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ARTICLE



## Disaster and Utopia: Looking Back at 3/11

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### ABSTRACT

This article takes the notion of the ‘disaster utopia’ as a starting point for reconsidering the impact of the Japanese triple disaster of 11 March 2011 (3/11). It has often been observed that disasters may lead to utopian longings for a better world, and that these may, in some cases, lead to long-term social and political change. Drawing particularly on the ideas of Charles Fritz and Rebecca Solnit, the article briefly surveys the history of ‘disaster utopianism’ in Japan before exploring the specific versions of the search for ‘world renewal’ that emerged from 3/11. I argue that the ideas put forward by Fritz and Solnit can help us to reassess some of the widely accepted images of the response to 3/11. The 2011 disaster generated visions of a new world which, although profoundly divergent in their social implications, shared a common vocabulary centred upon terms such as *saisei* (regeneration) and *kizuna* (bonds of community). Exploring trends in postwar Japan through the prism of the ‘disaster utopia’ can, I suggest, shed new light on the processes of political change that have affected Japan in the years since 3/11.

The connection between disaster and utopia has been observed in many times and places. Pioneer of disaster studies Charles Fritz, writing in the early 1960s, remarked that a catastrophic event

provides an unstructured social situation that enables persons and groups to perceive the possibility of introducing desired innovations into the social system ... People see the opportunity of realising certain wishes which remain latent and unrealisable under the old system ... They see the possibility of wiping out old inequities and injustices.<sup>1</sup>

Rebecca Solnit has developed this insight into a more complex image of the ‘disaster utopia’. In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell* – published in the year before northeastern Japan’s triple disaster of 11 March 2011 (3/11) – Solnit drew on stories from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1917 Halifax explosion and the 2005 destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina (amongst others) to argue that ‘disaster throws us into the temporary utopia of a transformed human nature and society, one that is bolder, freer, less attached and divided than in ordinary times, not blank, not tied down’.<sup>2</sup> This ‘temporary utopia’ may in turn give rise to more lasting transformation:

In the moment of disaster, the old order no longer exists and people improvise rescues, shelters and communities. Thereafter, a struggle takes place over whether the old order with all its shortcomings and injustices will be reimposed or a new one, perhaps more oppressive or perhaps more just and free, like the disaster utopia, will arise.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fritz, ‘Disaster’, 685.

<sup>2</sup>Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell*, 20.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.



**Figure 1.** Protestors in central Tokyo hold placards proclaiming the ‘Hydrangea Revolution’, June 2012 (photograph by author).



**Figure 2.** The festival-like atmosphere at ‘Hydrangea Revolution’ protests in Tokyo, June 2012 (photograph by the author).

Others too have made a connection between disaster and renewal. Jacky Bowring, for example, reminds us that the devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami created the canvas for the Marques de Pombal's vision of a planned Portuguese capital embodying the aspirations of the Enlightenment. She goes on to explore the utopian architectural and urban design visions which have arisen from the rubble of the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes.<sup>4</sup> As John Holloway puts it, disasters 'open a window onto the possibility of another world and lay bare the miseries of the existing one'.<sup>5</sup>

In the pages that follow, I bring these broad reflections on the relationship between disaster and utopia into conversation with the specific story of Japan's experiences during and since the 3/11 triple disaster. General explorations of the connection between disaster and utopia can, I think, shed light on neglected facets of the Japanese experience, while the history of 3/11 prompts a re-examination of some of the ideas developed by writers like Fritz and Solnit. After looking more closely at the notion of 'utopia' itself, and briefly reviewing the history of 'disaster utopias' in Japan, I shall go on to consider the specific forms of utopian thought that emerged from 3/11, and examine how they have affected Japanese society in the years since the disaster.

## Understanding Utopias

It is important to reflect on the nature of utopianism itself, because the word is used in such diverse contexts, and sometimes in such vague terms, that it can readily generate confusion. In an attempt to draw some clarity out of this confusion, Ruth Levitas has examined the *form, function* and *content* of various utopian visions, and proposed this definition:

Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being. This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation. It allows for this desire to be realistic or unrealistic. It allows for the form, function and content to change over time.<sup>6</sup>

Here I want to adapt Levitas' three-dimensional approach to utopian thought and practice so as to pose some rather more specific questions about utopias in post-disaster Japan. I begin (like Levitas) with 'form', but focus particularly on the distinction between *conceptual*, *practical*, and *enacted* utopias. *Conceptual* utopias are those that (like Thomas More's classic) are created in the mind or on paper, as a thought experiment, with no serious intention to put them into practice. *Practical* utopias, on the other hand, are designed to be blueprints for actual social change (even though they may never in fact leave the drawing board); and a subset of these are *enacted* utopias, which some people attempt to create in the real world. A good example of an enacted utopia is the 'New Village' (*atarashiki mura*), an experiment in communal rural living established in 1918 by Mushanokōji Saneatsu, which still (on a very small scale) survives today.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, utopias can be subdivided, in spatial terms, into visions for a new *world*; or for a new *nation* or community of nations; or as strictly *local* projects to transform the life of a particular community, like the small-scale 'everyday utopias' explored by

<sup>4</sup>Bowring, 'Revisiting Utopia'.

<sup>5</sup>Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 32.

<sup>6</sup>Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 8.

<sup>7</sup>See Ōtsuyama, *Mushanokōji Saneatsu kenkyū*; Yiu, 'Atarashikimura'.

