions. Being associated with those religions allowed RK to be more active on a global stage. Internationally, they worked toward religious cooperation on matters of human rights and world peace, which were causes that gave them a great boost in social legitimacy and helped to show that they were not the human rights violators that the press had earlier made them out to be.

RK's work toward international cooperation started in 1963, when the

⁴⁸ Elsewhere in the history, RK writes of this as "society itself" or "society per se" (*shakai sono mono*).

founder joined a delegation of religious leaders from Japan who were opposed to nuclear weapons. The group spoke from the position of being from the only nation to be attacked with a nuclear bomb and placed themselves on the forefront of Cold War diplomacy. They “travelled for forty days and went to ten different nations, including the United States, England, and the Soviet Union” (Niwano 1989: 104). During the trip, members of the Japanese delegation had a chance to talk with each other about issues related to their respective religions. Those conversations helped to set the stage for future interactions between RK and other sects.

While creating new, meaningful relationships among each other, the delegation met with many international religious and political leaders, including U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations at the time. However, it was the first stop on the trip, Rome, that would turn out to be the most significant stop for RK. While there, the delegation had an audience with Pope Paul VI. They presented to him proposals to ban nuclear weapons and “through the peaceful utilization of atomic power based on international cooperation, to overcome the unequal distribution of wealth and to promote the welfare of all the peoples of the world” (ibid. 105).

Despite the inherently political and economic nature of the last portion of the proposal, and despite the Vatican and RK’s respective economic means, the founder notes that “The man of religion is neither a politician nor an economic authority. ... Religion must plant courage and the hope to live in peace in the

hearts of its followers. I have always insisted that the man of religious faith must base his thoughts and actions on the essential nature of religion and must then persist in striving to bring about peace” (ibid. 105). From the first move to cooperate on an international scale, then, RK accepted a definition of religion that was to some degree separated from the forms of serving self-interest that we call “politics” and “economics.”

Putting those boundaries or constraints on “religious” activity eventually led to some of the financial and institutional difficulties that RK was facing when I did my fieldwork. At the same time, however, those boundaries created great opportunities for RK and made cooperation — or, at least, dialogue — with other religious and political groups easier.

In 1965, just two years after joining the delegation of religions opposed to nuclear weapons, RK was invited to attend the Second Vatican Council. As Niwano writes in his autobiography, “It was the first time in the history of the Catholic Church that a member of another faith had been invited to participate in an assembly of its leaders” (118). RK frequently cites this event on their website, in their publications, and in sermons about topics ranging from the importance of openness and cooperation to those about hard work and humbleness.

The Second Vatican Council was officially opened by Pope John XXIII. He had issued a cyclical entitled *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) in 1963. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, the cyclical called for nuclear disarmament and

emphasized the importance of human rights and the United Nations. Under Pope Paul VI, who succeeded John XXIII, the Council took a similar route, attempting to orient the Catholic Church toward peace, ecumenicism, and internationalism by, for example, decrying modern warfare and moving to provide its texts in local languages. It also opened up cooperation with other religious traditions, as evidenced by RK's presence as a representative of Japanese Buddhism.

The Council and the Pope, who shook the founder's hand and told him that he respected his work toward religious cooperation, deeply inspired Niwano. And Niwano's having attended the Council inspired members in Japan. It also helped to establish RK's legitimacy. Reporters met with Niwano when he arrived back in Japan and the story of his meeting the Pope spread among religious leaders within Japan. The spread of that story, in turn, created more opportunities for cooperation within and beyond Japan's national borders.

Bound to others: From cooperation to selfless giving

RK's cooperation with other organizations took two major forms. One, the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), was oriented toward global disarmament, development, and human rights. The other was called *Akarui Shakai Tsukuri Undō* or The Brighter Society Movement. It was meant to spread peace and compassion in practical ways within Japan. From the beginning, both of those efforts have been explicitly opposed to material gain and materialism that do not serve compassionate ends. They have also been presented as extending from the

solid base that RK built up with standardization.

Those two tendencies are nicely captured in a statement that the founder made in the January 1967 issue of RK's periodical, *Kōsei*, where he wrote, "Everyone is so dazzled and blinded by the shiny goods of material civilization that we have fallen into a time of temporary confusion. However, the people of this country will certainly open their eyes. Opening their eyes is our mission. ... Until now, we have been doing the necessary work to prepare for this restoration of people's collective faith. ... Our emphasis last year on 'fulfilling the faith' (*shinkō no jūjitsu*) was partially about setting the groundwork for this. Now we can finally extend this into society."

Fulfilling the faith meant stepping beyond the faith. The first meeting of the WCRP took place in Kyoto in October 1970. There were more than one-thousand attendees and 219 delegates from 39 nations. Representatives included "Bahai, Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jew, Muslim, Shintoist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and others" (Jack 1973: ix). Together, with Niwano serving as one of two chairmen of the conference, they determined seven points of unity among them:

A conviction of the fundamental unity of the human family, and the equality and dignity of all human beings;

A sense of the sacredness of the individual person and his [sic.] conscience;

A sense of the value of human community;

A realization that might is not right; that human power is not self-sufficient and absolute;

A belief that love, compassion, selflessness, and the force of inner truthfulness and of the spirit have ultimately greater power than hate, enmity, and self-interest;

A sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor and the oppressed as against the rich and the oppressors; and

A profound hope that good will finally prevail

Those commonalities were put into a declaration, which also stated, “We believe that we have a duty transcending sectarian limits to co-operate with those outside the historic religions who share our desire for peace” (Jack 1973: xi). For the WCRP, that most directly meant support for the U.N., which granted the group consultative status in 1973. For RK, too, that meant support for the U.N., but it also meant working on the Brighter Society Movement.

RK organized and founded the Brighter Society Movement in 1969 after meetings were conducted with mayors and local governments around Japan, members in various chapters of RK, and welfare organizations working on issues such as poverty, women’s rights, and education. Members of the movement organize presentations, demonstrations, and community events. They also clean streets and train stations and do other types of volunteer labor. In their early years, participants in the Brighter Society Movement sought to prevent the formation of something that sounds like what is currently called Japan’s “relationless society.” In the words of Niwano when reflecting on the founding of the movement:

The cities are overcrowded; there are too many automobiles on the roads; wickedness is rife; and all kinds of unpleasant incidents occur. One of the most startling manifestations of our social ills is certainly the isolation and indifference that separate people from each other.

Five years ago, a leading newspaper carried an article stating that an unmarried man had died in his home and that it had been a week before anyone had found his body. Two years ago, a middle-aged woman died in her home; and it was eight days before anyone discovered her. Incidents of this kind show the extent to which members of society are indifferent to each other. But the worst that I have heard was this: in June 1975, a corpse was discovered in a house; the person had been dead for two years.

People who remove themselves entirely from their neighbors and exchange words with them only when they play their television sets too loud or when their houses block the sunlight pay no attention to the elderly person who has not been seen recently or to the overflowing mailbox suggesting that something is preventing the person from collecting his letters. I am deeply distressed to see that, while I continue my travels in the name of peace and international religious cooperation, society at home is becoming increasingly selfish and isolationist. (Niwano 1989: 136)

The Brighter Society Movement was conceived and functioned in opposition to those “increasingly selfish and isolationist” tendencies. It tied together a wide variety of people in order to improve society and to establish RK’s social legitimacy, albeit at a cost. RK quickly stood aside and got a series of prominent men to serve as public figureheads of the movement. The first to serve was Maeda Yoshinori, a journalist and the vice-chairman of NHK, the public broadcasting company that had initiated attacks on RK in the 1950s. He was followed by Ibuka Masaru, the co-founder of Sony, Fukuda Takeo, the Prime Minister of Japan from 1976-1978, and Ishihara Shintaro, who was the Governor of

Tokyo from 1999-2012.

RK quietly worked behind the scenes to bring the movement together and provided the majority of funding and volunteers to keep it going. They still do. Their work garners them recognition from government leaders, whom I have personally seen visit RK to ask for support and policy preferences. However, residents of the cities, towns, and villages that the movement tries to serve do not often know that RK is doing anything for them. As one staff member of RK told me, “The Brighter Society Movement is not recognizable as being associated with RK. To be honest, we don’t always know what’s going on with it either and it has become really dispersed. At the same time, though, our members do still do most of the work. ... Our founder felt that cooperation was really important and we deeply agree. We try to actualize his wishes, but a lot of our ‘cooperation’ with other religions and with government bodies is still mostly one-sided. Well, it’s not equal. We wish it was. We need it to be.”

That need stems from being unable to shoulder the financial burden of doing work for society at large without using that work for the purposes of proselytization. From the booming 1960s until the early 1990s, RK was able to sustain large amounts of giving, which also gave members a sense of meaning and purpose. As one member at a dharma center in Tokyo told me, “I’m really proud of our work worldwide and here in Japan. I like giving money because I know that makes me a part of good projects that we are doing even though I can’t

go there myself, like when we donate blankets in Africa, for example.”

The Brighter Society Movement and RK’s participation in the WCRP gave rise to and entailed many smaller social projects. Notable among those projects are the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, participation in the International Association for Religious Freedom, establishing a Niwano Peace Foundation and Peace Prize, the blanket donation program that the member told me about, a “donate a meal movement,” policy outreach to politicians, trips to the Philippines, Vietnam, and other countries involved in past or contemporary wars and violence that RK wanted to help stop or heal wounds from. In addition to making frequent donations, RK maintains or provides permanent, paid staff members for each of those projects. In several cases, they also provide significant office space in Tokyo and elsewhere for them, publish periodicals, pamphlets, and books, and pay for international and domestic transportation so that people can meet each other face-to-face in order to connect and solve social problems.

Over the years, I have seen and participated in many examples of RK’s selfless giving. As programs funded by RK and the WCRP, parts II and III of this dissertation are among those examples. Two other examples from my fieldwork with RK between 2012 and 2017 stood out as exemplars of the way that RK has built up trusting, meaningful relationships that spread its teachings in a very general way without sustaining RK as an organization. The first of those was a Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei, an inter religious gather of prayer for world

peace associated with the WCRP (*Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto: Sekai Heiwa Inori no Tsudoi*). The second was a meeting of elected government officials from all over Japan that took place at RK's headquarters in Tokyo.

I attended the Religious Summit in 2012. It took place mostly at the Kyoto International Conference Center and was attended by representatives from the Vatican, the Anglican Church, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Religious Affairs, various Buddhist groups, and others totaling about 1200 religious leaders from around the world. The final portion took place on Mt. Hiei, the headquarters of the Tendai Buddhist sect in Japan, which gave rise to many of the other Buddhist sects in Japan and is one of the strongest representatives of "established religion" in the country. The first world summit to take place on Mt. Hiei occurred in 1987. It attracted 600 active participants who wanted to conduct "religious diplomacy" to work toward world peace "for generations to come" (<http://www.tendai.or.jp/summit/history/summary00.html> accessed 7/20/2019). The 2012 meeting was the 25th anniversary of the first summit and attracted a fair amount of media attention.

A senior member of RK and I provided real-time interpretation for members of the press and to attendees, including the Secretary General of the WCRP. Earlier, a team of people from RK's external affairs division and I had transported and arranged chairs, helped to prepare waiting rooms, written press releases, and provided transportation and guidance to people coming from abroad to Mt. Hiei.

RK's team members were proud of what they were able to do to make such an important and prestigious event a success. One of the team leaders told me, "We have been working with the Tendai sect for a long time. We have always kept our promises and they know that we work hard for world peace. Like that, we build up trust over time, so we can cooperate on things like this. ... We like to work as backstage hands to help others to accomplish their goals instead of stand in front and just say what we want."

RK certainly did facilitate other people achieving their respective goals during the summit. However, many people coming from abroad did not know the extent to which RK had done the preparation for the event or provided the labor that kept the event running smoothly. No one advertised RK or expressed particular thanks to RK. They received an equal amount of attention as most of the other groups present, which is how they wanted it. The only group that got much more attention was the Tendai sect, since the event was happening on their holy mountain and involved a small tour around some portions of the impressive temple on the mountain. In the case of the summit, then, RK gained trust and a sense of social legitimacy by propping up a wealthier, more famous, and more broadly accepted religious organization.

The meeting of elected government officials at RK's headquarters in 2012 was quite different from the summit. It took place in two of RK's impressive buildings and started with the chairman of RK reading a speech written by the

current president and leader of RK, Niwano Nichiko, the founder's son. The speech presented RK as being, in a way, the same as the politicians in the room. "We are both working to improve society. We are both trying to do good things for people and for the country," it said. The majority of the 366 attendees were not particularly religious and RK did not ask them to be. RK did not even make specific demands of them. Instead, they set the stage for them to work out society's pressing problems, including nuclear power and the importance of getting aid to disaster-stricken areas in the Northeast. In order to emphasize the pressing nature of aid work, they had Ms. Kiyama Keiko, the leader of Japan Emergencies NGOs (JEN), which is the largest organization of Japanese NGOs, give a presentation on what was being done to help people in the Northeast. After that speech, attendees left the main hall and RK yielded the conversation to them.

Along with other staff members of RK, I helped to prepare about thirty small rooms for the politicians to meet in. We made and arranged signs listing the people who would be meeting in each room, which were organized based on region. We put drinks in each room and provided water to people as they walked by. And, later, we set up and cleaned up a ballroom with tables, chairs, and place settings while cooks made massive amounts of food. What we did not do was make any sort of direct policy proposal or other demands of the people present. At the end of the night, before people retreated to the dorms at RK where they would drink late into the night, RK reminded attendees that "we are all riding on the same

vehicle. In other words, we are all in this together.”⁴⁹

Conclusion: Humanitarian politics and the actualization of self in self's demise

Scholars and practitioners such as the International Red Cross or even, occasionally, RK, present human rights and humanitarianism as apolitical. Especially in the case of humanitarianism, interventions are made on behalf of the basic needs of humanity, needs that everyone can ostensibly agree upon. Some critical scholars have even gone so far as to call humanitarianism a form of anti-politics (Fassin 2012; Ferguson 1990; Hale 2002; Ticktin 2011). “Anti-politics” here means the presentation and application of quick-fix solutions imbued with historically particular notions of humanity, cooperation, and international relations to displace and prevent struggles for economic, political, and historical justice. When those types of struggles are elided, what remains is a form of pluralism that hardly resembles politics at all insofar as politics entails substantive difference. As Kabir Tambar succinctly puts it in his work on pluralism in Turkey, “Politics, in this framing, is the field of action that transcends the pluralities that would otherwise fracture a polity” (2014:1).

RK’s political strategy is both a cause and effect of that framing of politics. Unlike the violence and exclusion that are often the primary ways by which pluralities are “transcended,” RK’s strategy is based on compassion. They work toward world peace and the expansion of human rights. However, in enacting

⁴⁹ This is based on the Mahayana Buddhist teaching of the “one vehicle” or “great vehicle,” which teaches the interdependence of all things.

compassion rather than violence, RK binds themselves to that frame in a way that slowly depletes their resources. In this case, compassion moves proponents of pluralism to erase their own difference rather than the differences of others in order to accomplish unity. That self-defeating movement, at least in the case of RK, stemmed from a desire to help “society *per se*” (*shakai sono mono*) combined with a desire to garner social legitimacy after being attacked by the Japanese government and the press. In a very different setting, then, it raises the same questions as Tambar raises in relation to the spread of pluralism in Turkey, even among non-liberal groups; namely, “What do contemporary formations of pluralism owe to the history of political violence they are otherwise meant to transcend? What forms of power animate the pluralist political subject?” (2014: 8-9).

A history of RK’s political strategy and the concomitant depletion of their resources reveals a more nuanced picture of the effects of the discourses of human rights and humanitarianism on its proponents than one based on the notion of anti-politics, albeit one in line with that general framing.⁵⁰ The charge of “human rights violations” against RK drew a clear distinction between self and other that became the basis of many of their compassionate humanitarian activities. In this case, neither human rights discourse nor humanitarianism offered simple solutions to problems in a already well-formed world. Rather, the government used the claim

⁵⁰ Far more work has been done on the effects of human rights and humanitarianism on its supposed recipients than its proponents. Some recent exceptions to that trend include Lea 2008; Malkki 2015; Watanabe 2019.

of violations to create the social units and categories that post-war liberalism presupposed. In order to prevent their own eradication in a way that was in line with their aspirations, RK focused on world peace, compassion, cooperation and self-effacement. Practicing humanitarianism and pluralism allowed them to present themselves as a non-threatening exemplar of the category of religion and unite with more established groups. So while compassion is almost always conceived of as a hierarchical relation between a giver and a receiver (Berlant 2004), a broader historical perspective shows that givers of compassion sometimes use compassion to create social legitimacy from a position of weakness. That weak position, in turn, might make it easier for the compassionate party to imagine that they could potentially fall into the same position as the sufferer, which further encourages compassionate engagement with a sufferer rather than harsh criticism of that same person (Nussbaum 1996).

The government's use of human rights discourse to separate RK from non-members set the basis for the RK's split between a self and an other called "society" and "the world" that could be served. The particular way that the government and press attacked RK also had an enduring effect. Other than the founder and a select few individuals who were imbricated in the claims of superstitious fortunetelling, members of RK were not attacked. Rather, RK was attacked as a fraudulent organization. Unlike in many cases of ethnic, racial, or some religious violence carried out by governments, attacking the mass unit did

not entail attacking all of its members, who were seen and see themselves as practitioners or believers rather than essentially, a-historically marked people. That, in turn, allowed for a separation of “true teachings” from the running of the organization. That separation, which occurred alongside the shifts in organization that I detailed in chapter one and also the separation of self and other, is indexed by RK’s distinction between the historical periods of the “Era of Skillful Means” and “The Era of the Manifestation/Revelation of Truth,” which started in 1957.

Manifesting the truth of the teachings undoubtedly took on a form that was and is beneficial to the Japanese government. RK provides social services that the government does not pay for, local governments sometimes use RK’s facilities for meetings or as designated emergency shelters, and RK has served as a representative of a peace-seeking Japan in U.N. meetings and numerous projects worldwide. As a part of the ongoing formation of the U.N., the Cold War, and Japan’s rapid economic growth, RK was able to bolster Japan’s international diplomacy, sometimes explicitly. However, even when functioning as a humanitarian group, RK is not merely an extension of the state or a simpleminded proponent of development, which spreads the global reach of exploitative capitalist infrastructures and epistemologies (compare Escobar 1995; Fisher 1997).

Stated in a more psychological idiom, they are not what Christopher Lasch (1984) calls a “minimal self,” which is a self under threat that can be characterized by “our emotional disengagement, our reluctance to make long-term emotional

commitments, our sense of powerlessness and victimization” and an inability to fully distinguish the self from its surroundings (18-19). On the contrary, leaders of RK are proud of the organization and confident enough to make sacrifices on behalf of a future that they feel could be brighter than the present, even if RK is not there to enjoy it. They are willing to perish to honor their long-term commitments to others so long as those commitments serve peace and human rights — the things they were accused of violating in the 1950s. In fact, they are so committed that they recognize that their work is ongoing and has no clear end, so it is greater than just their organization (RK 1983: 362).⁵¹

The means by which they attempt to fulfill their promises are explicitly political, but political in a way that nonetheless fits the frame described by Tambar above. That frame is based on avoiding conflict in order to secure similarity. RK’s political strategy is to serve as a “backstage worker” who sets the stage for others to work out problems. For them, this is the work of spreading the teachings. After all, if they can get others to act out of compassion and a sense of interconnectedness, then they have done their job.

Ironically, however, their stance undermines their ability to continue to function as an organization, which may threaten their long-term ability to perpetuate the teachings, especially when those teachings are interpreted more strictly as the founder’s interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*. That, in turn, takes some

⁵¹ I address the relation of the lack of a clear end to the ability to endure in chapter six.

joy out of practice for some members, who remember times of growth and less of a distinction between self and other. So rather than applaud RK's altruism — which is worth applauding — I prefer to point out that altruism is a bind that arises out of historically situated self-sacrifice that is only possible once a particular, historical self has been divided from an other. This bind only becomes visible without universal abstractions. Take, for example, Hegel's argument in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "...the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself" (1977[1807]). While some members of RK might agree with this and it is certainly a pattern that can be seen in some aspects of social life (for example, if we accomplish world peace, then there will be no need for peace organizations), it obscures the ways that such efforts are slowly vitiated in their own efforts to overcome the ways they are governed.

In the next chapter, I look at this same dynamic in relation to suffering and the formation of the category of religion in Japan. I do so by offering a glimpse of a training program for interfaith chaplains that is partially funded by RK and the WCRP. In a sense, that program brings together some of the arguments made in chapter one and in this chapter and places them in a new light. In chapter 1, I presented an argument about how generals such as "community" can undermine the particulars out of which they arise, such as RK's social relations. In this

chapter, I looked at how compassion came into being as a relation that contributes to the long-term inability to sustain a form (or general) that supports a “teaching” or, as RK’s founder earlier put it, a Buddhist spirit (*Bukkyō seishin*). In the next chapter, I show that self-alienation and destruction are not limited to generals that, in a sense, precede particulars. With the chaplains, I present what is, in some ways, an opposite case — that of particulars working to produce a general that, as it turns out, negates them in the process of its formation. In other words, I look at how particulars can overcome themselves in order to create new generals. More specifically, I look at what the chaplains themselves call “religion overcoming religions.”

Part II

Chapter 3: Religion overcoming religions: Suffering, secularism, and the training of interfaith chaplains in Japan

Rev. Wakamatsu is a Buddhist priest from a temple in a rural part of Japan. I met him in 2016 at a training course for interfaith chaplains (*rinshō shūkyō-shi*), a new type of religious worker that emerged after the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in the northeastern part of the country. During the three-month-long training, religious professionals learn techniques for providing “care for the heart” (*kokoro no kea*) in “public places” such as hospitals and government-run temporary housing units in disaster-stricken areas. When I asked Rev. Wakamatsu how he planned to apply those techniques, however, he took pause. Departing from his usual confidence, he answered, “I don’t know how I’m going to balance being an interfaith chaplain with the work I do at my temple.” Elaborating on this impasse, he said, “I think interfaith chaplaincy is an important way for us to connect with society, and it’s a way for me to pay back the community for all the years that they supported us with donations for funerary services, but it doesn’t bring in new parishioners or money.”

For priests like Rev. Wakamatsu, parishioners and money are in short supply and high demand. Japan’s fertility rate is so low and so many people are fleeing non-urban centers that 35.6 percent of all registered religious entities in Japan are located in cities, towns, and villages that might not exist twenty-five years from now (Ukai 2015: 163, 241; see also Reader 2012). Many temples and churches are already in dire financial straits. Facing obsolescence, Buddhist priests have been experimenting with various ways to keep their temples afloat (Nelson 2013; Ueda 2004). Experimentation carries risks, however, and attempts by struggling priests to generate income by offering “hire-a-monk” services through Amazon, for example, have met with resistance from wealthy sect leaders. Sect leaders and struggling priests are unified in their concern that commodification

would transform the nature of payments to priests from “donations” (*ofuse*) that carry karmic value into pure monetary exchanges, thus weakening the effect of the services offered. And my informants have told me that sect leaders are concerned that such clear commodification of religious services could annul sects’ tax-exempt status.

