COVID Cough and Fukushima Novels
On the Not-Bareness of Life in Environmental Humanities

ABSTRACT This essay introduces three works of post-Fukushima Japanese literature, by Hayashi Kyoko (1930–2017), Kimura Yusuke (1970–) and Kobayashi Erika (1978–), to offer an environmental humanities alternative to Giorgio Agamben’s response to COVID-19. Politically, Hayashi is probably closest to Agamben in that her work has been embraced by antinuclear activists in Japan and upheld as evidence of the injustice of the state of exception into which victims of both Fukushima and Hiroshima/Nagasaki were thrust. The author focuses instead on how these three authors acknowledge the cruelties of biopolitics but nevertheless celebrate the fact that “life” is never bare. For them, ionizing radiation acts like the COVID cough did for many of us: not as an invitation to critique the state but as a material intrusion that forces an awareness of what Rocco Ronchi, in his response to Agamben, called “the destiny of the community of man with nature.” What are the material forces immanent to that destiny? What does it do to our mental health to engage them directly? The three works analyzed answer these questions in creative, powerful ways.

KEYWORDS environmental humanities, Fukushima, COVID-19, Kobayashi Erika, Giorgio Agamben

In a puppet show posted to YouTube in April 2020, German scholar Melanie Kleinert stages a six-minute conversation with a turtlenecked puppet-Foucault. That month the European Journal of Psychoanalysis had just published its special issue “Coronavirus and Philosophers,” centered on Giorgio Agamben’s claim that the lockdown in Italy was a “frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded” reaction to an “alleged epidemic.” Was this what Michel Foucault’s biopolitics had become, a theory for critiquing an epidemic invented by the Italian government to legitimize the suspension of democratic freedoms? Kleinert’s puppet show begs to differ. Puppet-Foucault wears a mask in her fictional interview, compelled not by an overzealous government but by what he calls “solidarity with you guys . . . and a tribute to my former fate, as a human figure . . . who died from the consequences of an epidemic.” Puppet-Foucault also urges us not, like Agamben, to reject the “bare life” of lockdown but to negotiate a fragile truce with it: “I hope you stay healthy and sane in these crazy times.”

If we want to appreciate what the new discipline of environmental humanities brings to the problem of COVID-19, a good place to start is this rift between
the insufficiently biological biopolitics of Agamben and what Kleinert presents as the much more biological biopolitics of Foucault. Puppet-Foucault knows that life as taught to us by something like COVID or AIDS is not “bare.” Yes, the Seventeenth-century plague town, his account of which figures in both the puppet show and the journal’s special issue, is a meticulously disciplined prison. But within its confines we nevertheless become intimate with life forces of the most lethal, nondiscursive sort and trace networks of solidarity with other affected bodies. Yes, our modern political systems are designed to produce, manage, and administer the life of their populations, content to let die a certain inevitable segment. But if we encourage one another to stay sane while this happens, is it only because we don’t want to be doubly managed, as both infected and mentally ill? Or is it also because the life of the virus exceeds state production and threatens our sanity with what it can do independent of any state of exception?

In the special issue of European Journal of Psychoanalysis, these are points made in a response to Agamben by Rocco Ronchi, a Deleuzean. When I read Ronchi I felt an immediate affinity with the post-Fukushima texts I have been studying since 2011. Lamenting the trend toward Far Right populism in Italy and tracing an implicit contrast to both the United States, where I live, and Japan, about which I teach, Ronchi argues that COVID precipitated a public health response previously unimaginable in Italy amidst what he calls the populist hatred of cosmopolitanism and nature. He marvels:

> In a matter of days, and with incredible speed, the virus has forced us all, willingly or not, to take upon ourselves . . . the destiny of the global community, and, what is more, the destiny of the community of man with nature. Our culturalist and anthropocentric prejudice was not overcome by the slow and almost always ineffective action of education, [but] a cough was enough to make it suddenly impossible to evade the responsibility that each individual has toward all living beings for the simple facts of (still . . .) being part of this world, and wanting to be a part of it.4