Davina Cooper.<sup>8</sup> Spatial scale is particularly important in the case of practical or enacted utopias, because it influences the way in which individual members of society relate to the utopian vision. It is much easier to gain willing consent to a utopian project when that project is small and localised than when it is enacted on a national stage; the larger the scale, the more the question of consent versus coercion comes to the fore. Thirdly, a utopia may either be a *total, closed vision* – a complete blueprint for the perfect society, of which no revision is acceptable – or it may be *open-ended and emergent*, allowing space for experimentation and change. Such open-ended utopian practices are what Lewis Mumford envisioned when he wrote of ‘a concrete eutopia which shall arise out of the real facts of the everyday environment and, at the same time, turn upon them and mould them creatively a little nearer the heart’s desire’.<sup>9</sup>

The differences between these dimensions of utopianism are not absolute. They may overlap, merge into one another and change over time; but they can, I think, provide a way to give shape to the quest for utopian responses to the Tōhoku disaster. In discussing these responses, it is also important to remember the very unusual circumstances of 3/11 as a disaster. The fact that 3/11 was at once a natural and human-made disaster is not unusual. Almost all so-called ‘natural disasters’ have human-made elements. But disasters like the San Francisco earthquake can be seen as one-off extreme events which, though enormously destructive, ended quickly, allowing recovery and rebuilding to begin. Perhaps the most important feature of 11 March 2011 is that it was a day that never ended. The disaster still continues, in the sense that the nuclear meltdown has not been brought under control, and will not be under control for decades to come. It was also a multi-layered catastrophe (unlike, for example, the Chernobyl disaster). In the case of 3/11, the overlapping impacts of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown combined to create both multitudinous challenges to those who sought to respond to the disaster and multiple angles from which utopian responses could emerge.

## Renewing the World

The year 2011, of course, was not the first occasion in Japanese history when disasters gave rise to utopian visions. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Japan experienced severe famines, which affected the Tōhoku (northeastern) region particularly badly. People were driven to eating grass and tree-bark, and tens of thousands died. The famines were partly a result of underlying changes in the Japanese economy and partly precipitated by natural phenomena. Initially, a variety of community mechanisms were used to cope with disaster. But in the longer term the social problems revealed by floods and famines, combined with an uneasy awareness of living in a rapidly changing world, provoked peasant uprisings across large parts of Japan. In 1866, for example, some 170,000 peasants in the Fukushima area participated in a rebellion in which the houses of officials, wealthy silk merchants, sake brewers and others were attacked and sacked. This was just one of a series of ‘world renewal’ (*yonaoshi*) rebellions which broke out across Japan in the 1860s. In many cases, the goals of these violent protests were simple and immediate: reducing the heavy burden of rice taxes imposed upon peasants, or curbing the monopolistic powers of merchants. But in some cases

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<sup>8</sup>Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*.

<sup>9</sup>Mumford, *Story of Utopias*, 116.

the uprisings offered glimpses of more radically different visions of the world. The peasant rebels in Fukushima drew up petitions on which the names of the signatories were written in a circle: a striking visual representation of solidarity and equality, as well as an effective way of preventing any individual from being singled out as the ‘ringleader’.<sup>10</sup>

The ‘world renewal’ rebellions of the 1860s sometimes flowed into spontaneous explosions of quasi-millennial religious fervour. Often responding to rumours of miraculous showers of amulets which were said to have fallen from heaven, masses of people would gather in streets, dancing, singing and reciting the mantra *eejanaika* or *yoijanaika* (‘isn’t it great?’) in an ecstatic abandonment of conventional social restraints. There are fascinating parallels between these Japanese phenomena and events in nineteenth century China and Korea, where a decaying social order and the intrusions of imperialism sparked the Taiping Rebellion of 1850 to 1864 and the Donghak Revolution of 1894, both of which offered millennial visions of an impending heaven on earth.<sup>11</sup>

Japan’s history contains many moments, such as the *yonaoshi* and *eejanaika* movements, where natural or human-made disasters have given birth to utopian visions. A well-known example from the early twentieth century is the story of politician and philosopher Tanaka Shōzō (1841–1913), whose encounter with the massive environmental disaster caused by the Ashio copper mine in Tochigi Prefecture prompted him to abandon his seat in parliament and become a grassroots activist and social visionary. After moving to Yanaka village to join the displaced victims of the Ashio pollution disaster in 1904, Tanaka channelled his anger at the sufferings of the victims into a vision of a world transformed, where social justice would prevail over greed and materialism, and where violence and war would give way to enduring peace.<sup>12</sup>

Most famously, the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 created a landscape of devastation on which modernisers like Gotō Shinpei (1857–1929) dreamed of creating a Tokyo reborn: a perfect planned capital to match Haussmann’s Paris. Though Gotō seized on the disaster as a golden ‘opportunity of reviving the country’, ultimately his plans proved overambitious and unrealistic.<sup>13</sup> As Charles Schencking argues, this most destructive of all Japan’s modern natural disasters created social and political division as much as the social solidarity depicted by Fritz and Solnit:

Rather than unite Japan’s polity in a ‘postdisaster utopia’, as some scholars claim has emerged following other natural disasters, in Tokyo, reconstruction plans, their budgets, and the government’s final bill exacerbated political tensions.<sup>14</sup>

The disaster did, though, encourage a new wave of (often nationalistic) campaigns for ‘spiritual renewal’ to overcome the perceived moral failings evident in the aftermath of the earthquake. As Gennifer Weisenfeld suggests, media images of the Great Kantō Earthquake (rather like those of Hurricane Katrina over 80 years later) tended to focus on the panic, chaos and confusion that followed: ‘The Great Chaos of Tokyo’, proclaimed the headline on a special earthquake edition of the *Osaka Asahi shimbun*.<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Haga, *Yonaoshi no shisō*; Sasaki, *Yonaoshi*; Suda, *Bakumatsu no yonaoshi*.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*; Shin and Lee, *A Short History*; Rhee, *Asian Millenarianism*.

<sup>12</sup>Stolz, *Bad Water*, 85–116.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster*, 183; see also Schencking, *Great Kanto Earthquake*, Chapter Five.