Devastated by demographic shifts and unable or unwilling to commoditize their religious practices, chaplains have come together to engage suffering and death as an effort to breathe life back into their struggling traditions. As Rev. Wakamatsu’s dilemma suggests, however, gathering around suffering to reinvigorate religions has transformed religion itself. Moving outside of their temples into public spaces often funded by and run by the government to pay back communities has driven a wedge between the practice of compassion and the practice of maintaining the temples that house many of Japan’s religious activities.

Focusing on suffering after the 2011 disasters also had its benefits. It allowed chaplains to move beyond the constraints of their sects and engage the world as expressions of what Casanova (1994) calls “public religion.” “Refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them” (Casanova 1994: 5), religious professionals in the disaster area gained access to municipal funeral halls and temporary housing complexes. Chaplains’ compassionate work challenged the image that many people in Japan have of Buddhism as a moribund tradition

surviving only because of its historical ties to funerals. It also allowed chaplains to effectively respond to critiques aimed at them for not providing adequate services after a large earthquake in Kobe in 1995. Indeed, their public engagement with suffering has garnered them recognition from scholars, news reporters, and their “clients” (McLaughlin 2016). Their activities were frequently a topic of conversation at the University of Tokyo, where I was a visiting foreign researcher in 2015-16, and at some of the sites in disaster-stricken areas where I was conducting fieldwork on the relationship between compassion and loneliness. Such social recognition did not come easily, however.

The desire to provide compassionate services to suffering people motivated chaplains to engage with the Japanese government on the government’s own terms. Government officials adhered to strict interpretations of Japan’s constitutional division between church and state after the disasters, which in Japan generally means precluding activity conducted by any particular religion in taxpayer-funded spaces. Those officials required religious professionals working in public spaces to suppress “religious sounding speech,” “prayer,” or anything that anyone could interpret as an effort to evangelize. As a result, chaplains were compelled to translate their traditions into the “universally accessible language” of suffering and compassion in order to fulfill their social obligations after the 2011 disasters.

This type of translation is a defining characteristic of secular pluralism and

forms of liberalism based on notions of the universal human, and is advocated for by thinkers ranging from Habermas (2011) to Rawls (2001). In practice, translating the teachings and words of particular religions into the language of suffering and compassion forced chaplains to transform their respective religious traditions into private motives. Without access to their own words, chaplains could not spread religion as a means to salvation, let alone a mode of governance. “Universalizing” their language also transformed the existence of the chaplains themselves.

Motivated by Buddhist and Christian teachings that they could not outwardly express, chaplains cooperated as “religious professionals” in general rather than as practitioners of any particular religion in order to enter public spaces after the disasters. As I will show, this deprived chaplains of their institutional authority and transformed them into “human beings.”

In rendering themselves into unmarked “human beings” and in translating their words and concepts into the language of compassion and suffering, chaplains accepted and (re)produced the concepts, practices, and sensibilities that provide a basis for “the distinction between private reason and public principle... [and] the placing of religion in the former,” a hallmark of secularist governance (Asad 2003: 8). Importantly, this formation of the secular in chaplains’ practice arose not from the erasure of religion in public life. To the contrary, it arose from the appearance of a type of public religion focused on suffering and compassion (cf. Isomae 2014). Chaplains aptly referred to this form of religion as “religion

overcoming religions” (*shūkyō wo koeta shūkyō*).

This chapter is about the creation and practice of that form of religion, which was institutionalized in the training course for chaplains that Rev. Wakamatsu was attending. I was able to participate in and observe that training largely due to its being situated in a public university. The training is open to scholars for observation, and participants are made aware that what they are doing will be observed and potentially analyzed. For me, the training provided not only a unique perspective on the relationship between religion-in-general and secularism in Japan, but also useful techniques that I could use at other field sites where I myself had to engage the suffering of victims of the 2011 disasters. Due to its usefulness and the camaraderie I felt with various administrators of the program, I attended two of the trainings and have maintained relationships with many of the participants.

In what follows, I work through three moments of chaplains’ engagement with suffering and provide a history of the relationship between compassion, Buddhism, and governance in Japan. I do so in response to Agrama’s (2012) provocative question, “How does secularism [as a political doctrine] work to support or undermine the concepts, sensibilities, assumptions, and behaviors of the secular that it draws and depends upon?” (2; see also Mahmood 2016). I argue that (1) gathering around suffering, (2) suppressing religious differences in order to recognize suffering, and (3) sharing suffering are central to the way that

secularism motivates religious professionals to actively produce a split between a general form of religion and the work of particular religions. This split, in turn, actualizes the secular division between the public and private and makes it difficult for religious professionals such as Rev. Wakamatsu to maintain their particular traditions, even while those professionals strive to make their respective traditions relevant to society.

Gathering around suffering and the emergence of religiosity

On March 11, 2011, the fourth largest earthquake in recorded history and a 133-foot-high tsunami that ravaged areas up to six miles inland left thousands of bodies strewn throughout the coastal cities of Tōhoku, Japan. For the sake of the living and dead alike, those deceased friends, family members, and once-familiar faces needed to be treated with dignity and respect.⁵²

A history of association with death and funerals made religious professionals some of the people most capable of providing that dignity and respect. Just four days after the disaster struck, Nakamura Mizuki, the administrative head of the Sendai City Buddhist Association, went to a municipal funeral hall. Conditions were hectic. Many city workers and religious professionals had themselves suffered great losses, and after the disaster bodies were being cremated without the customary rituals. Seeing this, Rev. Nakamura suggested to

⁵² See Takahashi 2016 for an ethnographic account of how religious specialists dealt with hauntings that occurred when the dead were not treated to culturally appropriate rituals. See also Takahashi 2014 for the importance of these activities in relation to multiple kinds of care for survivors.

the government employee in charge of the funeral hall that religious volunteers could come to chant sutras and offer prayers when appropriate. Despite the circumstances, the government employees running the funeral hall balked at the prospect of violating the separation of religion and state mandated by the Constitution of Japan.

The earthquake and tsunami, however, had not respected the man-made boundaries between religion and state or between religions. No particular religion's followers were spared, and the identifiable corpses that came into the municipal funeral hall came from different sects. In many cases, it was impossible to identify the religious affiliation of the deceased, leading Sendai city employees to avoid funeral rites altogether.⁵³ According to Takahashi Etsudō, a Sōtō Zen priest who has appeared in television programs and books for his work as an interfaith chaplain, "The indiscriminate and sudden way that the earthquake and tsunami took people's lives and the inability to distinguish the religious affiliations of the dead created an emphasis on religiosity more than on any particular religion immediately after the disasters."

As several scholars have noted, then, it seems that some historically specific forms of suffering have the potential to establish a basis for universalized notions of the human (Calhoun 2008; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). After the

⁵³ In some other places, government employees asked religious professionals to come to provide ritual services. No such cooperation was officially sanctioned, however, and anecdotal evidence suggests that such cooperation was largely limited to rural areas with smaller populations.

tsunami, death's deletion of difference rendered human bodies alike. As anthropologists working on humanitarianism have astutely argued, however, suffering does not completely erase differences among people (Fassin 2011; Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011). Those anthropologists have focused on how not all suffering is equally valued. Rev. Takahashi's insight, however, suggests something different about differences that endure processes of universalization. Namely, that the particular differences erased in the process of universalizing dead or suffering bodies can take on an abstracted form amongst the still-living. In this case, the violent removal of markers of religious difference on the bodies of the dead gave rise to a quality of "religiosity" that was washed of sectarian particularity.

Answering the call of this religiosity, Rev. Takahashi told me that religious professionals who wished to serve society "as compassionate religious professionals rather than only as members of a particular religion" came together around the bodies and cremated remains of the deceased. Gathering around suffering bound those religious professionals to each other as much as to the dead, allowing them to form "bonds of suffering" (*kuen*) and to become signs of the quality of religiosity rather than signs of their own particular religious traditions (Kitamura 2013).⁵⁴

Cooperating as "religious professionals" in general rather than members of

⁵⁴ In technical terms, they became "qualisigns." See Chumley and Harkness 2013; Munn 1986; Parmentier 1994.

particular religions yielded access to state-run facilities. At the same time that Rev. Nakamura approached the municipal funeral hall, the Sendai Christian Alliance was offering prayers for the dead and grief counseling for survivors. The Buddhist Association and Christian Alliance came together and, with support from the Miyagi Prefectural Council for Communication Between Religions, obtained permission to perform limited funerary rites at the funeral hall in Sendai. According to the “Official Sendai City Record of Activities that Took Place within One Year of the Disasters,” religious professionals were allowed to “chant sutras without remuneration ... as an activity independent of the city government from March 17th until April 30th,” the date that officially marks the end of the “period of chaos” (*konranki*) at the funeral hall.

The lack of remuneration for religious professionals that was stressed by the municipal government was eventually codified by the government agency responsible for disaster recovery (*fukkō-chō*) as a part of “care for the heart.”⁵⁵ This official prohibition of funding for “care for the heart” provided by religious volunteers created a clear split between compassion and the financial support of temples. It was also arguably an instance of a government trying to save money by using religious volunteers to provide services that might otherwise be provided by the state (Adams 2013; Berlant 2004; Muehlebach 2012). However, it was equally an attempt by religious professionals to leverage suffering to break down

⁵⁵ See http://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat2/kouhukin/160608_besshi.pdf accessed 1/20/2018

the barriers between them and state-run facilities.

Having already gained access to public space as “religious professionals,” compassion allowed these religious people to move from the bodies of the dead to the suffering of the living. Realizing that they could be of use to grieving family members, the religious professionals offering their services at the funeral hall set up an “Emotional Consultation Room” (ECR; *kokoro no sōdanshitsu*). They ran the original ECR on the second floor of the funeral hall from April 4th until April 30th, when Rev. Nakamura says they were asked by the municipal government to “stop all of their activities because things would return to normal operating status on May 1st.”⁵⁶

After May 1st the people involved in the original ECR created another ECR so that they could maintain the bonds that they had formed with one another and continue to help suffering others. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of suffering, participants in the ECR adopted the World Health Organization’s (WHO) 1948 definition of health as “A state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Following the guidelines provided in the WHO’s 1998 “Health Promotion Glossary,” these religious professionals produced a flyer offering to provide free, over-the-phone consultation regarding professional medical care, mental health, religious matters such as

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<https://sites.google.com/site/syuenrenindex/home/report/meeting/20151017nakamura>
accessed 1/20/2018

“funerals” and “the meaning of living,” and challenges of daily life such as “filling out government forms, requesting aid for an evacuation center, anxiety from living in temporary housing, and/or employment issues.”

As scholars have noted, translating suffering and pain into medicalized, non-religious language has been an important part of the development of the secular (Asad 2003; Hirschkind 2011; Zito 2008). In practice, positing suffering and health in terms of the WHO’s distinctions between medicine, mental health, the religious, and the social allowed the ECR workers to pull in a wide range of support, albeit at the cost of explicitly limiting religion to a matter of “meaning” and rituals (see Asad 1993).

Many types of specialists came to help the ECR workers provide such a wide range of consultation. Financial support and volunteer workers came from faith-based organizations such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), political groups such as the Anti-Poverty Campaign, counseling professionals such as those at the Sendai Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone service, academics, and medical doctors. Kawakami Naoya, a Christian reverend, became the primary counselor of the ECR⁵⁷ and a Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Tōhoku University, Suzuki Iwayumi, was named top administrator. Dr. Okabe Takeshi (1950-2012), a graduate of the medical school at Tōhoku University and an expert in end-of-life palliative care, took on the role of head of

⁵⁷ Kawakami’s position was shūnin sōdan-in. He was later made primary contact person/secretary general for Dr. Okabe.

the ECR. In addition to the ECR, the group formed a traveling “Café de Monk” headed by Kaneta Taiō, a Sōtō Zen master, to provide consultation throughout the disaster-stricken area. Yoshinaga Kaoru, Professor Emeritus of Medicine at Tōhoku University, was placed at the head of the group, which now encompassed the ECR and Café de Monk.

Having multiple members affiliated with Tōhoku University, an elite public university, allowed the group to set up an office there. This move clearly positioned the group as a form of public religion not affiliated with any particular religion. It also allowed them to establish an endowed program in “practical religious studies” at the university in April 2012. Funding for the program first came from international Christian organizations and later from the WCRP and the Buddhist “new religion” Risshō Kōsei-kai. Affiliated with a public university and having a bit of money, the group worked to spread the type of religious engagement with suffering that had been facilitated by the religiosity that emerged from the disasters. Their efforts took form as the training course for interfaith chaplaincy attended by Rev. Wakamatsu.

Religious professionals from all over the country have come to participate in the training, which, as of October 2016, had been conducted nine times. Recent trainings have gotten far more applicants than can be accepted, and the highly capable staff have trained 141 graduates, 118 of whom have been Buddhist. Graduates, in turn, have gone on to form seven regional groups for interfaith

chaplains. They have also set up their own local branches of the Café de Monk to serve people in hospitals, hospices, and disaster areas across Japan.

Notably, six Buddhist universities have augmented pre-existing courses or implemented new ones to train interfaith chaplains.⁵⁸ All of the different interfaith chaplaincy programs joined to form the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan on February 28th, 2016. Yet despite all of their successes, the status of the original program at Tōhoku University is highly uncertain.

As of late 2016, the group only had enough funding left for one more training. One reason for this, ironically, was that not a single major, established religious organization in Japan had contributed funding to the course at Tōhoku University. This situation highlights some of the main challenges of the interfaith chaplaincy. In order to keep engaging with suffering people who are not necessarily religious and who seek care in spaces not affiliated with any religion, the chaplains must find a way to serve society as religious people in general rather than as members of a particular religion. But as their funding difficulties show, the effort chaplains are making to face suffering others who do not share their religious proclivities challenges the very form of belonging – particular organized religions – that sustains them spiritually, institutionally, and sometimes financially. The leaders of the training attempt to overcome these challenges by forming bonds of suffering in what they call “religion overcoming religions.”

⁵⁸ A Catholic university has also established a similar program.

Religion overcoming religions: Recognizing suffering and the suppression of religious difference

The wind was strong. We were lined up in two rows on top of a barrier facing the ocean at a spot where it had devastatingly overcome land five and a half years earlier. Taking turns, participants who belonged to the same sect or whose primary sacred texts were the same moved from the back row to the front. The people in the front united their voices in prayer to grant some peace to the spirits of the deceased. The wind almost drowned out the sound of their elegies.

It was the first day of the first session of the interfaith chaplaincy training. The second and third sessions of the training would be held in Sendai city, near Tōhoku University. For this session, however, we met in Ishinomaki, a small city whose name the tsunami carried throughout Japan with horrifying statistics: 29-foot-tall waves filled more than 28 square miles of land with water, damaging 53,742 buildings, killing 3,140 people and leaving another 452 missing. The leaders of the training told us some of the human stories behind those statistics before we embarked on a four-mile pilgrimage along the coastline.

Our point of departure for the pilgrimage and the training was Dōgen-in, which has been a Sōtō Zen sect temple since 1570, though its history includes periods of association with two other sects and dates back to 1061. Rather than sharing stories of sectarian competition and changing affiliations, however, the participants, who came from eleven different sects, were brought together listening to how this temple had served as an evacuation center after the tsunami. Four-hundred people had come to stay at this temple, eventually “becoming like a big

family.” Everyone maintained a sense of order at the temple while waiting for government assistance to come. As Rev. Onozaki, the head priest at Dōgen-in, told us, “Even the twenty-five children who were here, whose vitality kept the adults going, lined up their shoes neatly at the entrance to the temple. ... When the Self-Defense Force came with supplies, they could hardly believe that this was an evacuation center! It was much more orderly than other places. ... That was the result of this being a temple, and also of the power of religion.”

The temple as it currently stood was an inspiring sign of the power of religious people to sustain the religiosity that arose after the disasters and to create a sense of comforting order in the midst of chaos. We dwelled inside of that sign during the morning of the first day of the training. Like the people who had entered that temple during the disasters, we were welcomed with hospitality irrespective of our religious affiliations.

That is not to say, however, that religious affiliations were irrelevant to participants’ presence. To the contrary, affiliation with a recognized religious organization was a prerequisite for participating in the course, which its organizers describe as “a meeting of religious professionals who overcome sects and religions to engage in dialogue in order to learn how to provide emotional care.”

Throughout the training, participants’ co-presence re-activated the religiosity that had broken down distinctions between religions after the disasters. At the same time, those distinctions were maintained as one of the conditions of

possibility for their own overcoming. Every morning, members of different sects masterfully chanted as the rest of us used handouts to read along as best we could. Prayers from different sects were offered before each meal. And in addition to the prayer walk I mentioned above, participants took turns leading prayers at memorials that we visited during the first and second training sessions.

For several of the participants, this was the first time that they had heard, let alone spoken, prayers from some of the other religions involved in the training, and the differences being overcome in their very performance did not go unnoticed. Participants were explicitly reminded during the training that the Buddhist, Christian, and Shintō priests sitting around them and the words coming out of their own mouths came from sects or religions with whom they have deep-seated disagreements. Equal access to suffering, however, helped to elide historical animosities and inequalities among participants' religions. That elision and the shared goal of compassion, in turn, facilitated interaction between head priests whose temples belong to famous sects and mid-level employees of "new religions" sometimes disparaged as being "fake" or "fad" religions in popular media despite long records of social service.

The training was also the first time that several participants had been able to converse with professionals from different sects and religions. At night, these conversations were aided by the consumption of food, including meat, and alcohol (see Hara 2014). Nearly all of the twelve male and three female participants, the

instructors, and other observers consumed enough alcohol to loosen “the glue of a social order that is generally glued tight” (Allison 1994: 45); in this case, the social order of religious organizations in Japan.

An instructor told me that drinking was just as important for trainees as the lectures and workshops. Drinking together after exhausting days of training helped participants to create “a network of connections to people from other religions and to irreligious people. They’ll get support from those people, and those people will also help participants to better serve others. For example, there’ll be times when someone requests to talk to a Christian minister or when they need help from medical professionals. If an interfaith chaplain can’t introduce someone to those people, then they haven’t fully done their job.” Being able to fully do one’s job as a compassionate religious professional, then, requires participants to overcome personal discomforts and historical antagonisms between religions and sects in order to create a more general form of religion.

The work that these people are doing to create a new form of “religion overcoming religions” is political in nature and full of challenges. As Taniyama Yōzō, a professor at Tōhoku University who is also an ordained Buddhist priest and the leader of the training, puts it in one of his books, “Like at the municipal funeral hall in Sendai, religious cooperation can scale the wall separating church and state. Article 89 of the Constitution of Japan problematizes relations of the government to any ‘particular religion’ and the ‘profit’ that could arise from any

such relation. ... There are many ways to interpret the Constitution, but at the very least, the example of the funeral hall in Sendai makes it clear that religious cooperation makes cooperation between religion and regional public services possible. ... Concrete forms of religious cooperation are also necessary in order to provide ‘care for the heart’” (2016: 42).

The religious cooperation that makes it possible to overcome the wall between church and state requires members of particular religions to overcome conflicts between religions. Arguably, then, the explicitly liberal “utopian ideal” of “overlapping consensus” championed by Rawls (1993) was actualized by these religious professionals as a prerequisite to their entry into public spaces (see Asad 2003). Their accomplishment generated a new form of religion that, while acceptable to the government, made it difficult for chaplains to maintain the institutional basis for their participation in civil society (see Connolly 1999: 62-70). In other words, the different conceptualizations of suffering and compassion that various participants brought with them did not “disrupt the ethos of compassion that underlies humanitarianism, voluntarism, and philanthropy” as Mittermaier (2014: 520) convincingly argues Islamic volunteering sometimes does. Rather, the government-sponsored ethos of compassion disrupted particular religions’ ability to proselytize and flourish, even while facilitating the formation of a lived category of religion-in-general.

In practical terms, Taniyama tells participants that this means, “When you

go into a hospital, hospice, or disaster area to provide care, you do not go there as the head priest of so-and-so temple. You go there as a normal person (*futsū no hito*.)” That is, the chaplains’ existence as participants in religion overcoming religions is the existence of an individual without institutional authority. Working to recognize the suffering of universalized humans had, in practice, retroactively turned the chaplains themselves into universalized humans subject to government strictures on speech and comportment rather than to the regulations of their respective religious traditions.

In the first instructional presentation of the training, Taniyama, with his usual clarity, said, “When you go into public spaces, you have to follow the government’s code of ethics, so you cannot proselytize. ... You have to give precedence to the beliefs of wherever you are working, the beliefs of the person in front of you. ... You will be working at different kinds of places with different kinds of people who care for people in different ways. For example, you will be with doctors who won’t believe anything without proof that they, as materialists, can accept. That’s fine. The important thing is to recognize and accept that difference.”

The process of learning to recognize, accept, and overcome the differences between religions and between the norms associated with different types of care brought participants into contact with a slew of constraints that they would not have faced if they had stayed in their own temples and churches. Under no circumstances are interfaith chaplains supposed to spread their faith. If they say or

do something that anyone they are working with interprets as being “too religious,” they can be thrown out of whatever facility they are working in; a threat with seemingly no limits that I saw almost actualized when a group of religious volunteers in a disaster area spoke “too politely.” In most facilities, participants are not allowed to perform rituals or chant unless explicitly requested to do so by their “client.” At some locations, particularly hospitals, participants whose religions require them to maintain a particular appearance must camouflage themselves. Chaplains’ robes, collars, and religious sashes are sometimes forbidden, and Buddhist priests occasionally have to wear wigs or let their hair grow out a bit in order to enter places not normally associated with religion. This could be seen as a tactic used by a disempowered group to “penetrate socially sealed space” not normally open to them (Povinelli 2011: 30; see also Certeau 1988). However, if we do not hold to an ontological division between outward signs and essences, such camouflaging can also be seen as a threat to the religions whose markers are being removed from public view.

Seeing the difficulties that participants were sometimes having balancing their roles as religious professionals with the work of “caring for the heart” as interfaith chaplains, I approached Takahashi Hara, a professor involved in the course. “Do you think that ‘religion overcoming religions’ is a negation of religion by religious people that allows them to reject their rejection from public space?” I asked. Smiling, he responded, “Yes, but it’s also the affirmation of religion. Don’t

misunderstand. A lot of what's being done here is meant as encouragement for religious people." After reading a draft of this paper, he added, "It's to let them know that people still expect something of them as religious people, and that they should be proud of that. ... I'm also impressed that these people really come to the aid of people in trouble regardless of where they are."

If the training course was encouragement, though, what it was encouraging seemed to be something different than forms of religion practiced in temples and churches in Japan. After all, if it were not different, there would be no need for the course in the first place. Curious, I asked Prof. Taniyama, "In overcoming religion while maintaining it, do you think that you're creating a new concept of religion?" Without a moment's hesitation, Taniyama responded, "No. We would never do something so risky as create a new concept. We are just trying to meet the needs of Japanese society."

