

## A Shaking Voice can Shake it All: Representing Trauma as a Political Act

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### Abstract

I focus in this paper on the way fiction produced after the 3.11 disasters has engaged with the daunting task of giving meaning to suffering and outliving a traumatic event. I argue that the present practice is based on an overarching literary convention that combines three main tropes. First, how questions over the responsibility in representing trauma appear reflected in the way characters relate to the traumatic event. Second, the articulation of elements of corruption of the body or mind as unavoidable reminders of the trauma. And third, the construction of victims and survivors as invisibilized and ostracized individuals. I show how post-3.11 literary production both follows and enhances a convention set to blame instituted socio-cultural dynamics for perpetuating the violence of the traumatic episode by failing to address survivors as a social responsibility. This piece will explore these themes in Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*, Furukawa Hideo's *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure*, and Tawada Yōko's *The Emissary*. My ultimate goal is to explore how literary representations of trauma in 3.11 literature challenge hegemonic propositions that shape the cultural memory of the event.

### 1 Introduction

This paper explores the representation of trauma in the literary production concerning the triple disaster that happened in Japan on March 11, 2011, also known as the 3.11 events. I focus this study on understanding the construction of the characters of victim and survivor as both subjects and objects, mediums and agents, casualties and avatars of the traumatic episode. I expose the present literary convention of character construction through an exploration of three of their principal axes of articulation. First, I explore how the question of who takes responsibility in representing trauma when shaping a community's collective memory appears reflected in the literary works. Second, I study the presence of elements of corruption of the body or mind as unavoidable reminders of trauma. Third, I analyze the entrapment of victims and survivors as invisibilized and ostracized individuals. My ultimate argument is that post-3.11 literary production can challenge hegemonic claims over the construction of cultural memory while denouncing systemic oppressions that go beyond the impact of the triple disaster.

I do not intend to produce an exhaustive, quantitative, or anthological overview of 3.11 literary production. Instead, in this paper I explore the representation of survivors and victims of the 3.11 events by focusing on three works: Yū Miri's 柳美里 *Tokyo Ueno Station* (2019) (*JR Ueno-eki kōen guchi* JR 上野駅公園口, 2014), Furukawa Hideo's 古川日出男 *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure* (2016) (*Umatachi yo, soredemo hikari wa mukude* 馬たちよ、それでも光は無垢で, 2011),<sup>1</sup> and Tawada Yōko's 多和田葉子 *The Emissary* (2018) (*Kentōshi* 献灯使, 2015). I will use elements from these novels to illustrate the significance of this construction when framed against the shaping of cultural memories in a context of counter-narratives opposing propositions of power. I have chosen these three works because they help me navigate through my arguments in ways that problematize the already complex task of representation. As I show in my analysis, these three works avoid easy categorization. Moreover, these three authors have varying degrees of affinity and proximity to the 3.11 events. Their works, therefore, provide me the grounds to discuss the role of literature in creating a bridge between trauma representation and cross-sectional challenges.

The triple disaster of March 11, 2011, has emerged in public discussion as a practical watershed to assess the country's contemporary challenges. Literary production that appeared after and in relation to these events has been particularly active in the shaping and re-shaping of Japan's contemporary cultural narrative. Exploring these themes helps us understand better both this particular case and literary representations of trauma in general. On the one hand, it is an excellent opportunity to push forward collective work on Japan's specificities when it comes to the relationship between cultural memory, trauma, and literature. On the other, it provides tools and resources to add to the rich tapestry of work done on the processes behind the socialization of memory.

Throughout this analysis and in my conclusions, I intend to show how the way survivors and victims are represented in literature can acquire a counter-hegemonic condition that challenges propositions of power when it comes to the shaping of the cultural memory of this event.

## 2 Theoretical principles

Out of the vast, rich, and complex body of work produced on the relationship between literature and trauma, I want to highlight a few key concepts that are going to be useful in this journey. Many of these notions emerged from the spring of ideas on memory, artistic representation, and trauma that became the field of so-called Holocaust studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. These concepts are not, however, exclusively linked to that particular experience, but they nevertheless need to be disentangled from a

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, just *Horses, Horses*.

Eurocentric matrix of conception. We must constantly be aware of the epistemological and material bias of institutionalized knowledge production. This includes an attentiveness of the advantaged location of scholars, academic research groups, and institutions dealing with memory studies; the popularity and choice of conflictive memory case studies as referential over others as merely regional or context-bound; and the unchecked privilege of some works over others only because they were produced in the Global North. If we want to push back against these biases, studying the role of literary production in the shaping of 3.11's cultural memory should not be treated as a matter of interest only for researchers on Japan. It can also serve as a case example to further expand our understanding of the way cultural agents engage in this task beyond the specific contextual boundaries of the triple disaster of March 11, 2011.

### *Social and psychological trauma*

Three questions are central in this theoretical journey: are all disasters traumatic? Are all kinds of traumatic events the same when it comes to their effects over suffering individuals and communities? And, are all survivors traumatized? As Jeffrey Alexander posed it, we must differentiate between individual acts of trauma and the social construction of traumatic memories. Therefore, when assessing the representation of roles associated with traumatic events, we must depart from a position in which we accept their socially mediated nature.<sup>2</sup> I move on from this locus to point out, however, that even if these episodes are shaped culturally by different agents that provide them with their traumatic condition. We must also attend to the struggle of giving cohesive meaning out of inherently disruptive phenomena to understand their representation. I work from a combination of these two angles. I argue that the social construction of traumatic narratives hinges from themes and tropes contingent to psychological dynamics of interpretation.

This paper assumes that there are no grounds for claiming an incompatibility between these two interpretations, when, in fact, they complement each other. Regardless of whether one takes a constructivist approach or a psychoanalytical one, trauma can never be sealed as *fait accompli*. Trauma is a wound that cannot be explained, only explored. Similarly, surviving is a condition that cannot be outgrown but only sustained, both personally and as a collective narrative. Consequentially, any attempt to provide trauma with a fixed meaning is futile. Because traumatic events cannot get set to a single interpretation that would identify the limits of their damage, they break and distort their point of origin. The event that gives them birth ends tangled up with their consequences,

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<sup>2</sup> ALEXANDER 2004: 8.

with the wound that they produce, to the point that traumatic events become source and outcome, beginning and end.

*Trauma, memory, and narrative*

This process is so because of the narratological structure of memory, both as individual production and as a socially constructed device. Ernst van Alphen has explored this operation based on the works of Pierre Janet. Trauma breaks the normal process of remembering the disaster. Time becomes arrested, fossilized, suspended in the moment of shock, rendering the “before” and the “after” completely meaningless: “a narrative memory is retrospective, it takes place after the event. A traumatic memory does not know that distance from the event. The person who experiences a traumatic reenactment is still inside the event.”<sup>3</sup> This effect promotes a feeling of haunting grief that enhances confusion and is extended from the individual to the rest of the community. Trauma defies logical description and clear answers, both for suffering individuals and for the community that supports them.

