

Article

Atomic Metaphors, Victims, and the Contestations of Nuclear Discourse

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Abstract: Atomic metaphors permeated daily life as the world reacted to the atomic bombings of Japan and the nuclear threat of the Cold War. These metaphors reveal a widespread sense of ownership of atomic narratives and public conceptions of victimhood that are often divorced from actual nuclear victims. Japan faced the reality of the nuclear again in 2011 when three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant exploded, spreading toxic radiation far and wide. Rather than turn to religion to make sense of the traumatic destruction and existential threat of this invisible force, the Japanese have processed the catastrophe through a secular discussion of victimhood. In the decade since the Fukushima accident, the discourse about victims in Japan has narrowed to emphasize the authority of the *tōjisha*—victims with direct experience of the disaster—to tell their story. The debate over narrative ownership has challenged the literary community, and post-disaster Japanese literature is an important site of imaginative exploration of this victimhood. Using the theories of Jean-Luc Nancy and Michael Rothberg, this article examines collective memory and the catastrophic equivalence of Hiroshima and Fukushima, as well as the Japanese terminology for victims, in order to provide insight into the struggles for ownership of atomic narratives. Rather than proposing solutions, the article interrogates the ongoing literary controversy over the victim/non-victim divide.



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1. Introduction

The atomic emerged as a powerful, multivalent symbol in the postwar period, often used metaphorically to express the fear of nuclear victimhood. In Japan that victimhood became a reality yet again when a 9.0 earthquake struck Japan's northeastern region of Tōhoku on 11 March 2011. It triggered a record tsunami that swept destruction over the coastline and flooded the backup generators of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, creating meltdowns at three of the six reactors. Close to 20,000 people died and over 330,000 were displaced in the worst disaster in Japan's postwar era, the most severe nuclear accident since Chernobyl. How have the Japanese dealt with the tremendous destruction and trauma of this triple disaster and the ongoing invisible threat of radiation? They could have turned to Buddhist beliefs in their search for answers, like many in the Western world who have looked to religion when faced with catastrophic loss and the existential threat of the atomic.¹ Buddhism would seem an apt choice since disasters are “further proof of the inevitability of suffering based on the fundamental Buddhist insight of the impermanence of all things” (Victoria 2012). Author Murakami Haruki invoked this Buddhist idea of impermanence or *mujō* in his acceptance speech for the International Catalunya Prize to explain why he and the Japanese keep living in one of the world's most seismically dangerous areas (H. Murakami 2011). While Buddhist temples were important sites for community support and for burying and mourning the disaster's dead, Buddhism, or religion in general, has not materialized as focal point in post-disaster Japanese society. As

one critic stated: “It is safe to say that in considering the events of 11 March 2011 including the ongoing disaster at the Dai-ichi Fukushima nuclear power plant, Buddhism is not the first thing that comes to mind” (Victoria 2012).

This may seem surprising given the religious themes that emerged in Western fiction, as readers imagined themselves as victims in the wake of atomic disasters and the Cold War nuclear threat. In fact, poet John Canaday asserts that the most frequently used form for understanding the nuclear is the religious—in other words, “the bomb is like God” (Canaday 2010, p. 30). This comparison arises from their shared sense of omnipresence, mystery, inaccessibility, potent meanings, assured destruction, and our limited and secondhand knowledge of both (Canaday 2010, pp. 32–33). The lack of an obvious turn to religion does not mean that the Japanese have made their peace with this disaster. Rather, they continue to work through this trauma by turning their attention to secular questions of victimhood. Japan has a history of dealing with disaster and nuclear victims, but this is not just an issue for Japan. The atomic is a global threat, and the anxiety it creates is often displaced to narrative, be it religious or secular. As a way of thinking through the current debate in Japan, rather than discuss the facts of the disaster or the science of nuclear power plants, I turn to the pervasive symbolism of the atomic and an interrogation of how nuclear discourse takes account of victims. My primary focus is post-disaster Japanese literature, an important site of imaginative exploration of this victimhood.