While I first balked at Taniyama's response, taking him at his word reveals much about the relationship between the concept of religion, practices currently associated with particular religions in Japan, and contemporary engagements with suffering. Profs. Takahashi and Taniyama's answers strongly suggest that the chaplains are fulfilling a role expected of religious professionals, but not fulfilled by the activities of most religions as they are currently practiced. That role is to help "people in trouble" rather than to govern or make money, for example. In that sense, the chaplains actualize the concept of religion as the "heart of a heartless

world” (Marx 1978: 12) rather than create a new concept of religion. In so doing, they functionally distinguish religion from other realms of social activity, such as economics or modern medicine, for example. This type of functional distinction of religion is one of the most agreed-upon aspects of secularism, but why would religious professionals want to take on this role when doing so requires them to submit to constraints that they would not face if they provided care to patrons of their own religions? Why would they make such an effort to enter public spaces despite the tension this caused between their desire to help suffering others and their need to make money and increase patronage of their respective religions? To answer these questions, I find it useful to interrogate the nature of the suffering that these religious people are working so hard to encounter and ameliorate. After all, it is this suffering that has brought them together and that demands their recognition and acceptance.

Secular salvation and the sharing of social suffering

“When you run a suicide prevention hotline, you see all of society through the phone.” Rev. Kaneta is a charismatic Sōtō Zen master who runs the now-famous “Café de Monk.” In Japanese, the word “*monku*” means “complaint.” Playing with language, he created a traveling salon where people can talk freely to monks - express *monku* to monks. With Thelonious Monk playing in the background, people living in disaster-stricken areas that Rev. Kaneta and his crew visit share harrowing stories between good-spirited, if quite serious, laughter. Those stories stay with Rev. Kaneta long after the café closes each day. They

remain not only in his memory, but also in the time waiting for phone calls that he accepts any time day or night.

Rev. Kaneta was a founding member of the interfaith chaplaincy training program. He offers lectures and allows participants to volunteer at his cafe during the training. In a presentation on “Care and Human Rights” that he gave during the last session of the training, he described the world he “sees” through the phone. The scope of his vision is immense. He started with two stories. The first was a gruesome tale of a “death at 200 miles per hour” that had occurred when someone jumped in front of a train that Rev. Kaneta was riding. In the next story, he told of his feeling of powerlessness when a person with whom he had been talking periodically over six years ended their own life. Deftly shifting scales, he related these two stories of suffering to the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy in 1991 and 1992. He pointed out that the enduring effects of that crash were felt when the GDP shrank in 1997 and 1998 due to bankruptcies caused by the Asian financial crisis and increasingly tough economic competition with China and Korea. Suicides spiked in 1998, and Rev. Kaneta explained that official statistics stating that Japan had more than 30,000 suicides a year from 1998 until 2011 underestimate the number of suicides that actually occurred. He went on to explain how the law only counts a death as a suicide if a person dies within 24 hours of doing something to end their own life; anything after that, such as dying from organ failure caused by an overdose, counts as an “unusual death” (*henshi*).

Not stopping at suicide, Rev. Kaneta spoke passionately of other aspects of the “dysfunctional social system” of Japan. He spoke of Japan’s low fertility rate, which since 1973 has been below the 2.08 children per female required to replenish the population, and Japan’s “hyper-aged society” with more than 25% of the overall population over the age of 65. Rev. Kaneta told us that the percentage of people over the age of 65 is much higher in rural areas as younger people flee to large cities to find work, even if that work will not likely provide long-term stability and benefits such as a nice pension. Lifetime employment is down, and Rev. Kaneta explained that “economic problems” were the second most often cited cause of suicide, right before “family problems” and after “health problems.” The lines between economy, family, and health are blurred, and even though “suicide is an extremely personal issue, it’s also a social issue and a social-structural problem.” Summing up a portion of his convincing argument, Rev. Kaneta noted that things are so bad that some scholars and reporters have called Japan a “relationless society.”

Indeed they have, and precarity now almost serves as a baseline for scholarship related to the social situation in Japan (Allison 2012, 2013; NHK 2012; Tsuchiya 1996). At the same time, however, anthropologists have argued that images of Japan’s precarity are “productive of a fantasy of sociality” based on the notion of social contact (Nozawa 2015: 377), and that the transformations that Rev. Kaneta spoke so powerfully of have allowed for the “distancing of the

individual from the company frame [thus] creating (or forcing) new possibilities for identity formation” (Slater 2011: 112). Working to lighten the burden of others, chaplains’ compassion contains all of these aspects of the precarious world it seeks to overcome. Their formation of a new identity pulls them away from their sects and temples as much as it brings them into contact with each other and with suffering others, and the power of the concept of social suffering or “relationlessness” to unify seemingly disparate phenomena enables them to try to (re)connect with their communities (compare Kleinman et al. 1997; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016).

Using the word “relationless society,” Rev. Kaneta brought together forms of suffering as diverse as clinical depression, a lack of stable jobs, the shrinking and aging population, and the depopulation of non-urban parts of Japan as a way to make participants aware of the scope of the problems they would face in their efforts to prevent suicide and depression. He did not have to work hard to convince this audience of the vast scale of the social issues he faces every day or of the reality of the loneliness that he “sees” through the phone. Many of the participants were already intimately aware of the problems that he brought up in his talk. Their awareness came not only from frequent references to relationlessness in mass media or from their previous work experience as counselors, aides at facilities for the elderly, and social workers, but also from the social conditions of the places where they live.

In the two trainings that I attended, eight out of twenty-seven total participants lived in areas that the national government has designated as “depopulated areas” (*kaso chiiki*). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications defines depopulated areas as “areas where a drastic decrease in the population leads to a decline in the productive power of the local society, including relatively low manufacturing capabilities and a scarcity of resources available to support daily life.”⁵⁹ According to the government’s most recent figures, a staggering 46.4 percent of all “cities, towns, or villages” in Japan are now depopulated and only 8.9% of Japan’s population lives in those areas even though they compose 58.7 percent of the country’s geo-physical area. The situation is so dire that 62,971 out of 176,670 — 35.6 percent — of all registered religious entities are located in cities, towns, and villages that might not exist 25 years from now (Ukai 2015: 163, 241).

Large-scale, internal surveys conducted by various Buddhist sects support these projections. A 2012 survey conducted by the Pure Land sect, a large sect which has more temples in urban areas than most other sects, for example, revealed that 14 percent of its temples were in depopulated areas and 20.8% were run by a head priest who had to run more than one temple. 50 percent of head priests were themselves over the age of 60 and 79 percent of them expected the number of patrons at their temple to shrink over the next 20 years. Significantly, 43

⁵⁹ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/2001/kaso/kasomain2.htm accessed 7/20/2019

percent of temples had yearly incomes of less than 30,000 USD (3,000,000 JPY), the minimum amount necessary to support a temple. Unsurprisingly, 50 percent of that sect's head priests either have worked or are currently working other jobs to support themselves and their temples. In this, the Pure Land sect is not alone.

During the training, Rev. Suzuki, a Buddhist priest who belonged to a different sect, commented on the difficulty of not engaging people like a "career businessman" (*sarariiman*) when they told him their stories of suffering. He later told me, "I sometimes feel a tension between the values of business, such as pushing for more efficiency from workers, and the values of faith, such as making sure that people live comfortable lives." Despite feeling this tension, working for capitalist corporations has influenced Rev. Suzuki's conceptualization of suffering and humanity.

When I asked him why he worked for a corporation, he responded, "I don't really have a good response to your question because for me it's completely natural (*tōzen*) to have a regular job while being a priest." Though having a full-time job made it difficult for him to take time off, forcing him to wait four years to take the interfaith chaplaincy course, during an interview after the course he told me, "I don't usually have much confidence in the way I am living. But being able to complete such a difficult course while working full-time gave me a great amount of confidence. ... Having a job other than being a priest also lets me experience the same kind of suffering and concern as most people, so I think I can listen better,

be more convincing, and better understand people's feelings in my work as an interfaith chaplain."

For Rev. Suzuki, working at a capitalist corporation to financially support his religious activities allows him to be better at those activities because he can share the suffering that comes with work. Sharing that suffering, however, takes up his time and makes him realize, "I'm a human being. I fail, I want a promotion and more money, I speak badly of others, and sometimes I'm envious of them." Sharing the broad forms of suffering of the "relationless society" to some degree and the suffering of working for a profit-seeking corporation makes him feel like a "human being." Feeling like a human being, in turn, challenges his ability to feel like a religious professional and sometimes prevents him from "fully recognizing the other" at the same time that it makes him a better practitioner of a form of religion predicated upon sharing secular suffering.

Rev. Kaneta and Rev. Suzuki, who does not "usually feel confidence in the way [he] is living," together lend credence to Susan Sontag's claim that suffering, for people with modern sensibilities, is "something to be fixed" and "makes one feel powerless" (2003: 99). At the same time, however, actively engaging with suffering as interfaith chaplains provides many participants in the training a way to overcome a profit-seeking portion of their self that is wedged between them and the people they want to help (see Asad 2003: 82; Berlant 2004: 9). It allows them to serve society as religious professionals and, in so doing, prove to themselves

and the people they treat that they are not just businessmen or relics of the past.

In that sense, the training course, like many humanitarian projects, is partially “a project for the redemption of the redeemers” (Mutua 2001: 207-208; Malkki 2015). However, this particular redemption – in contradistinction to the salvation promised in sectarian teachings – only comes for religious professionals who suppress the language and other outward expressions of their particular religions. It also only comes for religious professionals who can overcome the separation of compassionate practices from a source of financial income that could be used to sustain their traditions. For many of the chaplains, this overcoming is partially achieved by working for profit-seeking corporations and in the chaplaincy rather than in full devotion to the practices housed in their temples and churches.

The split between financially profitable labor, the work of an interfaith chaplain, and the work done at temples and churches is not a logically necessary one. To the contrary, several participants and leaders of the training told me that they hope to one day fully integrate the practices of chaplaincy into the daily practices of their respective religions, and that this would perhaps allow their particular religions to flourish once again. Rather, this split is the result of a long historical process. In the final portion of this chapter, then, I would like to explore the socio-historical process that makes engagements with social suffering an appealing option for the mostly Buddhist participants in the chaplaincy training.

Compassion and governance revisited: From the living to the dead, from the dead to the dying

The deep history of the interfaith chaplaincy could be told in many ways.

Here, I am not interested in writing a history of secularism and the concomitant invention of religion in Japan per se. What I offer is a history of the impasse between Buddhist interfaith chaplains' activities and the practicalities of maintaining their temples. Since the seventeenth century, that history has been closely connected to Christians, with whom Buddhist interfaith chaplains now cooperate.

In 1612 the military government (Tokugawa bakufu) outlawed Christianity in an effort to limit the power of feudal lords in the south. Some of those lords were Christian and had trade relations with "foreign" Christians such as the Portuguese, for example, who in 1543 brought the first rifles to Japan. Temples provided a convenient way for the bakufu to expel Christianity and control the population (Tamamuro 2002[1963]).

The only problem was that temples were not ordered in a way that allowed for centralized administration. To remedy this, the government required all temples to affiliate with existing sects in 1615. Stabilized sects were then used to certify people as non-Christian. Tied to particular villages, many of which are now depopulated, and sects, which chaplains are now working to overcome, temples were unable to proselytize. Unlike now, however, temples' power to certify people as non-Christian provided them with the ability to garner income and membership.

In what came to be known as the temple-parishioner system, all people had to register with a temple, financially support that temple, and have their funeral performed there. Funerals brought in steady income, but limited the ways that organized religion interacted with people's daily lives. Popular practices that later came to be called "folk religion" flourished as people's relation to temples came to be defined by "donations" they had to make in exchange for care for their deceased ancestors and certification as non-Christian.

Modernization efforts by the Meiji regime, which followed the Tokugawa bakufu, came partially as a result of the arrival of American warships in 1853 and 1854. The freedom of religion, including Christianity, was an important issue of negotiation between elites in Japan and the Americans. As Josephson (2012) and Maxey (2014), building on earlier work by Hardacre (1989), Ketelaar (1990), and Isomae (2003), have shown, this engagement with the concept of "religion" was a core aspect of the formation of Japan as a modern nation-state. One major aspect of that formation was a radical change in the legal status of Buddhist priests.

Arguably, the interfaith chaplains' ability to camouflage, to work outside of their temples, and to feel like "human beings" arose in 1872. Ministry of State Order Number 133 issued in that year states "Priests may do as they wish regarding the eating of meat, marriage, and the cutting of hair. Moreover, they need not be concerned about the propriety of wearing commoner's clothing while not performing official duties" (Ketelaar 1990: 6). Now, that order surreptitiously

ushers many Buddhist priests into the workforce so that they can financially maintain their temples and their families (Sakurai and Kawamata 2016: 5). Pushing those priests into the workforce through marriage was, in a sense, what the order aimed to accomplish.

In 1872, the order broke a connection between Buddhist law and government law that had existed, albeit loosely, since the eighth century. As James Ketelaar has argued, “Priests, and later nuns, who might violate the vows of their vocation would no longer be in violation of public law... Priests and their institutions were, in fact, stripped of their previously enjoyed political status” (1990: 6).

Allowing Buddhist priests to strip off their robes and special political status was supported by progressive Buddhists as a way to modernize (Jaffe 2001). In so doing, those Buddhists fit themselves into a broader effort by the Meiji government to establish itself by separating “gods” from “Buddhas.” The “way of the gods,” Shintō, was framed as being Japanese in a way that left no room for Buddhism, which was framed as a foreign threat to Japanese modernity. Working to create a government-grounding version of Shintō led by a divine emperor, nativist modernizers destroyed over 40,000 Buddhist temples (Ketelaar 1990: 7).

Modernization atrophied the ties between Buddhist temples and the living, but ties between temples and the dead proved to be inseparable. People in some areas rebelled when the Meiji government tried to do away with Buddhist funerals,

affording sects time to form a sufficiently modern and nationalistic “religion” called Buddhism (Ketelaar 1990; Snodgrass 2003). By 1898, Buddhists’ monopoly on funerary rites was once again tied to governance of the population. In that year, the Meiji Civil Code legally mandated funerals, graves, and ancestor worship as a means to ground the “patriarchal, extended family” (ie). That mandate linked Buddhism to the model of kinship that served as the basis for property transfer, gender distinctions, and, metaphorically, the relation of subjects to the emperor.

That relationship of temples to governance did not face existential challenges until Japan’s loss of World War II. The succession of government regimes after the war brought attacks on the institutions grounding temples’ legitimacy and income. In 1946, the American occupational government of Japan issued an order requiring local governments to allow any religious group to create graves (Takemae et al 2000; see also Mullins 2012). The extended family system was legally dismantled in 1947, and post-war land reforms aiming to “liberate farmland” from absentee landlords greatly diminished temples’ income. Religious organizations were forced to sell 38 percent of their land, effectively cutting the income of a mid-sized temple in half (Hardacre 1989; Rowe 2011). Losing land made temples more dependent on income from funerals than ever before, but the patriarchal family that had served as the basis for those funerals no longer carried the weight of law.

To this day, 90 percent of funerals in Japan are conducted in a Buddhist

fashion and funerals are the primary source of income for 90.5 percent of Buddhist temples there (Sakurai and Kawamata 2016: 4). Over the last forty years, however, the depletion of rural populations, economic stagnation and the flexibilization of the workforce, and the shrinking population have made it difficult or undesirable for many people to pay for the expensive funerary services offered by temples.

Priests that stay to care for the deceased are bound to depopulated areas. For young priests, having a low income and living in a depopulated area makes it difficult to find a spouse and have children. This means that priests cannot generate heirs to inherit their temples unless they join the capitalist workforce. The survey by the Pure Land sect that I mentioned earlier indicates that 30 percent of their temples have no successor, generating much anxiety for young, male priests. One day when I was worn out from fieldwork in a disaster area, I asked a friend at the training how he protects himself from feeling too much of the suffering of the people he cares for. Sighing, he said, "Michael, you have a family. I wish I had a family." His compassion for the dead and dying leaves him tied to the depopulated and aging area where the small temple that he inherited from his father is located. Chaplaincy offers him camaraderie and access to spaces beyond the grave-filled fields around his temple. But even though my friend interacts with other interfaith chaplains and patients nearly every day, other chaplains do not help him run his temple and his patients pass away. This leaves him struggling to produce a future

that reproduces a past where religious activity supported religious organizations.

Conclusion: Delving into suffering, the good, and the anthropology of the savage slot

No longer rendered religious by the laws of the government and facing an existential threat posed by demographic shifts, engaging with suffering has become an important way for chaplains to confirm that they are, in fact, religious. Confirming their identity and worth through engagement with suffering leads the chaplains to take on a religiosity that escaped the formalization of religions and was produced by and in opposition to them. That religiosity, in turn, melts their respective religions into a form of religion that does not support their temples.

The form of religion that chaplains work to produce is a generalized one that is something other than just an aggregate of particular religions. It is a “religion overcoming religions” that erases the markers of chaplains’ religious traditions. While that erasure satisfies the demands of government officials and allows chaplains to enter public spaces, it also generates an impasse between engaging suffering and maintaining the institutional basis for that engagement. Here, then, the emergence of “public religions” is not simply a rejection of secularization. Rather it is the means by which the secularist division between church and state leads religious professionals to produce “the concepts, sensibilities, assumptions, and behaviors of the secular that [secularism as a political doctrine] draws and depends upon” (Agrama 2012: 2). This weakens their particular religions even while offering chaplains a means to connect with society

as religious professionals in general.

Religious professionals transform their traditions in accordance with the demands of the secularist government in-and-by gathering around suffering, suppressing religious difference in order to maintain access to suffering, and by sharing in that suffering. Compassionately engaging with suffering others and bound to the dead, chaplains are obliged to work toward their own collapse. They share the vicissitudes of dying and the isolation of aging and depopulation, leaving temples and priests without heirs. When engaging suffering in public spaces, they must shed signs of their respective religions and avoid appearing as if they are working to spread those religions. In compassion, their traditions become internal motives without external expression, and feeling like a human can sometimes interfere with feeling like a religious professional. Unlike the historical sects and religions from which chaplains come, the interfaith chaplaincy only gets cooperation from the government to the extent that they alienate their traditions from economics and the governance of the population. Their elegies quiet and their “care for the heart” superb, chaplains’ way of life fades as it comes into existence.

I would like to conclude with a provocation aimed at anthropologists. While writing this chapter, I have often been reminded of the situation of many of my fellow anthropologists. I have been left wondering if this dynamic whereby engagements with suffering lead professionals to work toward their own collapse

is not limited to secularism and the secular. After all, Robbins (2013) and Ortner (2016) have argued that many anthropologists have recently made suffering their object of joint attention. As in the case of the chaplains, Robbins notes that focusing on “the figure of humanity united in its shared vulnerability to suffering” allows authors and readers to affirm their own humanity in the act of affirming the humanity of their subjects of inquiry (450: 455-456). To some extent, this leads anthropologists who focus on suffering to suppress signs of difference between them and the subjects of their research (Robbins 2013). Also like the chaplains, many anthropologists share suffering with their interlocutors. Junior anthropologists analyzing neoliberalism, for example, often face precarious employment at universities even while their daily labor supports the neoliberalization of the academy (Gusterson 2017; Navarro 2017). Could it be that active engagement with suffering motivates people removed from positions of governmental and economic privilege to reproduce the conditions of their marginalization?

In an indirect response to this question, Robbins (2013) calls for an “anthropology of the good” to stand in balance with an anthropology of suffering. He suggests that this will reinvigorate anthropology by “lead[ing] us to a vision of a world that was better than ours in ways we could not on our own imagine” (456). An anthropology oriented toward sameness in suffering and an anthropology oriented toward difference in “the good,” however, are both about saving a “we”

that lies on the other side of difference-and-sameness (Ball and Nozawa 2016; Fennell 2015; Hankins and Fennell 2015). As Trouillot (2003) has argued, the spread of colonialism and global capitalism have rendered the structure of the imagination that placed a “we” on the other side of difference-and-sameness obsolete. Here, then, Robbins’ alternative seems to be anything but a means to make anthropology relevant and seems to point to a broader set of questions: Do engagements with suffering and its binary opposite render anthropologists and the chaplains into people who attempt to save their institutional bases and their jobs by overcoming them, but in the very moment of overcoming, create the epistemological conditions that necessitated that overcoming in the first place? In the most general terms, then, do anthropologists and the interfaith chaplains now produce modes of governance that motivate difference to render itself into sameness in the very process of attempting to establish its own worth qua difference? In the next chapter, I propose an analysis of the chaplains’ listening practices as practices of negation in order to answer that very question.

Chapter 3 is a full reprint of the material as it appears in: Berman, Michael. 2018. “Religion Overcoming Religions: Suffering, Secularism, and the Training of Interfaith Chaplains in Japan.” *American Ethnologist* 45 (2): 228–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12634>. The author of this dissertation was the sole investigator and author of that article.

Chapter 4: The ear from nowhere: Listening techniques and the politics of negation in the practice of Japanese interfaith chaplains

The hall inside the Buddhist temple was dimly lit. We sat on the woven-straw mat floor, facing two people sitting on chairs in front of us. Those two people, a practiced chaplain and a trainee, role-played a scene of a man diagnosed with cancer talking to an interfaith chaplain. Out of the near silence of the temple, the sufferer's voice emerged, "What do I tell my wife? We have no savings. I'm going to die, and my wife and kid will be left with nothing."

The person playing the chaplain had nothing to say in response. While the man expressing pain wept real tears, the listener bent over, folded his hands, and let forth a number of sighs and quiet groans. When they finished, the professor overseeing this portion of the training asked the sufferer a single question: "Did you feel the existence of the chaplain next to you?"

What does it mean to be felt as a presence without speaking? What is the difference between a silent presence and a listening one? And what is at stake in becoming a listener? In this chapter, I offer some tentative answers to those questions by exploring the chaplains qua a nearly silent, non-judgmental, listening existence that sits next to suffering and must be felt by the sufferer in order to be recognized and affirmed. I argue that working to foster that particular listening existence transforms listeners into modern human beings (compare Foucault 1978, 1988). By "modern human beings," I mean people who strive to be universal in ways that conflict with the particular traditions that have raised and supported them institutionally, emotionally, and economically. In the practice of the chaplains, the desire to listen to anyone, regardless of whether they are from the same background as the chaplain or not, creates a tension for the listener: Despite being professionals with significant training and experience in particular religious

traditions, a type of person the chaplains call a *shūkyō-sha* (a person of religion or religious professional), they must avoid acting like they come from those traditions in order to become a *shūkyō-shi* (a shortened word for interfaith chaplain) who can listen to people who do not share individual chaplains' religious language or concepts. The tension between wanting to be a universal listener despite being a situated individual, in turn, fosters a deep reflexivity among chaplains: they question the limits of their own knowledge and being without questioning the ontological underpinnings of the listening practices that they are being taught.⁶⁰

In contemporary Japan and elsewhere, the role that listening plays in creating this critical reflexivity complicates the assumption that listening is apolitical and passive — pervasive assumptions that underlie anthropologist's relative silence on the social significance of listening. As James Slotta (2015) argues, listening is “inflected by political values and practices” (527; see also Hirschkind 2006; Inoue 2003). The political values and practices that permeate acts of listening, and the ways that listening relates to those values and practices, are always historically specific. In liberal-democratic societies, listening is often thought of as passive, whereas the ability to speak or have a “voice” is thought of as a fundamental trait of political and moral agents (see Kramer 2013; Povinelli

⁶⁰ Scholars ranging from Anthony Giddens (1990) to Timothy Mitchell (2000) have argued that this reflexivity is a constitutive aspect of the split between modernity and what is, to some degree, retroactively framed as tradition. The projection of the reality of that ideological split, in turn, is itself constitutive of secular modernity (Asad et al. 2013; see also Fujiwara 1998).