It can be argued, therefore, that traumatic events, precisely because of their disruptive nature, facilitate dissent and struggle in the social construction of narratives by evading concrete and consensual representations. The survivor is trapped between the impossibility of representing trauma cohesively and the responsibility of having to account for it. Gabriel Gatti explores these limits when he discusses the impossibility of representing what he calls the figure of the ‘detained-disappeared’ (‘detenido-desaparecido’): the individual victim of structural political violence that cannot be counted as dead or alive. Representing this figure is impossible because it embodies the void: the emptiness left by a human being that signifies an undisclosed process of personal and collective damage. Struggles for representation are attempts of dignifying these victims, of rescuing them from official neglect or active censorship. Gatti argues that this tension of representation is the element that creates the necessary power to keep ignited the flame of criticism and subversion.<sup>4</sup>

Representation is then always an exercise of tentative approximation. It is only within this struggle of convergence that meaning can emerge and take shape. In accepting these limits, art and literature become a medium suited for the task. Instead of attempting to restore a faithful recreation of the sequential process of events that constitute the kernel of the traumatic event, art can create a forum where interpretation is the right tool to engage with the production of meaning. It can propose the construction of bridges of understanding and healing not out of a will of restoring monolithic truth, but by accepting literature as a space of productivity instead of a field of uncertainty.

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<sup>3</sup> VAN ALPHEN 2005: 169.

<sup>4</sup> GATTI 2008: 31.

The intervention of literature in this process of providing meaning to trauma enhances, however, the narratological dimension of memory. Jan and Aleida Assmann have built on the work of Maurice Halbwachs to structure the differences between what they call “communicative” memory from “cultural” memory.<sup>5</sup> Cultural memory entails an exercise of selection, elevation, canonization, and institutionalization of narratives of memory that, as Tzevetan Todorov points out, paradoxically includes both forgetting and overflowing the community with memories.<sup>6</sup> The articulation of cultural memory is also a field of interest and a space of perpetual conflict for agents in power. The management of narratives of memory can be a powerful weapon of legitimation for hegemonic groups. Following the points developed by Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer*, we could argue that the exceptional circumstances created by narratives of trauma can be used not to manage the exception, but to adjust the rules of the norm.<sup>7</sup> The state of exception establishes the limits of what is legitimate and allowed after exceptional times are over. Disasters, in their nature as exceptional episodes, can shape and redefine new limits in the norm through their interpretation within cultural memory.

#### *Trauma, literature, and counter-hegemony*

Literature and the arts can also rise to become an agent of confrontation to these same official narratives. It would be naive, however, to presume that literature always assumes a subversive role in its articulation of narratives of trauma. Even when they are confronting official narratives, artistic manifestations institutionalize dissent and limit, albeit perhaps unwillingly, the channels through which disagreement can be defined. It is then important, when approaching post-Fukushima literature, for instance, that we acknowledge their shortcomings as contra-hegemonic agents.

There are other limits and potentialities present in the relationship between literature and trauma that I want to point out, especially for their relevance to this case study. As mentioned earlier, the unresolved nature of traumatic experiences and their recollection can overpower individual attempts of interpretation, particularly those directly involved with the disasters. Traumatic experiences are passed on across generations, and in this voyage, they can get a chance of interpretation and representation. This process is what Marianne Hirsch called postmemory. Postmemory is the mediation of traumatic experiences through second and third generations of individuals that did not live the ordeal, but that received the memory through the process of acculturation. Postmemory aims to reactivate and approach memories through creative and aesthetic means, restoring the emotional bonds between an event and a memory that trauma erased:

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<sup>5</sup> ASSMANN 2010: 37.

<sup>6</sup> TODOROV 2000: 13.

<sup>7</sup> AGAMBEN 1998: 30.

Postmemorial work, I want to suggest – and this is the central point of my argument in this book – strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.<sup>8</sup>

Hirsch focuses on the institution of the family as the space where postmemory takes place most vividly. Clara Valverde develops a similar argument when she explores the generational transmission of political violence through her study of the management of silences and tampered memories of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>9</sup> It makes sense to frame the family as the space where to develop attempts of restoration given its strong affective bonds. Hashimoto Akiko also defends the use of the framework of postmemory as a relevant paradigm to understand the construction of postwar discourses on recovery in Japan that include amnesia, criminalization, and heroic portrayals, all mixed together. She points out “how personal and intimate connections shape the moral evaluation of war for postwar generations in ways that are more real and intimate than school textbooks and cultural representations.”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, in the three selected works the idea of family has a unique role in this same direction. I argue, however, that affection cannot be restricted to the boundaries of the family household or of strict generational lines. I take Hirsch’s consideration of postmemory as “a platform of activist and interventionist cultural and political engagement”<sup>11</sup> to test how the problematization of responsibility in narrating trauma and memory can be associated with broader discourses on contemporary social criticism.

### **3 Responsibility in representing trauma**

The question of representation of trauma and the mediation of voices in its articulation, especially when approached to the study of artistic forms of expression like literature, needs to be addressed as an essential point of departure for its problematization. Who is writing about the trauma? Is it the survivor? Is it another member of the in-group? Or is it an individual from outside of the affected community? I address these problems by asking, instead, who is taking the responsibility to write? As mentioned before, one of the reasons behind the selection of these three novels when it comes to exploring the construction of victims and survivors in its relationship with themes on social protest is precisely to delve into these issues. None of the three authors can be considered direct survivors of the 3.11 events. They represent three different approaches to the task of representation that go

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<sup>8</sup> HIRSCH 2012: 33.

<sup>9</sup> VALVERDE 2014.

<sup>10</sup> HASHIMOTO 2015: 26.

<sup>11</sup> HIRSCH 2012: 6.

beyond the testimonial. These works engage with the responsibility shared by a community to provide meaning that can work in tandem with greater discourses on sociopolitical issues.