<sup>14</sup>Schencking, *Great Kanto Earthquake*, 222.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster*, 40.

sense of chaos was, of course, heightened by reports that seeped out of mob violence – spurred by unfounded rumours of disorder and often encouraged by police – which led to the killing of thousands of Koreans as well as numerous Chinese and Okinawans in the immediate aftermath of the quake.<sup>16</sup> The longer-term public reaction often took the form of calls for unity and moral reform. The wider sense of national emergency that emerged from this reaction has led some observers to see the disaster as a key turning point in Japan's history, away from democratisation and towards repression and militarisation.<sup>17</sup> Expressing sentiments that were to be echoed in the wake of 3/11, the term *kyōkoku itchi* – ‘national solidarity’ – became one of the mantras of post-Kantō Earthquake Japan.<sup>18</sup>

Radically divergent visions of ‘post-disaster utopia’ also emerged in the wake of the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. On the one hand, this disaster is widely seen as marking the birth of a new form of Japanese civil society, based on local non-governmental action and volunteering.<sup>19</sup> On the other, it was also one factor behind new religion Aum Shinrikyō's violent attempt to create its own version of ‘heaven on earth’.<sup>20</sup>

## Disaster Utopias from San Francisco 1906 to Northeastern Japan 2011

In stark contrast to media representations of the 1923 earthquake, the most enduring narratives of 3/11 are stories of the calm and stoic response of those most directly affected by the earthquake and tsunami. Countless powerful accounts from across the Tōhoku region testify to the self-restraint and generosity with which ordinary citizens endured the aftermath of the disaster. In popular media accounts, and in some scholarly studies too, this response was contrasted with the chaos and mayhem which is believed to be the normal human response to disaster elsewhere. Many observers were quick to conclude that the distinctive Japanese response to the horrors of 3/11 was a reflection of deeper national cultural traits of cooperation, group solidarity and respect for social order.

Four days after the disaster, for example, the US ABC news channel reported (in the words of their headline) that ‘Japanese, Waiting in Line for Hours, Follow Social Order after Quake’. The report went on to explain that ‘family ties, social hierarchies and a collective spirit are important to the Japanese, unlike the culture of individualism that predominates in the United States’.<sup>21</sup> A similar report by CNN portrayed the response to disaster as clear evidence that ‘Japan's society has characteristics that simply don't exist in any other large country’:

[U]nlike other disasters where the world has observed looting, rioting and public outbursts of sorrow and rage, it [3/11] has seen a country quietly mourning, its people standing patiently for hours in orderly lines for a few bottles of water.<sup>22</sup>

As Richard Samuels observes, following 3/11

<sup>16</sup>Yamagishi, *Kantō daishinsai to Chōsenjin gyakusatsu*; Niki, *Kantō daishinsai Chūgokujin daigyakusatsu*.

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Orihara and Clancey, ‘The Nature of Emergency’.

<sup>18</sup>See Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster*, 183.

<sup>19</sup>For example, Imada, ‘The Voluntary Response to the Hanshin Awaji Earthquake’.

<sup>20</sup>Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save it*, 131–33.

<sup>21</sup>James and Goldman, ‘Japanese, Waiting in Line’.

<sup>22</sup>Lah, ‘Amid Disaster’.

the people of Tohoku were repeatedly (and by all accounts deservedly) applauded for their selflessness and resolve. They were widely admired – almost to the point of essentialist caricature – for their patient and persevering nature (*gaman zuyoi*) and for their acceptance of what had befallen them . . . On this account, the people of Tohoku embodied what it meant to be Japanese – they formed a community (*komyunitei*) connected (*tsunagu*) by bonds (*kizuna*) and human contact (*fureai*) that sustains solidarity (*renkei*) through common struggle (*Ganbarō Nippon!*).<sup>23</sup>

The fortitude and kindness in the face of disaster shown by many survivors and by those from other parts of Japan who contributed to the rescue and recovery efforts were indeed remarkable. But when we place these stories in the context of the literature on disaster and utopia, ethno-cultural explanations of the reasons for that response are thrown into doubt. Both Rebecca Solnit's book and the earlier writings of Charles Fritz are powerful critiques of the popular belief that panic, chaos and mass violence are the natural reaction of people exposed to disasters. Drawing on detailed studies of the immediate responses to tornados and other disasters in the US during the 1950s, Fritz emphasises that the most widespread behaviour was not panic, looting or general mayhem, but rather efforts to 'assist relatives, neighbours and immediate associates'. He particularly stresses the importance of 'emergent, small-group organisations' which appear spontaneously as people work together to tackle the immediate tasks of survival.<sup>24</sup>

Even in the case of Hurricane Katrina, widely seen as a classic example of disaster followed by crime and chaos, Solnit argues that many of the images of disorder and violence were manufactured by the media, and (in an analysis that evokes memories of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake) that the worst instances of post-disaster violence were inflicted by white vigilantes panicked into action by these rumours.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Solnit quotes philosopher of religion William James, who lived through the event, and who observed that the most striking features of the human response to the disaster were the 'rapidity of the improvisation of order out of chaos' and the 'universal equanimity': 'the discipline and order were practically perfect', wrote James, in words that might be taken straight from a media report on 3/11 and its aftermath.<sup>26</sup>

It is this spontaneous sense of community and solidarity in the face of catastrophe that Solnit refers to when she speaks of 'disaster utopias'. A catastrophe like the San Francisco earthquake or the Japanese triple disaster of 2011 sweeps away lives, homes, workplaces, memories and the physical infrastructure of whole communities. On the one hand, it overturns the social hierarchies that divide people from one another; it makes people confront profound issues of life and death which are often overshadowed in daily life by much more mundane and trivial concerns; and it forces people to create their own patterns of order and ethics in the wastelands left where formal structures have been stripped away. Pre-existing social and political systems have an influence on the way people behave in this void, but (drawing on the ideas of Kropotkin and others) Solnit argues that an even more powerful influence is the innate human impulse to cooperate in the interests of survival.<sup>27</sup> On the other

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<sup>23</sup>Samuels, 3.11, 39.

<sup>24</sup>Fritz, 'Disaster', 672–75.

<sup>25</sup>Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell*, 245–59.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell*, 54–55.