A contestation over linguistic ownership and referentiality of the atomic experience has engulfed Japanese literature since 1945 and most recently in the years after the Fukushima accident in 2011. Unlike atomic-bomb fiction that was primarily penned by survivors, literature about the Fukushima accident was not so restricted, as evidenced by numerous novels, short stories, and poems written by those outside the affected area (See for example, (DiNitto 2019)). This literary florescence seemed to indicate a loosening of the ownership of atomic discourse in Japan. Yet in the intervening decade, public discourse has shifted to emphasize the authority of the *tōjisha*—victims with direct experience of the 2011 disaster—to tell their story. While the global spread of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi meltdowns would seem to allow for a wide-ranging definition of victim, in Japan the term has come to be used in a very narrow sense. The limiting scope of *tōjisha* discourse has had a silencing effect on Japanese writers and may have the unintended effect of erasing this theme from future literature.

This article examines the imaginative freedom and limitations of discursive expressions meant to capture the complexity of our atomic age. These shifts in usage and meaning reveal a complex and contradictory discourse evolving around our collective ideas about the nuclear, the widespread sense of ownership of atomic narratives, and public conceptions of victimhood. Some questions that arise in looking at the linguistic ownership of atomic discourse include: Who has the right to represent these events? Who is a victim? What is at stake in the contestation over atomic discourse? Given that the debate in Japan is ongoing, I do not presume to offer solutions to these quandaries. Rather, this article sheds light on the push and pull of atomic discourse itself, with specific attention paid to its circulation and tenor in post-Fukushima accident Japan. Literary, philosophical, and media responses to the Fukushima accident confirm that despite the desire of victims to pull back ownership of the nuclear experience and the hesitancy of writers, the power of the atomic inevitably expands into metaphor as a means to grasp that which we cannot see or understand. Rather than grapple with this invisible and incomprehensible threat through a religious lens, the Japanese have opted for a secular approach that retains an emphasis on the role of human responsibility.

2. From Victim to Bystander

While religious themes are mostly absent in post-disaster Japanese fiction, the title of one of the most famous post-Fukushima short stories would seem to indicate otherwise. Hiromi Kawakami’s (2012) has been translated into English as *God Bless You, 2011*, but the “God” in the translated title is misleading since her story references ancient Japan’s

animistic and pantheistic Shinto beliefs in the form of the indigenous non-human spirits or *kami*. However, Kawakami's story is arguably more about the physical trials and mental pangs of her characters living in an irradiated zone than it is about spiritualism or religiosity per se. Kawakami's story, a rewrite of her award-winning 1993 *God Bless You* (*Kamisama*), retained the original premise of the narrator taking a walk by the river with her neighbor, a bear, but shifted the setting to an irradiated no-go zone. In the new story, both the female narrator and the bear are radiation victims from an unnamed disaster. Kawakami's story, written from her home in Tokyo, was praised for being one of the earliest to address nuclear victims. The god of her title, the *kamisama*, appears in a line at the end of both versions of the story. Upon parting after their day together, the bear says: "May the bear god bestow his blessings on you." Back in her apartment that night the narrator admits: "I tried picturing what the bear god looked like, but it was beyond my imagination" (Kawakami 2012, p. 44). These lines are set against the backdrop of the gift of contaminated salted fish the bear gives to the narrator, and her nightly journaling of her estimated radiation exposure.

In the postscript published with the 2011 version, Kawakami expands on her reference to the gods who presided over nature in ancient Japan. Since radioactive uranium isotopes are found in nature, she wonders what the uranium gods think about humans breaking the laws of nature and putting the element to use for such destructive purposes. Kawakami's human protagonist in *Kamisama*, 2011 is unable to imagine the bear god, but the author does not have to imagine what happens when "humans break the laws of nature and turn gods into minions" (Kawakami 2012, p. 47). The Japanese lived this reality in 1945 and again in 2011. Rather than seeking comfort or blame in some higher being, Kawakami redirects the trauma and destruction of the 2011 disaster and Japan's dangerous embrace of the nuclear back to questions of human responsibility. In the postscript she asks: "Who built today's Japan if not me—and others like me?" (Kawakami 2012, p. 47). This displacement of the religious serves an important purpose in the national processing of trauma, as the Japanese struggled to understand their acceptance of nuclear power despite the horrors of 1945.