### *Responsibility and Survivor's Guilt*

Furukawa Hideo has his sense of responsibility in representing the trauma mediated by a particular case of survivor's guilt. Furukawa is a Fukushima native, but he was in Kyōto on March 11 researching for a novel. This happenstance haunts him. Although Furukawa had been living in Tōkyō for a while before the triple disaster, he wonders what would have happened had he been in Fukushima on 3.11. The thought of this hypothetical scenario fuels his special brand of survivor's guilt. Furukawa seems sure he would have died had he been living in Tōhoku on that fateful day. These feelings are tangled up with a complicated relationship with his birthplace: Furukawa moved away from his hometown because he felt that the area had no use for him.<sup>12</sup> He transforms the guilt that emerged out a sudden sense of abandonment and separation from his homeland into a quest of personal responsibility, a sudden urge to get physically involved with the incident. His is a pursuit for the lived experience of being hit by the disaster despite the impossibility of reenacting these events. Furukawa recognizes a subconscious desire for self-harm in this impulse, a wish to get physiologically maimed by the radioactive violence given that he was spared from the earthquake and the tsunami.<sup>13</sup> His way of engaging with the traumatic event, because he could not be present during its explosive occurrence, is accounting for its immediate consequences:

The over there on the television is the living realm, whereas I, I in particular, have passed over, on to the other side of the unreal. I am in no position to ask myself questions, but I ask myself anyway: why am I not among the victims? All of those people over there are swallowed by death, touched and caressed by the god of death, but me? How did I get off not dying? Guilt. To overdo the description, guilty conscience. Why is it that all those people over there had to be victims?<sup>14</sup>

*Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure* is part fiction, part essay, and part personal journal. In its core, the book is about Furukawa's relationship with the 3.11 event during its direct aftermath. There is a central narrative that drives the book forward: Furukawa's pilgrimage with a fellow crew of journalists into the exclusion zone. The book unfolds non-sequentially. Furukawa is constantly shifting timelines, which can be grouped into five categories. First, his impressions and experiences right after the 3.11 event

<sup>12</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 27.

<sup>13</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 25.

<sup>14</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 22.

outside of Fukushima. Second, his journey across the affected areas in Fukushima. Third, the parallel journey through the region of the two brothers from his earlier novel *The Holy Family*. Fourth, his historical reflections on matters related to Fukushima, in which horses take a significant role, as I will explain later on. Fifth, his process of coping with the tragedy and finding a voice to articulate his position, which involves his problematic framing as a 'Fukushima writer' and a promotional trip to the United States.

Furukawa expresses at different points of this book his inability to engage with the disaster from a steady and reliable position. In a sense, *Horses, Horses* shows the struggle of an individual towards providing meaning to a traumatic experience and the realization that it is only while in this process of interpretation that sense is possible. This process begins with the discovery that he has lost his capacity to write. Furukawa found himself suddenly powerless when it came to the task of keeping up with his work as a novelist. To be more precise, he was particularly unable to write fiction. He could accomplish other kinds of commissions, like short essays and newspaper pieces, but he had issues with literature. *Horses, Horses* can also be read as a text in which Furukawa fights his way back through this blockade by experimenting with a patchwork of styles, voices, spaces, and chronological shifts.

There is a link between his inability to write and his survivor's guilt. This obstruction of expression can both be associated with the struggle of representation (can trauma be adequately represented?) and with his concerns about the validity of his voice in bearing this responsibility. His trip through Fukushima is a trial to acquire legitimacy of enunciation: "time to go back home. I can write only if I go back."<sup>15</sup> Throughout this journey, he feels at a loss for words several times, unable to fully describe what he sees or how he feels.

Furukawa recognizes that self-expression is a combination of both fiction and personal recollection. Doug Slaymaker points out how writing in Furukawa takes the place of commitment towards alleviating the pain of the disasters, becoming one of the central axes of the book. Writing can feel insufficient, almost impossible, but in the effort, in the struggle, there is a positive meaning of engagement.<sup>16</sup> Despite it not being solid grounds for manifestation, this blend is a driving force of engagement:

I will stop here with the theorizing. Same with my efforts to shore up the logic. I just want to write. I want to write what I have seen. I want to describe the scene that "exists" in my head capturing it with all the internal urgency I feel. In this endeavor my imagination becomes the driving force. But is such imagination a good thing?

I write, "He is here."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 51.

<sup>16</sup> SLAYMAKER 2017: 203.

<sup>17</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 134.



The trigger of change is the sudden apparition in his travel party of a fifth passenger, one of his characters from *The Holy Family*. It is in this blending of fiction and non-fiction that Furukawa can find room for expression. Unlike his author, who left the region years ago, this character is framed as real Fukushima resident: he is the victim through which Furukawa can bridge his placement within Tōhoku. It is the fact that these characters are fictional, that they exist because he is portraying them, the key to creating a bridge towards the representation of trauma from the triple disaster.

By inserting the characters in the same diegetic reality as Furukawa's literary persona, the author Furukawa is raising questions over the authenticity of these brothers in relation to himself. The inclusion of unquestionably fictional characters highlights the fact that the Furukawa of *Horses, Horses* is also a literary representation, acting within a space of performance of trauma. Literature becomes an arena where the blurred lines between fiction and reality allow for a way of producing meaning in processing trauma less burdened by pressures of witness accounts or precise memory recollection.

#### *Yū Miri and Intersectional Responsibilities*

Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station* deals with the question of responsibility from a different angle. Contrary to Furukawa, Yū was not born in any of the areas most heavily affected by the 3.11 events, but she became deeply engaged with the region since then anyway. She visited the evacuation zones before they were sealed off and hosted a radio show between 2012 and 2018 called *Yū Miri 2 plus 1 (Yū Miri no futari to hitori)*, featuring interviews with guests in which they discuss life before and after the disasters. She moved to Minamisōma in Fukushima to settle there permanently in 2015. Despite Yū's record of personal engagement, *Tokyo Ueno Station* does not feature any character that would stand for her in the text. It is a novel that approaches the representation of victims and survivors from a holistic point of view. It strives to break with a spatially bound conception of 3.11 as a disaster enclosed in Tōhoku by showing the unequal relationship of subalternity of Fukushima in its relationship with Tōkyō and its metropolitan area. The chronological setting of the novel also predates the date of the incident throughout most of the plot.

*Tokyo Ueno Station* adopts the voice of a homeless protagonist living in the camps at Ueno Park. He is from Fukushima and moved to Tōkyō as a temporary worker just before the 1964 Olympic Games. Upon retirement, he moves back to Fukushima. After his wife dies, he returns to Tōkyō and lives as a homeless in Ueno. The narrator eventually kills himself by jumping in front of a train in this same station. His spirit lives on, trapped in this world, and witnesses how the tsunami of 3.11 engulfs her granddaughter. *Tokyo Ueno Station* is a tale of pain, loss, and separation from one's family. A life of coming back and forth between Tōkyō and Fukushima, unable to settle in any of these two places due to systemic economic violence.

The presence of Fukushima is evident in this novel even though most of the action takes place in Tōkyō. Yū establishes different connecting threads between the narrator's circumstances and the 3.11 events. She starts by narrating how many of the residents of Ueno Park were escaping in the 1950s and 1960s from poverty in Tōhoku:

There were no TEPCO nuclear plants or Tōhoku Electric plants along the coast at that time, no Hitachi or Del Monte factories. Big farmers could feed themselves easily, but the few paddies my family had were insignificant at best, so as soon as I graduated elementary school, I left home to work at Onahama Port in Iwaki, lodgings provided.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth reminding that TEPCO is the owner of the nuclear plants damaged on March 11, 2011. In another fragment, a TV is on and the reader gets access to an ongoing discussion in Japan's Diet regarding works of recovery in Fukushima one year after the disaster, but this appears detached from the rest of the narrative.