Like many of us who teach in the humanities, Ronchi wants to know how the COVID cough achieved so quickly, with regard to Italian public opinion on lockdown, what our lectures and assigned readings often could not, with regard to issues like immigration and climate change. His answer is that the virus acts as what philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers would call the “intrusion” of a commons, which gathers human minds and forces them “to think, to object, to create.”5 In this the COVID cough resembles Fukushima radiation as experienced, if not by the general population, at least by those who responded with the most interesting art. Both in Italy after 2020 and in Japan after 2011, people wore masks to try to keep these intrusions from entering their bodies. Whether or not masks...
worked on the microlevel, vis-à-vis their lungs, hearts, blood vessels, and cells, their minds couldn’t help racing along the macrolevel circuits traced relentlessly by both the virus and ionizing radiation, not just to wide swaths of the earth’s human population but beyond that, to the biosphere at large and its past and future. This induced a certain vertigo, a confrontation with enormity. It forced them to “take upon [them]selves... the destiny of the community of man with nature,” in Ronchi’s words.

In the passage above, Ronchi glides rather quickly from the staggering implications of this networked biodestiny to the more psychologically manageable ethics of individual responsibility. But how does this transition work, exactly? What are its politics? For me the driving questions of environmental humanities are precisely these. Let me sketch how three of post-Fukushima Japan’s most interesting works of literature take them up.

Zoe as Psilocybin: Hayashi Kyoko, From Trinity to Trinity

There is a moment in two of the most beautifully translated post-Fukushima novels that resonates with an anecdote from Michael Pollan’s 2018 book How to Change Your Mind. Pollan describes Iraq war veterans who, guided by a psychotherapist, use psychedelics to return to scenes of trauma and work them through. It is a curious phenomenon. Pollan says the drug acts as an analgesic, blunting the force of what would otherwise be too painful to recall. But he also says that without the drug the soldier might never gain access. Psilocybin throws open the door to sensation and accelerates engagement. In Kimura Yusuke’s (1970–) Sacred Cesium Ground (Seichi shīesu 聖地Cs; 2014) and Hayashi Kyoko’s (1930–2017) From Trinity to Trinity (Toriniti kara toriniti トリニティからトリニティへ; 2000), the drug in question is irradiated landscape, and the effect is equally complex.

Let’s look first at From Trinity to Trinity. Hayashi Kyoko survived the bombing of Nagasaki at a Mitsubishi munitions plant where she was conscripted as a high school student. From the 1970s to the 1990s she was a leading contributor to the genre known in Japan as genbaku bungaku 原爆文学 or atomic bomb literature. By the eve of the twenty-first century, the autobiographical narrator in Trinity is ready to lay her burden down. Traveling to the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the bomb dropped on Nagasaki was developed, and to the Trinity Site, where it was tested, she says she wants to sever her ties with August Ninth and make ground zero in New Mexico the terminus for her journey as a hibakusha 被曝者, or atomic bomb victim. It is a highly conceptual move.

Ten years earlier she and a high school friend had promised to walk a pilgrimage around a famous circuit of temples to mark their sixtieth birthdays, which in the Chinese zodiac symbolize a full sexagenary cycle. Then the friend, a fellow hibakusha, fell ill, and the journey to New Mexico became its substitute. We
sense that this trip is even more carefully designed to contain in a circle what grows increasingly burdensome when experienced in linear time:⁹

Trinity was the departure point of my August Ninth. It was also the terminal point for me as a hibakusha: from Trinity to Trinity.

If I made a full revolution, I could encircle August Ninth in the loop of my lifespan. Unable to cut ties, I could still end things by enveloping them.¹⁰

At first the story traces a similar pattern, starting wide and tightening. Mindful of New Mexico’s racial and colonial history, the narrator introduces Indigenous tribes, sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors, eighteenth-century friars and missionaries, nineteenth-century British explorers, and contemporary Latinx and Native American populations before arriving at commemorative Manhattan Project sites where there are only proud white veterans and their families. Mindful as well of New Mexico’s ecology, she brings us through wheat-colored grasslands, red clay mesas, the muddy Rio Grande River, ducks, scorpions, and rattlesnakes before narrowing her focus to the Trinity Site’s short list of inhabitants: only pebbles, glass fragments, flowers, soil, and sand.