<sup>27</sup>Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell*, 85–95.



hand, as Oliver-Smith and Hoffman observe, disasters may lay bare underlying social inequities, fuelling demands for a transformation of the existing order:

Relationships and allegiances change. New groups and affiliations emerge. Participants frequently seize disasters as opportunities to alter leadership and to disassemble or reassemble power arrangements. Hegemony enters. Not uncommonly, disasters become contexts for the creation of political solidarity, activism and new agendas.<sup>28</sup>

Although even Japan in 2011 experienced some cases of theft and other disorder following the disaster, the immediate response to the Fukushima disaster exemplifies just such a reaction to a catastrophe. But the reflections of Fritz and Solnit suggest further questions: how and when do temporary disaster utopias become a seedbed for more enduring utopian ideas and action? What visions of utopia grew from the wastelands of post-tsunami, post nuclear disaster Tōhoku?

### Visions of Japan Reborn: 1 – The Hydrangea Revolution

One unmistakable response to the events of 11 March 2011, and to the ongoing disaster, has been a profound longing for a ‘new Japan’, or perhaps more precisely for the ‘regeneration of Japan’ (*Nihon saisei*). This too appears to echo a widespread response to disaster. When people have suffered greatly through some unexpected event, there is a natural human urge to make sense of and redeem that suffering by turning disaster into the starting point for a new and better world. Richard Samuels has observed, for example, how commentators like philosopher Umehara Takeshi saw 3/11 as an occasion for Japan to fundamentally rethink and reverse its processes of modernisation and ‘return to coexistence with nature’.<sup>29</sup> The term ‘regeneration’ neatly captures both a sense of transformation and of the restoration of a lost self, implicit in the ideas of people like Umehara.

This longing for national regeneration can be illustrated by two contrasting ‘national utopias’ – that is, two visions of a ‘new Japan’ – which emerged and flourished in the couple of years following 3/11. The visions, although sketched in various written texts, were never spelled out in the intricate detail that can be found in classic utopian writings like the work of More, Tommaso or William Morris. They were more vaguely expressed longings for a new national society, but both also inspired political action, though in radically divergent ways. They were, in other words, practical utopias which were partially enacted (though with only limited success) on a national scale.

The first ‘new Japan’ to attract widespread attention was the vision of a Hydrangea Revolution (*ajisai kakumei*), a term coined at the height of the 2012 anti-nuclear demonstrations triggered by the Fukushima disaster.<sup>30</sup> Although it may be said to have achieved rather little in practical terms, I think it is important to look back at the concept of the Hydrangea Revolution to see what vision of a ‘new Japan’ it embodied, and to consider what its rise and disappearance meant in historical terms.

Just a month after the tsunami and nuclear meltdowns, some 15,000 people gathered in the Kōenji district of Tokyo to demand an end to Japan’s nuclear power program, and in the 18 months that followed, the country experienced an expanding wave of

<sup>28</sup>Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, ‘Anthropology and the Angry Earth’, 8.

<sup>29</sup>Samuels, 3.11, 32.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, 27 and 53.

demonstrations, which peaked in mid-2012 with gatherings outside the national Diet and the Prime Minister's Residence attracting (according to some estimates) as many as 200,000 participants.<sup>31</sup> On the face of it, these events were simply single-issue protests, condemning government plans to reopen particular nuclear power stations, or demanding a complete abandonment of the nuclear program. But the term Hydrangea Revolution suggested something more profound: a vision of the protest movement as the start of sweeping social and political transformation, in which ordinary people from many backgrounds, tired of the failings of government and business alike, would shape a new, more humane, caring and sustainable society. In this sense, it was initially and primarily a response to the nuclear disaster, but as it developed became a distinctive vision of 'regeneration' as a response to the disaster as a whole, and also to the long-term social and economic problems confronting Japanese society.

The expression 'Hydrangea Revolution' was, of course, a reference to the 'Jasmine Revolution' in Tunisia, which had broken out in December 2010, and which marked the start of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. The same term had been taken up in February 2011 by pro-democracy demonstrators who gathered in various cities around China to protest against corruption and political repression. 'Hydrangea' referred to the fact that the mass Japanese demonstrations against nuclear power which followed 3/11 reached their height in the summer of 2012 – the hydrangea season in Japan (see Figure 1). During the demonstrations that summer, many protestors arrived carrying bunches or images of the popular blue flowers.<sup>32</sup> Like the Jasmine Revolution, the anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan were relatively spontaneous and attracted people from a wide range of walks of life, and their scale and energy caught outside observers by surprise. Even those who had little political sympathy with their actions acknowledged that many of the protestors were 'ordinary citizens [*ippan shimin*] – mothers holding the hands of their children, students, businessmen etc'.<sup>33</sup>

Historian Oguma Eiji, an enthusiastic participant in and commentator on the post 3/11 demonstrations, saw events in Japan as part of a global moment of historical transformation, with the Arab Spring, the US Occupy Wall Street movement, and the Japanese anti-nuclear protests representing three facets of a single worldwide phenomenon. For Oguma, a key feature of this transformation was its ability to engage sections of the population who had until now been estranged from politics and activism.<sup>34</sup> Philosopher Karatani Kōjin, another participant-observer in the demonstrations, made a similar point. The real meaning of the actions, he argued, lay more in the act of protest itself than in the achievement of a particular goal. Anti-nuclear protest was not the means to an end, but an end in itself. Questioned about the capacity of the demonstrations to change Japanese society, Karatani responded: 'Society can certainly be changed by the demonstrations. The reason why is this: through the demos, *Japanese society is being transformed into a society in which people demonstrate*'.<sup>35</sup> This was, then, a national utopia with international aspirations.

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<sup>31</sup>Ogawa, 'Civil Society', 60.

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, 'Hissen'; Shioda, 'Tōfū karai: Ajsai Kakumei'.

<sup>33</sup>Takenaka, 'Han-genpatsu demo ni sankā'.

<sup>34</sup>Oguma, 'Rekishi no henka no genba'.

<sup>35</sup>Karatani, 'Demo de shakai ga kawaru', 64.