Just as Furukawa's *The Holy Family's* two brothers, the narrator acts as the proxy to engage with the question of responsibility. He embodies the futility and powerlessness of the victim in its relationship with a traumatic event. The protagonist feels a constant burden for his decisions, resolutions that, however, were determined by Japan's economic mandates. His suicide is motivated by inherited guilt of existence that, even in its execution, fails to provide him respite. The ultimate example of this essential helplessness is his inability to save his granddaughter, forced to watch passively as a spirit after he has died: "I could not embrace her, nor touch her hair or cheek, nor call her name, nor cry out, nor let tears fall."<sup>19</sup> The scene of her drowning is stitched together in a jump back in time with the narrator's last impressions before leaping towards the train tracks:

As Mari's car melted into darkness and I could no longer see it, I heard, from inside that darkness heavy with the weight of water over it, that sound. People wearing all colors of clothes, men, women, seeped out of the darkness and flickeringly a platform emerged. 'The train now approaching platform 2 is bound for Ikebukuro. Please stand behind the yellow line.'<sup>20</sup>

Yū's characters, albeit fictional, can stand for silenced and anonymous stories of marginalized concealment imposed by hegemonic narratives. By choosing to speak about these characters, as Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt argues,<sup>21</sup> Yū is providing them a context, a background, an emotional bond that humanizes experiences than can be seen reflected in this novel. Yū's choice of associating the triple disaster of 3.11 with Tōhoku's systemic

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<sup>18</sup> YŪ 2019: 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> YŪ 2019: 167.

<sup>20</sup> YŪ 2019: 169.

<sup>21</sup> IWATA-WEICKGENANNT 2019: 193.

conditions of subalternity offers a different, complementary insight than Furukawa regarding responsibility in representation. She seems to suggest that choosing to represent the trauma of particular episodes entails a responsibility towards its association with other struggles, in the spirit of an intersectional approach to situations of conflict and oppression.

### *Tawada and Responsibility in Imagining Consequences*

In Tawada Yōko's *The Emissary*, the question of responsibility when it comes to representing the 3.11 events shows a different degree of complexity. There are no explicit mentions of Fukushima, or the triple disaster, throughout the whole novel. Instead, there are constant allusions to this event or an equivalent one, framed as a censored episode by the authorities and invested with paradigmatic world-changing properties. *The Emissary* is a novel that sprung out of a previous short story called "The Island of Eternal Life" (*Fushi no shima*).<sup>22</sup> It describes a dystopian Japan set in an indeterminate but still relatively close future. In this scenario, the unmentioned natural and nuclear cataclysm put the country in permanent lockdown. The government became privatized and the state is run by a business conglomerate that rules by imposing radio-silence from the rest of the world. Electric appliances are an oddity and education is strictly limited. The central aspect of Tawada's projected Japan are the changes in human biology produced by this momentous disaster. Its main consequences are that people of old age who were already mature when the disaster hit, not only retained but even improved their strength and significantly extended their life expectancy. On the other hand, younger people become sickish and die at an earlier age, leaving a generational gap between children and the elderly.

This circumstance is embodied in the two main characters of the novel. There is Yoshiro, a man over a hundred years old that was born during the Shōwa era, who met his wife during the late 1960s student protests and lived through the unspecified disaster. He takes care of his great-grandson Mumei, a kid that is being screened to become an emissary, an ambassador sent abroad so that the rest of the world can have a chance to study and learn from Japan's atypical circumstances. He is selected for this role by Yonatani, his school teacher, who is later revealed to be the son of a mixed marriage and had to hide his Western ancestry to avoid issues with the government. In this story, Tawada seems to explore the ambivalence and multi-dimensional implications of representing the consequences of trauma. The survivor is embodied by Yoshiro and the victim by Mumei. Yoshiro carries the burden of having to live and outlive younger generations, a survivor's guilt that he is forced to live and relive given his unnaturally extended lifespan. Mumei, on the other hand, is a victim that did not live through the traumatic event but has to bear with the full weight of the consequences.

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<sup>22</sup> DiNITTO 2019: 142.

The question of responsibility is trapped between these two archetypes of representation. Yoshiro is haunted by what he believes is the injustice of not receiving the evident impacts of the disaster. Mumei, on the other hand, accepts this circumstance because there is no memory of the event that can trigger further damages. With this disposition, Tawada points at the link between responsibility and memory: Yoshiro's wounds are not physical like Mumei's, but they exist nonetheless and derive from the unprocessed traumatic memory of the disaster. Tawada is clear in letting the reader know that in her depicted scenario, responsibility exists and is unaccounted for by that version of Japan in obvious parallel with the current one. When Yonatan is teaching Mumei and the rest of the kids about geography, the topic of the disaster pops up, and he emphasizes a dimension which, although vague, goes beyond the inevitable of natural catastrophes:

But Japan isn't the way it is now just because of earthquakes and tsunamis. If natural disasters were the only problem, we certainly would have recovered long before now. So it's not just natural disasters. Got that?<sup>23</sup>

As I have already hinted, the three authors use stylistic resources to articulate the problematic rendering of responsibility in the process of providing meaning to the traumatic event and representing it in a cohesive and comprehensible manner. A key device in these representations is the articulation of time. These three stories mimic what van Alphen points out about memory recollection breaking the regular perception of time as a consequence of trauma. Tawada accomplishes this by altering the regular human lifespan and by placing the plot at an undetermined point in the future. Dan Fujiwara argues that Tawada's use of spheres as a literary device in the novel fits in a stylistic pattern across her other works for the understanding of time as spheric instead of linear. Characters in this post-apocalyptic Japan need to be reminded of the spheric nature of the world they live in.<sup>24</sup> Fujiwara's observation can also be taken as a call for optimism in a future that curves the flatness of oppressive circumstances. Time is also manipulated in Yū's novel, with memories shifting back and forth, co-living in the text, describing different historical points of the narrator's life and afterlife. The novel also has a seemingly circular structure, with the sounds of a train station at the beginning and end of the text. Furukawa refers to the rift in time that can be produced by traumatic events through his mentioning of a feeling of 'spirited away:'

Things that cannot happen in the mere span of one day are happening, expanding ... consciousness of the date on the calendar, of the day of the week, has

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<sup>23</sup> TAWADA 2018: 95.