Then suddenly her careful spatial strategy gives way to an unforeseen intrusion. Standing in the deadened silence of Trinity’s scorched landscape, the narrator is overcome by waves of intensity pressing in on her from the ground underfoot, from the red mountain slopes on the horizon, and from the brown wilderness between. “Until then I thought the first victims of nuclear damage on earth were us humans,” she realizes, “but we had forebears [senpai 先輩] here, unable to weep or cry out.”¹¹ The epiphany erases her identification as a nuclear victim and allows her to return to a version of herself who had never been bombed. Then she experiences the bombing for the first time, in New Mexico, and finds herself shedding tears she never shed in Nagasaki. It is an extraordinary moment. By becoming her forebears, the Trinity Site’s near pebbles and far mountains, tiny grasses and expansive sky allow her to return to “the landscape of the day [she] escaped.”¹² Far from being overwhelmed, she is able to weep tears on their behalf. It is as if the weight of the bomb has been borne by New Mexico’s physicality itself, out and up in a whoosh that mimics the blast, and then settles back, lighter, in her psyche.

The scene makes little sense if we conceive of life the way Agamben does when he defines biopower as what constantly threatens to reduce bios, political life, to zoe, living animality.¹³ Zoe in his scheme is understood negatively, as what the state has the power to reduce the population to. In contrast, zoe in Hayashi Kyoko’s New Mexico is vital and expansive. It presses in on the narrator with the lesson that even the most scorched-looking landscape is filled with forebears still connected to those who live now and those who will live in the future. It prevents her from making the nuclear event smaller, from squeezing it shut, and catches...
her up in a massive spatial and temporal expansion that helps her live, write, and think: zoe provokes bios and conveys it. Counterintuitively, ionizing radiation turns out to be a fellow traveler to life’s generative force, pulsing its way not just through living cells but through every element in the landscape that interacts with its isotopes. As Rosi Braidotti points out in her critique of Agamben, zoe is not just some mindless exterior to the social nexus. It inhabits bios with near-hallucinogenic force.

I call From Trinity to Trinity a post-Fukushima novel even though it was published in 2000 because it became the first part of a two-part work in 2013 when Hayashi published Another Letter to Rui. Rui is the friend to whom a portion of Trinity is addressed, a non-hibakusha who accuses the narrator of traveling to New Mexico out of an overinvestment in all things nuclear. Thirteen years later, Fukushima proved there could be no such thing. Indeed, Another Letter to Rui is a powerful indictment of ongoing underinvestment. Why is the government deflecting responsibility and minimizing health concerns? “Should I go to Fukushima and tell mothers how we treated the radiation-sickness pustules on our arms and legs?” asks the narrator, “with poultices made from persimmon leaves and dokudami flowers?” Incredulous that cutting-edge nuclear science produces sicknesses for which there are still only folk remedies, she falls into a depression and emerges only at the end of the text. She joins a crowd of eighty thousand antinuclear protesters at Yoyogi Park in Tokyo and is swept up in its “loving attachment to life” (inochi e no shibo). Although Another Letter to Rui is the better known of the two Rui texts—activist and writer Ōe Kenzaburō would quote from it at a subsequent antinuclear rally—I find it significant that one of the post-Fukushima genre’s most interesting young writers, Kimura Yusuke (1970–), builds his postdisaster masterpiece around a reference to the life force that inheres not in the protest scene of Another Letter but in the forebears scene in Trinity. As if in homage to Hayashi’s 2000 novella, Kimura’s 2014 novel Sacred Cesium Ground reenacts the moment in Trinity when irradiated landscape hits the protagonist’s bloodstream like a drug.

Nature Abhors a State of Exception: Kimura Yusuke, Sacred Cesium Ground

Sacred Cesium Ground takes place at a fictionalized version of real-life cattle farmer Yoshizawa Masami’s “Ranch of Hope” in the town of Namie, fourteen kilometers from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In March 2011, when the Japanese government issued orders to evacuate all humans and cull all cattle, Yoshizawa refused, attracting a flood of media attention and a stream of volunteers to help run the ranch. Sacred Cesium Ground steals the spotlight from Yoshizawa, here named Sendō, and shines it instead on a character of Kimura’s creation, a woman volunteer named Nishino. It is Nishino who finds her mental health radically reoriented by a communion with “cesium ground.”
Let’s look first at her foil, Sendo. The novel makes him the mouthpiece for a solid biopolitical critique of Japan’s Fukushima recovery policy. He keeps abandoned cattle alive to protest the bare life to which the exclusion zone’s human population has now also been reduced. Stripped of their property rights, their communities broken by haphazard relocation policies, his people have no legal recourse; the zone is a classic “state of exception.” Sendo is right, of course. Where the novel betrays its misgivings about the limits of critique is in poking fun at him as an unreformed student radical. A veteran of the movement in the 1970s, he regales his volunteers at the ranch with speeches that smack of the self-righteous rigidity that drove Japan’s New Left into the ground four decades earlier. Meanwhile, Sendo’s mental health is excellent. Ignoring radiation readings twenty-two times higher than the legal limit, he calls his postmeltdown notoriety the “ultimate stage” and ramps up his rhetoric accordingly.