Commentators remarked on the festival-like atmosphere of the protests, which were often accompanied by music, dance and other performances, and whose creative energies mobilised a new generation of young people (see Figure 2). Some indeed drew parallels between this atmosphere and the carnivalesque mood of the late nineteenth century 'world renewal' movements.<sup>36</sup> The demonstrations themselves, it seemed, were, for a moment at least, creating the longed-for new Japan: a place of joy and conviviality, in which the dividing lines of generation, class and gender would dissolve in the creative pursuit of a common purpose.

As in the case of simultaneous upsurges of activism in other parts of the world, Japan's short-lived Hydrangea Revolution attracted large numbers of people precisely because it was unstructured and unorganised, and because its long-term vision was relatively inchoate. Many of those who took part certainly shared a profound disillusionment with Japan's political and industrial establishment, and a deep concern about the environmental damage wrought by ever-expanding consumerist capitalism. But the shared hope that disaster might transform Japan into a better, more environmentally and socially sustainable place was never translated into a practical program for action, and if it had been, this in itself would surely have split the demo participants apart, for (despite their shared general aspirations) their political and social philosophies were very diverse.

While the Jasmine Revolution and the Arab Spring, as they ran up against the harsh realities of national and international politics, turned into something entirely different, the Hydrangea Revolution, when it encountered similar harsh realities, quickly wilted. This is not to say that it was meaningless. I shall return in a moment to some of its legacies. But let us turn first to a very different vision of a new Japan which also grew from the ruins of the disaster.

## Visions of Japan Reborn: 2 – Kizuna and the Beautiful Country

Less than half a year after the mass anti-nuclear demonstrations gathered outside the Prime Minister's Residence, the staunchly pro-nuclear, pro-development Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) under the leadership of the hawkish Abe Shinzō was swept back to power with a huge majority. The reasons for this political phenomenon were complex, but to understand the events of late 2012, I think it is important to recognise how deeply elements in Abe's rhetoric appealed to a 'national utopian' longing for a new Japan which overlapped with longings expressed in the rapidly fading Hydrangea Revolution.

One way of exploring this overlap is to focus on the term *kizuna*, which became a crucial mantra of the responses to disaster. Literally referring to a yoke which links oxen together, *kizuna*, when applied to social relationships, implies the bonds that are created by shared experience and common destiny. It was a word frequently used in the aftermath of the Kobe Earthquake of 1995, and in 2011 became perhaps the word most widely used to describe the 'disaster utopia' that followed 3/11. At the end of each year, the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation (Nihon Kanji Nōryoku Kentei Kyōkai, formerly part of the Ministry of Education, but now a public corporation) runs a nationwide poll in which participants are asked to select a single Chinese

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<sup>36</sup>For example, Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, 164.

character to represent the year that has passed. At the end of 2011 the character chosen by a large majority was 絆 *kizuna*, a choice which attracted huge media interest and public enthusiasm.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, *kizuna* was both an expression of pride in all that was good about the cooperative human response to the disaster, and an expression of lack and longing: a desire to recover a lost community, destroyed both by the processes of modernity and, more immediately, by the tsunami and the disastrous aftermath of the nuclear meltdown.

But *kizuna* also had an interesting political pedigree which has not been widely discussed. The term has, of course, appeared in a wide variety of political contexts, but it attained particular political salience in 2006, in the lead-up to Abe Shinzō's first prime ministership. In the second half of 2006, a contest developed between Abe and two other leading LDP politicians, Asō Tarō and Tanigaki Sadakazu, for leadership of the party, in anticipation of the resignation of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō. During this contest, it was Abe's competitor, the relatively 'small "I" liberal' Tanigaki, who chose *kizuna* as his trademark slogan. His catchphrase during his unsuccessful campaign for the party leadership was 'building the three bonds [*kizuna*] of household, local society and national citizens'.<sup>38</sup> The economic liberalisation pursued by the LDP, Tanigaki argued, needed to be founded upon a society in which '*kizuna* are clearly visible'.<sup>39</sup> In saying this, he was referring particularly to the need to address the widening gaps which had emerged between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' (in Japanese, *kachigumi* and *makegumi*) under Koizumi's neo-liberal economic restructuring. To the delight of the media, Tanigaki even visited a kindergarten where one of the infants was called Kizuna (a relatively unusual given name), allowing him to heap praise on little Kizuna-chan's parents for their wise choice of name.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, Abe too was integrating the notion of *kizuna* into his vision for the future of Japan. In the first part of 2006 Abe played the key role in a specially created government Commission on the Renewal of the Bonds of Family and Local Community (Kazoku, Chiiki no Kizuna Saisei Seimukan Kaigi), and in June of the same year he published an unofficial 'manifesto' for his bid for the prime ministership in the form of a book entitled *Utsukushii kuni e*.<sup>41</sup> In this, Abe's key message was the need to recover the traditional values which had been lost or neglected in the course of Japan's postwar occupation, democratisation and pursuit of material prosperity. Among the most important of these values were 'the bonds (*kizuna*) of family, love for the region where one was born and brought up, and love of the nation'.<sup>42</sup> Addressing the LDP's annual conference as leader for the first time in January 2007, Prime Minister Abe embedded this vision in the core of the party's goals, which he defined as being 'the creation of a beautiful country' (*utsukushii kuni-zukuri*) through 'the bonds (*kizuna*) of tradition, culture, family and region'.<sup>43</sup>

Abe's use of the term was subtly but significantly different from Tanigaki's. Rather than being an expression of the need to address widening economic and social

<sup>37</sup>'Kotoshi no kanji'; "'Kizuna": Kuchi de tonaete owaraseruna'.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, "'06 gekiryū seikyoku'.

<sup>39</sup>Sakai, 'Kasoku – '06 sōsaisen'.

<sup>40</sup>'Sekai danwashitsu: Kizuna chan ni nikkori'.

<sup>41</sup>Coleman, *Building Parents of the Next Generation*, 285; Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*.

<sup>42</sup>Abe, *Utsukushii kuni e*, 29.