At the time *Kamisama*, 2011 was published, it cast an important light on the new lived reality of post-nuclear accident Japan and the plight of victims in the irradiated zone. While the story was not strictly autobiographical, Kawakami's commentary on victims a decade later came as a surprise. In a revealing editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* written in 2021 on the ten-year anniversary of the disaster, Kawakami confessed that she had reevaluated her own subject position and no longer felt she could legitimately call herself a victim (*tōjisha*).

In the editorial, Kawakami recalls her state of mind as she wrote *God Bless You*, 2011, one week after the disaster. Watching the reactor explosions on TV, she imagined she would soon be forced from her home in Tokyo, just as residents of Chernobyl had been twenty-five years earlier. She recalls feeling that "suddenly, everyday reality had been irrevocably changed." However, ten years later, she was not living an "altered everyday," but "the same old everyday" from before the disaster. Kawakami confessed: "When I wrote 'God Bless You, 2011' a week after the disaster, I thought I was a 'victim' (*tōjisha*) of the nuclear accident. But at some point I had unbeknownst to myself turned from a 'victim' into a 'bystander'" (Kawakami 2021). What changed in ten years to cause this reevaluation or to cause Kawakami to feel that her victim status was unwarranted? Kawakami's self-expulsion from the category of victim seems to rely on the unchanged nature of her everyday reality, but also on the shifting definition of victim.

Kawakami's shift from victim to bystander provides an entry point to examine the reactions of writers and thinkers to victim discourse in and around the ten-year anniversary of the 2011 disaster, and its impact on Japanese literature. Given Japan's history of atomic atrocity and its global repercussions, I plot a course from atomic metaphors to the controversial comparison of Hiroshima and Fukushima. From there I consider the different terms for victim in Japan, and conclude with a discussion of Japanese literary responses to victim narratives as secular attempts to understand the catastrophe and suffering caused by invisible forces of destruction.

3. Atomic Metaphors

The use of metaphorical language was morally condemned in the wake of the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, but atomic metaphors continue to thrive in popular culture.² What is the relationship between metaphorical discourse and actual victims? How have these metaphorical references been used? In *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*, Weart tracks the rise and fall of the nuclear as a topic in Western public discourse across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from atomic bombs to nuclear missiles to nuclear power plants. Fear of the atomic flooded popular culture and remained a touchstone for inciting public sentiment (Weart 2012). After the Second World War, the atomic emerged as a powerful, multivalent symbol, used less to help us understand the actual bombings and tests in Japan and the Pacific, and more as a means to explore other social and political anxieties. These metaphorical usages allowed for a separation of Americans from their role as perpetrators. During the Cold War, Americans rallied images of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to reverse roles and express their fears of becoming the target of an attack (Broderick and Jacobs 2012). Given the expansive and pliable nature of this atomic discourse, it is not surprising that after 9/11, Americans once again invoked the language of nuclear attack to express national victimhood. These metaphorical instances acted separate from considerations of the actual victims.

In 2011, the mushroom cloud emanating from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant reactor reanimated horrific memories of the unimaginable events sixty-six years earlier. As the threat of nuclear power plants reemerged into daily life, it seemed that the atomic would once again retreat from metaphor to the confines of narrative historicity, but this imagery, like radioactivity itself, defies containment. The most recent rallying of atomic discourse came with the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, as the Western media turned again to atomic metaphors in an attempt to capture the lightning speed and invisible nature of the deadly transmission. As it had in the past, the media exploited the language of the atomic for its ability to capture and evoke public dread. On 18 March 2020, a headline in *The Guardian* read “Covid-19 outbreak like a nuclear explosion, says archbishop of Canterbury—as it happened.” The explosive spread of the virus and the ubiquity of masks and PPE also recalled the spiraling contamination and mismanagement of the Chernobyl disaster from 1986. With its reputation for catastrophic mismanagement, Chernobyl made ready fodder for media critiques of then President Trump’s failure of leadership (Schmemmann 2020; Klaas 2020), but the virus, like radiation, also struck a personal note. The victim could be anyone, but these comparisons did not occasion a revisiting of the suffering of Chernobyl’s victims.

