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### **Paper:**

Doel, M. (2019). Rewriting the Disaster: Body-Bagged Earthworks, Postmortem Landscapes, and the De-Description of Fukushima. *GeoHumanities*, 1-30.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2019.1565597>

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**Rewriting the Disaster: Body-bagged Earthworks, Post-mortem Landscapes, and the  
De-description of Fukushima**

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Forthcoming in *GeoHumanities*

Print ISSN: 2373-566X — Online ISSN: 2373-5678

**ABSTRACT**

The photo-essay is inspired by Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995), especially the book's sensitivity to the self-effacing double movement of writing as a violent inscription that brutally 'de-scribes,' and Jacques Derrida's *Athens, Still Remains* (2010), which revolves around a series of photographic stills or snapshots and the polysemic phrase '*nous nous devons à la mort*' (we owe ourselves, or we owe one another, or we owe each other to death; or else up until death; or even to Death personified). The photo-essay describes, through ill-said words and ill-seen images, my experience of Fukushima Prefecture in the wake of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster (often dubbed Japan's 3.11), and the remedial re-description thereafter, during a journey through the Prefecture in July 2017.

**Key Words:** *Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami (3.11); landscape de-description; deconstructive writing; photo-essay; Fukushima nuclear disaster.*

# Rewriting the Disaster: Body-bagged Earthworks, Post-mortem Landscapes, and the De-description of Fukushima

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“This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes” (Blanchot 1995, 7)

“Writing is not destined to leave traces, but to erase, by traces, all traces, to disappear in the fragmentary space of writing” (Blanchot 1992, 50)

## INTRODUCTION

The photo-essay is inspired by Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995), especially the book’s sensitivity to the self-effacing double movement of writing as a violent inscription that brutally ‘de-scribes,’ and Jacques Derrida’s *Athens, Still Remains* (2010), which revolves around a series of photographic stills or snapshots and the polysemic phrase ‘*nous nous devons à la mort*’ (we owe ourselves, or we owe one another, or we owe each other to death; or else up until death; or even to Death personified). The photo-essay de-scribes (sic), through ill-said words and ill-seen images, my experience of Fukushima Prefecture in the wake of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster (often dubbed Japan’s 3.11), and the remedial re-description thereafter, during a journey through the Prefecture in July 2017.

## AND SO ...

“*Nous nous devons à la mort*. We owe ourselves to death” (Derrida 2010, 1)

*Now, then ...* Having never travelled along Japan’s Joban Expressway before today, it begins to dawn on me that this is the third or perhaps fourth time that we have driven back and forth on this twenty to thirty kilometre stretch, yo-yoing between one seemingly innocuous interchange and the next, expecting to find the elusive exit that will take us towards “*that landscape*,” as Hideo Furukawa (2016, 59) once dubbed the coastal swathe of Eastern

Tohoku devastated by the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011, and the source of the devastation that is surely to come: the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. Perhaps the turn-off no longer exists. Perhaps it was sealed off at some point in the six years or so since the triple disaster: earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. Or perhaps it has simply disappeared without trace. But our driver continues to have faith in a smartphone navigation app. “It should be around here,” he relays. Our self-effacing peregrination is beginning to induce palpable anxiety: partly because we are prohibited from stopping in this rather beautiful part of the exclusion zone; partly because we keep glimpsing the towers of the stricken nuclear power station that seems to be too close for comfort; and partly because the roadside radiation-monitoring signs on this stretch of the expressway have elevated warnings. The sanguine zero-point-two micro-Sieverts per hour that we saw a while ago are now zero-point-six micro-Sieverts per hour and above. This, apparently, is “not good.” And for the first time I notice that nearly all of the lorry drivers whizzing past in the opposite direction are wearing facemasks – as is the man behind the steering wheel of the tarpaulin-clad truck that is tailgating us. I cannot help but think of the seminal 1971 Hollywood film, *Duel*, and the fact that I always rooted for the sadistic trucker rather than the neurotic protagonist, the needle-nosed rather than the valiant. I imagine that most of the Joban Expressway lorries are ferrying a tiny fraction of the millions of tons of radioactive soil that is being systematically skimmed off the surface of the exclusion-cum-evacuation zone and bagged-up for eternity to enable more and more of the tens of thousands of nuclear refugees to return home as the compulsory evacuation orders are slowly lifted and the mandatory exclusion zones gradually contract. Dwelling probably doesn’t get much weirder than this: a semi-skimmed landscape with body-bagged earthworks [Figure 01]. But not all is doom and gloom. The brand-spanking-new expressway service area on the edge of the exclusion zone has the most fantastic toilet block known to humanity and possibly the world’s most pointless isolation booth for cigarette smokers [Figure 02]. The booth reminds me of citizen Girardet’s 1791 ill-fated proposal to the revolutionary French National Assembly for a glass ‘asphyxiation booth’ for enlightened yet edifying public executions, which lost out to Dr Guillotin’s eponymous beheading machine (Doel 2017).