<sup>43</sup>'Jimintō taikai: Shushō "datsu-Koizumi" senmei ni'.

divisions, Abe's deployment of *kizuna* was part of a rhetoric of nostalgia for a vanished past. Yet at the same time, and somewhat ironically, Abe's other, most frequent and emphatic use of the word *kizuna* was in the context of Japan's alliance with the United States, and not in the context of Japanese domestic society at all. This usage re-emerged loudly and clearly around the time of the December 2012 election which returned Abe to power. The day before assuming office, for example, Abe announced that 'we will resume an assertive foreign policy. Strengthening the bonds (*kizuna*) of the Japan-US alliance is the first step to rebuilding Japan's diplomacy and security'.<sup>44</sup> A week later, in one of his first speeches of the New Year, he proclaimed that 'the Japan-US alliance must be given first priority. I want to hold summit meetings at home and abroad to show that the strong bonds (*kizuna*) of the alliance have been restored'.<sup>45</sup> The same language was also repeatedly deployed in the context of the US-backed free trade proposal for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), where Abe claimed that the LDP, unlike their political opponents, possessed the skills to negotiate in ways that would 'firmly restore the bonds (*kizuna*) of the [Japan-US] alliance'.<sup>46</sup> These statements resonated with the sense of almost personal bonds of friendship with the US established through 'Operation Tomodachi' (*Tomodachi Sakusen*), the assistance given to Japan by the US military in the immediate wake of the 3/11 disaster.

The Abe vision of 'Beautiful Japan' thus tapped into the experience of the social bonds formed in the 3/11 'disaster utopia', and into the enduring utopian longings for a return to a simpler, cohesive, caring society that (in the imaginings of many) had existed before Japan's wartime defeat, postwar occupation and hyper-modernisation. But at the same time, Abe's rhetoric rather skilfully linked the same sentiments of personal warmth and caring to the radically different context of the US-Japan military alliance. *Kizuna* became the bond that connected the two seemingly irreconcilable sides to Abe's ideology: nostalgic nationalism and pro-Americanism. While the utopianism of the Hydrangea Revolution sprang from immediate concerns about the dangers of nuclear power following the Fukushima meltdown, Abe's rhetoric of rebirth and *kizuna* blurred the distinctions between the multiple dimensions of 3/11, and so in a sense also served to obscure the specific issue of radiation contamination by melding the response to the Fukushima disaster into a generalised vision of a new and beautiful Japan. While the Hydrangea Revolution linked national utopianism to global social movements, Abe's 'beautiful country' was firmly focused on the Japanese nation and its links to its major ally, the US.

The factors behind the LDP's sweeping 2012 election victory were multifaceted, and included the incompetence of the Democratic Party (DPJ) government in dealing with aspects of the 3/11 disaster, and the vacillation of Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's DPJ administration on the issue of nuclear power. It is also important to note that Japan's electoral system allowed the LDP to be swept back to power with a large majority of lower house seats on the back of a quite modest share of the popular vote. (With turnout falling below 60%, only 28% of eligible voters actually voted for the LDP.) But media reports indicate that Abe's electoral success, and his ability to maintain relatively

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<sup>44</sup>Kanō, 'Dai-2ji Abe naikaku'.

<sup>45</sup>Shushō, *Minsu no yosan hōshin o ōhaba tenkan*'.

<sup>46</sup>Abe, *Jimin sōsai: TPP maemuki*'.

high approval ratings, can also plausibly be linked to the way in which his political rhetoric resonated with post 3/11 utopian longings. In the run-up to the 2012 election prominent businessman Fukuchi Shigeo highlighted the appeal of notions of *kizuna* and of 'love of family, local region and nation' as a major source of support for Abe, and comments from voters collected by the media often echoed the same message.<sup>47</sup>

But, unlike the anti-nuclear demonstrations, which were almost entirely devoid of formal political structure, Abe's election campaign was backed by an enormously powerful and entrenched political machine, and was thus able to convert the inchoate longings for national regeneration and the restoration of social bonds into a source of practical political power. It remains to be seen what the political regime which emerged from that longing for regeneration will in fact deliver in the longer run. So far, though, the signs are that the rhetoric of social bonds and national renewal have been accompanied by a reality of ever growing social divisions, with the number of Japanese households living on welfare reaching a record high of 1.6 million at the start of 2015, while the total assets of the wealthiest households rose sharply.<sup>48</sup>

### Everyday Utopias in Post-3/11 Japan

It would be too simple to conclude, though, that the utopian longings for a new society which emerged from 3/11 have simply been captured by the political establishment. The informal, carnivalesque style of the Hydrangea Revolution demonstrations of 2012 was continued, on a smaller scale but to considerable effect, by groups like SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy), created in May 2015 to oppose the Abe government's plans for constitutional change and other aspects of the LDP regime's neo-conservative politics; though this too proved relatively short-lived.<sup>49</sup> After a number of high-profile actions nationwide, the group was disbanded on 15 August 2016, following general elections which gave the Abe government the majority they needed in the Upper House to press ahead with plans for constitutional revision.<sup>50</sup>

Other actions more directly connected to 3/11 also suggest new ways of challenging conventional conceptions of social order. These have generally involved small-scale steps to enact utopian visions, at a grassroots level or through the creation of networks linking several localities. They are, in other words, local, enacted and open-ended utopias. Some of these emerge directly from the nuclear disaster. On 29 October 2015, for example, around 140 people gathered in Tokyo to establish a group called the 'Hinan no Kenri' o Motomeru Zenkoku Hinansha no Kai (National Association of Refugees to Demand the 'Right to Refuge').<sup>51</sup> This association represents just some of the over 160,000 people still believed to be living displaced as a result of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.<sup>52</sup> It demands recognition for the rights of those from areas affected by radiation (whether or not these have officially been declared evacuation zones) to make their own choices whether to stay or to leave. As Association representative Uno Saeko

<sup>47</sup>See, for example, 'Dokusha sabisu shitsu kara – Kizuna'.

<sup>48</sup>Nakata, 'Under "Abenomics"'.  


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<sup>49</sup>Mark, *The Abe Restoration*, 105; see also the SEALDs website: <http://sealdseng.strikingly.com/>

<sup>50</sup>Osaki, 'SEALDs Leaves Door Open'.

