



Anne Allison

*Precarious Japan*Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013
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1. Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison frames her account of how people experience precarity in Japan with the Tohoku earthquake (March 2011 C.E.), which occurred just before she finished the book. The catastrophic shaking, tsunami, and nuclear power plant breach 'catapult[ed] the country and its people into whole other dimensions of precarity I knew little about' (p. 17). In *Precarious Japan* the fallout, as it were, from the events becomes synecdochic for the nation's slide from an illusion of rock-solid prosperity to what she calls 'liquid Japan' (p. 21). In showing this movement at the level of the personal, her book is invaluable for its description of precarity and affect in a major economy.

Stagnation and insecurity

2. At the time of the earthquake and tsunami Japan had never fully recovered from a 1991 recession following a long economic bubble. The young, elderly and women have been among those most affected. Calculated as the number of people falling below half of mean income, in 2007 Japan had the second-highest poverty level among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, about 50 percent above OECD average.^[1] More than half of all workers aged 16 to 34 need a second source of income to cover basic living expenses (p. 48). Businesses in Japan have increasingly used *haken* (dispatch or temporary) workers (p. 29) and in part because of this, one-third of all workers are irregularly employed, lacking job security, benefits, and, for the great majority, decent wages (p. 5). Irregular employment rises to about 50 percent of young people and about 70 percent of women (p. 5.). Allison interviewed several young part-time workers, male and female, who sleep in Internet cafés, unable to afford anything better, using their cell phones each morning to seek employment.
3. Under national economic policies advocating *jiko sekinin* (individual responsibility), funding for health programs has been cut (p. 37) and 'more and more Japanese find payment of health [insurance] premiums along with those of social security and pension instalments to be beyond their means' (p. 38). In 2008, 20 percent of all households lost health-insurance coverage for non-payment of premiums (p. 38). Given a large gap between healthy life expectancy and life expectancy regardless of health, the reduction in the state's social safety net, 'even, or particularly, when this involves the elderly' has 'incit[ed] panic' among the aging, resulting in increases in stress, depression and suicide.^[2] Reports of elderly going missing have made the news. Some leave home because they

do not want to burden others or are mistreated by them, some have no families and cannot afford a place to live, and some because of dementia, which can lead to costly consequences for families.^[3] Homeless older people are not hard to find. In the years before the disaster, strolling through Tokyo's parks and making my way through large railway stations like Shinjuku and Tokyo Station I saw clusters of apparently homeless people, mostly men, tucked into out-of-the-way locations. Tokyo and some other large cities also have skid rows of the very poor.

4. These are major real and perceptual changes for a society once claimed, incorrectly, to have had lifetime corporate employment for most adult men.^[4] They have been marked by a vocabulary of precarity. In Allison's text, these include, in addition to *haken* and *jiko sekinin*:

- *furita* (part-time / disposable worker)
- *futoko* (school refuser)
- *genpatsu nanmin* (nuclear power plant refugees)
- *hikikomori* (socially withdrawn, used to describe *tojisha*)
- *hiseikikoyo* (irregular or under-employed)
- *kodokushi* (dying alone, without others knowing)
- *muen shakai* (relationless / uncaring society)
- NEET (not in education, employment or training)
- *parasaito shinguru* (parasite single, used to describe adults dependent on parents)
- *ryudoka* (fluidisation / flexibilisation of work)
- *tojisha* (the person concerned, used by social withdrawees)

Recovery and affect

5. A few months after the disaster Allison and other volunteers sat at a table in Harunomachi, Fukushima Prefecture, scraping dirt off photos. Wearing a mask and gloves, using a toothbrush, wet towels and wipes, they tried to recover images found in remains of homes devastated by the earthquake and tsunami. It was 'an arduous task, painstakingly slow and rarely produces a truly clean image. Most results are fragments; edges rubbed off revealing traces at best: one face out of a group of three, a mother holding empty air' (p. 195). In the aftermath of the events people deployed memory, in part to help re-establish the borders between land and water that had failed so catastrophically. Borders had gone missing and remained so as 'the earth, still shaking, stayed sodden in mud' (p. 183) and an invisible poison wafted from the ruined nuclear plants.^[5]

6. Others tried to police these boundaries. A retired Tokyoite told Allison that, since the disaster about three months before, he

has been going up to Iwate on the weekends to offer relief. The first time there, just days after the tsunami, he met an *oba'chan* (old woman) walking up and down the beach who was thinking of throwing herself in to join her husband who had been swept away in the waves. There are many stories of mainly women attempting to drown themselves to reunite with those claimed by the tsunami (p. 188).

7. The man had returned every weekend since his first visit to look for *obachan* on the beach. In multiple trips to some of the hardest hit areas for volunteer work, Allison describes a world where mud covered over, clung to, obscured, made indistinguishable,

[a] mud that oozes everywhere: standing in pools, smeared against buildings, encased in the ruins of what had become this downtown [Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture]. Slimey, inky, riddled with particles—some decipherable (like a child's toy) but most not—and pungent with a smell that hasn't left me yet, the mud fills our senses (p. 191).