In contrast, Nishino is in fragile mental health, having volunteered in defiance of an abusive husband who says the radiation will ruin her “functionality as a woman.” Inspired by footage from documentaries about the Ranch of Hope, she is drawn in particular to the image of a newborn calf that refused to stop sucking its dead mother. In the first days after the meltdowns, when even resisters like Sendo had to evacuate, hundreds of dairy and beef cattle had starved. At the climax of Sacred Cesium Ground, Nishino wanders off to find the graveyard where their carcasses are stacked and falls headlong into a slurry of mud, cow shit, cow urine, radiation, and decomposing cow bodies. The slurry transports her to her childhood and to being physically abused by her father after her mother died. Thinking about the calf’s putrid cow mother, its massive body transported by tiny maggots, she realizes she has no memory of her own mother’s body, only her father’s voice berating her. But as she struggles, she finds herself overwhelmed not with the fear of death but with the clamor of life. It is as if the swarm of maggots that consumed the calf’s mother’s body had honored it by repurposing and enlarging it. In the mud-shit Nishino realizes that her own “functionality as a woman” is not to make babies but to make kin, Donna Haraway style, with the life forces that have and will have flowed through this “sacred cesium ground.”

Again the movement of radiation mimics the movement of life through bodies, becoming sacred through a relation not of transcendence but of total immanence. No doubt this is key to how zoe can serve as an analgesic. It forces the narrator to understand herself impersonally, as but one link in a vital chain that can share her burden: “Cesium soil, cesium grass, cesium trees, cesium water, cesium air, cesium cattle. And cesium me.” Although radiation brings these relations into relief, it too is immanent rather than transcendent, undercutting the anthropocentric logic that humanity achieved a new order of mastery over
the material world when it discovered nuclear fusion. As Ronchi writes in his response to Agamben, “In nature there are no autonomous regions that constitute an exception.”

“No” to Mediocre Freedom, “Yes” to Being Worthy of the Event: 
Kobayashi Erika, *Breakfast with Madame Curie*

The protagonists we have met so far are relieved to encounter *zoe* because it helps redistribute the enormity of something with which they are already struggling. In Kobayashi Erika’s 小林エリカ (1978–) novel *Breakfast with Madame Curie* (マダム・キュリーと朝食を; 2014), in contrast, the protagonists face *zoe* in the present and the future, where its threat looms larger because sanity requires its disavowal. All four of Kobayashi’s protagonists have what became known pejoratively after Fukushima as “radiation brains,” brains that worry too much about radiation. Kobayashi makes it an aural sensitivity—the ability to hear *hikari no koe* 光の声 (voices of light). She also widens its historical frame, from the years after 2011 to the long arc of global nuclear history.

The four main characters are four generations of women in the same family. The oldest, Great Grandmother, hears the voices after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Her daughter, Grandmother, hears them after Chernobyl, together with her daughter, Mama. Mama’s daughter, Hina, hears them with all three of the women in her maternal line, as a baby born right after Fukushima. Far from stopping after the bombing or meltdown in question, each generation’s “voices of light” live on in soil, air, and food, ringing in their ears their whole lives through.

“Radiation on the brain” works as pun because the word for brain, *nō*, is part of the word for radiation, *hōshanō*. In Japan after 2011 it was useful for a government bent on minimizing health concerns and prioritizing economic recovery, particularly agricultural recovery. Those who worried openly about contaminated food could be accused of spreading *fūhyō higai* 風評被害 (harmful rumors). In her book *Radiation Brain Moms and Citizen Scientists*, sociologist Aya Hirata Kimura explains that many mothers attempted to avoid the accusation by becoming experts in the science of food monitoring. Raising money for state-of-the-art becquerel counters and authenticating their voices with data, they wanted to be taken seriously as scientists. As Kimura documents, however, although the government was happy to let mothers generate private data to quell their fears, its official line remained that anxiety about Fukushima health effects was itself the biggest Fukushima health effect. As if in response, Kobayashi’s novel asks what it would mean to embrace one’s “radiation brain” as such. What if *hōshanō* were a form of inevitable, collective mental ill health that each of us must learn to inhabit ethically? Like listening for the COVID cough?