We leave the service area with a variety of tasty snacks and a cute key-fob, featuring Akabeko, the legendary red cow or bull from Aizu Yanaizu, which has become something of a mascot for Fukushima Prefecture, and the whole Tohoku region more widely. Imagine my

surprise when I belatedly discover that over a millennium ago Akabeko warded off a smallpox epidemic and that Akabeko's charm has been associated with good health ever since. I wonder how my diminutive Akabeko will have fared against radiation-induced cancer. It now lives in the corner of a picture frame on the top of the Yamaha high-fidelity sound system in my dining room, with neither keys nor fob [Figure 03], much like the famous Lichtenberg knife, which has neither blade nor handle, yet strikes with the utmost force, much to the amusement of a certain Sigmund Freud (to wit, the comic is, for Freud, an expectation turned to naught as several incompatible senses collide with one another and dissolve into nothingness. The burst of laughter that follows is pure pleasure.)

On a couple of occasions I wind down my window to take photographs of the nuclear power-plant's towers, the real-time radiation warning signs, and those seductive features of the landscape that solicit my attention: uninhabited buildings in various states of collapse; surrendered fields overwhelmed by a resurgent nature; and thousands upon thousands of neatly stacked black bags full of radioactive soil that are conspicuous in the landscape, even when they are shrouded in tarpaulin [Figure 04]. These stacks have mostly sprouted up in redundant fields and they would probably resemble a recently scythed crop were it not for their incongruous tiering. It is almost as if the landscape were once covered with hundreds of massive pyramids that have been washed away by the tsunami – except for a few tiers that now stand as enormous plinths or pedestals. The presence of absence and the absence of presence are tangible to my haptic eye. They weigh heavily on this terraced landscape. I imagine a Promethean figure striding from pedestal to pedestal: *Shin Godzilla*, for example, who I once saw from an Airbus A380 over the Pacific en route to Melbourne, Australia; or a gigantic Akabeko, perhaps; or even one of the gargantuan elemental guardians dreamt up by the young children of Yuriage, a coastal neighbourhood of Natori in Miyagi Prefecture that was almost entirely wiped out by the '3.11' tsunami [Figure 05]. And mid stride, I recall my favourite Freudian maxim: *He did not know that he was dead*; as well as Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), which I intended to reread on the train from Tokyo to Sendai: *Great to be alive, said the Dead Father*. (The Dead Father is dead only in a *certain* sense, explains one of the Dead Father's entourage during the course of the novel, although I should confess that the word 'certain' is not stressed in Barthelme's text, and I should also confess that I was in two minds as to whether I should stress the word 'certain' or the word 'only.' But saying that the Dead Father is dead *only* in a certain sense would have left an entirely different

impression of the Dead Father's deadness.) Meanwhile, each time that I roll down the window to take a photograph or snapshot I am berated for letting more of the 'outside' into the car, which strikes me as entirely misunderstanding our current state of invagination: for we are already turned inside out and outside in, like those infantile souls who 'play house' in the darkness of Robert Coover's *A Child Again* (2005).

Eventually, we find the turn-off for the coast, whose semi-automatic tollbooth valiantly attempts to thwart our entry into this recently reopened part of the exclusion zone—but to no avail. We pass through the screen into the “*desert of the real*,” to purloin one of Jean Baudrillard's (1994, 1) signature phrases, and gingerly approach ‘*that* landscape.’ With few exceptions the vehicles that we encounter are police and security cars, construction vehicles, and covered lorries that are probably laden with radioactive soil. Suffice to say that we feel a little queasy about being here. We feel utterly out of place in this ‘land-scrape.’ We are essentially dark tourists – voyeurs *of* the disaster, and voyeurs *from* the disaster. We half expect to be pulled over by the police as we creep along snatching photographs of the environmental remediation work [Figure 06] whilst pondering the strangest of words: *restore*, *revive*, *resume*, and *revitalize*. But this part of the irradiated region once under the veil of mandatory evacuation orders no longer seeks to exclude people like us. We are most welcome – welcome in deed – except in the residual ‘difficult-to-return zones’ and ‘restricted habitation zones.’ But here and now, they say come. Indeed, at one particularly poignant location in this post-mortem landscape (sic), the sealed-off remains of Ukedo Elementary School, the local authorities have even fastened laminated photographs of its dilapidated interior on the fence to try to satisfy the profane curiosity of would-be ‘urban explorers’ and ‘place hackers’ [Figure 07].