8. Allison shows how precarity operates as affect. It can include stresses, fractures, and separations of how people relate to one another. She records how people work against this, in some instances reimagining meanings of relationship in a society where relations have changed. One sign of precarity can be loneliness, something seen throughout her book. Loneliness is touched on in a collection of stories by Edo-period author Ihara Saikaku, *Nippon eitaigura* (Japanese family storehouse, 1688).^[6] He writes of a tea merchant without friends or family who swindled his way to wealth. The man spurned marriage offers, preferring 'a lonely life, enjoying himself by accumulating silver and watching his expenses with the greatest care.'^[7] At the end, ill and anticipating his death, he ordered his money be brought from his storehouse and placed around his bed. His clerks found him dead, alone, clutching his silver.^[8]
9. The Nippon Active Life Club (NALC) calls itself 'a storehouse for the future' (p. 127), perhaps in a gesture to the storehouses that figure in Saikaku's book. Unlike the Edo-period warehouses I saw in Kawagoe, stout structures that had safeguarded food, goods and money, NALC operates more like a bank in giving labour a liquidity like currency as well as an ability to store it. If you donate time in one city you can convert it into care in another. People may give time with the expectation they can use someone's time later. By enabling a formal use value for care, NALC has a very different vision of work and capital than apparent in the practice of Saikaku's merchant.^[9] Unlike capitalism in which labour is under the control of an employer in exchange for money, NALC treats labour as reciprocal, putting its use value under the control of anyone willing and able to supply it.
10. Another volunteer effort Allison shows countering the effects of *muen shakai* is '*chiki no cha no ma*' (acquaintance and tea space). It is a national movement calling itself a 'regional living room' (p. 168). It provides places for people to get together for companionship outside of family, work or groups. For a modest fee people may, depending on the place, drop in to drink tea, converse, play cards, have lunch or stay the night. Allison observes that *chiki no cha no ma* offers 'a sociality that is unbounded by commitment or time' (p. 172). Describing one in Nigata, she noted that 'the operative term is not *relationship* but connectedness (*tsunagari*), which is post-identitarian and premised on mutuality and care' (p. 172, italics in original). The Nigata *chiki no cha no ma*'s website emphasises it as a place to talk and get to know others in a low-key and unstructured way.^[10]
11. These and the other initiatives she describes were mostly begun by individuals, activists, student groups, and others, including *tojisha*. What comes through are initiative, dedication, ingenuity, creativity and, in some instances, courageousness. Allison sets the state's having reduced programs to help its citizens against the wishes of many, including a clear majority of people in one survey which wanted state services to be at a level seen in a nation that prioritises welfare, as in some Northern European states. A slim majority in the survey were willing to pay higher taxes or insurance payments toward that end (p. 160).

Sotegai and seeing new things

12. *Precarious Japan's* narrative is by necessity open ended. One precariousness emerging in the aftermath of the disaster was a greater visibility of state-corporation malfeasance. Some government and power company officials were quoted in press accounts calling the earthquake-tsunami-meltdown '*sotega*' (unforeseen) as if to explain why they had not constructed systems to prevent the reactors failing.^[11] An ability to foresee something is helped by knowledge of what has come before. Tsunami knowledge from the Edo period is preserved on *stelae* placed in areas above the coast.

Their warnings are simple, direct, sometimes plaintive. One urges, 'Remember the calamity of the great tsunamis. Do not build any homes below this point.' Another implores, 'Choose life over your possessions and valuables.'^[12] News articles reported how officials had for years misled, rather than warned, at-risk populations about the danger.^[13]

13. As noted above, a number of Japanese words that describe precarity appear in the book. Words can have perceived resonances, potential meanings, possibilities, commonalities and differences, fraught histories, a wealth of unstated context deployable by the speaker. Words invoke other words. In our minds words can coalesce around some thing, and they may evidence something else, helping to see the previously un(fore)seen. I began thinking of the precarity words in Allison's text as clusters of possibilities: how ideas form (*tojisha* as disordered), how identities such as 'Japaneseness' change in calamity,^[14] what connectedness may mean for identity, and how power relations are uncovered revealing impunity. Allison's reporting is so wide-ranging and rich in detail that readers may find many things to draw upon.
14. A few criticisms: Allison invokes but never really does much with theory, and she only touches on consideration of mental illness and/or personal responsibility in living and being stigmatised as *tojisha*, *parasaito shinguru*, *futoko*. Also, her style is recursive, its own type of liquidity. She called her fieldwork 'jagged' (p. ix). My admiration for her work and for having helped the recovery was tempered by mostly trivial faults such as inconsistencies, gaps, facts contradicting each other, incorrect translations—unexpected textual shards distracting my attention from her argument.^[15] I wish more care had been taken with her text.
15. The promise of new ways to treat sociality, whether as storable labour or companionship 'unbounded by commitment or time' or connectedness surmounting identity barriers, and the accounts of many working to overcome the failures of those in power, are heartening. What *Precarious Japan* could not be expected to cover is whether these efforts are scalable enough so as to make sustainable, substantive changes.