1995; Schäfers 2017). Slotta (2017) presciently notes that where this construal of speaking and listening are dominant, “calls to redress inequalities and past injustices often involve demands to invert the communicative roles of speaker and listener” (329). That inversion is often framed in broad terms, such as allowing disenfranchised people, victims of human-rights violations, or the subaltern to speak (see Butler 1997; Posel 2008; Spivak 1988). However, the inversion of the roles of speaker and listener also occurs on a personal scale as a way to right some of the injustices of everyday life. For example, the chaplains explicitly work to “recognize the dignity of speakers by listening to them.” Accomplishing that recognition requires the active formation of a recognizing subject, not just a recognized one (compare Fassin 2011; Hankins 2014; Malkki 1996; Povinelli 2002; Ticktin 2011).

Chaplains are not taught that listening is a completely passive process. To the contrary, they engage in “active listening” (*keichō*), a way of listening that they have adopted from clinical psychology (e.g. Rogers 1995; Rogers and Farson 2015; compare Eideliman and Coutant 2015; Rose 1998). Moreover, some of the chaplains have told me that their ability to listen to humans makes them, as listeners, more human. The particular version of humanity that is formed in acts of listening is neither an innate nor ready-made aspect of daily life for many people, hence the need for training. If the version of humanity formed in acts of listening is not simply natural, and listening requires effort and training, then, as Hirschkind

(2006) has argued, the specific type of human formed by a specific type of listening is an inherently historical and political subject.

I call the historical subject formed in the chaplaincy training “the ear from nowhere.” I do so not to suggest that the chaplains actually come from nowhere, but rather to highlight the situatedness of their attempt to develop the ability to sooth anyone by listening to them. Like the “view from nowhere” (Nagel 1986) and the anonymous “voice from nowhere” (Woolard 2016; see also Frekko 2009; Gal and Woolard 2001; Silverstein 2000), the listener with an “ear from nowhere” must appear as socially unbiased and without a history. However, unlike the view or voice from nowhere, which generate authority by “abstract[ing] away from each person’s private and interested individual characteristics to distill [a] common voice” (Woolard 2016: 25), the goal of the ear from nowhere is to allow speakers — that is, others — to feel fulfilled as unique individuals.

In the case of the view and voice from nowhere, people generate their authority by making their own, individual existence appear to be a rational, universal norm (e.g. Habermas 1996). The chaplains, however, must erase their own particular, biographical existence in order to make speakers feel like individuals who are worth listening to. In other words, the “nowhere” of the “ear from nowhere” is a negation of the listening subject rather than a nomic site that grounds that subject’s authority (cf. de Certeau 1988; Silverstein 1993). More specifically, this “nowhere” is a place removed from both the listener’s own

personal history — such as temples or churches in the case of chaplains — and from the circulation of discourse out of which a public can arise (Gal 2003; Silverstein 2005; Spitulnik 1996; Warner 2005). The double-removal of the listener —she or he is neither a situated religious professional nor a representative of the public at large — allows the speaker to feel unique and important rather than like a token of a social type (i.e. just another person, worker, wife, mother, husband, etc.). The “ear from nowhere,” then, is a subject alienated from tradition and contemporary authority who, in that very alienation, allows speakers to feel comfortable with themselves. Ironically, that self-alienation is an inherent part of the process by which chaplains make their presence felt by speakers.

In the rest of this chapter, I show how particular techniques of listening create an ear from nowhere. Like the formation of any subject, the creation of an ear from nowhere is a complex process. Despite the centrality of listening to ethnographic fieldwork and academic exchange, the process of creating different types of listeners has thus far attracted little attention from anthropologists. Instead, and in-line with modern ideas about language, communication, and the senses,⁶¹ linguistic anthropologists have focused largely on the social effects of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer 1975; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1962, 1964). Anthropologists in other subfields have also largely overlooked listening as an object of inquiry. This chapter is therefore an attempt to open anthropological

⁶¹ That is, language ideologies. See Irvine and Gal 2000; Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998.

discussion about listening and, in so doing, work against dominant ideas about language, signs more generally, and subjectivity. As any attempt, whether by academics or otherwise, to create something general necessarily engages the particular, and those particulars, in turn, contain aspects of the general (Pedersen 2008; 2013), let me now return to where I left off, with the professor asking the sufferer whether he felt the existence of the chaplain who had just listened to him.

Signs of listening: Attending to speakers, suppressing self

The sufferer responded to the professor, “Yes, I did. He was there. He kept the right distance, I think, and I could hear him responding.” Proximity to speakers was something that we had been taught about earlier, when we were told that we were not to physically touch speakers under any circumstances. Apparently listeners could be felt (*kanjirareta*) without making physical contact.

Some of the trainees in the audience also responded to the professor. One said, “He was bent close to speaker,” and another added, “He had an appropriate expression on his face.” Afterward, the person who commented on appropriate expression elaborated for me, “He wasn’t smiling or making light of what he was hearing, but he didn’t go overboard. He was focused and adjusted to the speaker.”

Listening is not something performed by the ears alone. When it is, then it is often not apparent to the speaker that listening is really happening. In a situation where a listener must make the speaker feel her or his presence in order for both existences to be affirmed, showing that one is listening is an important part of listening itself. Here, ideas about signs of paying attention are very important (compare Csordas 1993; Hankins 2014). More specifically, for listening to work, the speaker must perceive no gap between signs of listening, the act of listening, and the existence of the speaker and listener (compare Hastings and Manning

2004).⁶² The first step toward achieving an ear from nowhere, then, was not to be nowhere, but rather to adjust to speakers and their expectations. As knowing those expectations was an important part of adjusting to them, chaplains frequently emphasized the importance of knowing local dialects and styles of speaking. Not having local knowledge created signs of gaps between speakers and listeners, such as chaplains over or under-reacting to what they were told or gaps in the timing of reactions (Jakobson 1960; Silverstein 1993).

When gaps arose, the conditions of felicity for the act of listening had not been met (compare Austin 1975). Given the extraordinary degree to which many speakers invest themselves in the words that they share with chaplains, not meeting those conditions can have serious emotional consequences for the speaker and listener alike. As such, much of chaplains' training was focused on how to master the aspects of listening that lie between the speaker and the listener rather than those aspects, such as analysis or cognitive attention, which are sometimes considered to be within the listener. In other words, becoming an ear from nowhere required not only alignment with the speaker, but also active diversion of attention from the listener's own knowledge. The listener was expected to work toward that alignment and inattention and express both to the speaker without using words.

Throughout the training, participants and instructors alike often emphasized

⁶² For more on semiotic ideology see Engelke 2007; Keane 2003, 2007; Parmentier 1994

the importance of “posture” (*shisei*) — which, like in English, can mean interactional stance or footing (Goffman 1981; Jaffe 2009; see also Kockelman 2004) — and the management of physical proximity between a listener and a speaker. As in the case of Egyptian Muslims who train themselves to actively listen to sermons, in the chaplains’ active listening, “the auditory apparatus consists of an experienced body in its entirety” (Hirschkind 2006: 98; see also Hirschkind 2001; Mahmood 2005). Unlike Muslims listening to sermons, however, the chaplains never knew to whom or what they would be listening or where that listening would occur. Moreover, the chaplains listened primarily to soothe speakers rather than to improve themselves. In the training, some orientations of the body worked with almost any speaker: not turning one’s back to the speaker, not relaxing to the point where one’s arms and head were dangling, and sitting or standing close enough that the speaker did not have to strain to be heard, but not so close that they could feel your breathing or your flesh, for example. However, many of the movements and positionings of the listener’s body depended on what was being said, by whom, and where. The chaplains’ bodies therefore had to be ready to constantly respond to an unknown, somewhat unpredictable other.

For unexperienced chaplains, and even many experienced ones, the need to constantly pay attention and somatically respond to a speaker was an exhausting task. Several of them told me how tired they were after the first day of the training. Later, one of them told me that his work in a hospice, which was a

portion of his training, was deeply fulfilling, but “took all of [his] energy.” The energy required to listen appropriately was not purely cognitive — at least not in the sense of a mind isolated from a body. Listening sometimes required sitting for extended periods of time, leaning over, staying relatively still, making small sounds to signal attention, and, at all times, coordinating all of one’s movements with the speaker’s movement.

Arguably, all practices of listening could be considered acts of coordination that occur in real time interaction. However, there are different patterns to those interactions, and those differences make a difference for listeners. For example, listening is often one part of a pair-part participant structure of interaction whereby people take turns talking and listening, as in a conversation (Levinson 1983). In those cases, listening is oriented toward formulating a spoken response. This is particularly true for the chaplains, who occupy positions of authority at their own temples and churches. Due to their positions as experts and leaders, they are frequently asked to provide instruction or advice for their parishioners. However, such advice or instruction is often not welcomed outside of an explicitly religious context, particularly when speakers do not share chaplains’ religious background or when they are facing dire situations that have no practical solution. Indeed, even when speakers ask chaplains about life after death or other religious matters, chaplains are instructed to turn the question back to the speaker, asking either, “What do you think?” or “What is your ideal version of life after death?” Chaplains

must therefore make an effort to suppress their desire to formulate a response while listening as an ear from nowhere, further removing their own situated particularity from the speaker's attention.

When chaplains do speak, instructors sometimes point out that doing so indicates a weakness. Speaking, in this context and many others, is a way to steer an interaction. Speaking so as to steer an interaction, in turn, makes an ear from somewhere that might not be open to another speaker. So, while people sometimes expose themselves in and by speaking, speaking is also a way to protect oneself from having to listen to or hear undesirable things. Thus, as one of the chaplains told me, "some of us speak more when we are tired, but if we are too tired, we should really avoid being there [in the listening situation] if we can. But often we can't avoid it [because we are obligated to listen]." In turn, one of the instructors told me, "the ability to listen even when you don't feel up to it is what really separates professionals from volunteers."

I personally experienced that difference when I was placed in the position of the listener during one of the hardest days of my fieldwork, and one of my worst failures in the field. It was in a community that I was not familiar with and I was with the chaplains. I had just gotten back from a long stint in another disaster-stricken city and was utterly exhausted. I was paired up with two middle-aged women who started telling me about their lives before the tsunami. The conversation was relatively light until one of the women started talking about her

possessions. Finally, she started a phrase that I had heard many times before, “On that day...” I was unable to listen to what came next, so I interrupted her, saying, “It was all washed away.” Even though the words were the same as the ones that she would have spoken, saying them myself blunted the pain of hearing them. Sadly, protecting oneself in this situation can mean hurting a speaker. After my interruption, the women stopped talking to me and did not say goodbye when they left, which was the only time that that happened to me in any of my field sites.

When listeners speak, as I did, it can hurt speakers and can cut off communication entirely. While this might seem to be commonsensical to many readers, it still provides a hint of an important aspect of listening: the idea of receiving. At the end of almost every listening session, chaplains tell speakers, “Thank you for allowing me to listen to your story” (*ohanashi wo kikasete itadaite arigatou gozaimashita*). Though this is a very formulaic utterance that is not limited to the chaplain’s practice, it suggests — even more in the Japanese than in the English translation — that the listener has been given something like a gift by the speaker. While exchange might not always be a good metaphor for language (Irvine 1989; Manning 2006), in this case it is. And like the rejection of other types of gifts, the rejection of the gift of a story by a listener can count as a rejection of the giver (compare Bourdieu 1990; Mauss 2000; Munn 1986). With chaplains, however, there is no illusion that the relationship between the speaker and listener will endure — speakers often die soon after meeting chaplains and even when

they do not, they usually only meet with them once or twice. An ear from nowhere does not cultivate or arise from enduring relationships, and the act of unconditional receiving is all that chaplains can give speakers (compare Derrida 2008).

For an ear from nowhere, to speak is to reject that gift exchange and, in so doing, reject the speaker. There are, however, two major exceptions to this. One is backchanneling, which, understood most simply, is providing verbal confirmation that the listener is listening. The other is much more advanced; to give voice to words that were not spoken.

Speaking without using one's own voice: Backchanneling and voicing absent others

The woman was in her mid-70s. She was visiting her husband in the hospital. He did not have much time left. His body had finally given out after being neglected for years. The woman felt like he had neglected her, too, for as long as she could remember. And like his body, she was about to break down. She met with a chaplain in a waiting room and began to tell her story, “My mom just died. I took care of her for years. Took her to the bathroom, gave her massages, fed her. At the end, she didn’t even remember my name.” The chaplain responded with an extended inhalation and exhalation through his mouth, “ah.”

The woman continued, slightly angry but on the verge of tears, “She didn’t even remember my name. And now my husband [is here]. And I have to do everything for him.” She was speaking slowly. Her words were not forthcoming, so the chaplain gently encouraged her, “Now it’s your husband.” She nodded, “Do this. Do that.’ I’m tired. And I don’t know what to do.” Not having anything to say, the chaplain once again made an “ah” sound and followed it with a standard response, “That must be quite difficult.”

At that point, the instructor stopped the role play and offered his evaluation of the listener-in-training. “That was pretty good,” he said, “but I wish you had been a little braver. You really should have said ‘thank you’ instead of ‘that’s quite difficult.’ Whenever you do that at the right moment, people just start bawling because that is what they have wanted to hear for so long.” A highly accomplished chaplain nodded in agreement, “Yes, that’s right. I know it’s hard to say ‘thank you’ at that moment, that you need to be brave to do so, but it really is what you should have said.”

Several months later I witnessed a listening session that was almost

identical to this role play, though the listener was not a chaplain. The listener, who was highly skilled, had the bravery and wisdom to say “thank you” after hearing of the speaker’s struggles. The speaker broke down in tears. Through her sobs, she, too, said “thank you.” She said it repeatedly until she calmed down, wiped the tears from her eyes, and offered one final “thank you” in a steady voice. She was ready to return to her struggle. The listener had done his job.

Cultivating an ear from nowhere requires one’s own voice to disappear, even when one is speaking. To use Goffman’s (1981) terms, a person with an ear from nowhere must “animate” words without appearing to be their author or the party responsible for them. However, as several linguistic anthropologists have noted, the roles of “animator,” “author,” and “principal” cannot adequately capture the work that goes into making a communicative utterance. Rather than break the roles down into more precise and numerous categories (e.g. Hymes 1972) or focus on how multiple voices can coexist in a single utterance (Bakhtin 1981; see also Irvine 1996), I would like to focus on the importance of the work of absencing one speaker — in this case, the listener — in order to affirm another speaker — in this case, the sufferer. In other words, I am interested in the work necessary to dissociate words from the people who speak them in cases other than reported speech, and in the type of subjects that arise from that dissociation.

People who wish to develop an ear from nowhere must learn to listen for absences (compare Grice 1991). They must also give voice to those absences in order to be felt as listeners rather than as interlocutors. Doing so requires an

enormous amount of skill and, as the instructor said in the example above, bravery. Absenting one's own voice is the first step to building up the skill and bravery necessary to listen to and voice absences. Chaplains must do this in every listening session that they have. They must feel out each speaker and gradually gauge the best way to absent themselves. They must also gauge whether they could or should go beyond absenting their own voices with that particular speaker. The short vignette at the beginning of this section shows the steps in this process. The listener moved through three different strategies for backchanneling, each of which moved the listener's own voice further away from the ongoing interaction. Before looking more closely at those strategic moves, I would like to point out that the interaction being analyzed here occurred during the training, so the participants jumped right into the most intense portion of listening. The intensity and directness of the interaction highlighted the hierarchical and processual nature of absenting one's own voice, listening for absences, and voicing those absences.

The chaplain in the example above did not use words the first time he responded to the speaker. Instead, he sighed and made an "ah" sound. This "ah," with a slight lowering of pitch, had no referential or social-indexical meaning. Instead, in Japanese, it sounds like exhausted exasperation.⁶³ Anyone could make this sound, and other than slight differences in pitch, it does not carry anything unique to the producer of the sound. By making this sound instead of speaking,

⁶³ Note that even this type of iconic language is based upon a system of signs rather than being completely transparent or natural (Eco 1979; cf. Kohn 2013).

the chaplain refrained from interjecting himself into the interaction. He effectively mimicked the speaker's affective state, thus reflecting her back at herself. This reflecting of the speaker back at herself in order to erase the listener's voice was even more striking the second time he responded to her.

After the speaker said, "She didn't even remember my name. And now my husband [is here]. And I have to do everything for him," the chaplain responded, "Now it's your husband." In the original Japanese, the chaplain's response was an exact replica of the woman's comment that her husband was dying, "ima ha otōsan."⁶⁴ The chaplain had skillfully picked out the portion of the speaker's utterance that was most salient for her. He repeated it back to her. In doing so, he made the context of their interaction her here-and-now — a here-and-now that was with her husband rather than with the chaplain (Bakhtin 1981; Hanks 1990; Jakobson 1971). The chaplain accomplished this contextualization without using any of his own words or gestures (Compare Auer 1992; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Gumperz 1992).

After hearing her own words spoken back at her and acknowledging the chaplain's presence with a nod, the speaker continued talking. When she did, she said something about herself rather than her situation for the first time in the interaction — that she was tired. That is, she put the chaplain's "ah" into words. This made it possible for the chaplain to respond with words that she had not

⁶⁴ Here, "otōsan" or "father" means husband.

explicitly spoken. He transformed her statement of being “tired” into “difficulty,” saying, “that must be quite difficult” (*taihen desu ne*), thus voicing an absence contained in the speaker’s statement. The particular words that he used, however, are a common, formulaic response to hearing about people’s efforts to deal with tough situations. The commonality of that response likely made it easier for him to utter those words, but put the chaplain at risk of sounding like he was not really listening.

Saying “ah” before “that must be difficult” made the latter sound less mechanical in its delivery. Nonetheless, the instructor chose to stop the role play after the listener relied on a platitude. Rather than push for more repetition of what the speaker had actually said, which can sometimes make speakers feel like they are not being listened to, the instructor encouraged the listener to engage in riskier behavior. Rather than listen for a single absence — something not said by the speaker — the instructor told the chaplain to listen for and utter a double absence — something not spoken by someone who was not currently present in the room.

The words “thank you” were not meant to come from the listener himself — he personally had very little if anything for which to thank the speaker. I do not think that they were supposed to be coming from the speaker’s husband or deceased mother either. After all, a listener in this context cannot and should not assume a close enough relationship with a speaker to stand in for her or his kin. Rather, this “thank you” was meant to come from a voice from nowhere. That is, it

was an anonymous but pervasive voice of gratitude that affirmed the speaker's efforts and, arguably, her existence.

Each of the listener's responses affirmed the speaker's existence while erasing the particularity of the listener's voice, and thus of the listener's existence. Repeating words spoken by the speaker, giving voice to struggles unspoken by the speaker, and, finally, expressing gratitude for the speaker's efforts, which were not directly related to the listener, were each ways to speak that reflected the speaker back at herself. In serving as an affirming mirror for the speaker, the listener was able to become an ear from nowhere. And only as an ear from nowhere was that listener able to serve as a medium between the speaker and herself, thus allowing her to feel his presence while affirming her own existence. That is, chaplains must work to become an invisible medium. As invisible media, they cannot effectively reflect speakers back to themselves if they insert their own judgments into their acts of listening.

Listening without judgement: An ontology of the fact

We split up into small groups to discuss our experiences as listeners. The participants in the course had just finished a period of "practical training" (*jisshū*) at a wide variety of sites. Each participant had been required to provide a written record of one of their listening sessions. We re-enacted portions of those recorded sessions. After each re-enactment, during which the person who had originally served as the listener read the part of the speaker, everyone was asked how they felt about the original session.

The original listener provided her or his impression of the session before other people offered their feelings. The first volunteer in the group that I had joined, an older gentleman who was the head priest at a temple, was quite satisfied with his listening session. "I was really happy. I got to listen to the patient's 'true feelings,' an expression of their 'true self' (*honshin*). We had a good connection." Everyone nodded and made sounds of approval. Most of us were

even smiling. Then the instructor stepped in. He gently scolded the trainee, “You should not judge like that.” We were slightly puzzled, not knowing exactly what judgement the instructor was referring to. He clarified for us, “It doesn’t matter if you think you were listening to the ‘true self’ of the person in front of you. The fact of the matter is that there was someone in front of you and that they said something, regardless of what you think about they said. Whether those words are coming from a person’s true self or not is irrelevant. You have to take whatever they say as fact.”

An ontology of the fact, which precludes judgements that are judged to be value-based (see Peirce 1992), pervaded the chaplain’s practice of active listening. Taken on its own, this ontology entailed the reduction of human beings to the referential content of their speech. In other words, there was the fact of what they said and then there was the judgement of that fact. The latter was to be suppressed in the act of listening as a chaplain.

As I argued in the previous section of this chapter, the requirement that chaplains listen for absences suggests that the referential content of sufferers’ speech was not considered to be complete or transparent (compare Sakai 1991). Nonetheless, any inference that chaplains made from sufferers’ speech was expected to come from meanings contained in that speech rather than from the chaplains’ personal or institutional histories. Listening to meanings and trying to respond without judging them in any way challenged chaplains in three ways, each of which was an inherent part of developing an ear from nowhere in people that were very clearly from somewhere.

The first challenge arose from the need to orient aural attention toward a sufferer. Chaplains had to change the way that they interacted with the audible world to focus on the human voice. Many of the chaplains came from places and traditions where sounds other than the human voice are an important part of life and religious practice: Crying cicadas are a reminder of life and its ephemerality, bells are used to make and mark time, and the absence of the human voice, such as during meditation, sometimes allows them to achieve a different relationship to the universe than the one that they establish in listening to the suffering people (compare Bauman and Briggs 2003). As one of the chaplains, a Zen Buddhist priest, put it, “Listening to the human voice does make us focus on the world of [referential] meaning (*imi no sekai*), which a lot of our teachings say we need to overcome.” In that sense, the chaplains’ ear was displaced. More specifically, it left a world that “overcomes meaning” in order to hear sufferers’ voices. Hearing suffering voices, in turn, made it difficult to hear the world that many chaplains’ ears had previously been trained to hear — a transformation of the sensorium that facilitated a lack of judgement when engaging with speakers. For example, listening to what speakers said, rather than listening or looking for indexes of sincerity or religious conviction, limited chaplains’ range of possible responses to speakers.

Second, listening without judging required chaplains to listen without taking refuge in the teachings of their respective religions. Chaplains were not allowed to

respond to speakers by offering them religious teachings, even when they believed that those teachings would assuage speakers' suffering. Nor were chaplains supposed to disagree with or deny what a speaker told them. Sometimes this meant accepting statements that contradicted the teachings of chaplains' respective religions. That is, chaplains had to accept as true what they judged as false in order to develop an ear from nowhere.

For example, one of the instructors told a story about a bereaved woman who saw a bird at her deceased relative's funeral. The bird came right when they were speaking about the deceased and hung around a bit longer than birds normally do. In pain and looking for signs that the deceased was still around, the woman felt that the bird was a reincarnation of the deceased. As a Buddhist priest himself, the instructor told the chaplains that he knew that, according to Buddhist teachings, the bird could not have been a reincarnation of the deceased. However, the fact of the matter was that the woman had said that the bird was a reincarnation, and the instructor's specialist knowledge was not relevant to his listening to her statement.