The first person who attempts this ethical inhabitation is Great Grandmother. She conceives her daughter in a defensive act meant to drown out with sexual
moaning the voices that arrive in her Tokyo kitchen from Bikini Atoll on July 1, 1946. That was the day of Test Able, when Americans experimented not just on the fish and coral of the atoll but on 3,030 rats, 109 mice, 57 marmots, 176 goats, and 147 pigs strapped into decommissioned warships and exposed to a nuclear blast. Great Grandmother convinces herself that she alone can hear their pained bleating. To stop hearing them she paints her vagina with jellied kombu昆布 to accommodate a husband for whom she would otherwise not get wet. Her plan to leave behind the animals by making a human with another human is foiled, however, when she locks eyes the neighborhood alley cat while having sex. The coincidence opens her to a lifetime of feline kinship, as she bribes first this cat and then many others to “keep her secret”—the secret of hearing radiation. Preparing them fish, meat, gleaming saucepans, and cookbooks opened to specific recipes, she is convinced that cats are gourmands who cook elaborate meals in the kitchens of absent humans. It is a crack-up, to be sure, but a deeply ethical one. Unable to ignore the animal suffering caused by nuclear fury, she splits her psyche into two distinct lines: a crazy, animal kin line, full of fear and intensity, and a “sane” human kin line, full of post-war silence and denial.

The daughter she conceives on the day of Test Able inhabits the latter line. This daughter, who goes by the name Grandmother in the novel, can also hear “voices of light.” But Grandmother takes the less ethical, more common path in postwar Japan, drowning them out with affluence and, in her case, classical music. This is how Breakfast with Madame Curie sets the stage for third-generation Mama to heal the rift between an animal madness of nuclear attunement and a human “sanity” of nuclear disavowal.

How she does it is a question the text answers at the level of form by presenting a collection of separate narratives from separate narrators. This confounds readers at first. Why are some sections of the novel narrated by a cat? Why do others present factual outlines of different chapters from global electronuclear history? The cat-narrated and fact-oriented narratives turn out to be Mama’s creations. Gradually readers realize that, having devoted her life to studying the history of electronuclear cruelty, Mama died when Hina was ten and left a set of Dictaphone recordings full of anecdotes about the scientists who unleashed it, focusing heavily on Thomas Edison and early X rays. These are what appear verbatim in the novel as the factual historical sketches. Even more gradually, readers realize that the cat adventure is a novel Mama wrote for Hina. Knowing she was about to die of cancer, wanting to leave a guide for living that her daughter could unpack over many decades of growing up without a mother, she spun the histories from her voice memos into the tale of a female cat who learns from Marie Curie’s own cat how to time travel by eating radioactive food. Like the narrators in Hayashi’s From Trinity to Trinity and Kimura’s Sacred Cesium Ground, the cat narrator in Mama’s novel-within-a-novel experiences radiation as a kind of drug.
It opens her mind to the past and future and floods her body with overwhelming intensity. How can it be borne? Kitty becomes something of a junkie in the process of figuring it out, hurling herself headlong into one cesium-fueled journey after another before achieving a semblance of equilibrium by means of a daring cross-species love affair with a dog(!!).

What kind of guide for living is this? The reason *Breakfast with Madame Curie* lends itself so well to an environmental humanities reading is that it answers, A deeply ethical kind! Mama is encouraging her daughter to make kin with all these animals, all this intensity, all this madness, all this addiction. But she is doing it in a work of art so historically competent and affectively grand that it serves the same analgesic function as the landscapes: It spreads as it expands. It lightens the intensity. It impersonalizes. It’s even funny! The cat novel prompts Hina to understand that freedom from the nuclear, from the unjust, from the ecotoxic, is not the only kind of freedom worth seeking. She is also free to acknowledge how inextricably she is caught up in the global nuclear event and to experiment with what this means for her personal powers of navigation.