Notes

^[1] Japan's OECD poverty level was 15.3 percent, second to the United States at 17.1 percent. The OCED average is 10.7 percent. Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, p. 5.

^[2] The gap between healthy life expectancy and life expectancy is 7.9 years for women and 6.3 years for men; on average people are bedridden for more than seven years before end of life (Allison, *Precarious Japan*, pp. 39–40).

^[3] In 2007 an elderly man with dementia wandered onto railway tracks and was killed by a train. Central Japan Railway Co. demanded his 85-year-old widow reimburse it lost ticket revenue, 7.2 million yen (about \$67,000 USD). A court ordered that she pay half that amount. [Kanok Matsuyama](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-11-03/dementia-crisis-roils-japan-as-10-000-seniors-go-missing.html), 'Dementia crisis forces Akiko's mom to roam Osaka Streets,' *Bloomberg*, 3 November 2014, online: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-11-03/dementia-crisis-roils-japan-as-10-000-seniors-go-missing.html> (accessed 10 March 2015).

^[4] In the 1970s no more than about 30 percent of working men held mainly white-collar positions in mid- to large-sized companies (Allison, *Precarious Japan*, p. 23).

^[5] A friend of Allison's used the word *gesenbyo* (landsick) to describe Japan's bodily and psychic state during innumerable aftershocks in the earthquake's immediate aftermath (Allison, *Precarious Japan*, p. 23).

^[6] Ihara Saikaku, *Nippon Eitaigura* (Japanese family storehouse) 1688.

^[7] Ihara Saikaku, *Nippon Eitaigura, The Way to Wealth*, trans. Soji Mizuno, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1955, p. 130.

^[8] Saikaku, *Nippon Eitaigura, The Way to Wealth*, trans. Mizuno, p. 133.

^[9] After the tea merchant's death, his ill-gotten gains were given to the local Buddhist temple, whose bonzes, rejoicing at

their good fortune, went to Kyoto to spend it on boy actors and in male brothels (Saikaku, *Nippon Eitaigura, The Way to Wealth*, trans. Mizuno, p. 134). In dissipating in one fell swoop on transient and intimate companionship money hoarded by the solitary merchant over time, the priests acted as his antithesis. In creating this contrast, Saikaku introduces the idea of equivalence between these two uses of money, allowing the reader to consider whether the priests or the merchant had wasted the money more.

[10] ??? ?? (Foundation for Refreshment), ??? ('A Place to Be Oneself'), ??? (Koshinetsu Region), n.d., online: <http://www.sawayakazaidan.or.jp/ibasyo/case/04koushinetsu/uchinojikka.html> (accessed 30 August 2015).

[11] Hiroko Tabuchi, 'Report condemns Japan's response to nuclear accident,' in the *New York Times*, 26 December 2011.

[12] '[Ancient stone markers warned of tsunamis](#),' *Associated Press*, 6 April 2011, online: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ancient-stone-markers-warned-of-tsunamis/> (accessed 29 March 2015).

[13] Tabuchi, 'Report condemns Japan's response to nuclear accident.' In lieu of warnings, power companies and the Ministry of Economy spent 'hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising and educational programs emphasising the safety of nuclear' power. After the disaster at Chernobyl, USSR in 1986, visitor centres adjacent to some of Japan's nuclear plants were reconstructed as theme parks, using characters from myth, anime and the Western tale *Alice in Wonderland* to reassure parents and children about the safety of nuclear reactors. (See Norimitsu Onishi, "'Safety myth" left Japan ripe for nuclear crisis,' in the *New York Times*, 24 June 2011).

[14] 'Japaneseness,' p 184. Cf. pp. 59-61 for self-identified furita Akagi Tomohiro's, advocacy of war as spurring social cohesion: 'without [war], social differences will only exacerbate' (Allison, *Precarious Japan*, p. 60).

[15] One substantive fault in my view is Allison's giving the earliest use of 'parasite single' to Yamada Masahiro in 1999 (209n6), without acknowledging an attribution to Yamada in a February 1997 newspaper article, or criticism that Yamada, a sociologist, in a 2000 book 'holds them responsible for the worsening economic crisis in Japan, instead of considering the opposite, and in my view more logical, possibility that the economic crisis may partly be the cause of this phenomenon, as young people nowadays have less job security and less money...' (Wim Lunsing, 'Parasite and non-parasite singles: Japanese journalists and scholars taking positions,' *Social Science Japan Journal* vol. 6, no. 2 (2003): 261-65, p. 261).

Some of the trivial ones include:

- the tsunami's wave height is given as 'over forty metres' and 'over forty feet' (pp. 18, 185);
- a Fukushima festival is "*nomaioi*" and '*namaoi*' (pp. 201, 202);
- '*ikizurasa*' is defined the same way twice in the same sentence (p. 65);
- 'reverse-poverty activist' is used without definition; given context but no definition eleven pages later (pp. 33, 44);
- a publication is cited differently under the same author (Murakami Ryu;' and 'the' *New York Times*),
- Japan's being the second-poorest OECD member is repeated without additional context (pp. 5, 136);
- omission of an indefinite article: 'sense that he was' instead of 'a sense that he was' (p. 133).

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