<sup>51</sup>Honda, 'Jūtaku e no fuan setsusetsu'.

<sup>52</sup>'Hinansha 16-mannin: Higashi Nihon daishinsai'.

puts it, there is a need to assert the ‘important right actually to make an autonomous choice between taking refuge or continuing to live there’.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, what looks at first like a simple demand for compensation for victims turns out to embody a much more challenging ‘drive towards social self-determination’: a questioning of the competence of the state to make key decisions about the safety of its citizens.<sup>54</sup>

For many of those most affected by the 3/11 nuclear disaster, the drive towards self-determination has been not so much a political choice as a necessity forced upon them by the failure of the authorities to address their needs. As a result, new grassroots self-help groups have appeared in many of the places across the country to which refugees from the 3/11 disaster were dispersed. To give just one of many examples, in April 2011 a gathering held in Sapporo to welcome ‘disaster refugees’ who had relocated to Hokkaido became the starting point for a refugee self-help group which took the name Michinoku Kai (after Michinoku no Kuni, the old name for the region which covers most of the places worst affected by the disaster). By February 2014, the group had some 1600 members, of whom about 10% had been forced to relocate from the exclusion zone around the Fukushima nuclear plant, while 90% were ‘voluntary refugees’ from surrounding parts of the region.<sup>55</sup>

The group offers networking, advice to newcomers and regular gatherings where disaster refugees can meet and share experiences and ideas. It also organises special events for children and publishes both a newsletter and a series of collections of testimony from members. Though it does not engage in anti-nuclear activism itself, the Michinoku Kai also provides a channel putting members in touch (for example) with others who are engaged in class actions against the government or TEPCO (the operator of the Fukushima nuclear power plant), as well as assisting them to obtain the limited official assistance to which they are entitled.<sup>56</sup> Its membership rose to over 1700 in early 2015, before falling to 1050 by March 2016,<sup>57</sup> and indeed, the group is not designed to last: its organisers’ hope is that the very reasons for its existence will disappear, as its members put down roots in their new homes, or as reconstruction of tsunami-affected areas and falling levels of radiation from the nuclear disaster make it possible for those who wish to return to their old homes to do so.<sup>58</sup> Yet, even as some disaster refugees return, others still continue, more than six years after the event, to leave the areas affected by the nuclear disaster in search of safer places to live.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the Michinoku Kai’s quiet, community-based activities have become a basis for a wider search for renewal and social change. In the words of one core member,

I feel that those of us who survived [the disaster] have acquired a duty to ‘keep on thinking’ about how we are going to keep on living ... autonomy does not mean living on your own, but developing the strength to live together, in the midst of connectedness to the people around us.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>‘Genpatsu hinansha ga zenkoku soshiki setsuritsu’.

<sup>54</sup>Holloway, *Change the World*, 217.

<sup>55</sup>Honma, ‘Owari ni’.

<sup>56</sup>Author’s interview with staff of Michinoku Kai, Sapporo, 6 September 2016.

<sup>57</sup>Honma, ‘Owari ni’.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Author’s interview with staff of Michinoku Kai, Sapporo, 6 September 2016.

<sup>60</sup>Honma, ‘Owari ni’.

Or, in the words of one of the Michinoku Kai's teenage members (which oddly echo the early twentieth century sentiments of Tanaka Shōzō mentioned earlier):

Public memory doesn't last long. Events are forgotten after a decade, so I think it won't be long before 3/11 is forgotten ... In order to ensure that we don't have to climb the same hill twice, it's important, as far as possible, to increase the number of people who look back [at the path we have trodden]. For this reason, I want to say: do not make Japan into Tokyo. In Japan, everything is standardized to the norms of Tokyo ... Because the population gravitates to Tokyo, wealth accumulates there too, so people who look for wealth gather in Tokyo. Rather than working in Tokyo even though it's depressing, I believe it's better to take care of the woods and forests of the countryside. But I think the reason why they gather in Tokyo is because of the impoverishment of minds that can only find pleasure amongst the artificial buildings and appliances of the metropolis.<sup>61</sup>

As these examples suggest, much of the energy of the post-disaster quest for regeneration and new forms of community has been channelled into 'everyday utopias', which focus on the re-creation of life at the local level. Small-scale experiments in alternative community building can be found, not only in regions which directly experienced the events of 3/11, but in many places across the country. One example can be seen in the growth of Japan's Transition Town movement, which expanded greatly following 3/11. The Transition Town concept, launched in the towns of Totnes, England, and Kinsale, Ireland in 2006, aims to engage communities in the fundamental reshaping of their social and physical ecologies. The objective is to reduce the community's environmental footprint and increase self-sufficiency and resilience, thus both preparing for an age of global warming and resource exhaustion and slowing its onset.<sup>62</sup>

The movement spread to Japan in 2008, with the establishment of transition town communities in Fujino, Hayama and Koganei, and by July 2010 the number had grown to 15.<sup>63</sup> The events of 3/11 marked the start of a further phase of rapid growth of the Japanese movement. By September 2012 there were 32 active Transition Towns in various parts of the country, and by the beginning of 2017 there were 46. Though some of these were based on already existing ecological or alternative currency movements, many were founded in the wake of the disaster. Seventeen new Transition Towns were created between March 2011 and the end of 2013, while communities already established before 3/11 also embarked on new projects in response to the nuclear meltdown. Fujino Transition Town, for example, responded by creating 'Fujino Power' (Fujino Denryoku), a venture which helps local residents to shift from purchasing electrical power from the grid to using their own sustainable sources of energy.<sup>64</sup>

Fujino Power is in turn part of an expanding network of 'Citizens' Cooperative Power Stations' (*shimin kyōdō hatsusen-sho*), which create small-scale, cooperatively run projects to generate energy using solar power and other renewable energy sources. As of 2015, there were over 450 Citizens' Cooperative Power Stations Japan-wide. The Transition Town and Citizens' Power Station movements (like the Hydrangea Revolution) are immediately concerned with questions of energy and resources, but

<sup>61</sup>Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Hinansha no Kai Michinoku Kai, ed., *Ano hi, soshite ima*, 46.