This comparison of COVID-19 and the nuclear offered a powerful means to comment on the pandemic, but it served to reduce the horrors of the atomic once again to metaphor. This was exactly the fear of atomic-bomb victims, who in their capacity as writers distrusted the medium of language to fully and faithfully represent an experience that defied representation. This example of the mutability of atomic language and representation is only the latest in a long history of invoking the nuclear and of its presence in literature and popular culture. It reveals a shared public consciousness for our atomic age where citizens the world over imagine themselves the victims of nuclear annihilation. This global definition of victim is not uncontroversial and relies on an at times uncomfortable calculus of victimhood as well as a collective idea of victim consciousness. That calculation can produce instances of inappropriate or even cruel metaphors when faced with actual victim suffering.

4. A Question of Equivalence: From Hiroshima to Fukushima

In *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy draws on Marx and theorizes that global capitalism threatens to homogenize catastrophes, making them all equivalent, but Nancy resists this capitalist calculation and comparisons between Auschwitz and Hiroshima or Hiroshima and Fukushima, warning the reader that “not all catastrophes are equivalent” (Nancy 2014, p. 3). Nancy focuses instead on

the incommensurability of these events. For Auschwitz and Hiroshima, their incommensurability lies in the threat of annihilation they posed to the human race. In that regard, Nancy argues that these events also “signify an annihilation of meaning” that destroys our ability to compare them (Nancy 2014, p. 13). Fukushima signifies yet something different with its contradictory potential to constitute both an existential threat and a banal incident, an expected if not inevitable outcome of the workings of capitalist nuclear technology to which we have become inured. While Nancy recognizes the “ferment of something shared” between the two Japanese catastrophes, he says “we must not in fact confuse the name Hiroshima—the target of enemy bombing—with that of Fukushima, a name in which are mingled several orders of natural and technological, political and economic phenomena” (Nancy 2014, pp. 13–14). Indeed, the conditions of the origins, victims, perpetrators, and source of radiation for Hiroshima and Fukushima must not be ignored. Yet, scholars and atomic bomb victims themselves have connected these two events for their global significance.

Similar to Nancy, there are voices in Japan that call for resisting such comparisons. Writer Kiyoshi Shigematsu is troubled by the correlation of the atomic bombs and the Fukushima meltdowns, as manifest in the post-disaster Japanese convention of writing “Fukushima” in the phonetic *katakana* script—reserved for foreign words or italic emphasis—rather than in its traditional Sino-Japanese characters. There are only two other cities that are regularly written in *katakana*: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³ Hence, Shigematsu argues that when Fukushima is written in *katakana* it becomes subsumed under the heading of “nuclear power” and the “atomic.” Despite his support for expanding the boundaries of the disaster beyond Japan, he fears that such action can turn into wordplay that allows for responsibility to be shirked. Additionally, he argues that this large scale makes it harder to see the actual pain, anger, and sadness borne by the residents of Fukushima (Shigematsu 2012, pp. 124–25).⁴

On the other side of the debate, scholars have affirmed the need to include Fukushima in a discussion of the atomic, because the accident at the Fukushima plant was a global event on the order of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one which threatens the future of humanity and easily exceeds national bounds (Kuroko 2013, p. 7). For atomic-bomb specialists and writers of atomic-bomb literature, the need to tie the nuclear to the atomic is vital given the historical struggles of anti-atomic-bomb movements to protest nuclear weapons, and of atomic-bomb victims to gain recognition and health benefits from a recalcitrant government.⁵ This argument pushes for recognition of the significance of the Fukushima accident for both its representation within Japan’s nuclear history and its global import. The catastrophic equivalence is complex but is also necessary if the aim is to reach beyond the local to create wider communities, recognize victims, or to speak of the atomic threat on a global scale.

Japanese writers employed the logic of equivalence within one year of the 2011 disaster, but for a purpose other than capitalist equivalence. Ryū Murakami compared the Japanese triple disaster to Auschwitz in his post-disaster short story *Little Eucalyptus Leaves* (Yūkari no chisa na ha 2012) when his semi-autobiographical narrator recalls a disposal and recycling site in Sendai, in the affected area, that he visited four months after the disaster.