Having been thoroughly semi-skimmed this part of the region was reopened to the public in March 2017. We drive – in July 2017 – through a posthumous landscape that has been systematically decontaminated and doggedly remediated. We broach a recently reopened town, called Namie, just ten kilometres or so from the epicentre of the disaster, most of which has been left as a decaying still life – although some of which has been partially resurrected and revived [Figure 08]. This town of Lazarus, once home to 21,500 people and an assortment of pets and pot plants, is half mummified and half zombified – and evidently non-biodegradable. We enjoy being here, immersed in this hyper-real living picture, soaking up

its affective atmosphere [Figure 09]. But we encounter neither cats nor dogs. In fact, we espy no domesticated or feral animals of any kind – save for a solitary bird perched on a telephone wire [Figure 10] that reminds me of the lonesome bird that makes an uncanny appearance down the centuries in Chris Ware’s marvellous graphic novel, *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2003). Did I mention, by the way, that this was a glorious mid-summer’s day, with blue skies and little fluffy clouds? [Figure 11, Figure 12] We wore hats and sunscreen and sunglasses to protect ourselves from the rays – from some of them at least – whilst being skewered by other rays unbeknownst to us, no doubt. I thought of our much-anticipated rendezvous with a planetarium that failed to take place, Jean Baudrillard’s retelling of Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Nine Billion Names of God*, and Somerset Maugham’s tale of *Death in Samarkand* as glozed by Baudrillard (1996, 2003). But I did not think about them for long.

Most of the structures in Namie remain abandoned, and much of the fabric of the town has been more or less recolonized by a post-mortem nature [Figure 13, Figure 14]. Abandoned, but not necessarily disowned, disavowed or dispossessed. Distant attachments undoubtedly remain, not least for the nuclear evacuees and refugees scattered hither and thither across Fukushima Prefecture and beyond. I am reminded of those long-neglected city-centre ruins of places near where I live in South Wales that have also gone to seed, especially those shrubs and trees sprouting proudly from redundant chimney stacks. What strikes me most about Namie is neither the ruination and the decay, nor the redevelopment and the resurrection, but the incongruity of it all. For instance, a partially collapsed shrine enjoys a recently installed solar-powered radiation-monitoring device [Figure 15]. Zero-point-five micro-Sieverts per hour, it recounts. Another dose of ‘not good,’ I suppose. A few car-parking spaces have been marked out with rope, although the red splatters give the impression of a crime scene [Figure 16]. It was perhaps the perfect crime: the murder of reality by hyper-reality (Baudrillard 1996). Maybe there is finally nothing *as such* to see here. Maybe the quotidian dwells here afresh, taking everything in its yawning stride, as the truly well prepared are wont to do – such that *the* disaster becomes nothing more than one dress rehearsal amongst others. Also, some of the properties are up for auction, and their unadorned signage jars with the chaotic state of each site. Meanwhile, amongst the ruins of the town centre, a small cluster of newly built shops caters to the ebb and flow of decontamination and restoration workers. It includes a restaurant, a launderette, and a convenience store [Figure 17]. I am struck by the prominent display of recycling bins in this intoxicated landscape, spilling their precious guts all over the

pavement [Figure 18]. However, this oasis of consumerist banality remains surrounded by abandoned housing, an abandoned petrol station, an abandoned video-rental store, and an abandoned amusement arcade [Figure 19]. A few people live here – or appear to live here – perhaps from yesteryear. And then we drive a few kilometres further westward, or ‘worstward,’ finally flirting with the coast [Figure 20].