<sup>24</sup> FUJIWARA 2020: 158.

collapsed. I think I can put a name to it: 'spirited away.' Abducted by spirits. ... Time can't be accounted for, it's impossible to measure.<sup>25</sup>

### *Responsibility and affective bonds*

Taking on the responsibility of representing trauma, especially given the psychological and social difficulties involved in this process, calls for a specific kind of commitment. It is, on the one hand, an emotional, affective commitment, and on the other, a political undertaking. Although I have enumerated them as separate entities, they are part of the same dynamic: efforts of affective transmission and representation are political, as they provide victims with tools for meaning formation beyond official recipes of unification or forgetting. I would like to retake Hirsch's focus on the institution of the family, identified as a site where this political affection can be nurtured, and show how it fits with these three novels. I argue that representation and responsibility are tied together in these three works with political action through this understanding of affective bonds contesting official narratives. Furukawa's literary characters from *The Holy Family* are his proxy agent in his journey throughout Fukushima, in recovering his literary voice, and in overcoming his struggles with survivor's guilt. In a scene of *Horses, Horses*, a character tells the story of how his little sister recovered her voice after years of voluntary silence.<sup>26</sup> This episode becomes a moment of bonding, a reminder of togetherness when faced by the challenges of living.

In *The Emissary*, family connections and their precariousness are a central subject of discussion. Yoshiro's whole family is scattered throughout Japan: his daughter moved to Okinawa and rarely ever visited. His wife also decided to live on her own to manage an orphanage, or a house of 'independent children' as they are called in the novel. Yoshiro is taking care of his great-grandson because the father of this kid, his grand-son, rejected him. Despite this disintegration of the family household, Yoshiro's dedication to Mumei is his source for a better future.

Yū devises a wicked parallelism between the protagonist's family and the Imperial household. The narrator was born on the same year as Emperor Akihito, and his son on the same day as now Emperor Naruhito. This comparison is compelling for many reasons. By placing next to each other representatives of the highest and lowest strata of society, Yū highlights the immanent inequalities of Japan.<sup>27</sup> This disparity is shown when comparing the fates of the two families: the narrator and his wife live most of their life apart from each other, as familiar strangers. Their son dies a young man, alone in his student flat.

<sup>25</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 85.

<sup>27</sup> IWATA-WEICKGENANT 2019: 190.

Their granddaughter dies in the 3.11 triple disaster and the main character kills himself. Yū's articulation of the family as a site of memory and affection is revealed precisely in its absence: the destruction of the narrator's legacy reifies his casting into oblivion. The family as space and unit of political affection should not be understood as the only medium of engagement, but it serves as a platform from where to explore its limits and potentialities.

#### 4 Altered Corporeality

The second aspect I want to argue is the articulation of meaning through an exploration of altered corporealities as ways to discuss trauma's biopolitical impact. Trauma's Greek etymology reminds us that it is a concept inextricably associated with the idea of injury and physical harm. A seemingly effortless parallelism can be established between the healing of a wound and the process of dealing with a traumatic memory. Both seem contingent on a combination of understanding (knowledge of the nature of the wound), care (expertise on its diagnostic and treatment), and time (patience in letting the process unfold naturally). This apparent similarity becomes a source of instability and pain both for the individual survivor and for the community that is responsible for incorporating and processing the traumatic event. Dealing and taking care of the impacts in body and mind of traumatic episodes does not follow a strict line of recovery. In fact, recovery can be neither a possibility nor a desired outcome. Discussing corporealities represented as affected by trauma can put the spotlight on the significance of bodies in the construction of national narratives by organs of power and control.

##### *Bodies, wounds, and biopolitics in Japanese literature*

Before discussing how corporealities are represented in 3.11 literature, I want to make a brief detour to explore a previous episode of body degradation in contemporary Japanese literature. This example helps me introduce a few of the complexities of body representation in literature in Japan, its relation to official narratives of forgetting, and how a body's materiality can bridge the gap left by trauma's elusiveness. In his 1997 short story "Droplets" (*Suiteki* 水滴), Okinawan writer Medoruma Shun 目取真俊 uses the Kafkaesque trope of the metamorphosis of the flesh to provide an interpretation of unaddressed wartime memories in veterans of World War II. The protagonist of this story, Tokushō, wakes up one day, decades after the end of the conflict, paralyzed and with a swollen leg. His limb has taken the shape of a gourd melon and water starts dripping out of his toe. Every night, the ghosts of comrades and loved ones, dead in the war, visit him and drink from this dripping water. This circumstance forces Tokushō to relive different episodes of his traumatic experience in the war, particularly his reprehensible acts during the conflict, embellished in public interventions in schools during the postwar years as a

way of escaping from survivor's guilt. I have argued in another piece for the understanding value of this story as a powerful instance of postmemory literature in Japan.<sup>28</sup> Kyle Ikeda has done remarkable work precisely on the matter, pointing out how "Medoruma's literary narratives are characterized by an anxiety over representation, a focus on hidden and suppressed war memories, and a concern with transgenerational war memory."<sup>29</sup> Ikeda also provides interesting insights into how the geographical nature of trauma in Okinawa, where survivors and their descendants lived in the same space of the traumatic incident, offers different interpretations about postmemory, a concept rooted in memories of the Holocaust and the physical displacement of its survivors via migrations.<sup>30</sup>

I want to use here Medoruma's example to introduce the trope of the transformation of the body as a particular element of trauma representation. Tokushō's unaddressed suffering is represented by the aberrant degradation of his leg. Medoruma shows through this trope how his condition as survivor, hidden out of sight for decades, resurfaces violently to be exposed as an inescapable burden to the rest of the community. Just as the construction of traumatic episodes is a social process of attribution of meaning, the presence of wounds and the degradation of body and mind are a collectivized process of disclosing vulnerabilities.

The impacted body is re-victimized, reifying its condition of close association with trauma. I argue that this rendering entraps the victim in a privately elusive and socially eluded dynamic of interpretation. The wounds are permanent markers of association to events that are sources of pain and disturbance. As such, they produce compassion for the victims but also repudiation, even when involuntary. This rejection is enhanced by the construction of the traumatic incident as a space of exceptionalism. Igarashi Yoshikuni explores this phenomenon in his work *Bodies of Memory*.<sup>31</sup> Yoshikuni's thesis is that Japan remembered its war memories discursively through a systemic and centralized management of corporeality. Bodies are used to articulate Japan's understanding of the war. First, from the suffering and decay of the direct aftermath. Then, through the will of promoting a healthy body that came during the 1960s and 1970s. Last, in associating rotting bodies to repressed memories and traumatic reenactments. This 'body trope' is inherited from hegemonic biopolitical paradigms in Japan based on the duality healthy/corrupted body. For instance, the existence of the *eta* 穢多 (pariah) caste in Tokugawa's social pyramid or the idea of *kokutai* 国体 (national body) as political philosophy up until the end of World War II. This frame incorporates victims and survivors into a narrative that can place them in two different categories. On the one hand, they can also be framed as individuals built in constant tension (and temporal suspension) with their

<sup>28</sup> SERRANO-MUÑOZ 2015: 117.

<sup>29</sup> IKEDA 2014: 2.