“At the disposal site, the refuse was separated by category—concrete, metal, plastic, vehicles, appliances, lumber, scrap wood, dirt, textiles, and on and on. They were in enormous piles that called to mind the pyramids of Egypt. It was surreal . . . I began to feel that I had no business seeing this. It was a strange sort of *déjà vu*—reminding me of those captivating photographs of Auschwitz that had enraged and horrified me. I remembered one of a warehouse in which the possessions of gas chamber victims—shoes, clothing, jewelry, eyeglasses, even locks of hair—had been sorted into various piles” (R. Murakami 2012, p. 191).⁶

Murakami used this comparison to draw attention to the global import of the nuclear accident, and his evocation of an equivalence between the “natural disaster” of 2011 and

the atrocity of Auschwitz is provocative. While he does not refer specifically to the nuclear accident, his move from local to global through a calculus of catastrophic equivalence is of import to the shifts in atomic discourse. Returning to Nancy's equivalence, we can ask: what is at stake in discussing a genocide alongside a "disaster" that introduces an element of the accidental? Michael Rothberg's scholarship in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* helps us evaluate the viability of such comparisons. Rothberg is interested in moving beyond the impasse of two major competing scholarly trends that treat the Holocaust as either "absolute discontinuity"—emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust as something that cannot be transgressed by an act of comparison—or "complete continuity"—that erases "all lines of discontinuity between the genocide and other histories" (Rothberg 2009, pp. 113–114). Rothberg re-narrates the history of Holocaust memory not through competitive, but comparative memory, or as he terms it, "multidirectional" memory that is not a "zero-sum struggle" but memory that evolves within the public sphere as it confronts different histories of victimization (Rothberg 2009, p. 3). In Rothberg's view, the memory of the Holocaust does not erase the memory of other events, rather: "The emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories" (Rothberg 2009, p. 9). In his study, Rothberg investigates the intersection of the rise of Holocaust consciousness and the independence movements of former European colonies.

For Japanese Nobel laureate Kenzaburō Ōe, atomic memory also works in a comparative mode. Writing in the *New Yorker* on 28 March 2011, Ōe asserted that the construction of nuclear power plants in Japan was "the worst possible betrayal of the memory of Hiroshima's victims" (Ōe 2011). He grouped victims of the atomic bombs, nuclear testing in the Pacific, and nuclear power plant accidents as all victims of the same atomic menace. Ōe said: "One hopes that the accident at the Fukushima facility will allow the Japanese to reconnect with the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to recognize the danger of nuclear power, and to put an end to the illusion of the efficacy of deterrence that is advocated by nuclear powers" (Ōe 2011). Where Nancy sees difference in the "several orders of natural and technological, political and economic phenomena," Ōe sees an equivalence that may be challenging and controversial, but in the end is vital.

Ōe's sentiment was echoed by Nagasaki atomic-bomb victim and author Kyōko Hayashi. For her, equivalence is found in the very creation and existence of nuclear victims (*hibakusha*) themselves. Hayashi recognized the importance of connecting these atomic events on Japanese soil—atomic bombs and nuclear power plant accidents—especially as regards the birth of a new generation of nuclear victims. Hayashi spoke of the many *hibakusha* in her 2013 essay *To Rui, Once Again* (Futatabi Rui e). "We who were made *hibakusha* [atomic bomb victims] in the twentieth century spoke and wrote of our experience and lived our lives in the hope of being the last of this new race. But in the twenty-first century, our nation, our irradiated nation, has given birth to yet another generation of *hibakusha*" (nuclear victims) (Hayashi 2013, p. 13).⁷ In invoking the term *hibakusha*, she links the atomic bombs and nuclear meltdowns, and indicates a strong kinship between the victims, including the physical effects of radiation poisoning and poor treatment by the government. Her use of *hibakusha* is nuanced. She notes the difference in circumstance, or Nancy's "orders of phenomena," by means of the Sino-Japanese characters, or spelling, that she uses. The first spelling of *hibakusha* refers to victims of the atomic bomb and the second to those exposed to radiation from events like meltdowns, but Hayashi also uses the phonetic *katakana* script version which lends the term an inclusivity that not only encompasses victims in Japan, but nuclear victims worldwide.