The tsunami evidently consumed almost everything as it in-scribed and de-scribed the landscape, and what remained in its wake has largely been scraped clean during the decontamination, redevelopment, and revitalization process: de-scribing the de-scription, so to speak. A few ravaged monuments continue to hold out against the wanton erasure of the erasure. For instance, the vestiges of the original road layout have been spliced with the semblance of a new road layout, parcelling out these flatlands into a hotchpotch of would-be building plots pockmarked by the skeletal remains of a few twisted road signs, stretches of shredded tarmac, and the occasional orphaned tree [Figure 21]. Most of the nascent plots have sunk beneath grassland but some have been raised a few more miserly metres above sea level, so called, and now sit proudly in the landscape (sic), waiting to become the pedestals for the signature components of tomorrow’s world: housing estates, warehouses, shopping malls, industrial parks, office blocks, car parks, and suchlike [Figure 22]. One of the few structures to have been more or less fully rebuilt is a large cemetery, in the Ukedo district of Namie, which has also been relocated to higher ground [Figure 23]. The cemetery now overlooks a huge swathe of grassland where a fishing village and rice paddies once stood. I have been advised not to use the restrooms, and not to wash my hands, since the water may be contaminated. But the warning came too late. Now, I finally belong here. *Death in Samarkand* pops into my mind’s eye once again. Could I imagine bathing in bottled water, they ask. I wonder if they mean still or sparkling, but I keep my wonderment to myself. For a while thereafter we ponder the anxiety-provoking nature of potentially radioactive tap water, as well as the ambient fear associated with rainfall, runoff, and ground water. Perhaps *Ground Zero Water* or *Ground Water Zero* will become the *Death Cigarettes* of the not-too-distant future, securing its place alongside more established canned- and bottled-water brands such as *Evian*, *Tennensui*, and *Desani*, or even *Anheuser-Busch*. I am reminded of Hiromi Kawakami’s (2012) short story, *God bless you, 2011*, whose sublime incongruity reminds me in turn of Peter Kennard’s *Haywain With Cruise Missiles* (1980). For we all dwell amongst the ruins of the future, surrounded by the ‘atomic cathedrals’ and ‘bunker architecture’ of



nuclear power stations and nuclear weaponry. Here, as there, we truly belong to a world of overexposure. What the disaster de-scribes is literally ob-scene.

As we drift in this post-apocalyptic landscape, which is uncannily all too familiar, I am conscious of breathing in potentially radioactive particles whipped up by the strong coastal winds and the endless stream of lorries churning up the dirt. I am momentarily fascinated by the glittering film of dust that has clung to my black slip-on shoes, although, when all is said and done, I will end up performing my good deed for the day back in my Tokyo hotel room – rinsing the dust off with tap water to return it whence it came. For now, however, as I stare at my filthy shoes I am reminded of Fredric Jameson’s (1991) pairing up of Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) and Vincent Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Boots* (1886), but fail dismally to recall either the gist of his argument or any of the specifics, except for something to do with hard graft and the ambivalent play of lusted and lustreless surfaces. We then plod towards a radiation monitor, straining to make out the stricken power station’s twin towers that may or may not be discernible on the horizon, and speculate about the guilt and gilt of disaster capitalism’s voracious appetite for risk as we breath in the windswept dust [Figure 24]. Was *that* landscape really worth *it*? Meanwhile, Jean-François Lyotard (1989, 214) once memorably quipped that “landscapes could be classified in terms of how easily they can be nibbled, BITTEN.” Looking out over these pedestals and plinths, there can be little doubt that the disaster of capitalism has well and truly sunk its teeth into *that* landscape [Figure 25].

Almost no one else is outside apart from a few workers tending a memorial at the rebuilt Ukedo cemetery. They dig into this hallowed and harrowing ground. Looking out from the cemetery over the grassland and the seascape beyond I wager that it is impossible to believe – to *really* believe, to *truly* believe – that a vibrant village once stood here, with its bedrooms and its bathrooms, its gardens and its garages, its street furniture and its domestic pets, its telephone poles and its traffic lights, its dustbins and its vending machines, its restaurants and its bars [Figure 26]. We have been assured that some of the dead still live around here, just up the coast, in Miyagi Prefecture, for example, which we visited the day before yesterday [Figure 27]. The dead have been seen loitering by the roadside and seeking refuge from the floodwater on higher ground – especially atop of bridges. Some of the dead have even been known to hail taxis, for destinations that no longer exist because of the tsunami. None of the dead were around when we visited – none that we noticed, at least, apart from the vampires,

obviously, whose bite marks are evident everywhere in this landscape (sic), and the cannibals, of course, who are still gnawing away at the necrotic flesh of our world.