The split between judgment and a fact of speaking is not natural and can be confusing (Bernstein 1983, 2010; Latour 2010; Putnam 2002). For example, upon hearing the instructor's example, a Buddhist priest in his early thirties sitting next to me said, "I don't understand. She was wrong. How can we accept that what she is saying is a fact?" I responded that the issue was not whether what she said was

true, but rather that she said it, and that chaplains were being taught to respond to what was being said regardless of whether they thought it was true or not. Another instructor had overheard my explanation and agreed, saying, “It is true for her, and that’s what we listen to.” The priest’s confusion and the response it elicited strongly suggest that the distinction of fact from judgement, the identification of what counted as a fact, and the prioritization of fact over judgment were not, themselves, objective or absolute. Rather, the course’s values undergirded the practical notions of fact and judgment to be applied in listening.

Finally, in accordance with the principles of clinical psychology, chaplains were not allowed to have “multi-layered relationships” with the people to whom they listened.⁶⁵ That is, they could only serve as listeners for the people with whom they met as chaplains. They could not be their priests, friends, or lovers, even if speakers desired those types of relationships.⁶⁶ This was critical to the legitimacy of the program. The hospitals, hospices, and temporary housing complexes where chaplains worked strictly banned any activities perceived as proselytization. If a chaplain’s relationship with a speaker became anything but one defined by listening, that chaplain would be expelled from the institution where they were working and the entire program, which was still quite new, could be threatened.

⁶⁵ In practice, the ethics surrounding these relationships, which are called “multiple relationships” in English, are not quite as simple as this suggests. See Behnke 2004.

⁶⁶ Even in the very rare case that a speaker explicitly stated that she or he wanted to join the chaplain’s temple or church, the chaplain had to demure. If the speaker was persistent, then the chaplain had to discuss the issue with the speaker’s family.

The stricture on multi-layered relationships is also important for the legitimacy of the program beyond the institutions that host chaplains. In a conversation that I had about the chaplains with an academic psychologist who had heard about their activities but was unaffiliated with their program, he said that he was “concerned that they would not be able to avoid creating multi-layered relationships because of their religious backgrounds.” If they were able to avoid that, however, he saw “no problem with professional psychologists helping the chaplains” learn how to listen to suffering people.

The limitation of chaplains’ relationships with speakers to listening prevents them from either using or spreading their own religious traditions, thus creating a tension between the program and the various religions and sects from which the chaplains come. However, that limitation ironically helped to establish the chaplains’ legitimacy among some religious professionals who did not participate in the program. For example, a Christian minister in Tokyo told me, “I know that Christians played a role in the formation of the program and that there are Christian chaplains, but most of them are Buddhists, right? And, you know, Buddhists are connected with death and funerals here [in Japan]. The chaplains’ work is basically a form of end-of-life care (*mitori*), so I thought that they were just making connections with people to increase their patronage. But it seems like that’s not what they are doing, so it’s probably a good program. [...] They are playing a useful role in society.” In this case, then, being perceived as a useful

listener requires not being perceived as self-serving or manipulative. In other words, when listening, chaplains had to appear as if they were from nowhere so that they did not lead speakers anywhere other than where the speaker had already been. Of course, this ontology of language, personhood, and facts has political entailments.

The politics of an ear from nowhere

“My listening went much better than I thought it would.” The Buddhist priest, a male in his young forties, expressed his relief in a way that more than hinted at his sense of pride and accomplishment. “The man was on his deathbed. He told me about terrible things that he did during World War II. He had never told anyone before. Really terrible things. But I just listened and did not condemn him. He was so thankful that afterward he sent me a small figurine as a token of thanks. I keep it in my temple tucked away next to the main altar.”

Chaplains must appear to unconditionally accept whatever they are told. Chaplains and the people they listen to often take acceptance of words as an acceptance of the person speaking those words. Extending the principle of non-judgment, chaplains accept speakers and their stories even when those stories are abhorrent to the chaplain listening to them. For example, the priest who told us about listening to someone who was likely a war criminal was himself deeply opposed to all forms of violence, nationalism, and military expansion. That is, he was opposed to everything that he was proud of being recognized for accepting.

Chaplains’ ability to accept even that to which they are personally opposed

was not based on acting. That is, in the training, they did not conceive of being as essentially separate from doing, such that one could do something without being affected by that doing (compare Goffman 1955; Strathern 1988). Rather, chaplains' ability to unconditionally accept what they were told was explicitly based on a notion of alterity. During the training, chaplains were repeatedly told not to make assumptions about the suffering speakers that they would face. As one trainee succinctly put it, "everyone has different things going on in their lives," and chaplains usually did not know what those things were.

Lacking knowledge about the circumstances of other people's lives perhaps contributed to a sense that people are atomized individuals (compare Peters 1999), but for the chaplains, more important was that that lack of knowledge made it easier to listen. Ignorance's practical importance was revealed to me by one young chaplain who was having trouble maintaining it. He was one of very few chaplains — two at the time — who had secured employment as a chaplain. He was employed as a test case by a hospital that he had been volunteering at for about a year. As a volunteer, he had not been privy to private information about patients. He did not know about their illnesses, who the people around their beds were, or what types of treatments they were undergoing. All of that information became available to him as an employee, and he lamented, "It really was much easier to do this work before I knew all of that. It's easier not to know" because knowing can create more of an attachment which, for better and for worse, made it

harder not to judge.

Ironically, however, maintaining ignorance was not only about maintaining distance and alterity. Not knowing or assuming to know the background or current condition of speakers allowed chaplains to draw basic similarities between themselves and speakers. Most notably, chaplains assumed (1) that people have a desire to be accepted and (2) that conditions matter in the formation of a person.

The assumption that people seek recognition allowed chaplains to conceive of their listening as a meaningful engagement despite their inability to change the health, wealth, or social status of the people to whom they listened. Constantly confronted with their inability to change either the conditions that speakers found themselves in, chaplains were told to hold on to a “forward-facing powerlessness” (*maemukina muryoku-sa*). That fatalistic fortitude allowed chaplains to continue their work. So did the recognition that speakers gave them. Speakers may pass away, and chaplains’ interactions with them may be short-lived, but recognition of the chaplains endures in small trinkets, stories, and various institutions’ willingness to host chaplains. But the promise of recognition — whether from or for the chaplains — was not enough to facilitate unconditional acceptance of speakers and their words.

Paying attention to conditions rather than essences allowed chaplains to accept people regardless of what they had done because blame for those acts could be shifted to the contingencies of history. The priest who listened to the war

criminal said so much when he told us, “Many people did what that person did. And if it was us, we might have done the same.” The “if” in his comment maintained the alterity of the speaker — the priest did not identify with the speaker — while highlighting people’s susceptibility to the situations that shape them. That same “if” ideologically erased people’s participation and complicity in the creation of those situations.

Chaplains are taught that their work, like the lives of the people they listen to, is situational and largely devoid of agency. After all, what can a chaplain do when the person in front of them is dying, leaving behind a child and spouse who will suffer not only grief, but poverty as well? While there might eventually be mourning for the deceased sufferer, even in the case of the soldier, there was little to witness, and, given the context of a soldier expressing horror at his own acts, the line between victims and beneficiaries was blurred (compare Payne 2008). All the chaplain could do was to allow the perpetrator of violence to voice himself as a perpetrator, and therefore victim, of broader, state-sponsored violence.

The chaplain’s displacement of blame for the violence of World War II, which let him accept the speaker’s words, motivated the speaker to offer recognition to the listener. This seemingly mutual recognition, however, was partial and unbalanced. While the speaker was accepted despite revealing something that was ostensibly of the utmost significance to his entire life, the chaplain was recognized only in his role as a chaplain, which, though important to him, was a

minor portion of his life. And in order to be recognized and felt, he had to accept that which was unacceptable to him as a person and as a Buddhist priest, namely, terrible violence against other living beings.

Here, then, becoming an ear from nowhere — removing traces of where one comes from in order to listen to an other — appears as a cause of what scholars have called an “anti-politics,” by which they generally mean “a moral discourse centered on pain and suffering rather than political discourse of comprehensive justice” (Brown 2004: 454; see also Ferguson 1990; Fisher 1997; Meister 2012). Like in other forms of politics that are “anti-political,” such as humanitarianism or human rights, “inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma” (Fassin 2012: 6; see also Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011). There are, however, some important differences between the politics of an ear from nowhere and the politics of humanitarianism, for example.

Humanitarianism often supports powerful nation-states and world systems by legitimizing capitalist and military interventions as means to protect individuals from less powerful states or governments. As a means for nation-states to spread and maintain the norms that undergird their ability to govern, humanitarianism require the sufferers to appear to be morally legitimate in order to be protected. In that case, moral legitimacy is, in turn, determined in ways that enforce and quell challenges to the norms of liberal democracies (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). The

ear from nowhere, a means for people who are politically and economically precarious to gain recognition by recognizing others, makes no such demands. It does not ask sufferers to conform to or perform normative roles such as the abused woman, the sick or disabled human, or the politically oppressed and threatened friend of democracy. Instead, the ear from nowhere strives to allow speakers to recognize themselves as individuals — a minimal, individualized act of self-determination — through the medium of the listener.

Here, the burden of facilitating the self-determination of the speaker falls on the listener. To become an ear from nowhere, listeners must accept whatever they are told regardless of whether it is acceptable to them as individuals. In order to accomplish that acceptance, they must sometimes ignore their own ethical and political stances, which often come from the religious traditions to which they belong. That is, when working as ears from nowhere, chaplains must ignore their own traditions in order to garner recognition by allowing others to recognize themselves. In this case, then, the ear from nowhere lies between two sides of the modern individual: The speaker as a sovereign self and the listener as an unmarked, anonymous — that is, universal — human arising from the self-negation of tradition (compare Butler 1997; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Foucault 1978, 1988).

Conclusion: Toward an anthropology of listening and negation

Listening is an important aspect of activities ranging from chaplains' engagements with dying and suffering others to the spread of human rights as a

mode of governance. Differences in the forms that listening takes, the listening subject, and that which the subject listens to and for shape people's collective engagements with the world. For example, listening with the intent to judge or to leave a record (compare Inoue 2011; Sikkink 2011) is quite different from chaplains' listening from a position of "forward-facing powerlessness," which creates and is created by an ear from nowhere.

Whereas an ear with power tends to discipline speakers, encouraging them to say particular things in particular ways in order to get particular benefits, an ear from nowhere disciplines listeners. Developing an ear from nowhere requires orienting oneself toward the other, eliminating one's voice from the words coming out of one's own mouth, and not judging in accordance according to one's own ontological realities or ethical standards. It demands an erasure of the listener's particularity in order to achieve recognition in the face of the other.

In a way, the chaplain's ear from nowhere was meant to lead to different kinds of forgetting rather than to remembrance or enforced compliance with a system of domination. Hearing and accepting terrible things day in and day out can be exhausting. It is not unusual for chaplains to physically collapse after listening to sufferers for a couple of years. When I asked two prominent chaplains how they dealt with listening to and accepting suffering, they both told me that they had cultivated an ability to forget. Other chaplains have confirmed this for me: if one wants to pursue listening for a long time, one has to cultivate the ability to

listen intently when engaging with speakers, but not let the words from speakers stick. Speakers and the people surrounding them are also expected to engage in an act of forgetting. Speakers often die shortly after talking to chaplains. Even when they do not, the focus is on them rather than the chaplain, who serves as a medium between the speaker and her or himself. That is, for chaplain's listening to be effective, it must be forgotten — at least temporarily. In the words of one of the founding members of the chaplaincy program, to be an interfaith chaplain “you have to come and leave like the wind, leaving no impression of your presence.”

Wind is felt. It is felt not as a form unto itself. Rather, it highlights the form and limits of the feeler. This is how chaplains attempted to make themselves felt. They turned themselves into ears from nowhere — listeners without particular histories, judgements, or selfish ends — in order to recognize the particularity of speakers. They became universalized humans not by presenting their own perspective as objective or anonymous, as is the case of the view and voice from nowhere, but rather by suppressing their own perspective. Their universality was constructed from absence rather than presence, a nowhere rather than an everywhere. Their active self-negation exhausted chaplains, who were ironically recognized for rendering themselves unrecognizable as practitioners of their own traditions.

The recognition granted to people who can negate their own traditions — transform them into internal motivations without overt, public expression — is a

key aspect of the spread of modern, alienated notions of the universalized human (compare Asad 2003; Povinelli 2006; Taylor 1992). Scholars have identified this dynamic working in humanitarianism and among racial and gender minorities, who sometimes try to “pass” as cisgender, white and/or heteronormative so as to avoid negative repercussions. Even in those cases, however, the emphasis has largely been on positive expressions. That is, on passing as the positive, unmarked norm or as actualizing ideal types such as “the refugee” or “native culture” that allow for the management of otherness.

The work that the chaplains do spreads modern notions of the human in a very different way. Focusing on their practice of listening reveals the importance of acts of negation in the construction of modern subjectivity and liberal governance. Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) has rightfully argued that liberalism is “the project of founding a form of social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms” (335). In practice, the search for those norms, particularly for people who do not have direct access to the law-making or enforcing apparatus of society, often takes the form of listening in a way that negates one’s own tradition. From calls by self-proclaimed liberals and academics to “listen” to Trump supporters after his election to the practice of anthropology, the search for the particulars through which universal norms may be challenged and found is often about turning one’s own place into a nowhere. About turning

one's history into an absence that does not get in the way of understanding, which, in turn, is posited as a first step toward establishing agreements upon which universality might stand.

In practice, agreement does not often come easily. Even with the chaplaincy program, there were some people who were opposed to standing in for the “empty chair” of gestalt psychology. One of the main instructors of the course was trying to find ways to allow chaplains to bring more of their religious background into their practice, and many of the participants saw listening as just one facet of their own religious practice — albeit one that made them reconsider who they were and what their religious background was good for. As a senior advisor to the program, a Christian who has officially retired from a high-ranking position within his sect, told me, “You can't actually do this work by just sitting there. We are people of faith and we need to bring that to listening. We need to bring all of our experience into this so that we can be next to people. If we don't, then we are no different than a psychologist. Anyone could just sit there.” Of course, that is precisely the point. And at the time of writing, that advisor was having a difficult time finding someone to listen to his objections.

Chapter 4 will, in part, be submitted as part of an article for *Language in Communication*. Michael Berman was the sole investigator and author of the chapter and of the article that will be submitted.

Part III

Chapter 5: Imagined empathy, sympathy, and empathy: Creating a nation of strangers in volunteer activities at a tea salon in Tōhoku

Ten of us, eight women and two men, had come to Tōhoku from all over Japan to provide emotional care for people who had lost their homes and, in some cases, their families in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. One and a half years after the disasters, many of the survivors were living in temporary housing facilities. We were going to visit tea salons in those housing facilities so that we could “attentively listen” to anything that residents wanted to share with us. But before visiting the living, we went to see signs of their suffering. Upon arrival in Tōhoku, we were taken to look at the ravaged buildings that we had seen so many times in the newspaper and on television, and, when not forbidden to do so, we took pictures of gnarled steel and blue sky visible through spaces that had been walls. Our guide Sugimoto-san, a young man from Tokyo who, like the other volunteers, was a member of RK, told us tragic stories about the people who had died at these now empty sites. The tour felt to me like an attempt to recreate the gathering around suffering that brought the interfaith chaplains together right after the disasters and had a similar effect. Listening to those stories and looking at signs of suffering, we were brought together as sympathetic volunteers.

After our tour through the area, we went to the home where we would be staying during our five-day stint as volunteers. We set down our bags and sat on the floor for the rest of our orientation. Sugimoto-san passed out instructions prepared by psychologists and philosophers for how to listen and respond when spoken to in the tea salons. He had been trained in the art of listening, partially by staff members of RK who had participated in the training for interfaith chaplains. The instructions he gave set out the limits of our sympathetic encounter with victims of the disaster, a point that Sugimoto-san emphasized while passing them out. “We drove you around to show you places that people living in temporary housing might talk about and to give you an idea of the cleanup work that they’re doing. But don’t forget, you shouldn’t ask questions and you’re here to listen more than to talk. When you talk, it’s easier to say something that might raise painful thoughts for them, even if that’s not your intention. You should be empathetic (*omoiyari wo motte*) and consider what they’ve gone through, but you shouldn’t say anything because you don’t really understand how they might react.”

Talking was not the only limitation placed on interaction with people attending the tea salons. Volunteers were also instructed not to physically touch the bodies of other people. There were times when that was appropriate, such as when volunteer groups offered free massages (particularly foot massages) to the stressed and pained residents of temporary housing complexes. However, that practice had become less popular over time and touching in general was not seen as appropriate for volunteers who came to listen. As Mr. Umibe, who I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation and whose volunteer center I discuss in the

final chapter, later told me, “Touching is not fair (*zurui*). It can create a false sense of closeness that makes the person touched open up, sometimes more than they want to. And because the other person is giving a message, they can just focus on the speaker’s feet and not really listen. They don’t really share anything. It’s a bit dangerous.”

When receiving the original instructions from Sugimoto-san, we all listened intently. Most of us were inexperienced in interacting with survivors of disasters. The stakes felt high and we wanted to help, rather than hurt, the people who we came to meet, and it seemed that while we had a limited ability to assuage pain and suffering, we retained an ability to harm. I was reminded of my friend Hachisan’s comment about how Japan’s relationless-ness could be exemplified by young people wanting to offer a seat in a train to older people but being afraid that doing so would be insulting. More than that, though, I was happy to have the chance to practice with the members of RK who were going through the same thing as I was. We were, after all, there together.

I volunteered with RK at their tea salons during the summers of 2012 and 2015 while conducting research on work being done to ameliorate the social problems of suicide, depression, “lonely deaths” of people who die alone and without heirs, and a shrinking population that scholars and reporters have described as Japan’s “relationless society” (Allison 2012, 2013; NHK 2012; Nozawa 2015). As the chaplains and other people working in Tōhoku know quite well, these problems have been exacerbated by the disasters. People living in temporary housing facilities are at a higher risk for loneliness, depression, and suicide than the general population. As such, they serve as a particularly concentrated site for people to approach and combat social relationlessness.

Everyone from members of “new religions” and NGOs to representatives of the state pointed to sympathetic voluntarism as a type of relation that exemplified

connectedness among Japanese people. As Morioka (2012) writes in his book on aging in a relationless society, “The cooperation among people who experienced the disaster and the support provided for them by families, communities, and the rest of society prove that people are not alone. The situation taught us that no one lives completely disconnected from others—there is always the potential to connect” (31). However, what are we to make of such connections when they entail at most a weeklong series of interactions between volunteers and people living in different temporary housing units? And what can they tell us about the work of empathy in maintaining a nation bombarded with vivid representations of inequalities in the distribution of suffering and connectedness?

The volunteers who come to Tōhoku are different from the chaplains, who devote fairly large portions of their lives to making those connections, however fleeting. This volunteering also differed from most of RK’s other social projects. The volunteers undoubtedly came as an expression of RK’s compassion and their trip would not have been possible without the connections that RK had made with the local welfare council that managed access to the temporary housing complexes. As such, these volunteers were a lived interpretation of the histories of RK’s compassion, including the attempts to form community and RK’s turn to selfless giving after being accused by the press and government of committing human rights violations (see chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation). However, unlike many of RK’s other activities, which are built on decades of cooperation with other

religions and local governments working toward world peace and human rights, the majority of volunteers came to Tōhoku untrained and only for very short amounts of time.

Volunteering also seemed to shape people differently than either forming a community or engaging in long-term peace projects. NPOs and NGOs facilitated much of the volunteer activity in Tōhoku and were responsible for the use and allocation of a large portion of the five billion dollars donated following the disasters. The relative absence of the state in these activities led many social commentators to hail volunteer activities as the arrival of a true civil society in Japan (Robertson 2012). This arrival had been preceded by an arrival of the same in 1998 with the passage of the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities, which made it easier for small, voluntary organizations to claim tax benefits as NPOs. That law was passed as a state response to donations and volunteering after the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake. Volunteer activities after the 1995 earthquake, in turn, built on a long-term state strategy started in the late 1970s and early '80s of fostering “spontaneous” voluntarism meant to facilitate “self-realization” for volunteers and a sense of “solidarity” among them while lowering state costs for providing social safety nets (Avenell 2010a, 2010b; Ogawa 2009). Local *shakyō* or welfare councils that were established after the war in 1951 provided the institutional basis for those strategies. The councils and RK cooperated to create the tea salons in Tōhoku. Activities at the salons, like the

state's support of shakyō, were meant to “make everyone an ‘actor/subject’” while “bringing their hearts together.”⁶⁷

Anthropologists working on neoliberalism will recognize the above pattern as a move toward privatization of state functions in the name of “dignity” and “self-responsibility,” a shift that relies on and creates “a humanitarianized public sphere that makes individual compassion and private empathy primary public virtues” (Muehlebach 2012: 105; see also Adams 2013; Berlant 2004; Roy 2012). Beyond the confines of a small subsection of critical anthropology and literary studies, sympathy and empathy have been lauded as the foundations of justice and social solidarity. Everyone from Barack Obama Obama to Marxist theorist Franco Berardi (2009) has argued that empathy is the solution to contemporary forms of social alienation.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, however, the cultivation of compassion is not only a state strategy to create citizens who work without remuneration to provide services once provided by the state. Nor is it a magical solution to bridge social gaps. Empathy, which is one way to share the suffering of others, can also be an engine that drives the separation of those people from each other. Sugimoto-san's instructions to “empathize” with victims of the disaster while keeping in mind that we did not “understand how they might react” was an expression of the tension inherent in making “private empathy” a “public virtue”

⁶⁷ http://www.kosei-kai.or.jp/news/2012/05/post_2385.html last accessed 7/20/2019

and the fragility of a nation built upon fusing that tension. More profoundly, his instructions suggest that, far from “fail[ing] to recognize the Other as a ‘face’... that resists any attempt to possess it even in the name of good” (Fassin 2012: 254), the dangerous act of empathizing is here bringing self and Other—and self as Other—into being in a way that necessitated the “recognition” of their difference. In the temporary housing complexes, sympathetic voluntarism generated social splits internal to the nation—even as the nation served as a sign of belonging that motivated volunteers to give their time and care to others in need. That is, empathetic voluntarism led empathizers to experience themselves as fundamentally separate from others rather than as intimately connected with them or united by some greater shared interest.

Imagined empathy and the limits of sympathy

“Volunteering is a self-motivated activity based on the spontaneous desires of an individual. In addition to fulfilling the desire of the individual volunteer to participate in society and achieve self-realization, the spread of volunteer activities also contributes to society. Communities grow stronger as increased interest in contributing to society and participating in welfare activities brings people together in support of each other.” - Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi_kaigo/seikatsuhogo/volunteer/index.html accessed 7/20/2019)

As with any engagement, there were multiple aspects of the connection and disconnection taking place in the tea salons. Here, I analytically separate various meanings of the relations between people there to highlight ways that similarities and difference between people were presupposed and entailed in their

interactions. The overlapping and intermingling of different aspects of sympathy, empathy, and compassion are complex and, sometimes, conflicting. That conflict was evident in Sugimoto-san's instructions to us, which told us to "be empathetic" without assuming that we could actually achieve full empathy with people who had gone through the horrors of the tsunami. That tension arose partially from the geophysical distance between the disaster area and places less affected by the tsunami combined with the notion that communication between more and less affected people was possible. For many people, including members of the government and of RK, that communication was supposed to create "communities" (compare Peters 1999).