Ōe and Hayashi argue for atomic memory as comparative and continuous. Translated into a formulation similar to Rothberg, we can say that atomic bomb memory in Japan necessarily haunts the articulation of the Fukushima accident. Below I examine some of the terminology used for victims in Japan to think through ownership via Rothberg's concepts of memory. In contrast to Ōe and Hayashi's expansiveness, the discourse of the *tōjisha* in Japan has come to function on a "logic of scarcity" that resists the continuity of a

Rothberg-style collective memory capable of engaging a larger body of victims (Rothberg 2009, p. 2).

5. Naming Victims and Narrative Ownership

In media and literary treatment of the 2011 disaster, numerous terms were used to describe the victims. In addition to *hibakusha* were *hisaisha*, *higaisha*, and *tōjisha*. These words work on a sliding scale from semantically the narrowest (*hibakusha*) to widest (*tōjisha*). In this section, I explain these terms and analyze them via the calculation of equivalence in order to explore narrative ownership of the atomic experience.

Unlike *hibakusha* which indicates a victim of radiation, *hisaisha* refers to a victim of an accident or disaster, and was readily used to encompass victims of all aspects of the 2011 triple disaster: earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdowns. By comparison, *higaisha* refers more broadly to victims who suffer from damage, injury or loss including from natural disasters, war, crimes, or terrorist attacks, and who have rights to legal restitution. Moving further outward, *tōjisha* is semantically the widest and refers to “interested parties” in negotiations, discussions, or conflict who have a direct connection to the event or issue. The term encompasses situations well beyond the disaster to include a range of legal proceedings, and can refer to either the victim or perpetrator. In the case of the 2011 disaster, this means either the victims or TEPCO, the company that operated the nuclear power plant. *Tōjisha* does not define the nature of the harm, but it does confine itself to those who are directly involved, or for whom the issue is directly relevant. In other words, invocation of *tōjisha* creates its opposite, the *hitōjisha* or non-victim.

The act of applying these terms to the victims of the 2011 disaster is complicated as it relates to the ownership of experience. There are reasons to group the victims from all three disasters together—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdowns—and to separate them—earthquake and tsunami vs. meltdowns.⁸ Author Gen’ichirō Takahashi lamented that the quake and tsunami are so different from the meltdowns that it is challenging to think about them together (Takahashi 2012, pp. 21–23), but, there are victims who experienced all three and for whom all four of the terms would apply. The idea of a direct or first-hand victim is somewhat easier to delineate in the case of the earthquake and tsunami which had a more limited geographical impact; however, as mentioned earlier, the radiation from the nuclear meltdowns spread well beyond Japan, creating a much larger group of first-hand victims, many in other parts of Japan or overseas who may have been unaware of their exposure. Even within the disaster area itself, the community of victims is fractured, with communication and trust breaking down over differences in compensation depending on the type of harm that affected the victim. One news story from 2021 highlights the way the victims continue to be divided by the separation resulting from assignments to different housing units for tsunami (city) vs. nuclear meltdowns (prefectural). The physical distance exacerbates the psychological divides of victim consciousness (Nihon Terebi 2021).

A Boolean search in Google showed that all four terms dramatically increased in internet usage between 3 November 2011 and 12 August 2012.⁹ Additionally, there was a multifold increase in 2021 which was likely due to the ten-year anniversary in 2020 that returned the disaster to the headlines. *Hibakusha* had the lowest number of hits of all four terms, which is not surprising. This label is especially uneasy and uncomfortable, and many victims of the nuclear meltdowns in Japan were reluctant to self-identify as *hibakusha* because of the social stigma and discrimination. People living near the reactor were seen as contaminated and faced discrimination when they left their home prefecture; they were barred from staying at inns and receiving medical care, and their children were bullied in school.¹⁰ It is a status much less likely to be occupied willingly. This is even evident in post-disaster fiction, where certain writers avoided the term; for example, Randy Taguchi used the more neutral *hisaisha* to refer to a character in her *Into the Zone* (Zōn ni te, 2013) who is clearly a *hibakusha* (Taguchi 2013, p. 11).¹¹