After another short drive ever-worstward we arrive at our penultimate destination: the roadblock about four kilometres from the stricken nuclear power plant, all of which is obscured by a small hillock – even its svelte twin towers – at the base of which is yet another badly camouflaged plinth [Figure 28]. I dwell on this word, ‘stricken,’ and make a mental note to look up its etymology when I get home – but forget so to do. For what occupies me at this very moment in the text is another word: ‘impossible.’ So, let’s be crystal clear on the following point: *this* nuclear catastrophe and *that* landscape were supposed to be *impossible*. And yet they happened. This was their destiny – their inevitable rendezvous with fatality and finality. Here as elsewhere, the impossible happens. Meanwhile, the courteous sentry attending to the roadblock sports a white helmet, a white facemask, and white gloves. I cannot help but think of the Wizard of Oz and the Yellow Brick Road. I want to follow this road to Ground Water Zero, if only to touch the barbed-wire fencing or suchlike that surely embraces the plant. But no. This is as far worstward in *that* landscape that we are able to go. So, we wave. He waves. And that’s that.

Here, waving to one another by this exclusion barrier and empty plinth, so near and yet so far from the crippled reactors and the epicentre of the nuclear disaster, I am reminded of the idle chatter amongst Donald Barthelme’s (2003, 345) zombies: “Beautiful day!” “Certainly is!” [Figure 29] I think that I would have preferred to have been here in midwinter, on a moonlit night, amidst snowfall, rather than under the sun-drenched cover of blue skies and little fluffy clouds. I would have undoubtedly looked towards Oz and thought of so many other ashen skies: Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Dresden and Hamburg, Auschwitz and Treblinka. I would probably have thought about ‘hot spots,’ here as well as elsewhere, along with their coldness and cruelty. I would also probably have thought about a cluster of gothic music albums by the likes of Bauhaus that formed the nucleus of my *being* – of my being *here*. For here or there, *I make the air fall apart*.

Having done waving we get back in the car and drive inland for a couple of hours until we reach our final destination: the city of Fukushima, about eighty kilometres or so from the stricken nuclear power plant as the carrion crow flies. In the middle of the city, adjacent to

some temporary housing for nuclear evacuees [Figure 30], and at the base of Mount Shinobu, a sacred mountain so I am told, a large portion of a public car park has been commandeered for a pile of radioactive soil [Figure 31]. Here as elsewhere everyone seems to agree that for a while at least the bags should remain in situ, until a ‘final resting place’ for them can be found. Perhaps the secondary market for radioactive waste has become saturated. Or perhaps the attachment of people to place is truly inalienable. Whether burdened or obligated by these body bags, here *they remain*; here *they belong*. Here, where a life-world has been buried alive and swallowed alive, *topophilia* and *topophobia* have become indiscernible: the post-mortem landscapes of ‘zombie capitalism’ and ‘late capitalism’ have been “prevented from dying by death itself” (Blanchot 2000, 1). For reasons too complicated to explain (read: Derrida 2011) I find myself wondering not only whether a landscape can die – can die ‘*as such*’ – but also whether a landscape can survive and live on. Obviously, landscapes can be buried or swallowed, they can even be disinterred, but can they be buried alive or swallowed alive? Can they die a living death and so sur-vive a living death? Are they even capable of living and dying? Indeed, when all is said and done, can anything actually *happen* to a landscape? Can anything ever *affect* a landscape?

Here as elsewhere we dwell upon pollution, amid urine and faeces (Serres 2001). Much later I will learn that there are millions of these soiled body bags neatly arrayed all over the region’s landscape, including their occasional incorporation into civil engineering projects such as roadside embankments. With a lifespan of only a few decades a final solution for these body bags that would stretch into eternity suddenly seems a long way off (Madsen 2009). Alongside the millions of cubic metres of radioactive soil there are hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of radioactive rubble, tens of thousands of cubic metres of radioactive logs, and over a million tons of radioactive water. The fallout from Tokyo Electric Power Company’s (TEPCO) Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station joins the monumental ruins of other nuclear ‘events,’ as the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES) quaintly dubs them, from Three Mile Island to Chernobyl, and the colossal remains of the routine operation of the extant nuclear power industry, such as several hundred thousand tons of ‘spent’ nuclear fuel temporarily stored in cooling pools all over the world. I am reminded of the toxic pools in Richard Misrach’s *Violent Legacies* (1992), and a long-lost book that advocated the dis-alienation and re-enchantment of our ‘concrete jungle’ through design strategies such as

wrapping and camouflage (Mugerauer 1994). But back then, on the bullet train from Fukushima to Tokyo, I wondered about dwelling in an irradiated, semi-skimmed, and bagged-up landscape, especially from the perspective of animals, plants, and ghosts – not least because I had been rereading Hideo Furukawa’s *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure* (2016), some of whose turns of phrase have seared themselves into my imagination: *spirited away time*, *spirited away space*, and *ghost nature*, for example. What a sickening word: ‘dwell.’