The concepts of sympathy and empathy have long been tied up with ideas about the relationship between distance, similarity, and difference. Eighteenth century philosophers, most notably Hume (2000[1739]) and Smith (1982[1759, 1790]), developed the notion of sympathy as a moral relation based on the creation and identification of similarities between individuals. A concern with sympathy continued through the nineteenth century. In 1877, Peirce, for example, identified sympathy as the basis for the "ruthless" maintenance of society through the creation of "intellectual slaves" who conformed to and enforced norms rather than submit those norms to the scrutiny of scientific inquiry (Peirce 1991[1877]: 153-154). These works largely focused on the role of sympathy in delimiting social boundaries that were strongly motivated – but not guaranteed or bound – by

physical proximity and contact. As such, for Hume, “the sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov’d from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely” (207; see also Rutherford 2009).

Ironically, philosophical consideration of how sympathy delimited boundaries in eighteenth century Europe was spurred by the breakup of communities and households at the start of the industrial revolution, the subsequent formation of bodies that could be understood as “autonomous individuals,” and the circulation of print media—particularly the modern novel. Hunt (2008), building on Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined community, has described how this fomented “imagined empathy” that “reinforced the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations, or even nations to greater universal values” (32).⁶⁸ As Deleuze has noted, the conflict between proximity-based similarity and what Hunt calls imagined empathy posed a central problem for Hume. In Hume’s work, “the moral and social problem is how to go from real sympathies which exclude one another to a real whole which would include these sympathies. The problem is how to extend sympathy” (Deleuze 1991[1953]: 40; see also Hankins 2014).

The gap between imagined empathy and sympathy, like the problem of whether to extend sympathy and in what ways, is not primarily a philosophical

⁶⁸ See Fujii 1993 for a consideration of the empathies created and expressed in modern Japan fiction that does not present that fiction as a failed mimicry of “novels.”

problem. Nor is it benign. On the contrary, the extension of sympathy and the relation of that extension to imagined empathy are arguably constitutive of many contemporary forms of belonging. For example, voluntarism after the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan has been about an “increased interest in contributing to society,” and “society” is generally characterized as a collection of “self-motivated individuals” as in the above statement by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. The violent jolts of the earth undoubtedly created some degree of shared experience among Japanese citizens, all of whom have vivid memories of “3.11.” But it was the circulation of texts and images—such as the pictures we took while Sugimoto-san led us around collapsed buildings—on television, in newspapers, and on the internet that created the imagined empathy that moved approximately 4,317,000 volunteers and their money to Tōhoku in the seven months following the disasters (compare Boltanski 1999; Sontag 2003).

The movement of texts, images, money, and people spurred an imagination of the nation as exceeding regional variations. Interviewing volunteers in Tokyo three years later, many of them told me that their volunteering was the first time they had “acted as a Japanese” on behalf of Japan, a feeling that contrasted with the “difference” they felt when they first came to Tokyo from their hometowns elsewhere. The differentiated feelings inherent in acting on behalf of a nation that exists as a sameness in the differences between its unclear parts has raised a conflict in popular Japanese discourse that seems similar to the one at the center

of Hume's work—to what degree and in relation to what qualities does the imagined whole of Japan correspond to “real sympathies” or similarities in people's lives? Just as in Hume, difference appears as a problem and the extension of sympathy the moral response.

Here, the work of Kitamura (2013) on “bonds of suffering” (*kuen*) is quite revealing. After asking how we should face the suffering concentrated in Tōhoku, he writes, “There has been a spread of support and creation of ‘affective ties’ since the disaster, but the problems of the ‘relationless society’ that existed before the disaster have not disappeared” (4-5). He goes on to write about the spread of economic stratification and poverty in a society that “prioritized economic efficiency” over everything else. Returning to the disasters, he writes, “Employment is a serious problem in disaster-stricken areas as well. Tōhoku has long been experiencing a shrinking population [due to urbanization], depleting its economic base. It is precisely in those types of places that nuclear power plants are concentrated. What has been exposed by the cracks opened by the great earthquake and gas explosion [in the nuclear power plant] is perhaps an image of the future of the whole country” (5). In this image of Japan, what is shared are the conditions of relationlessness, even though these conditions are spread unevenly throughout the country.

The commensuration of people in Japan under a sign of relationlessness whereby the disasters in Tōhoku reveal the future of the rest of the country has

rendered precarious subjects the object of political and ethical debate.⁶⁹ Aspects of relationlessness, particularly the graying and shrinking population, undeniably provide the conditions of possibility for this commensuration of people and places. Nonetheless, the differences between the situations of people who are being commensurated are stark. The suffering of day laborers is not the same as the suffering of lonely people who have lost their families in a tsunami, let alone whatever forms of suffering volunteers might be dealing with in their lives. It is precisely this difference—a difference not necessarily felt or recognized without the encounter of these different people—that Sugimoto-san was wary of when he told us to remember that we did not understand how people would react if we spoke to them in certain ways. In other words, what Hume and Deleuze call “real sympathies” and what De Waal (1996) calls “learned adjustment,” which is the process of gradually becoming familiar with the limitations of others through interaction (48), is lacking, thereby increasing the possibility that someone will exceed those limitations and exacerbate suffering (see Powell and De Waal 1974).

In a way, then, never coming into close proximity is a condition of maintaining the type of imagined empathy that currently characterizes Japan. That is, the construction of a modern public—already a largely anonymous form of sociality (Gal and Woolard 2001; Habermas 1991; Warner 2005)—based on the circulation of texts, images, and people that carry the quality of relationlessness

⁶⁹ For more on precarity see Allison 2012, 2013; Molé 2010; Muehlebach 2012, 2013; For ethical substance see Povinelli 2001, 2011.

would seem to negate the possibility of creating the “real whole” that this public must conjure up in order to maintain itself as a viable form of belonging.

Meanwhile, the lack of learned adjustment increases the potential to cause suffering in actual interactions. That potential, combined with the desire not to harm others, presents a limit to the degree of sympathy that can be formed in volunteer activities.

Planners of those activities, such as the workers I talked to at the welfare council overseeing activities at the tea salons, are aware of this limitation. In the words of one worker at the welfare council, they “try to get local people to participate because they understand what other people are talking about and they get to know them over time.” Just as with the chaplains, people who are not “local” must conform to strict guidelines, particularly for their speech. Complaints from local residents about what is said in tea salons can lead to a volunteer group being banned from further participation.

The welfare council’s strictures on speech highlight the importance of language and ideas about language in the coordination of people that is required in order to generate sympathy (Kroskirty 2000; Woolard 1998). Recent work on sympathy has productively built on affect theory and theories of mimicry, largely as a way to bring attention to extralinguistic aspects of the transference of qualities between various types of objects and people (Ahmed 2004; Rutherford 2009; Taussig 1993). As we know, however, language use accomplishes social work

that is not primarily referential in nature (Austin 1975; Jakobson 1990; Peirce 1991). In the work of RK's volunteers, imagined empathy, language use, and ideas about language converged to share and limit the possibilities of forming sympathetic relationships. More specifically, a concern for hurting residents of temporary housing and the imperative to listen created different distributions of familiarity among volunteers—who can talk to each other freely—and residents, who learn little about volunteers' personal lives because volunteers are not supposed to speak to them.

Empathy as the object of sympathy

After our tour of the disaster area, Sugimoto-san drove us to the home where we would be staying for the week. It belonged to an RK member who no longer wanted to live there because she was afraid that another tsunami would come. It felt very homey and had a beautiful family altar arranged in standard RK fashion, so even though it was new for all of us, it was not foreign. If that was a home, we were arranged like family. Only, instead of being tied together by ties of kinship, we were tied together by RK's history, the home, and our desire to allow suffering others to speak. Imagined empathy had generated that desire among us, and the cultivated sympathy among members of RK facilitated their ability to fulfill that desire. There was another aspect of what they desired to do, however, which was to "empathize" (*omoiyari wo motte*).

Following Jodi Halpern (2001), Hollan and Throop have recently defined

empathy as “a first person-like, experiential understanding of another person’s perspective” (Hollan and Throop 2011: 2). That definition is similar to one of Adam Smith’s varied formulations of sympathy, namely, “changing places in fancy with the sufferer” (1982[1759]: 10). Yet, as Smith several times suggests and Hollan and Throop note, there is no guarantee to the accuracy of empathic perspective switching. However, without some degree of accuracy, empathy is no different than mere projection or, as it were, an imagined empathy that projects sameness across social differences (Hollan and Throop 2011: 3; 2008: 386). Sugimoto-san was deeply aware of the difference between empathy and projection, which is a part of why he warned us about not assuming anything, but also why he sat us down together.

In trying to teach us how to listen empathically to people living in the temporary housing complexes, he was engaging in a practice of cultivating sympathy between members. For, as Catherine Fennell writes, sympathy is “a communicative mechanism whose subscribers invest it with the capacity to extend feelings, qualities, and visceral states across very different entities” (2015: 7). Fennell’s definition shifts focus from de Waal’s learned adjustment or acts of switching perspective to people’s ability to create shared sensibilities in and through interactions in a built environment. In other words, by having us all try to project ourselves into the situation of a disaster survivor, Sugimoto-san created a similarity among us while maintaining our difference from actual disaster survivors.

After instructing us to project ourselves into the position of residents of temporary housing, but not suppose that we understood how they would react, Sugimoto-san told us to take a look at the documents that he had passed out. We were going to do exercises that would help us become better volunteers and allow us to voice concerns before the next day's sympathetic encounter. The first exercise involved taking turns reading the instructions for interaction at the tea salon out loud.

The instructions were written in short, bullet-point fashion, and we quickly fell into a cadence or poetic meter while reading (compare Jakobson 1960; Silverstein 1984). As Smith would have it, we were "beating in time" together: "When guests come, greet them with a sunny disposition"; "Show them the menu and offer them a drink"; "Sit next to them and start conversation normally"; "Allow the residents to talk to each other and appreciate that they let you listen." It came to be my turn. Sugimoto-san subtly offered his hand to take the paper in case I could not read it. "The first thing many volunteers notice is how happy and optimistic residents seem." The other volunteers nodded their heads in approval as I maintained the rhythm of our interaction. The next person in line was Nagatani-san, a woman in her 70s who had been selected by her local dharma center to volunteer and who was the eldest of our group.

"Some volunteers might wander, er..." she paused briefly and Sugimoto-san quietly corrected her. "Wonder," he said just as she started reading the next

words. “They wonder if it is ok to have a good time while volunteering.” The small slip passed by and the next person read the next sentence, which was underlined. “At times like those, let’s try to bridge the gaps between our hearts and those of the residents in order to deepen the relationship between us and them.” This brought us to the last section of the document, “But don’t forget, everyone living here is carrying emotional scars, and the reality is that they have to act happy if they are to keep on living. If they feel comfortable, they might express suffering in small drops, but you should never try to pull it out of them. Be careful.”

We were to stay mindful of the suffering lodged in the hearts of residents, a suffering that we could not see, while we bridged the gaps between us in moments of pleasure. Moments of pleasure, though, could at any time be pierced by the emergence of expressions of suffering which lie just under the surface of our interaction. In order to handle such moments, we went through our next exercise. This too involved reading out loud. In unison, we read the simple steps for responding to expressions of suffering. “Backchannel—provide indications that you are listening. Repeat what they said back to them. Put some feeling into it. Do not try to resolve any issues. The most important thing is to take in and accept the suffering that they are sharing with you.” Though the instructions were simple, executing them was not easy. We practiced in groups. When listening to residents, the conversation was supposed to be one-sided, but in our exercise, we took turns saying things and repeating them back in a way that felt somewhat like a natural

conversation. Once we had practiced with relatively harmless words that had nothing to do with suffering, Sugimoto-san upped the ante.

He gave each person a piece of paper with a chart on it. “Now write down something that’s troubling you. Make sure you write something real and write your name next to your concern. Then pass it to the person next to you. When you receive someone else’s concern, write an appropriate response and put your name next to it. We’ll do this until everyone’s chart is full.” And so we did. We shared personal information and responded appropriately to everyone else’s troubles. Once our sheet had made it around the table, we were given a moment to read everyone’s responses. After reading the responses, we had to tell everyone how we felt, which responses pleased us most, and why. We came to the conclusion that “it is enough just to repeat back what is said.” Such a response made us feel like the other person was listening without making judgments about what we were saying. However, just as in the previous exercise, we had each had the chance to express a concern and to respond to the concerns of others. This was an event that created sympathies in the circulation of our concerns and the coordination of our responses.

Those coordinations extended beyond our orientation. When we were done with our exercises, we were given schedules for cooking, cleaning, and praying. Everyone had to play an equal role in maintaining the household and the group. As there were no complaints, we ate our first meal together, which had been

prepared by another guide who helped Sugimoto-san manage and take care of us. Following this, we drove to a nearby hotel to bathe together in their public bath. We split up by gender and I had a chance to talk with Sugimoto-san alone. We talked a bit about literature but stayed mostly quiet. He got up to dry off. I followed several minutes later.

Upon returning to the house, we said nighttime prayers together in near-perfect unison (my mumbling voice threw us off a bit). This unison was the tightest expression of sympathy yet. Membership in RK was very important for all of the volunteers present in that house, which had been donated by RK members who moved to Tokyo after the disasters. The volunteers had been members for most or all of their lives, which ranged from twenty some years to more than seventy, and said these prayers every morning and night. Coming to volunteer allowed them to express and cultivate their Buddhist compassion. And yet, following the prayer, we were told that there was to be no use of religious-sounding language outside of the house. "It is forbidden by the local welfare council."

That was not the only thing that was forbidden. Before going to sleep we were given a list of things that we were not to do when we met residents. Giving gifts or asking for an address to send something to later, requesting something from residents, taking pictures, and exchanging contact information were proscribed by the local welfare council. Like the interfaith chaplains, we had to become anonymous as a condition of our participation. This was done to protect

residents who, as we were reminded several times, were not members of RK and would likely be averse to anything that sounded even slightly related to the group. In a past instance, this had even included “speaking too politely,” an act that warranted a visit from a representative of the local welfare council.

This was a clear sign that the people we would meet the next day were different from the newly formed “us” and they were unpredictable. As a final matter before going to bed, we looked at something written by Washida Kiyokazu, a philosopher of ethics at Otani University. “After the Kōbe Earthquake many people learned how difficult it is to listen. ... As psychologist Katō Hiroshi states with extreme clarity in his book *Emotional Care: From the Great Hanshin Earthquake to Tōhoku*, ‘Do not add to the suffering that people have already experienced.’ Don’t respond to people’s comments with thoughtless feedback, and don’t think you understand ... To truly understand is to know that you cannot fully know the feelings of the other who is right in front of you. ... Any support group that doesn’t recognize that limit should run into a sign that says, ‘We refuse your emotional care.’”

We had been firmly brought together in our joint experience of separation from other people who could potentially be harmed by the wrong type of attention. It had been made clear to us that not only the quality of our joint-attention (Hankins 2014; see also Kockelman 2005), and the medium for that attention (Fennell 2012), but also the particular qualities of the object of attention were of the utmost

importance. The otherness of the other and our shared relation to that other firmly established, we went to bed anxious. Our desire to empathize had been piqued, and we were prepared for the encounter to come.

Encounter as a gap between sympathy and empathy

We woke up, said prayers, ate breakfast, and split into two groups to go to tea salons in two different temporary housing facilities. I was put into group A. We would be going to a fairly large facility with about 50 housing units, each the size of a small apartment. Most of the temporary housing facilities were built on public lands after the disaster— at a cost that was 2.5 times the legal budget mandated by Japan’s “Disaster Relief Law”—but the facility that we would be going to was converted public housing. It had been built in the mid 1980s in order to encourage development, prevent the steady fall in population due to young people moving to big cities, and curb the potential harms of the then imminent decision of the town’s largest employer to close their steel mills. Because of this, it had a fairly large “meeting room” that we could use as a tea salon. We set up tables and put soft drinks in the refrigerator, which had been provided by the Red Cross.

After setting up, we were accompanied by Ishihara-san, a local volunteer who was also a member of RK. She guided us to the doors of people who had participated in the salon in previous weeks. The other volunteers had me knock gently and announce that we were going to be operating the salon on that day, suggesting that people might be more excited to come if a foreigner was present. I announced myself as “Michael Berman from RK, which has come under the

auspices of the welfare council.” That day, seven women in their fifties and sixties came to the salon. We greeted them and offered them drinks in accordance with our training. Things got off to a slow start, so one of the women pulled out a bunch of newspapers and told us that she would teach us how to make purses out of them. After a demonstration, she handed us newspapers and instructions.

I sat next to one of the women. The newspaper yielded to her unskilled fingers. I watched helplessly as the creases that she made strayed from the example provided by our teacher. If the newspaper was to become a handbag, we would need help. But we were not the only ones having trouble. We sat silently while waiting for the teacher to finish helping others. Unlike the steady stream of volunteers heading toward this particular housing facility, speech was not particularly forthcoming. “Should we fold it here?” I asked just as much to sooth my discomfort with silence and feelings of inadequacy as a listener as I did to connect with the person across from me. She smiled and glanced downward, “I don’t know.” After waiting another minute or so, the resident who was our teacher came to us. Tinkering with the newspaper, the two women spoke of crafts that they had made together in this salon during previous meetings, meetings that neither I nor all but one of the other volunteers had been to.

I sat silently with Sugimoto-san and nibbled on food that another resident had brought for volunteers while the women talked to each other and made a handbag. Ishihara-san encouraged me to join the conversation. The women were

talking about different kinds of fertilizer that they had used in their gardens before they came to live in temporary housing. Knowing nothing about fertilizer, I did my best. “It is interesting that fertilizers with fecal matter from different animals produce different results.” They nodded their heads gently and continued talking to each other. Sugimoto-san stood up and walked outside. Representatives from the welfare office had come to check if things were running smoothly. I suppose they were.

At the end of the day, I left with a full stomach and the bag that I had made with the help of our teacher. Though I had not received many words, I had received food, a gift, and care from the people that I had gone to help—people who I will likely never see again and whose difference from Sugimoto-san and myself was readily recognizable.

While volunteer activities in Tōhoku have rightfully been widely praised, I am not the first person to note a lack of sympathy or coordination between volunteers and survivors. For example, in her short story “In the Zone II,” award-winning fiction writer Taguchi Randy writes about elderly women living in a refugee center after the disasters. The women are visited by a group of Italian and Japanese volunteers who make pizza for them. Though it tastes good to the narrator, the elderly women find it bland. They eat some anyway out of consideration for the volunteers, but mention that not being able to tend their own gardens or cook for themselves has made them gain weight and feel a sense of

ennui. Our response to their situation is also questioned in the story. Toward the end, a local man who had served as the narrator's guide says to her, "You're going to feel empathetic and pity us (*dōjō suru*), aren't you? ... I really don't like that" (Taguchi 2013[2012]: 108).

I have heard stories similar to the one that Taguchi narrated in her book. I have also seen and participated in what could be considered failures among volunteer groups insofar as volunteers placed a burden on survivors. However, participants in the tea salons have told me that they do not mind having a slight burden placed on them. For example, almost every participant in almost all of the several hundred volunteer events I have attended in Kamaishi since 2012 has altered their language for the sake of the volunteers. The regional dialect, the thinking goes, is too thick and sometimes crude for the unaccustomed ears of volunteers. Some of the participants also enjoy providing food and small gifts. As one woman told me, "It's like I have a guest. I'm happy I can still offer them something. It makes me happy to give because I still can."

Moreover, to some degree, the lack of sympathy but persistence of empathy between volunteers and survivors, like in the situation with RK's volunteers that I described above, seems to be a condition of felicity for the social success of volunteering.⁷⁰ I first came to that realization only after several years of

⁷⁰ However, as Jamison (2014) demonstrates, it can be terrifying to have to reveal deeply personal things to a stranger, as is sometimes thought necessary during a doctor's exam, for example. I suspect that one important difference between a situation where it is desirable to reveal things to a stranger and one where it is not is the degree to which the

volunteering. The particular incident that triggered the realization occurred right after a gathering had officially ended but participants were lingering over some small snacks and coffee. While cleaning up, I was approached by a woman who was around fifty-years-old. She did not usually come to the salons, but on that day she had something she wanted to talk about. Only, she did not want everyone to hear. She pulled me aside from the group and asked if we could go outside. I agreed and we wandered to a place where no-one would overhear what she was saying. "Sorry for pulling you out here, but I couldn't say this in there because everyone knows me. ... I don't want them to worry about me. ... They are too close to me, so I don't think they could help either."⁷¹

As in the case of psychologists or counselors, then, a lack of personal relations and the short duration of volunteering facilitated some speech and, therefore, listening. That was why the chaplains and RK alike limited multiple or multi-layered relationships. However, for RK, not developing multi-layered relationships means not expanding membership. And the intensity of their concern for suffering others, too, can have an effect on volunteers that is not entirely intended.

Split selves

Upon returning to the house, we reunited with members of group B,

speaker has the ability to control the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of her utterance (see Austin 1975).

⁷¹ For the power relations, strengths, and dangers of gossip and language that could become gossip, see Besnier 2009; Gluckman 1963

exchanged salutations, and did our assigned chores. After that, we ate dinner in relative silence. Everyone was hungry and a bit tired. We finished, washed the dishes, and said evening prayers together. Following the prayers, we sat in a circle and discussed our experiences at the salons. We went around the circle until everyone had their say.

“Sometimes we have to forget what people have been through if we are going to be able to talk with them normally.”

“Yes, I woke up in the middle of the night last night and started thinking about it, but I told myself not to think because the next day I would freeze up and not be able to say anything to anyone. Well, I guess we can still listen.”

“But it was not like watching the news. These are real people. Right in front of us. I can’t even begin to understand the reality of the disaster, but when I think of it as reality, I feel I can’t do anything.”

“Well, sometimes I guess you can listen. And they gave us good food and crafts, too. I guess you can give the gift of receiving.”

It seemed that any “real sympathy” that we could experience with the residents would require that we forget our imagined empathy based on images of their suffering. And when the reality of the conditions for our imagined empathy threatened to overcome us, sympathy could not be actively achieved. What could be achieved even if empathy dominated the interaction with residents was listening and receiving, which ostensibly maintained the dignity of the residents.

The responses suggested, however, that maintaining that dignity had generated a feeling among volunteers of not being able to do much, a feeling that hinged partially on the gap between imagined empathy and the desire to spread real sympathy. Nonetheless, discussing our experiences brought us back together as a group, if one whose members felt slightly shaken.

After sharing with the group, we were told to take turns writing down our impressions of the day in the group journal. We could write anything, so long as it was thoughtful and not too short. Upon hearing this, Nagatani-san, the eldest member of the group, made a face. She pulled Sugimoto-san aside and asked him quietly if he would mind if she skipped this activity because she was quite tired. I only heard her ask because I was writing in the journal at the time and it was her turn next, but the exchange slowly grew louder. Sugimoto-san, surprised, appealed to the rules. "I'm sorry to ask you to do this when you're tired, but everyone has to write in the journal." Now it was Nagatani-san's turn to be surprised. "I don't want to, and I shouldn't have to." By now, everyone was averting their gazes and moving to other parts of the house. Sugimoto-san maintained his composure, but his voice grew tense, "You have to do it. If you don't, you'll have to go home. We have to do everything as we're told so that we don't hurt any of the residents. If you don't do this, how can I be sure that you'll talk appropriately with the residents? I'm sorry, but you have to write in the journal."