In comparison, *tōjisha* initially returned fewer internet results than *hibakusha* with 3960 in 2011 but increased to 51,300 by 2021.¹² The terms *higaisha* and *hisaisha* had higher rates of

internet usage, but *tōjisha*, has a valence that these other two terms lack. When the Japanese comment on how they are unable to speak about the 2011 disaster because they are not “victims,” they use the term *tōjisha*. One recent interview in the *Asahi Shimbun* sheds further light on the distinction given this term. Taisei Yamazaki, a victim who was a middle school student in one of the disaster areas in 2011, spoke of how the experience changed him from a “normal” person into someone with a “victim consciousness” (*tōjisha ishiki*). He asserts that even though one may be a *hisaisha* (disaster victim), they do not necessarily have this consciousness ((Higashi Nihon daishinsai 10nen) *Nani ga nokori, nani o nokosu ka* #4: ‘Tōjisha’ tte nan darō 2021). His comments point to a special status for the word *tōjisha*.

It was this term that Kawakami chose when discussing her victim status. Given her location in Tokyo at the time of the disaster, it makes a certain amount of sense that she would not have chosen one of the more semantically narrow terms. She does not refer to herself as *hibakusha*, *hisaisha* or *higaisha*; however, her status as *tōjisha* was only temporary. When she initially thought of herself as *tōjisha*, it was due to the fear of what might happen with the nuclear situation that could deeply affect her everyday reality. When that reality did not change, she rejected the self-identification of *tōjisha*. Her decision to choose the term *tōjisha* was also related to her position as a writer who was narrating the experience of being a disaster victim. With her external circumstances unchanged, Kawakami felt she could no longer legitimately narrate that experience. In this sense, *tōjisha* rejects catastrophic equivalence. It defines those who are involved and opposes them to the *hitōjisha* or “non-victim.” This has created a gulf between the victims and “bystanders” (*bōkansha*) or “outsiders” (*yosomono*). Despite its wide semantic range, *tōjisha* works on a “logic of scarcity.” The term has come to represent a crisis of representation in Japan referred to as the “*tōjisha* dilemma” (Komatsu 2019). In the next section I look at the reactions of Japanese writers to this crisis, and their ideas about possible solutions.

6. Expressing Atomic Victimhood

Japanese writers continue to struggle with *tōjisha* discourse, namely with the question of who can or should write about the 2011 disaster. Award-winning author Keiichirō Hirano spoke of the *tōjisha* controversy in Japanese literary circles in a talk he gave for the Japan Pen Club on the ten-year anniversary of the 2011 disaster.¹³ Hirano notes that the Japanese have come to conceptually distinguish the *tōjisha* (victim) from the *hitōjisha* (non-victim). Some victims have proposed that the writing of the disaster experience should be limited to the *tōjisha*. For Hirano, this would mean that outsiders (writers like himself) cannot take up the disaster as a fictional topic. When Hirano spoke with survivors, he was told there are things he cannot understand as a *hitōjisha*, and that is the position from which he should write. On one level Hirano accepts the boundary between victim and non-victim, but he reminds the audience that literature has a long history of writing about individuals who have experienced disasters, war, etc., suggesting there is a role for literature in narrating the victim experience.

Given the historical role of artists in interpreting disasters, it is not surprising that in the days and months following the disaster, many writers (and artists and filmmakers) in the Tokyo area traveled to the disaster area to collect material and experience it for themselves. For many this was a way of gaining a foothold from which to speak. Similar to Kawakami, many living outside the disaster area felt that they were also victims. Novelist Arata Tendō argued that it was the job of the novelist to give expression to the victims overlooked by mass media for not fitting their stereotypes—namely of victims who have made full recoveries—and help readers understand their experiences (Tendō 2021). Many writers argued that the novel was the only means to depict the scale of the disaster, even as they were creatively challenged by it. It is worth noting again that with minor exceptions like Kawakami, writers did not seek recourse in the language or imagery of religion.

A primary concern in all these literary experiments, mostly by non-first-hand victims or *hitōjisha*, is artistic misappropriation. This was the case in 2008 when the performance art collective Chim↑Pom wrote the word *pika* with the exhaust of a small plane in the sky

over Hiroshima. The word, a reference to the flash-roar (*pika-don*) of the atomic bombs, set off controversy among Hiroshima's citizens who were troubled by this insensitive and unexpected reference to and reminder of a collective tragedy.¹⁴ Documentary filmmaker Mori Tatsuya and his creative team were criticized for the voyeuristic nature of their *311* (2011) filmed in the disaster areas. Their filmic quest emphasized the safety concerns of the team and invaded the privacy of disaster victims. In his fictional novel, *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure* (Umatachi yo, sore demo hikari wa muku de, 2016), writer and Fukushima native Hideo Furukawa (2016) has his protagonist hear a voice telling him to go to the disaster area and expose himself to radiation. Furukawa's fictional character misappropriates the *hibakusha* victim experience in desiring to willingly harm himself in this way.