Sadly, despite their venerable association with the region, there were no horses to be seen in our jaunt through Fukushima Prefecture that day. Oddly enough, however, we did encounter a life-size model of a mounted samurai horseman taking part in the historic Soma-Nomaioi Horse Festival. It was in the foyer of that Joban Expressway service area with the amazing toilets, gas chamber, tasty snacks, and Akabeko key-fob. I cannot recall if the model stood on a plinth, but looking back on the end of the world I imagined giant samurai horsemen galloping across the land de-scribed by the disaster, using those empty plinths as stepping-stones to hunt down and slay Genshi-chan (Little Atom), a kitsch mascot that TEPCO employed to promote its civic-minded, nuclear-power operations to youngsters before the magnitude 9.0 seaquake unleashed the radioactive airquakes from its Fukushima Daiichi facility. The thought of this makes me smile, as does the fact that the nuclear catastrophe was not only billed as impossible, but, like the so-called ‘global financial crisis’ of 2008, it was billed as being impossible many times over. The subjects-supposed-to-know thought that they knew not. They imagined that by knowing not, this not was under their control. And yet, here as elsewhere, the impossible happened: again, and again, and again (Lochbaum, Lyman, and Stranahan 2014). Indeed, once *it* happened in *that* landscape, ‘not knowing’ was evidently no longer “knowledge of the disaster, but knowledge as disaster and knowledge disastrously” (Blanchot 1995, 3). At this very moment in the text, *here* is the real disaster [Figure 32]. *Beautiful day! Certainly is!*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Richard Carter-White and Sergei Shubin for collaborating with me on the broader themes de-scribed here, and for travelling with me through Fukushima Prefecture in July 2017. I am very grateful to Sébastien Boret and Julia Gerster for their company and

expertise during that trip, and to Sheila Honess for enabling me to visit Japan in the first place, and for introducing me to Hideo Furukawa's *Horses, Horses*. Angharad Closs Stephens, David Clarke, Siwan Davies, and Thomas Keating provided invaluable critiques of previous versions of the text, and I greatly appreciated the generous comments of the two referees who reviewed the paper for *GeoHumanities*. Finally, I am grateful to Bridget Keehan for inviting me to contribute to a soundscape entitled *A Walk Around Our Place* whilst she was an Artist in Residence at Swansea University. My brief contribution was the germ of the present work.

## FUNDING

The author gratefully acknowledges the College of Science at Swansea University for financially supporting the trip to Fukushima Prefecture and Tokyo in July 2017.

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Figure 01.tif



Figure 02.tif



Figure 03.tif



Figure 04.tif



Figure 05.tif



Figure 06.tif



Figure 07.tif



Figure 08.tif





Figure 09.tif



Figure 10.tif



Figure 11.tif



Figure 12.tif



Figure 13.tif



Figure 14.tif



Figure 15.tif

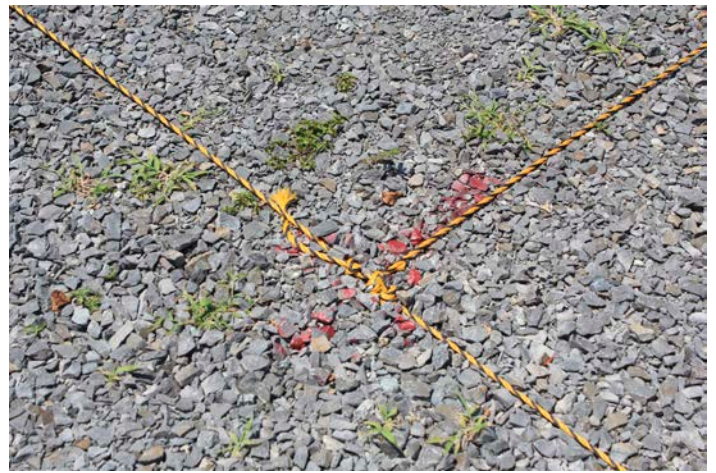


Figure 16.tif



Figure 17.tif



Figure 18.tif



Figure 19.tif



Figure 20.tif



Figure 21.tif



Figure 22.tif



Figure 23.tif



Figure 24.tif



Figure 25.tif



Figure 26.tif



Figure 27.tif



Figure 28.tif



Figure 29.tif



Figure 30.tif



Figure 31.tif



Figure 32.tif