Remembering Nagatani-san's slip the previous day during the reading

exercise, I realized that she might not be able to write and offered her my electronic dictionary. Not knowing her for long enough to know how she would respond, it seemed that I had made a mistake. Nagatani-san got flustered, "I don't know what I would write. I was chosen to come here. I even met the founder of our religion. What could I write?" Sugimoto-san, in a softer voice than before said, "It's ok. You can write anything. Don't worry about it too much. You can write something simple." With that, she calmed down and wrote something. After she was done, Sugimoto-san announced that it was time to go to the public baths. We loaded into the vans and drove off.

This time, conversation was more forthcoming between Sugimoto-san and me as we bathed together. "I'm sorry you had to see that," he said.

"Not at all, though I must admit, I'm a bit tired after today."

"Yeah, sometimes this is a bit tiring. But you know, I have to do everything I can to make sure that no one adds to the pain that the victims of the disaster are already feeling. I didn't want to make Nagatani-san do something she didn't want to do, but I had to as those small things are really important here. Anyway, I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Sugimoto-san had been through a lot. While I had felt worse for Nagatani-san while listening to the interaction, after hearing Sugimoto-san explain that he had done everything in order to protect the people whose suffering he imagined to be more intense than whatever embarrassment Nagatani-san might feel when

being forced to write, I felt more sympathetic to his position. His empathy with survivors had moved him to violate the hierarchy associated with age that members of RK tend to respect deeply. It had also motivated him to consider the feelings of strangers above a respected member of his own in-group. That night, the coincidence of sympathy for Nagatani-san, whose will he did not want to force, and empathy for the residents had created a tension within him. When we got back to the house, we all went to bed fairly quickly.

We volunteered for the next two days and then stayed one more night before going our separate ways. Several days after my return to Tokyo, I was in RK's headquarters preparing for an event where RK would be hosting politicians to encourage them to stop nuclear power. The division of RK that Sugimoto-san was working for at the time was organizing the event. He came up to me and apologized again for what had happened. Apparently, the tension had stuck with him.

Conclusion: Imagined empathy, empathy, and sympathy in the formation of stranger sociality

In Kamaishi, the coincidence of imagined empathy, empathetic projection, and sympathy brought people together and drove them apart in volunteer activities following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. There, imagined empathy based on the suffering of people in temporary housing facilities formed an unknowable other for volunteers. The suffering of the unknowable other was posited as something that existed "within their hearts" rather than in interactions with others. That

created an ontological split between an internal “reality” and external appearances. It was that internal reality that volunteers were asked to empathize with so that they did not forget the suffering covered up by laughter, smiles, and tasks. Sharing in the formation of the unpredictable, suffering other and their private reality, the exhortation to project oneself into that private portion of the other, and exercises designed to minimize the potential harms of an encounter brought volunteers closer to each other. In other words, empathizing with a suffering other allowed volunteers to engage sympathetically with each other and form a collective self.

In the actual encounter with the other, ideas about the potential harm of speaking combined with the force and vivacity of empathy exacerbated pre-existing differences such as age, gender, and lifestyle to impede efforts to achieve sympathy with residents of temporary housing facilities. After encountering the other formed in an attempt to come together, volunteers came back feeling tension between their imagination of suffering and the formation of sympathy. This made them feel as if they could do nothing but receive words, food, and small gifts from the people who they imagined were suffering.

The efforts of those volunteers were neither a complete failure nor complete success. Their activities were part of a long-term state strategy to create autonomous individuals who would work, free of charge, to simultaneously achieve self-realization and a sense of community. To some degree, that strategy and vision of the human subject was arguably actualized by creating the separations

between volunteers and residents that made it possible for them to feel fundamentally isolated from others. Like with the chaplains and their engagement with humanity, linguistic signs of the religious belonging that held the volunteers together before they arrived in Tōhoku were proscribed upon their arrival. Additionally, the inability to exchange contact information assured that long-term relations between volunteers and residents would not emerge from their interactions. Moreover, the imperative to listen rather than speak prevented volunteers from saying anything too personal to residents, thus rendering the volunteers even more anonymous—all in the name of protecting others from suffering that they were imagined to already be experiencing.

The concern for a suffering other overrode existing sympathies based on in-group belonging and also other standards for ethical behavior, as when Sugimoto-san was moved to force Nagatani-san to do something against her will despite the fact that she was older than him and a respected member of his religious group. In that case, the coincidence of empathy and sympathy created an internal split in Sugimoto-san himself. He felt conflicted and apologetic as he was torn between being a respectful member of RK and a respectful human being trying to protect vulnerable people in the housing complexes. That split was also embodied by other members of the group, who went to other parts of the house rather than watch the strained breakdown of the age-based hierarchy that they value but could not adhere to in the imagined face of a suffering other. Far from providing the

answer to contemporary “relationlessness,” then, the combination of an imagined empathy based on suffering and attempts to cultivate empathy and sympathy in volunteer activities would seem to be one of its causes, putting strain on long-term forms of belonging, such as RK, for the sake of short-term compassion.

The work in Kamaishi might also indicate something more general regarding sympathy than what I have argued thus far. It seems to suggest that the moral limits of sympathy as expressed in Hume and Smith’s respective philosophies exist not only along politicized lines of the recognizable, but also within the very concept itself. After all, if an ethic based on sympathy encourages us to treat others as we wish to be treated, and we wish to be treated as determining the ways we are treated, then is it not the case that sympathy as an ethical mode of engagement leaves us no option but to become listeners? But perhaps that is an overstatement and is only applicable to short-term interactions like those between volunteers and residents of temporary housing complexes. What about people like Mr. Umibe, with whom I started this dissertation, who devote their lives to cultivating and providing long-term compassion in places full of suffering?

Chapter 6: Concluding with hope: The maintenance of time and space in post-disaster Japan

“Really? You look so young,” I said with half-feigned surprise. Straightening her posture and speaking with a playful assertiveness, she responded, “Yep, eighty-seven next week.” Her smile was contagious, and the faces of the three other people in the room lit up. Huddled around the table where we would make crafts for the next three hours, they nodded, seemingly agreeing with both my estimation of their friend’s youthful appearance and her insistence that she was, in fact, old.

One of the people nodding was Mr. Umibe, the director of a local volunteer center called “Hope” in Kamaishi, a city in northeastern Japan that was devastated by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Still grinning, he delivered his standard line, “Congratulations. What do you think, could you live another 30 years for us?” Everyone chuckled and gazed expectantly at the soon-to-be birthday girl. Putting her hand up, she quickly put an end to the thought of living as a 117-year-old, “Hmm. I think I’ll pass on that one. Thanks though.”

Hope was a popular refrain in Kamaishi during the fourteen months that I spent there between 2012 and 2017. People worked to produce it in various forms — most commonly as small social gatherings where participants made mirth amidst ruin. The particular hope generated in and as these gatherings was radically different from popular and academic concepts of hope. Rather than focusing on the future or the “not yet,” as most accounts of hope do (e.g. Bloch 1996; Miyazaki 2004), people in Kamaishi focused on the creation of safe spaces in the here-and-now (compare Mattingly 2010). Creating and being in that here-and-now allowed them to partially escape the suffering that dominated their daily lives after the 2011 disasters. In other words, the gatherings in Kamaishi were oriented toward a hope-without-a-future.

Take, for example, the scene above. If we understand the future as continuity or progression in time, then there is no future in the hope produced by Mr. Umibe and the other attendees of the gathering (compare Edelman 2004; Tanaka 2004). The birthday girl will almost certainly be dead within ten years (compare Danely 2016). She rejects even the thought of living too much longer. Mr. Umibe, who has been claiming to be thirty-eight years old for the last ten years or so, is unmarried, childless, and came to Kamaishi after a string of dead-end jobs in big cities throughout Japan. His devotion to the people of Kamaishi, where more than thirty-seven percent of the population is over the age of 65,⁷² made it difficult for him to find a mate and bound him to a life of poverty. He frequently bemoaned his lack of future prospects. And the temporary housing complex where the meeting took place was scheduled to be demolished just two months after our meeting, making the lack of a future a particularly pressing issue for all of the residents at the time. Each of these temporal engagements is an expression of a broader lack of a future — that of Kamaishi, an “iron city” once celebrated as a seat of modernity that is now struggling to fend off the rust of old age and nearly empty steel mills (Genda and Nakamura 2009; Wittner 2008; Yonekura 1994). Kamaishi, in turn, is emblematic of contemporary Japan, which is no longer considered an “economic miracle” and is struggling with a low birthrate and an aging population (Allison 2012, 2013; compare Comaroff and Comaroff 2001;

⁷² For the most recent statistics from Kamaishi’s municipal government, see http://www.city.kamaishi.iwate.jp/shisei_joho/tokei_joho/jinkou/detail/1201390_2978.html

Ferguson 1999; Shoshan 2012)

And yet, attendees of the gathering explicitly told me that there was “hope” (*kibō*) among them. Looking at their hope as a practice rather than reifying it or using it as an analytic method (Kavedžija 2016), we can see that it is reducible to neither a “prospective orientation” (Lempert 2018; Miyazaki 2004) nor an embrace of the possibility “for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible” (Lear 2006: 95). Rather, their hope stemmed from their ability to create a time and space that was different from, but incorporated into, their daily lives, which were saturated with the pain of loss caused by the tsunami and by the longer history of Kamaishi’s decline as an industrial center. They told me that their meeting space allowed them to stay hopeful. In other words, their hope came from a difference that was internal to their lives and allowed them to endure an otherwise unbearable present.

The difference that allows people to endure, whatever that difference may be, need not be based on the future. The timespace of the gatherings allowed participants to endure and enjoy aspects of their here-and-now. Their endurance was not facilitated by the imagination of spaces and times “that extend from the insistent reality of the here and now” (Crapanzano 2004:14). Nor was it oriented toward the desire to “design a future” based on a “politics of possibility” (Appadurai 2013). On the contrary, the hope produced in hyper-aged, post-industrial, disaster-stricken Kamaishi was based on people’s ability to maintain and use the here-and-

now to temporarily displace the pain of prior and coming losses.

Of course, the here-and-now is not a simple, entirely coherent unit. To the contrary, both the here (Foucault 1986; Rodman 1992) and the now (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Osborne 2010) are internally diverse on multiple scales. Indeed, the here-and-now created in the small gatherings in Kamaishi's temporary housing units was not the same for everyone involved. The people in the gatherings each had different stories that they carried with them and different everyday struggles, and the here-and-now of Kamaishi looked different when seen from different angles and distances. For residents of temporary housing units, the punctuality or point-like nature of gatherings contrasted and overlapped with a durational present saturated with stories of the tsunami and of Kamaishi's downfall as an industrial city (compare Guyer 2008; Povinelli 2011). For Mr. Umibe, the gatherings often felt like repetitive performances that nonetheless provided him with a sense of meaning. That sense of meaning, however, came at the cost of his imagined future. Ironically, people living in other parts of Japan looked to Tohoku for visions of a unified Japan and a hopeful future. And for me, in this moment of writing, all of this serves as fodder for a conversation with you (Fabian 2002; Povinelli 2001) – a conversation that I hope will help me get a job in the near future.

These here-and-nows provided differences for each other, but those differences were neither entirely internal nor external to each other. That is, each of these here-and-nows were connected to each in complex ways. Mr. Umibe's

volunteer center, which was called “Hope,” and its activities were one form that these connections took. Despite the particularities of each of the here-and-nows that I have discussed, looking at the form produced by the relationships between them allows me to attempt to answer a general question: What happens to hope when the future itself becomes something that people no longer expect or even desire? To answer that question, I move between hope in multiple moments of its production in Kamaishi and in popular and scholarly works. The answer that emerges from the relationships between residents of the temporary housing units, care workers such as Mr. Umibe, participant-observers from Tokyo, and this inquiry is that hope, understood as an internal difference that allows people to endure, becomes a matter of space when people no longer believe in or strive to produce the future. Before jumping to conclusions, however, it is first necessary to delve into the formation of Hope – the volunteer center and the differences that it brought together – in Kamaishi. In a narrow sense, that formation started with the tsunami of 2011.

The tsunami, the center, and the stoppage of time

“I’m still here. I’m still here.” She said it twice, as if doing so made it twice as real. “The water came up to the top of the room and I almost froze to death, but I’m still here. I’m still here, but time stopped on that day.”

On March 11, 2011 a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off the coast of northeastern Japan. In Kamaishi, the resulting tsunami reached heights of 27.5

feet, took more than 1,000 lives, and left nearly 10,000 people homeless. The violence of the tsunami severed space from time. Space took precedence as people scrambled to survive. It was mentioned mostly in the form of imperatives: “Go to high land!” “The hill!” “Get on the roof!” (compare Gill et al. 2013: 5). This emphasis on space without time continued six years later, the last time I visited Kamaishi. Nearly every horror story of the tsunami that people have shared with me contains within it a clear warning: “If they sound the alarm, go to the evacuation area immediately. Go somewhere high.” During the tsunami, nearly “immediate” shifts in location became the primary determinant of survival.

People eventually found safety in evacuation centers and, later, temporary housing units. As Martin Heidegger (2001) suggests, such buildings became dwellings when they unified “sparing and preserving” (147). That is, when they allowed people spared by the tsunami to “remain at peace” (ibid.) in the spaces that became available in particular locations (152). Or as Mr. Umibe, the director of the volunteer center, Hope, put it, “Even if people can’t be the people they wanted to be, maybe they can be comfortable with themselves and be the people they were before the disasters. That’s what our center, Hope, tries to provide.” In practice, those dwellings became “heres” that needed to be built upon the recently destructed past.

Unlike in Heidegger’s ahistorical musings, people could only construct new dwellings once they had cleared the remains of the former dwellings that had

failed to protect them from the destructive powers of the earth.⁷³ Rather than gathering earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, as Heidegger says dwellings do (compare Tambiah 1969; Bourdieu 1970), the effort to build safe locations in Kamaishi gathered volunteers from all around Japan. Mr. Umibe was one of the 725,200 people who volunteered in the disaster-stricken part of Japan in the first three months after the tsunami hit.⁷⁴ Those volunteers had to work to overcome and save people from earth just as much as to use it, particularly as earth had recently shown its destructive power and highlighted the precarity of any imagination of a stable future.

Wandering into the heart of the ravaged city, Mr. Umibe sorted and cleared massive amounts of waste alongside volunteers and paid workers, usually males from Kamaishi or nearby areas. He accompanied volunteers from further away as they listened to people's stories and provided counseling. When temporary housing started to become available, he passed along complaints from the older women who would live there to construction companies and city workers, making sure that kitchen sinks and shelves were placed at a comfortable height for actual use, for example. Above all, he, along with other workers, made sure that everyone who survived the disasters stayed alive. As he put it, "Going around

⁷³ Richard Bernstein (1991) makes a harsher version of this critique, writing "Heidegger's own understanding ... anesthetizes us to the frightful contingencies of human life and death ... [and] can dismiss the difference between motorized agriculture and mass murder as 'non-essential'" (133, emphasis in the original)

⁷⁴ This was the number of volunteers that registered at volunteer centers located in local welfare offices (*shakai fukushi kyōgi-kai no borantia senta-*)

listening to everyone was just as much a way to make sure they were alive as a way to hear what they were going through and what they had endured.”

Like the woman who told me that she was “still here” even though “time stopped,” making sure that people were alive involved making sure that they were “still here.” That, in turn, spurred the creation of more “heres” where that confirmation could occur. One of those heres was the volunteer center, which secured a location four months after the tsunami. For the first two years of its existence, the center was fully funded and administered by a large protestant Christian denomination with deep pockets and an established history in Japan. They rented a storefront on a main street just beyond the outer reaches of the tsunami. It was a two-story building, so volunteers could sleep in the room on the second floor while using the first floor as a small office, a distribution center for donated clothes and blankets, and a place for people to comfort each other in conversation.

Mr. Umibe, who had been a devout member of the denomination in another part of Japan, was asked to run the volunteer center. He accepted and spent his first six months in Kamaishi reacting daily to the scattered needs of tattered lives. After that first, frantic period, Mr. Umibe and the center fell into a life-affirming groove. Skillfully identifying ways to help keep people’s morale up in temporary housing units, Mr. Umibe displayed a knack for finding volunteers who were willing to do various kinds of work and who were not there “just for their own sake.” He

made a point of cultivating volunteers from Kamaishi so that the center's activities, such as serving coffee or teaching people how to cook, could be repeated on a regular basis. Mr. Umibe and several of the volunteers were able to keep these events going and eventually started to hold them in temporary housing units rather than at the center.

Several of the residents of temporary housing units have told me that this regularity created a "sense of stability" (*antei-kan*) that helped them endure their losses. This "sense of stability" as an understanding of space falls between the extremes suggested by Michel de Certeau (1988) and Timothy Ingold (1993). Contra de Certeau, for whom a place becomes stable due to its inert position in a language-like system (1988: 117-118), those residents suggested that it takes constant effort to produce and maintain a somewhat stable meeting place/space. And contra Ingold, for whom the ceaseless nature of activity means that "the present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it" (1993: 159, emphasis in the original), the repetition of the volunteer center's activities, such as talking and making coffee, allowed survivors of the tsunami to temporarily isolate themselves from the recent past and the near future.⁷⁵ As Ingold's argument suggests, however, it was not easy to maintain that marking-off.

⁷⁵ This differed from short-term volunteer activities, which sometimes focused on talking about the suffering caused by the earthquake and tsunami.

Hope as the maintenance of space: Three contradictions

Repetition marked space off from time for participants in the volunteer center's events. Meeting regularly in the same rooms transformed those rooms into "meeting rooms" and lent them a sense of stability. As one participant, talking about an exercise class, told me, "It's a relief knowing that this event is always held here." The relief that that participant felt confirms something that Hegel (2008) and Lefebvre (1991) argue — and that Harvey (2006) fails to note — about the nature of relational space, which Harvey defines as a view of space as "embedded in or internal to process" (2006: 123; compare Munn 1986, 1992). Namely, that it is partially the product of arresting time in repetition, of creating an "always" or "every" upon which people can rely.

In Kamaishi, the arrest of time to produce safe space was an exercise of maintenance rather than of becoming or rupture (cf. Rabinow 2008; Thorkelson 2016; compare Miyazaki 2004). Genda Yuji, a sociologist from the University of Tokyo who has been studying hope in Kamaishi since 2006, has nicely captured the relation of maintenance to hope. Talking to doctors after the tsunami struck, he found that "Just because you are in a situation that you have never faced before does not mean that you have to think or act differently. [On the contrary,] you have to make an effort to do things in the same way as you always have" (2014: 18). When things have gone awry, "doing things in the same way as you always have" can become a difference that makes the present endurable. That is, it can provide hope for survival.

Continuing to do things in the same way takes a lot of effort. That is, the repetition of events that created space in Kamaishi, like repetition in general, was neither automatic nor perfect (Deleuze 2004; Derrida 1978; Keane 1997). Mr. Umibe constantly worked to coordinate multiple schedules so that people could continue to meet. Municipal government workers, people from the local welfare council, other NPOs and NGOs, and residents of the temporary housing complexes each made different demands on the rooms and often wanted to meet at the same times. Other people did not want to meet at all. Some people complained about not meeting frequently enough while others suggested that meeting too often put too much strain on volunteers. Mr. Umibe was able to satisfy most of the above parties by offering a variety of activities, each of which could be run by different volunteers but attended by the same people. In other words, he created a reliable repetition of differences that, in his words, “let people be themselves in different activities.” However, even that regular repetition of differences was not easy to maintain.

The volunteer center’s success was hindered by three contradictions. The first of these contradictions arose when repetition started to close off space. Like with RK’s dharma centers, habitual patterns of interaction between regular participants made it difficult for new participants to join, particularly when the activities, such as origami or torn-paper art (*chigiri-e*), required any level of skill. Having regular participants was necessary for the success of the activities, but

new members provided a means for social reproduction. Without them, Mr. Umibe had to stop or change some of the volunteer activities when existing members started to move away from particular housing complexes, became bored because the center's activities no longer counted as a meaningful difference in their daily lives, or stopped coming to events because of health problems.

The second contradiction poignantly expressed the estrangement of time and space in Kamaishi, particularly after the disasters. The Christian denomination that founded the volunteer center only funded it for two years.⁷⁶ They cut off funding not because their project had ended, but because it had no end in sight. While the settling of people in temporary housing units allowed the denomination to justify their flight in quasi-moral terms — “now that everyone is housed, we can comfortably retreat” — the final decision was based largely on economic rationality: the cost of continuing to produce space was greater than the returns, which, in terms of converts and money, were next to nothing. In other words, the denomination judged the potential future of the center to be a drain on resources rather than a means for reproducing the denomination. Ironically, then, the potential for a future worked against the production of space in Kamaishi even though that space was produced to counter the lack of a future there.

The third contradiction was inherent to the meeting spaces and perhaps to space itself, which can never be completely severed from that from which it is

⁷⁶ I do not specify which denomination so as to prevent any possible negative repercussions for the denomination, Mr. Umibe, or the Center.

partially sequestered, such as surrounding areas or imagined geographies of pain and prosperity. As Mr. Umibe put it in relation to the residents of temporary housing units:

“People live in the city, so if the city can’t support them, then it’s impossible for them to fully recover. Supporting them means addressing broad issues such as domestic violence and education, and in Kamaishi it means providing general healthcare, particularly as more than 35 percent of the population here is already over 65 years old and that number is going to keep on climbing. Regardless, if we want to provide real hope and support now, we must find ways to build communities. We must become well-rounded, knowledgeable social workers rather than just listeners or counselors. ... But donors aren’t interested in hearing about this, and some people at the local welfare centers, for example, are opposed to using funds for people who aren’t victims of the disasters.”

Scholars and practitioners alike know that framing people as morally legitimate, helpless victims is an effective way to motivate people to donate money from afar (Brown 1995; Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011; see also Boltanski 1999). However, even generous benefactors tend to put an expiration date on victimhood. Suffering is more moving when it is fresh, and its consumers are happy to give up a disaster that has already had its run in mass media to pay for a connection to the newest catastrophe. Given those dynamics, Mr. Umibe’s desire to serve victims by refusing to maintain boundaries based on their victimhood fragments the space of the center and its activities. He has had trouble finding steady funding for the center and has had difficulty creating meeting places outside of the temporary

housing complexes, challenges that put an extra strain on him and his future.

Hope as the estrangement of meaning and a future

The difficulty of dealing with the three contradictions inherent in the Center — maintaining existing relations without closing off new ones, finding funding for a project that has no clear end date, and maintaining safe spaces without disconnecting them from surrounding social realities — challenged Mr. Umibe's personal future. It did so in two ways. First, it challenged his livelihood. Second, it challenged his marriage and reproductive prospects. In other words, his unwillingness and inability to set clear temporal and spatial limits to the volunteer center — which, remember, is called Hope — threatened his existence as a modern man: he was very precariously employed and did not have a family. And yet, he found deep meaning in his work. Sacrificing himself to support others made him feel satisfied, but that satisfaction came at the expense of happiness and the future he had once imagined for himself.