<sup>30</sup> IKEDA 2014: 14.

<sup>31</sup> IGARASHI 2000.

trigger event, like Medoruma's Tokushō. On the other hand, they can be cast into ostracism based on a perception of polluted corporeality, like the atomic bomb survivors (*hibakusha* 被爆者), represented in literature most famously by Ōe Kenzaburo's 大江健三郎 *Hiroshima Nōto* ヒロシマ・ノート (*Hiroshima Notes*) and Ibuse Masuji's 井伏鱒二 *Kuroi ame* 黒い雨 (*Dark Rain*). Some authors have attempted a comparison between *hibakusha* and 3.11-victims, but this subject has been justifiably the target of much criticism from both *hibakusha* and *hisaisha* 被災者 (disaster victims), as Rachel DiNitto points out in her work *Fukushima Fiction*.<sup>32</sup> The dynamics of solidarity and empathy, although they might share a common spirit of denouncing oppression and stigmatization, risk erasing critical differences between both episodes. The question of blame, responsibility, and consequences are different for the *hibakusha*, and any exercise of comparison needs to depart from the point of caution and acknowledgement of the varying degrees of separation that might be in place between the two groups. At the same time, as DiNitto says, the absence of more direct reference cannot automatically be interpreted as disregard from Fukushima writers of the memory of 1945 *hibakusha*.<sup>33</sup>

### *Bodies of bent steel and torn asphalt*

Furukawa's relationship with the corporeal can be found in his account as an eye-witness of the aftermath rather than as a direct subject of the disaster. The 3.11 events produced two different types of direct wounds: those caused by the natural catastrophes, the earthquake and the tsunami, and those resulting from nuclear contamination. This distinction is important because visual force affects the meaning transferred to the representation of the wound. Tokushō's leg's spectacular transformation into a gourd melon can be inscribed in a tradition of 'body horror' that, as Kelly Hurley points out, emphasizes otherness in the construction of the suffering individual.<sup>34</sup> Furukawa admits with shame to have been seeking spectacularity from the consequences of the disaster in his trip through the affected areas and appears to be let down when he cannot find it. Furukawa tells us that neither he nor any of the members of the crew saw "any bodies" or "recognizable body parts"<sup>35</sup> when scouting the land.

This void of human corporeality is supplanted instead by a focus on material destruction. The space left by altered human corporeality is filled by a focus on material destruction. The need to account for changes, given the absence of human traces, leads to an emphasis on the ruined geographical landscape. Furukawa appears in a state of terrified awe when depicting scenes of debris. His comparison with "air raids" and "atomic-bomb

<sup>32</sup> DiNITTO 2019: 91.

<sup>33</sup> DiNITTO 2019: 120.

<sup>34</sup> HURLEY 1995: 8.

<sup>35</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 41.



sites” triggers associations with a tradition of wartime imagery that still carries unresolved issues of repressed and unworked through meanings in postwar Japan’s national narratives. He paints pictures of torn asphalt, skeletons of buildings, wrecked bridges, and crumpled cars.<sup>36</sup> DiNitto has worked on the role of debris in the construction of a narrative of cultural trauma from the 3.11 events. She questions whether the lack of images of bodies of the victims in the official archive of the disaster can be understood as an effort to dehumanize the disaster.<sup>37</sup> This sense of destruction can be seen, according to Linda Flores, as another resource that adds to the breaking of time in making the reader sympathetic with the process of trauma recovery:

The narrative itself is in ruins: it is fragmented, disjointed, and out of order. Arguably, reading this type of trauma narrative is itself a profoundly unsettling act. The text does not provide a compass to guide the reader through the act of reading; instead, they must navigate through the frequently rocky terrain of the text, meandering through various literary styles and genres (stream of consciousness, historical narrative, poetry).<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of questions of intentionality, the scarcity of images of bodies – or of any other human, for that matter – points at the power of altered corporeality in articulating trauma. Its concealment, however, can perpetuate victimization, as it happened with the *hibakusha*, for a hidden wound is a wound nonetheless.

*Turning into an octopus, turning into a bird*

Tawada has a more open approach to the description of wounded corporealities in *The Emissary*. One of the main premises of the novel is the changes in the lifespan and physiology of the Japanese population because of the mysterious disaster. Not only the elderly live seemingly eternal lives, but they also retain and even improve their general health and strength. Contrary to common reason, they occupy the most strenuous posts. On the contrary, the young are sickish and weak, only capable when and if they grow up to be employed in office jobs. Physical strength and height cease to be valued as useful or desired, for “the tallest were always the first to sicken and die.”<sup>39</sup> Younger generations also experience different types of metamorphosis. Mumei’s mother turns upon death into a bird-like figure, and Yoshiro, the only next of kin available, is faced with the decision of cremating her or accepting an officer’s request to hand her transformed corpse for

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<sup>36</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 42.

<sup>37</sup> DiNITTO 2014: 357–358.

<sup>38</sup> FLORES 2017: 162.

<sup>39</sup> TAWADA 2018: 86.

research.<sup>40</sup> Mumei's bent, twisted, and bundled legs are compared to those of an octopus, and Mumei himself feels a connection with the animal, as if there was "an octopus inside him," fantasizing about converting at will into one and swim effortlessly in the school's pool.<sup>41</sup> Mumei's generation also appears to experience sudden changes in their sexual genitalia, shifting back and forth between male and female organs at different points in their life. Eating food is for Mumei a challenge that puts his metabolism in danger instead of strengthening it:

"No matter how they ate fruit, alarms went off throughout their bodies. When Mumei ate kiwi fruit he had trouble breathing; lemon juice paralyzed his tongue. And it wasn't just fruit. Spinach gave him heartburn, while shiitake mushrooms made him dizzy. Mumei never forgot for an instant that food was dangerous."<sup>42</sup>

These characters tacitly accept this new paradigm of circumstances, but Tawada makes a point to remind its human-made origin. The role of 'emissaries,' for instance, is to bring young children outside of Japan so that the international community can treat them. The Japanese government in the novel treats children's medical information with great zeal. It forces doctors to write their reports by hand to minimize leaks or the tampering of this information. It can be interpreted, therefore, as a metaphor of how body alterations made by the traumatic episode are disregarded and covered up by Japan's official narratives.

Many of the changes in Tawada's dystopic country are a projection of harmful consequences to ongoing major themes and fears of contemporary Japan. The novel strikes a chord at three. First, the disintegration of the family household, an inherited trope from Meiji times and articulated through the scattered members of Yoshiro's family. Second, its depiction of a Japan ruled and populated by older people seems a mirage of its possible future given the declining birth rate and already high lifespan of its elderly population. And third, the description of younger generations as dependent on the old can be extrapolated as a potential outcome of Japan's younger workforce cast into economically unstable conditions. Other issues hinted at but not as thoroughly explored in *The Emissary* are Japan's neoliberal politics, the final marriage between corporations and government, and the triumph of xenophobic policies.