<sup>62</sup>Bulkeley, 'Climate Change and Urban Governance'; Barry and Quilley, 'The Transition to Sustainability'.

<sup>63</sup>See the website of the Transition Town Japan network, <http://transition-japan.net/wp/transitionjapan> (accessed 5 January 2017).

<sup>64</sup>Yoneda, 'Transition Towns in Japan'; Otsuki, *Transformative Sustainable Development*; see also <https://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/japan>; <http://fujinodenryoku.jimdo.com/>



at a deeper level they embody a vision of a transformed society which will turn away from the mass production, mass consumption and mass disposal of material goods and towards a new awareness of ‘the social usefulness and environmental impact of the things we produce’.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, such movements precisely embody the type of ‘eutopia’ envisaged by Lewis Mumford almost a century ago, arising out of the realities of the everyday environment and, at the same time, turning upon them and moulding them creatively ‘a little nearer the heart’s desire’.<sup>66</sup>

The impact of the 2011 triple disaster can also be seen in the changing scale and nature of participation in already existing Japanese grassroots groups. One of the oldest members of the Japan Transition Town network, for example, is the Santo Club Ma~yu,<sup>67</sup> a local alternative currency group in the regional city of Ueda, which was established in 2001 and developed close connections to the Transition Town network following a group study visit to Fujino, Hayama and Kamakura Transition Towns in September 2011.<sup>68</sup> Founding member Yasui Keiko observes that in the early years most of Santo Club Ma~yu’s members were in their fifties or older, but after 3/11, an inflow of new members changed the composition of the group. Many of the new participants in the local currency exchange and related community actions (which include discussion groups in environmental issues and growing and processing organic food) were young to early middle-aged parents, whose concerns about the world in which their children were growing up had been intensified by the disaster.<sup>69</sup> In cases like these, we can see how specific concerns about the nuclear dimension of the disaster fuel a wider quest to rebuild society from the grassroots upward, creating ‘new worlds from below’.<sup>70</sup>

As these small groups experiment in trial-and-error ways with new forms of social existence, they too deploy the vocabulary of the post-disaster utopia: ‘regeneration’ (*saisei*), ‘human contact’ (*fureai*) and ‘the bonds of community’ (*komyuniti no kizuna*).<sup>71</sup> But *kizuna* here refers neither to the blood bonds of family and native soil nor to the political pseudo-brotherhood of the US-Japan strategic alliance. It references a *process* of creating human relatedness through working together to find a sustainable lifestyle that relies less on the global corporate market and more on locally sourced resources, skills and knowledge. A similar usage of the term is highlighted by Shoko Yoneyama in her discussion of the shared visions of a world transformed that emerge from the Minamata and Fukushima disasters.<sup>72</sup> In the case of Ma~yu, the group has grown from a network of people using their own currency to exchange certain goods and services into a community of people engaged in a wide range of exchange, food-producing, educational and cultural activities centred around ideas of ecological sustainability. Open-endedness, a willingness to explore and experiment, and a focus on the practices of everyday life are central to its ever-changing pattern of activities. In the words of one member:

We can’t predict the ongoing struggles that we will have: struggles both with existing institutions . . . and with the preconceived ideas that exist within ourselves. But fortunately,

<sup>65</sup><http://www.ecotech.net/about/>

<sup>66</sup>Mumford, *Story of Utopias*, 116.

<sup>67</sup>The group’s name is a reference to Ueda City’s long history as a centre of Japanese silk production. The word ‘Santo’ means literally ‘silkworm capital’, and the word ‘Ma~yu’ is a variant of the Japanese word for cocoon.

<sup>68</sup>Santo Kurabu Ma~yu, ed., *Tazukeai, tsunagaru kurashi*, 12–24.

<sup>69</sup>Author’s interview with Yasui Keiko, Ueda City, 28 May 2015.

<sup>70</sup>For further discussion, see Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ‘Introduction: Informal Life Politics in Northeast Asia’.

<sup>71</sup>See, for example, Santo Kurabu Ma~yu, ed., *Tazukeai, tsunagaru kurashi*, 94–107.

<sup>72</sup>Yoneyama, ‘Animism’.

'political' discourses and grand rhetoric from 'on high' are completely ineffective. It's best to just create your own 'place and time' by focusing firmly on protecting and enriching your own life.<sup>73</sup>

## Towards the Future

Since the devastation that followed the earthquake of 11 March 2011, we have seen a utopian longing for a reborn world emerge and divide into two very different currents. One current has sustained a national vision of a resurgent Japan, united internally by the *kizuna* of family and love of homeland, and protected externally by its *kizuna* to the US alliance. The other current initially expressed itself in nationwide protests, whose dream of a Hydrangea Revolution was acted out in huge and vibrant demonstrations at the heart of the national capital. This movement subsided, but, rather than disappearing entirely, it came to direct its energies more quietly and on a smaller scale into a host of local experiments in the re-shaping of society. These experiments often deploy the same vocabulary that permeates the vision proclaimed by the national government, but use its watchwords with very different meanings and to very different ends.

Have these small emergent everyday post-3/11 utopias any hope of bringing about real social, political or economic change in contemporary Japan? From one perspective, the task looks hopeless. Japan's national politics appears characterised by the division and withering of opposition parties, the ever-deepening entrenchment of a small political elite, and public disaffection from the political process. But from another perspective the small utopias may be seen as a different form of politics, an informal life politics, which probes the cracks in the existing order, without a perfect finished blueprint of a world to come, but only with a sense of discomfort with the present and desire to grope toward something better. This grassroots utopianism in post-Fukushima Japan resonates with a wider twenty-first century sense of longing that appears in many forms and places around the globe today: 'We start from being angry and lost and trying to create something else, because that is where we live, that is where we are. Perhaps it is a strange place to start, but we are looking for a strange thing. We are looking for hope in a dark night.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Miyazaki, "Mina no ie" wa mina no mono ka', 29–30.

<sup>74</sup>Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 20.

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