The future that has eluded Mr. Umibe included lifetime employment, a wife, and a couple of children. As he told me while riding in his car one day, "I didn't want to be famous or anything. But I thought I could work at a big advertising agency in Tokyo and then I could get married and have kids. I did want that. [...] I still want to get married, but, you know [that's probably not going to happen]. [...] There are no young women in Kamaishi." In other words, Mr. Umibe feels what Lauren Berlant (2007), Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan (2012), and

Noelle J. Molé (2012), among others, have called “post-Fordist affect”: a “haunting of the present by a host of attachments” related to “the promise of relative economic security and well-being, plausible middle-class aspirations, and a sense of linear biographical legibility” (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012: 318, 317).

While the imagined plausibility of such aspirations in Japan has largely faded with the rise of neoliberal policies there, those aspirations were never fully realizable (Ishida and Slater 2010; Kelly 2002). Neither are they fully unattainable now, but more people seem to be living lives that find meaning outside of the structure of work or the atomic family (Goldfarb 2012; Nozawa 2015; Slater 2011a; White 2002). Mr. Umibe, for example, played an active role in giving up the future that he desires. He left behind a job at a small advertising agency in a big city and a girlfriend in order to come to Kamaishi – a choice he frequently lamented. He once again gave up a potentially stable future when the Christian denomination stopped funding the volunteer center and he refused to leave Kamaishi, thus, in his own words, “cutting off the possibility of working for them” due to just how fraught the struggle over keeping the Center open had been.

In this case, it was not optimism that tied Mr. Umibe to a place that limited his chances of reproducing the heteronormative nation-state (cf. Berlant 2011). Rather, it was his desire to sacrifice his future to foment and sustain hope among suffering people. That desire could be partially explained by a Japanese cultural tendency to focus on relationships and others rather than on the autonomous self

(Benedict 1946; Doi 1973; Kondo 1990; Nakane 1970; Shimizu and Levine 2001). However, talking to Mr. Umibe made it clear that his desire is more aptly explained by the history of Japan as a modern nation-state and by his Christianity.

Like other modern nation-states, Japan was partially unified through the formation of a national military. That national military was meant to protect Japan against Western aggression and to unify East Asia under a Japan-dominated umbrella. Japan's effort eventually became one of total war, which required every member of the population to sacrifice her or himself for the nation-state.

After World War II, men sacrificed themselves to work for the sake of the nation-state (Barshay 2004; Ivy 2000). That sacrifice was sometimes severe. For some people, the demands of work and stories of "death by overwork" made that sacrifice undesirable. For others, the burst of the bubble economy in 1992, the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and the two decades of economic stagnation that followed made even the dream of self-sacrifice seem distant. However, similar to Italy, where a strong work ethic remains even though stable employment sometimes does not (Muehlebach 2012), one form of meaningful sacrifice that is still available to people in Japan is what Muehlebach calls "relational labor," the labor of making community. In a way not unlike RK's long-term struggle to be compassionate, that labor is unremunerated, based on a notion of sacrifice, and "allows ostensibly dependent populations to purchase some sort of social belonging at a moment when their citizenship rights and duties are being

reconfigured in the profoundest of ways” (2012:7).

Also similar to Italy, though at a smaller scale, religion plays a part in that sacrifice. For Mr. Umibe, sacrificing his future for the sake of others was a profoundly Christian thing to do. He told me that he “wanted to help the weak” in the same way that Jesus helped him do his daily work despite, or because of, his own weakness. Indeed, sacrifice was one of his main ways of expressing his faith since he “doesn’t care about the Bible too much,” “isn’t sure that an afterlife even exists,” and, after the denomination pulled its funding from the volunteer center, “has torn feelings about the church, which often just thinks of itself.”

Ironically, Mr. Umibe’s devotion to the “weak,” mostly elderly people in Kamaishi and his desire to emulate Jesus separated him from the church. When they pulled their funding, he expressed his discontent and strained his relations with important members, thus cutting off one of his last potential avenues to find regular employment. As of the time of writing, he had produced Hope without steady funding for five years. This accomplishment has taken a toll on Mr. Umibe. Having left behind chances of marriage and stability, and facing an immense amount of suffering that seems to have no end other than death, he sometimes feels a desire to “just disappear.” The duration of the disappearance he imagines varies depending on his level of exhaustion, but one thing is clear: Producing hope for others allows Mr. Umibe to find meaning for himself, but that meaning comes at the expense of his future. His personal hope comes in the form of an elsewhere

that is perhaps nowhere in particular – a “somewhere else.” In that, his orientation is similar to that of the denomination that stopped funding the center because of no clear end-point and to observers of Tohoku, for whom Tohoku serves as a part of Japan that is also an elsewhere – an internal difference that makes the present endurable.

Hope from a distance: Commensurating spaces, imagining a shared future

An article in the June 11, 2011 issue of the Fukkō Kamaishi Shimbun

(Kamaishi Recovery Newspaper) has two headlines. One reads “Toward a Kamaishi Overflowing with Hope.” The other reads “City Residents aren’t Aware of the City’s Greatness.” If the article is to be believed, that awareness belonged to outsiders who came to the city to work toward its resurrection.

From a distance, hope as maintenance and the sacrifices such as those made by Mr. Umibe appeared to be a sign of a bright future. For example, in his 2011 book *Altruism and Religion (Ritashugi to Shūkyō)*, Inaba Keishin writes:

Japanese society is rapidly changing. In 2010, NHK aired a special called *The Relationless Society*. In society, there are no bonds between people, and like with suicide, there are now more than 30,000 people a year who die without anyone noticing. ... The lonely life of the relationless society overlaps with a lack of consideration for others. It is, or, I would like to say, ‘was,’ just like the society declared by neoliberalism or self responsibility ... But the horrific disasters awakened the empathy (*omoiyari*), feeling of being in something together (*otagaisama no kankaku*), and sympathy (*kyōkan suru kokoro*) that had been sleeping in people before the disasters (2-3).

Inaba is one of many scholars, reporters, and popular commentators who, each searching for “concrete” or “real” utopias (Bloch 1996; Munoz 2009; Wright

2010), point to hope-without-a-future as a sign that survivors' resilience, ingenuity, and sense of community contain the seed of something desirable (compare Williams 1973). Commensurating the "here" and "there" (Hankins and Yeh 2016; Larkin 2013), observers used the promise of an elsewhere — in this case, disaster-stricken parts of Japan — to produce a hopeful space for the entire nation. For example, negating the otherness of the struggles of people in disaster-stricken regions, the popular novelist and social critic Murakami Ryu wrote shortly after the disasters, "Everyone's lifestyle is threatened, and the government and utility companies have not responded adequately... The great earthquake and tsunami have robbed us of resources, civic services, and many lives, but we who were so intoxicated with our own prosperity have once again planted the seed of hope" (qtd. in Murakami 2012: 194). In invoking an "everyone" that summons a Japanese nation and a "we" that stands noticeably separate from "the government and utility companies," his comment transforms immense suffering into a vision of hope that, when coupled with the actual form of hope produced in the temporary housing units, turns yearnings for the maintenance of normalcy into a vision of hopeful future.

Finding the potential good in an elsewhere and transforming aspects of that elsewhere into a collective "we" with a horizon — Povinelli (2001: 326) calls this a "we-horizon" — is a disciplinary pastime of anthropology (Coronil 1996; Trouillot

2003).⁷⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, anthropologists made arguments similar to Japanese observers after the disasters struck Japan (compare Narayan 1993). Take, for example, the observations that David Slater published as an introduction to entries on the Cultural Anthropology website in July 2011, just four months after the disasters. Slater, who lives in Japan and has personally contributed to recovery efforts, made several of the same conceptual moves as Murakami, writing:

“Emerging are themes of shared concern such as ... the survival of citizens and society in times of increasing precariousness for everyone, not just those in Tohoku. ... In Japan, a country with a history of leftist fragmentation ... the range and momentum of this moment is a remarkable turn. ... The entries here document both the fear and anger of these past months, but also the hope and possibility that these fragile and emergent forms might lead to a new 3.11 politics in post-disaster Japan.”

Here, Slater and some of the commentators whose work he is introducing focus on emergent political forms that carry a concern for “everyone, not just those in Tohoku.” The suffering and efforts to maintain life in Tohoku serve as the basis for those hopes, which are removed from the hope that many people in Tohoku, such as Mr. Umibe and people who were living in the temporary housing units, worked to create.

The connection and gap between the hope of observers and the hope of

⁷⁷ Joel Robbins (2013) has even gone so far as to call for a resuscitation of an “anthropology of the good” in light of anthropologists’ recent focus on suffering.

people in Tohoku gives rise to a tension between what Joseph Hankins (2015), analyzing the “ends of anthropology,” has identified as “a future-oriented moral optimism reliant on the projection of an other and of a deep skepticism of that very project” (554). This tension is not only logical, epistemological, or ethical. It is also deeply practical. To the credit of Slater and other observers, including me, the academic conversation about Tohoku is not completely removed from the situation in Tohoku. Many of the observations and critiques being made have found their way into practice, and some of the political projects that Slater referred to might help the people in Tohoku. After all, spaces cannot be completely separated from their surroundings. Insofar as the nation-state is still a unit that produces practical effects, the people in Tohoku are a part of the Japanese “everyone” and are sometimes linked to aspects of the future conjured by an ethnographic “we.” Ironically, it is being a part of that “everyone” or “we” that can place hope-without-a-future at odds with hope-from-a-distance. At least in the case of Mr. Umibe’s Center and recovery efforts in Kamaishi, being an inextricable part of a greater whole means that recovery for survivors of the disasters requires social welfare and education programs that address issues beyond mere survival. That demand and the lack of a specific end date or spatial delineation for that support make it much more difficult for survivors to find funding for their projects, bringing new meaning to the idiom “hope against hope.”

Hope against hope: The politics of hope as space

In his book *The Method of Hope*, Hirokazu Miyazaki writes, “moments of

hope can only be apprehended as sparks on another terrain” (2004: 24). Following Bloch and Benjamin, he argues that those apprehensions of hope can reproduce hope. For Miyazaki, the hope that is reproduced necessarily exists at a temporal distance from the hope that is written. That is, the other “terrain” in his account is an earlier moment of hope, and the relationship between the earlier moment and the moment of reproduction is itself a hopeful one.

It is easy to see the appeal of hope when it is conceptualized as being on another temporal terrain, whether that be a prior moment or something on the horizon. In fact, scholars frequently praise this hope or try to reproduce it in one way or another. Sara Ahmed (2012), for example, has written that “politics without hope is impossible” (184), Richard Rorty (1999) claims that “hope often takes the form of false prediction ... but hope for social justice is nevertheless the only basis for a worthwhile human life” (204), and Miyazaki (2004) has elevated it to the level of a method.

Even many supposed critiques of hope are at the same time attempts to foment it. The calculated hope that spews from political fountainheads and the anxious hope of the hopeless masses have long been disparaged as, at best, “agreeable company but a poor guide, fine sauce, but scanty food” (Eagleton 2015: chapter 2, paragraph 1). And scholars frequently draw a distinction between political discourses of hope, feckless optimism, and a “true” or “radical” hope that does not cede the future to a determined present or past (e.g. Eagleton 2015; Lear

2006; Massumi 2002). The theoretical divide between ideological and “real” hopes has allowed hope itself to remain largely unscathed by academic critique.

The result is that hope often appears as something to defend or “reclaim” from conservatives, capitalists, and politicians (Bloch 1996; Kirksey 2014), all of whom have ostensibly left the vulnerable and underprivileged with little more than an empty or even “cruel” optimism that prevents them from escaping misery or moving toward the object of their hope (Berlant 2011; Nietzsche 1996). When not identifying a false version of hope, the critique becomes one of distribution – who has more access to hope and who has less (Hage 2003; Yamada 2004).

Instead of distinguishing between real and specious hopes or focusing on the problem of hope’s distribution, I find it more productive to focus on formations of hope. Any general understanding of hope must look at how it arises in the relationship between different types of hope that are produced in different circumstances. For example, for survivors of the tsunami, hope took the form of safe spaces; for Mr. Umibe, sacrificing his future to maintain those spaces gave his life meaning, but his hope exists in an undefined “somewhere else”; and observers of Tohoku used the activities of people like the survivors in Kamaishi and Mr. Umibe to generate an image of a relatively unified nation with a potentially better future.

Looking at those differently situated moments of hope reveals that while moments of hope may be “apprehended as sparks on a different terrain,” that

difference in terrain is neither solely temporal nor purely conceptual. On the contrary, it was based on degrees of proximity to the suffering caused by the earthquake and tsunami of 2011. People closer to that suffering focused on space whereas people at a distance transformed that space into a vision of the future.

This relation between space and time exposes a politics of hope that is different than the politics of hopeful scholars. Here, it is not imagination or a vague image of history that provides redemption. Rather, it is suffering people. Moreover, the relation between the hope in Kamaishi's temporary housing units and the one apprehended by reporters and scholars is not a particularly hopeful one. After all, it makes links between struggling people in ways that do not seem to fulfill the social needs of the people in Kamaishi, who will likely not directly benefit from many of the social projects and national projections that use them as an emblem of hope.

Michel Foucault stated in a 1982 interview with Paul Rabinow that it was laughable to say that "space is reactionary and capitalist, but history and becoming are revolutionary" (1999: 140 emphasis in the original). However, space does face challenges that becoming does not. The situation in Kamaishi, where people told me that "hope [wore] thin" (*kibō ga usuku natteiru*) when the temporary housing complexes were being bulldozed, suggested that it is difficult to fully internalize spatialized hope as a matter of faith, freedom, or the will, whereas history has tragically shown us the resilience of a future-oriented hope. For example, Viktor Frankl (1992), a psychologist and Holocaust survivor, tells us, "any attempt at

fighting the [concentration] camp's psychopathological influence on the prisoner ... had to aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out a future goal to which he could look forward. ... It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future" (81). In contrast, regardless of how much he believes in himself, God, or the value of human life, if the meeting rooms or Hope disappear, so do the particular hope and meaning that Mr. Umibe has worked so hard to maintain. In other words, if Mr. Umibe doesn't continue to produce space, he cannot produce the social relations that thrive in-and-as that space (Harvey 2006; Lefebvre 1991).

Unlike in the case of unfinished houses (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017; see also Yarrow 2017), which spatialize hope while facilitating a future, spaces of hope in Kamaishi struggle against time. With its passage, the amount of donations and volunteers willing to help produce hope have dwindled. As I mentioned before, the Christian denomination that founded Hope only funded it for two years. Ironically, they cut off funding not because their project had ended, but because it had no end in sight.

The version of hope abstracted from that decline by scholars and reporters comes with less struggle. Thus far, this prospective hope has been more durable, sustaining academic careers and political movements against nuclear power, for example. In the meantime, Mr. Umibe helps people laugh at the prospect of their own imminent death and the continued vitiation of their community.

Chapter 6 will, in part, be submitted for publication in *Cultural Anthropology*.

Michael Berman was the sole investigator and author of the chapter and of the article that will be submitted.

Conclusion: The heart of a heartless world

The vitiation of hopeful community in Kamaishi in some ways resembles RK's ongoing history, which includes the activities of volunteers in Kamaishi. It also resembles the chaplains' efforts to relieve the suffering of other people by listening to them. All three situations are expressions of a deep desire to provide a meaningful present for other people by sharing and relieving their suffering. In producing that present, however, people sometimes sacrificed the futures that they desired for themselves and for the organizations to which they belonged.

These three situations are also practically connected. They are each moments in an ongoing process of working toward compassion. RK has funded the chaplaincy training program and Mr. Umibe's volunteer center, and the training program and volunteer center both provide training and feedback to RK. RK uses that training and feedback to train its own members in the arts of compassion.

The process as a whole and each of the moments of that process can be seen as admirable but tragic signs of the relation between compassion and alienation. In those moments, a sense of meaningfulness and purpose was wrenched apart from fulfillment in different ways. For RK, their organization had to some degree become a workplace separated from members' homes and a religion that sometimes drew people away from their families, even though family had earlier been the biggest provider of new members for RK. In similar fashion, threats from the government and press combined with RK's desire to create world peace separated RK as an organization from RK as teachings. The

compassionate projects that bring a sense of meaning and purpose to members and have helped RK achieve social legitimacy challenge RK's very ability to continue to exist.

In the work of the chaplains, particular religious traditions are sublated into the category of religion. Chaplains often felt that they were practicing the true meaning of their respective traditions in practicing compassionate listening, but in that practice they had to partially undermine those traditions by suppressing signs of them. In that process of affirming traditions in suppressing them, chaplains struggled with a feeling that they were internally split three-ways — they were “humans” or “normal people,” “chaplains,” and “religious professionals.” The member of RK who led the first volunteer group I went with to Kamaishi felt a similar split between following RK's conventions and respecting the suffering of others when he had to chasten a more senior member of RK in order to protect survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Chaplaincy work and volunteering also took place in public spaces, which were separate from temples, dharma centers, and churches. Unlike RK, the leaders of the respective traditions from which chaplains came did not actively support their practice and, on occasion, told chaplains that their work was misguided. That sometimes created feelings of animosity among chaplains toward their own traditions even as they “deepened [their] faith” by constantly dealing with suffering.

Mr. Umibe, too, sometimes felt abandoned by the Christian denomination that he belonged to even while he was “trying to live like Jesus.” Like the other people that populate this dissertation, he suppressed signs of his religion and did not overtly try to convert people to his faith. For him, however, the feeling that he was sacrificing his own future by staying in Kamaishi weighed more heavily than any concerns about his relation to Christianity, relations in which he felt fairly secure due to his compassion. The uncertainty of his Center’s future compounded the concerns he had about his own, and he was determined to stay with the Center as long as he possibly could. His compassion tied him to the very place that he knew was unsustainable and that hindered his chances at finding happiness in marriage and financial stability.

There is undoubtedly a certain beauty to these stories. For many people, particularly those at a distance, they represented the human capacity to connect and to work toward loftier goals than money or the possession of private property. Even the people making sacrifices sometimes felt that way. RK, for example, explicitly denounces “materialism,” “selfishness,” and “greed.” Everyone who populates the pages of this book strove to find meaning for themselves in relieving the suffering of others. In their own words, they were performing “emotional care,” which can be more directly translated as “care for the heart” (*kokoro no kea*). But in a heartless world, caring for hearts is often grueling, lonely work that undermines its own conditions of possibility. It is, in a word, tragically altruistic.

Epilogue: Shifting gears

Way out in rural Northeastern Japan, beyond where the tsunami struck and beyond Japan's extensive train system, there is a place where Jesus Christ is supposedly buried.⁷⁸ Mr. Umibe and I took a circuitous route to get there. We drove on local roads rather than on highways. The slow drive took us through national parks where we would occasionally take walks along a coastline that is beautiful and dangerous. We gazed at caves and beaches that might now be open to tourism, but at the time were closed due to damage done by the tsunami. We ate ramen, which Mr. Umibe told me was "not particularly good, but not particularly bad." It was not fancy and had lots of bean sprouts in it, like Mr. Umibe used to eat when he was a kid, just not quite as good. There was not really a point to our trip even though we had a destination in mind, so we took it slowly.

When we got to the grave, we read the story of how Jesus got to Japan. There were tales of how Hebrew and Japanese sound similar and seemingly unrelated stories about local dances. A short video explained the history of how Jesus made it to Japan and why his journey is not well-known. I think we paid a small admission fee for the privilege of watching. The real sight, however, was outside and up a hill.

Sweating and looking at the small grave, Mr. Umibe looked at me with a mischievous grin and asked, "What do you think? You are getting a doctorate,

⁷⁸ This site is covered in Mark Mullins' (1998) enlightening book *Christianity Made in Japan*.

after all, so you should know.” I looked back at him and raised an eyebrow. For a moment, he was glowing. Then he put his head down and lit a cigarette. The glow moved from his face to the burning tobacco. Puffing out smoke, he accepted the improbability of the story we had just heard. Unwilling to completely give up, however, he wistfully remarked, “Wouldn’t it be something if it was true?” With those words, he started walking down the small hill to the parking lot. I followed, listening to the sound of our footsteps on the rocks, dirt, and grass that lie between Jesus’s grave and his car.

All in all, the trip took us about nineteen hours. It was an escape for both of us. We were silent for most of the trip. I asked him a couple of questions. He obliged me with answers. He told me some things that had been weighing on him, let those things sit for a minute, and then made fun of me. “You’re going to eat too much. Your body’s too big. Kind of like an American car, you’re big and use too much fuel. Oh well, it’s not your fault.” I obliged him with agreement, a laugh, and more than a few grumbles. We were having a kind of solemn fun, dealing with things we knew were a bit troubling and avoiding them at the same time, bouncing between silence, pain, and laughter. That is perhaps what driving was for us.

To some degree, the car and the drone of the road isolated us from the outside world. It isolated us from the demands and obligations that came with being in Kamaishi, where it sometimes felt like every interaction had high stakes, like every word heard and uttered could help or hurt someone whose life was on a

precipice. It was not like that in the car. In the car, it was loud and it was quiet. We were sitting still but we were moving. It felt like we were doing something and nothing at the same time, hazily focused on the road, but focused nonetheless. Perhaps this will sound overly American, but there was some feeling of freedom in these seemingly contradictory sensations.

I was not the only one who felt that way. Mr. Umibe frequently took drives, long or short, to “get away for a minute.” One of the long-term volunteers at his center worried that so much driving was bad for Mr. Umibe’s lower back, but said, “I understand why he does it. Sometimes I like to drive for a long time, too. You can just be by yourself. ... I don’t do it so much now that I’m older, but I still drive to a hospital about eight hours away once a month instead of taking the train. I guess I just like it.” Some of the chaplains also told me that driving was a way that they tried to recoup after hard days of listening. For example, Rev. Takahashi Etsudō enjoyed “driving through nature” as a way to relieve himself of the weight of the stories he hears. “The trees,” he said, “lend me energy.”

There is a history behind driving in Japan, of course, and of the jokes, the groans, and the selves that came together on the road. Cars, streets, manufacturing, gasoline, batteries, and trees all have their place in that story. And steel. Kamaishi’s steel bands in the tires kept us stable on our journey. They kept us from running flat, finding ourselves stuck in the middle of a nowhere that is someone else’s home.

But what if I now said that this dissertation was a story about the pleasure of driving? Of going to work and coming home tired but glad that there were moments alone in a car. Of constantly finding meaning in something painful that needs to be temporarily avoided. Of exhausting oneself in a long trip that is meant to be refreshing, coming back, and then wanting to head out again but not having the time or money to do so. With a little bit of research and a framework that does not separate causes and effects, a system viewed from a different point of entry might look eerily similar to the way it looks when approached from somewhere, somewhen, or something else. It might look like a different aspect of the same thing rather than a fragment. After all, despite our intentions, driving did not actually separate us entirely from the world. Neither did it solve our problems. On the contrary, if driving is a solution to a problem, it is also an aspect of that problem. Arguably, it is also a cause. A relation of relationlessness, a person just passing through, isolated in a vehicle, trying to reconnect with a self or with a friend so as to head back out into the world.

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