### *Some bodies and not others*

The impact of traumatic wounds cannot be limited to the damage directly inflicted by disasters. It needs to be framed within the larger scope of sociopolitical inequalities to see the range and degree of its impact, along with its constructed meaning. Yū's story reminds

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<sup>40</sup> TAWADA 2018: 98.

<sup>41</sup> TAWADA 2018: 131, 136.

<sup>42</sup> TAWADA 2018: 56.

the reader that class is a determining factor in dealing with trauma. The author creates a constellation of historical and cross-sectional offenses that breaks with an interpretation of traumatic episodes as isolated, exceptionalized events. The lack of closure in death becomes a key element in this plot through the figure of the narrator's son, Kōichi. He was discovered dead in his student dormitory, and little explanation is given besides the fact that he passed away while sleeping. The narrator's reluctance to accept this tragedy sparks in him a crisis of identity in which he first cannot recognize himself in the mirror and then refuses to identify Kōichi's corpse in the morgue by name.<sup>43</sup> Invisibilization can also be denounced with representation. Contrary to the narrator's suicide, which happens out of view, Yū provides us with a detailed description of Mari's corpse after it is washed away by the tsunami tide. The representation of the dead body of a victim of 3.11 fights against a narrative of invisibilization of the disaster's physical damages.

The other type of damages in bodies rendered in *Tokyo Ueno Station* is that of poverty and dire conditions in the homeless camp. This space is articulated as a shadowed site of tragedy paralleling the spotlight of Fukushima. Throughout the story, we see how Ueno has been the scenario of different repressed traumas where bodies were concealed from sight and memory. Perhaps the two most striking examples of this parallelism are Yū's accounting of Ueno's destruction during the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake (for its similarities with Fukushima) and Ueno's use as a mass burial site after the shelling and ensuing ravaging fires of Tōkyō in 1945. The death toll of these attacks is still in discussion, but most sources (and the novel) mention around one hundred thousand deceased and a million people who lost their residencies because of it. Although these numbers are similar to the nuclear attack of Hiroshima, its presence in commemorative public spaces and in Japan's national memory is far less notable. Inequality can be tracked down to a hierarchy of traumatic episodes, and not all bodies and wounds are treated the same even in their collective neglect.

## 5 Individuals invisibilized

As I have attempted to suggest here, the representation of altered corporeality signals a process of re-victimization. It can be conveyed through a rendering of corrupted, damaged, or deceased bodies, but corporeality of victimhood, particularly in post-Fukushima literature, also includes its concealment and its disappearance. I argue then that the process of representing survivors and victims includes a third axis of articulation: invisibilization.

To the physical torment of wounds and genetic mutations, the survivor appears as an individual invisibilized in the construction of the nation's present portrayal as a country at

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<sup>43</sup> Yū 2019: 52.

peace. Survivors are an ambiguous face for the way the official narrative, the narrative of the state, has articulated its account of the event. The cloaking of the figure of the victim fits in attempts by corporate and political authorities in Japan, from TEPCO to municipal, regional, and central governments of dodging the question of acknowledging the blame of insufficient foresight and the lack of will to assume larger sets of responsibility towards affected individuals and communities. The disaster as a damaging episode cannot be refuted or denied, but there is a constant struggle of interpretations over the construction of this narrative of trauma as collective memory. Given these hegemonic agents' reticence for scrupulous accountability, a model discourse that conceals victims from sight and confines them to the strict temporal and spatial boundaries of the incident and its direct aftermath is helpful for conservative ends. This position seems supported by a repeated process of wishing to move forward and away from episodes recognized as painful. This propensity moves at a path that is at odds with the measured mechanism of working through these issues in ways that can make justice to its far-reaching complexities. The problematized understanding of the victims is sacrificed for the sake of recovery. It is left behind as a price to be paid in order to overcome the trauma. Moreover, discourses espoused by authorities, such as the Japanese state's campaign of *Ganbarō Nippon!*, which encourages a narrative based on the concepts of *gaman* 我慢 or *kizuna* 絆,<sup>44</sup> seek to collectivize the pain of these episodes in a way that unjustly erases the differences between the many degrees of impact it had. It nationalizes the idea of the survivor in a way that makes subjects that can have reasons to identify as so completely obsolete.

This process of invisibilization corresponds to a strategy that – willful or not, as I do not wish to enter into questions of motivation – pushes for the following mechanic of representation: dissolving the figure of the survivor and the victim is the way of forgetting a disaster. As so, representing them becomes an act of proposing a counter-narrative that both rejects invisibilization by denunciation and vindicates the need to include their voice and presence into the collective act of shaping a memory of the event. One of Furukawa's narrative threads is a series of reflections on Japanese history from an anti-militaristic point of view. Furukawa calls Japan's past "a history of killing people,"<sup>45</sup> considers Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi nothing more than murderers,<sup>46</sup> and is interested in highlighting alternative, marginalized histories as a way of activism.

By reclaiming the focus to be set on marginal realities, he is fighting against the systemic cogs of indifference and omission that lead to invisibilization and ostracism. There are few human beings in Furukawa's travel through Fukushima, as if they have disappeared, just as the brother of one of his characters has done.<sup>47</sup> He focuses instead on

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<sup>44</sup> SUTTER 2016: 305.

<sup>45</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 73.

<sup>46</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 74.

<sup>47</sup> FURUKAWA 2016: 91.

animals, on looking for and then identifying birds. Even his fictional characters have an animalistic side, as their names include the characters of cow and dog. Furukawa reflects generously on the historical role of horses in the region. He speaks about how horses have been the invisible victims of wars, destruction, famine, and sickness. Later, once Furukawa believes he has recovered his voice and has found a track towards meaningful engagement with the events, he returns to the figure of the horse to articulate his conclusions. After Japan modernized, the utility of horses decreased and so their presence faded to an even fainter shade. The horses' existence, contingent upon the needs of greater forces, proved to lack autonomy. When the area was evacuated, the horses were left behind. Furukawa suggests how authorities are indifferent to the potential damage that radiation can have on these creatures. Horses, an animal associated in Japan's imagery with the region of Sōma (the same region where Yū's protagonist comes from, and she also includes a passage about Sōma's famous horse festival) represents in this tale the invisibility of victims and survivors.