One could argue this is the same point Ronchi puts forward, contra Agamben, after COVID. When Agamben urges Italians to reject the lockdown’s “limitations of freedom,” including freedom of movement and the freedom to attend schools, museums, churches, political meetings, and sporting events, Ronchi asks what this freedom can possibly mean if it is not premised on the virus’s real relation to our bodies:

Suddenly we feel we are being dragged by something that is overpowering, which grows in the silence of our organs, ignoring our will. . . . [Any] idea of freedom is certainly mediocre if it conflicts with the inevitability of what takes place. Among the virtues of the virus, we must also mention its ability to generate a more sober idea of freedom: the freedom achieved in doing something about what destiny does to us. To be free is to do what must be done in a specific situation.23

Ronchi would love the novel Mama wrote for Hina because it embraces her destiny and the destiny of all the women on her maternal line. For them hearing “voices of light” is precisely “the inevitability of what takes place.” There’s no getting around it. The cat novel celebrates finding freedom within the nuclear event, by understanding its magnitude and looking for a way to make it select in her something equally great. When he speaks of “doing something about what destiny does to us,” Ronchi is channeling Gilles Deleuze’s point that freedom comes not from resenting the event or figuring out whose fault it is but from taking one’s place within it and trying not to crack up. “Either ethics makes no sense at all or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”24
Nothing to Do but Care: Kimura Saeko, *Theory of Post-3.11 Literature*

In Japan and globally, the most important scholar writing on post-Fukushima literature is Kimura Saeko, who published *Theory of Post-3.11 Literature* (Shinsaigo bungaku ron: Atarashii Nihon bungaku no tame ni 震災後文学論:あたらしい日本文学のために) in 2013 and *Theory of Post-3.11 Literature after That* (Sono go no shinsaigo bungaku ron その後の震災後文学論) in 2018. Kimura Saeko argues that Fukushima novels return to nothing more frequently than the problem of anxiety, which haunts them like it haunts all of us, as the mystery of what ionizing radiation actually does to human bodies:

Consider the argument that even if people continue to live in Fukushima and eat food grown there, there is not enough radioactive exposure to prevent survival. This argument is completely meaningless for the simple reason that no one is capable of accurately measuring nuclear harm. The only thing on which both sides agree, both those who say Fukushima is safe and those who take the view that it is dangerous, is that radiation’s being invisible, imperceptible and ominous is intolerable. People simply cannot endure this inchoate anxiety [得体の知れない不安] every time they eat a meal. They appear to take opposite views, but the pendulum is simply swinging in opposite directions after being set in motion by one and the same inchoate anxiety [得体の知れない不安].

So the problem is amorphous anxiety [得体の知れない不安]. This is what “Fukushima” has wrought; it is the crux of “Fukushima.”

Kimura Saeko documents the ghostly presence of radiation-fueled anxiety not only in literature but also in cinema, theater, art, and photography. She notes that sometimes it is named but often it is not. As scholars, she says, our job is not only to perform this naming but also to resist the way radiation’s zettaisei 绝対性, its absoluteness, has produced in Japan’s intelligentsia the same schizophrenia she describes at Fukushima meal times, as one faction swears they have forgotten all about it and the other speaks of it incessantly, all while no one knows what it is.

In the three novels I discuss here, the work of naming is done by the texts themselves. Their protagonists flip the script described by Kimura Saeko, agreeing that radiation is ominous but refusing to agree that it has no material reality beyond anxiety. For them the pendular swings between acceptance and denial are driven not by a ghostly absence but by a real physical presence, immanent to life. One either acknowledges it or not, and if one does, it is just as intolerable as Kimura Saeko suggests—at every meal, with every breath. The trick is to ask whether the encounter with this hallucinogenic, intolerable force can also be productive. We have seen how one of its productive roles is to serve as a painkiller. *Endorphin* is probably a better word, since it blunts by flooding, not minimizing. We have paid less attention to another of its productive roles, which is death.
address death in closing, using the figure of Mama in *Breakfast with Madame Curie* to bring the conversation back to COVID.

*Bbreakfast with Madame Curie* hints that Mama died as a result of her nuclear research. We see her undergoing treatments for the kinds of cancers that result most commonly from internal radiation: leukemia, breast, lung. We do not know which one she has. We only know that she contracted it by caring too much about our collective nuclear destiny. In this sense perhaps we can say that she plays the role of an “essential worker.” Traveling, studying, reading, writing, eating, and breathing, she never finds the origin or endpoint of electronuclear forces. The more she looks, the more ubiquitous they turn out to be. The quest exposes her to what we might call a massive “viral load,” both physically, along with everyone else (her cat novel reveals that every third box lunch at the convenience store is pulsing with cesium-137), and psychically, in a mental space she shares with her daughter via the cat novel. Like the many care workers we lost to COVID, Mama cannot accept our collective ignorance about the scientific and social effects of the force she studies. It may be a truism, in Kimura Saeko’s words, that “no one is capable of accurately measuring nuclear harm.” But Mama cares too much not to ask why no one is capable. Meanwhile, she measures it in her own way with her own body and mind, just like so many health care workers in COVID wards have measured it with theirs.

That their deaths are not meaningless we know from the second sense in which Mama and her COVID comrades are care workers. When Mama takes care of her mental health by writing a novel, we might say she adopts the strategy advocated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, where they argue that philosophers become worthy of events through concepts, scientists through functions, and artists through affects and percepts. The cat novel is Mama’s way of taming the enormity of what she encounters by channeling it into affects. To leave it as her legacy is to say to her daughter, Follow my example! You make art too! Or science! Or philosophy! Just make something, and make it last. This is a way to care for yourself! We might draw an analogy, scientifically, to how essential workers have left us the legacy of their careful observations during the COVID pandemic: the measurements and functions that have already become new treatment protocols, new medical science. The parallel helps us appreciate that *Breakfast with Madame Curie* is an environmental humanities novel in much the same way COVID is an environmental humanities pandemic. They are both tales of a material intrusion that forces us to think, object, and create. Teaching them this way does not allow us to guarantee our students a life, a *zoe*, not premised on the possibility of death. But it does allow us to teach an ethics of responsibility that comes from letting our minds be gathered by “what destiny does to us.” It allows us to disinherit amorphous anxiety in favor of art, philosophy, and science.
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Notes
1 Agamben, “Invention of an Epidemic.” Originally published online at the journal’s website, this piece and “Clarifications” by Agamben are still at the site, but responses by Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, Sergio Benvenuto, Divya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan, Rocco Ronchi, and Massimo De Carolis have been taken down in preparation for print publication. As of this writing, a PDF of the original special issue is at www.professores.uff.br/ricardobasbaum/wp-content/uploads/sites/164/2020/04/Philo_Coronavirus-and-philosophers-European-Journal-of-Psychoanalysis.pdf.
2 Kleinert, “Foucault on the Corona Virus,” 0:11–0:30.
4 Ronchi, “Virtues of the Virus.”
5 Stengers, In Catastrophic Times, 70.
6 Pollan, How to Change Your Mind, 375–89.
7 For an overview of the genre, see Treat, Writing Ground Zero. For an essay on Hayashi, time, and mental health (retelling Nagasaki as “mantra”), see Bhownik, “Temporal Discontinuity.”
8 The narrator and her friend were to have visited the eighty-eight temples known as the Shikoku Henro. The narrator’s first substitute is her solo journey to thirty-three temples on the Miura Peninsula, described in Hayashi’s 1999 novella Nagai jikan o kaketa ningen no keiken (The Experience of Someone Who Took a Long Time). In this sense the Trinity trip is a third attempt.
9 Karen Barad’s close reading of Hayashi’s From Trinity to Trinity makes a related point: that the narrator’s New Mexico journey challenges “the unilinear nature of time itself” (“Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness,” 207). Barad emphasizes the nuclear element of Hayashi’s treatment of time, which she says accords with quantum mechanics’ undoing of classical physics’ belief in “the void” and thus challenges the erasure of colonial and ecological suffering in nuclear New Mexico.
10 Hayashi, Toriniti kara Toriniti e, 131. The original has twice been translated into English, first by literature scholar Kyoko Selden in 2008 and again by Hayashi’s friend, performance artist Eiko Otake, in 2010. My translation is modified from Selden’s 2008 translation, “From Trinity,” 4; and Otake’s 2010 translation, From Trinity, 11.
11 Selden translates hibakusha no senpai (被爆者の先輩) as “elderly victims” (23). Otake uses “my senior hibakusha.” I use “forebears” to emphasize the genealogical element and also the resonance of the English “to bear,” as in to tolerate. In everyday Japanese senpai means someone who rose through the ranks of the same tradition or institution (club, university, etc.) before the speaker.
12 Hayashi, Toriniti kara Toriniti e, 166; Hayashi, “From Trinity” (2008), 23; Hayashi, From Trinity (2010), 51.
13 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 1–12.
14 Braidotti, Transpositions, 37.
References