Tawada engages with the question of invisibilization from a different perspective: the power of cultural narratives of memory in shaping the meaning and consequence of disasters. Her proposal for projecting a dystopian future brings her the chance to criticize the treatment of key issues in contemporary Japan by suggesting a possible scenario of how everything can be laid out if power is left unchecked. This world-building project is, however, rich in complexities. Instead of depicting an openly authoritarian government that only rules by coercion and fear of punishment, Tawada's model is commanded by the control over national narratives. Contact with the rest of the world is very limited, but getting out of the country, although not facilitated, is not harshly penalized. Instead of persecuting the opposition, dissent is better discouraged by a combination of fear of troubles with the police and the numbing of critical thinking. The nationalization of victimhood legitimates the authorities to carry on an isolationist, centralist, and hierarchical model of state control. The account of the incident that births this new paradigm (a disaster combination of natural and human-made cataclysms) is explicitly vague. It becomes a haunting ghost for the reader throughout the story, a puzzle to put together in an exercise that promotes revisiting how the memory of Fukushima has been subsequently articulated and employed.

Japan's isolationism is another way of describing an artificial invisibilization. By being excluded from participating in international affairs, it makes accountability and transparency more difficult. Instead of having a translucent invisibility, this concealment of narratives makes the invisible condition paradoxically opaque. Japan's isolationism is also mirrored in the treatment of Yoshiro. The rest of his family members are continuously absent from his life, a mere memory or a sporadic appearance like the brief episode when his wife pays them a visit. He is hardly seen with anybody else besides the people in the bakery in which he works, and in this scenario, human connections are severed or dwarfed.

In a seemingly inconsequential moment, Yoshiro mentions, for instance, how he is every morning late to see the woman who delivered her newspaper, no matter how much he tries.

Yū's *Tokyo Ueno Station* revolves precisely around the main theme of marginalization and invisibility of individuals and communities oppressed at multiple, inter-connected degrees. It is a story with a nameless narrator (his name, Kazu, is actually just mentioned once in passing), living in a village for outcasts next to a major station in the country's capital city. The erasure of identity is a major force of the narrative. The protagonist struggles to find meaning to a life of uncalled for tragedies to the point he forgoes his ontological existence: "If I don't exist, I can't disappear either."<sup>48</sup> Yū denounces a process of invisibilization based on systemic overlooking by authorities, the masses, and single individuals alike. The narrator gets rubbed out until he becomes part of an indifferent background. Yū strengthens this feeling of marginalization by sprinkling the story with casual conversations of passerby citizens, none of them engaging with the homeless, their banal stories completely detached from the narrator's struggles. The protagonist also believes that it would be possible to identify his corpse if found dead thanks to his watch, but it is, however, a mass-produced gimmick. Throughout the story, the protagonist mulls over his parallels with the Imperial family, but once he gets to see the Emperor in passing through Ueno – a moment for which municipal authorities evict the homeless so that the monarchs can be spared of its crude reality, he is unable to speak. Even his eventual demise is foreshadowed as unremarkable. The narrator's death is smothered by the PA system of the station announcing incoming trains, as if nothing worth stopping normality had happened. Scott Aalgaard argues that we can interpret Yū's employment of interruptive, intrusive sounds from everyday life under capitalism as a direct confrontation and denunciation of contemporary political economy and its dire effects on individuals.<sup>49</sup> Yū uses these PA messages to open and close her novel, establishing a narrative of ordinariness that enhances the narrator's invisibility in the greater scheme of things.

## 6 Can the Survivor Speak?

In this yet another turn of Spivak's famous question, I want to focus on the implications of such doubt rather than on pondering its resolve. Survivors can speak. Such bluntness on reacting to this question should not be understood as a disregard for the psychological hindrances of survivors in their processes of producing sense out of traumatic episodes. It also does not shy away from accepting that the act of speaking, particularly within the problematic debate of who is legitimate to speak in the name of the survivor's experience,

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<sup>48</sup> YŪ 2019: 34.

<sup>49</sup> AALGAARD 2019: 4.

is not conducted unconditionally. Nevertheless, I wish to expand its significance to channel Spivak's intention with her original question. First, the process of engaging with the disaster is already an act of speaking, as we must not be blinded by a bias towards completion and closure as the only acceptable outcomes of commitment. Representation, especially representations that can question official memories of the disaster, position the figures of survivor and victim in a politically engaging role that defeats other static interpretations like being just vessels of suffering or historically entrapped subjects. Second, as I have shown in these three examples, the survivor can also speak by having an author acting as proxy in a mechanic of affection. Instead of attempting to provide a so-called objective, universal rendition of the survivor's experience, their representation is an exercise of opening up the possibilities of interpretation and revealing the many themes outside of but still connected with the traumatic event for which they can become conduits of discussion. That is, even when there are psychological limits to the task of accounting for surviving a trauma, the cultural and collective process of articulating its memory acts as a vehicle for its definition. This fact acts as a reminder of the constructivist, narratological, and malleable nature of cultural memory. The constitution of traumatic episodes into identity discourses for individuals and whole communities is an ever-ongoing struggle. Last but not least, assuming an option where survivors cannot speak deprives them of their agency in a way that entraps its definition, fossilized in static, unidimensional interpretations that sacrifice their critical potential. Representing the survivor in literature is then an act of political involvement that provides us with a way to canvassing the limits and potentialities of current attitudes of social engagement.

I argue that the three axes that I have employed to reconstruct some of the main ideas of these representations can also be linked with overarching themes of contemporary social struggle that go beyond the representation of trauma or the demands more commonly associated with the impact of the 3.11 triple disaster. The question of articulating responsibility when it comes to describing the experiences and role of survivors and victims in the construction of cultural memories is useful when assessing how we understand the agency of social actors – either as individuals or as collectives – in their interaction with structures of power. Questions regarding corporeality can also have a significant position in discussing increasing interest over the redefinition of gender expectations and identities and a more open concern for racial oppressions within Japan. Last, the question of invisibility relates to discourses on tolerance and leniency. Invisibilizing survivors and victims can be seen as a way to belittle and even cover social protest. This has been a matter of concern for the Japanese state ahead of its Olympic bid (an issue addressed by Yū as an underlying theme of the story and thoroughly traced by Iwata-Weickgenannt)<sup>50</sup> and again once the country had the games commissioned for 2020

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<sup>50</sup> IWATA-WEICKGENANNT 2019.

(later postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 global pandemic). Opposition to this event has also been present in both traditional ways of protesting<sup>51</sup> and in alternative ones, like those of the group Hangorin no Kai 反五輪の会, which include pranks in public spaces and artistic performances.<sup>52</sup> The Japanese government has wielded the Olympic games as a tool to re-shape the narrative of the Fukushima tragedies, calling them ‘the Recovery Olympics’ (*fukko gorin* 復興五輪).<sup>53</sup> Keeping track of narratives of trauma in their relationship with power is then a matter of great pertinence and concern.

As time goes by, the memory of Fukushima will inevitably be framed as more distant. The modes of expression and representation that have emerged from its production, however, are leaving a mark that needs to be understood in its ongoing complexities. We must keep track of its impact as both witness of its time and agent of its change.

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<sup>51</sup> GANSEFORTH 2020.

<sup>52</sup> ANDREWS 2020.

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