Many writers found themselves deeply impacted by the events of 2011 regardless of where they were located at the time, and they speak of it as a watershed moment in the nation's history. In an essay, Gen'ichirō Takahashi asked readers if they didn't all feel as Kawakami did, that the world around them had completely changed (Takahashi 2012, p. 116). Despite a return to normalcy, Takahashi felt something was still amiss or had completely shifted: "A huge disaster happened that day, in other words, after that day, there was a change in me. And that change was felt not just by me, but by many others" (Takahashi 2012, p. 150). The change Takahashi speaks of is a transformational experience of the self, not alone but as a community. In other words, many writers saw the disaster as not having affected only those who experienced it first-hand, but the larger collective.

Does or can Kawakami's story reflect this sense of collective experience? Or does it reflect only the experience of a single *tōjisha*? On one level, the story is highly personal and individualized. The reader learns the backstory of the narrator and bear and their individual responses to the disaster. The original story came out of Kawakami's own experience raising her young son and feeling out of synch with the world. On another level, it is possible to see the narrator and bear metaphorically representing a number of subject positions—a human or animal victim (*tōjisha*) of the Fukushima meltdowns, or a social outsider—be it someone of foreign national origin or someone who has difficulty fitting into Japanese society. Kawakami says when she rewrote the story she did not mention the name of the Fukushima plant because surely there would be another accident in the future that would affect us all. The relationship between the woman and the bear emphasizes their differences—her humanity and his animality—but also their shared experience as nuclear victims.

7. Conclusions

What are the options open to Japanese authors who want to write about the disaster? Should writers follow the suggestions made to Hirano to stop writing about events for which they lack first-hand experience? If this were to happen, would those events fade into obscurity, even faster than the already are? Or would we learn of them only through stereotypical representations in the mainstream media that emphasize recovery and gloss over ongoing problems faced by affected residents? Should writers cede to the pressure of "correctness" that threatens to censor artistic expression, and allow society to decide on appropriate topics for literature?¹⁵ Are there other solutions? Does comparative memory necessarily have to be threatening to the immediate victims? Hirano proposed a new term of "quasi-survivors" (*jun-tōjisha*) (Japan-Canada Literary Exchange | The Japan Foundation, Toronto 2021). He does not elaborate on this, but the term implies a middle ground position potentially available to writers. Thinking along similar lines, local Fukushima activist Riken Komatsu proposed the term "*kyōjisha*" or "ally," someone who can accompany or be with the victim while realizing their own limits. Komatsu's *kyōjisha* exists in the divide between the victim and the indifferent outsider and attempts to move beyond the hard boundary between victim and non-victim (Komatsu 2019). He sought a term that would show respect and affirmation of the victim experience, but would lower the stakes of involvement so that more people could participate.

Fictional literary works can also offer a middle path between victim and indifferent outsider. Drawing on the richness of literary language and metaphors, stories like Kawakami's capture the ambiguity, complexity, and controversy of the atomic experience. Kawakami's story does not offer clear answers, but neither does it necessarily have to usurp *tōjisha* authority. My point in this essay was not to propose solutions, but to offer insight to these debates that often yield to metaphor because of the complexity of the issues. The divisive world of the pro/anti-nuclear debate has no room for Kawakami's ambiguity, but contradictions and misunderstandings are the very stuff of metaphor, language, and our experience of the atomic. While metaphors risk betraying the veracity of first-hand victim narration or distracting readers away from actual victim suffering, they are suited to expressing relationships that resist causal narratives because they do not fix meaning. Atomic metaphors have proliferated in popular culture because their imaginative power helps us express what we lack the experience to understand (Canaday 2010, p. 30). While in the West religion has served as a site for answers to the existential challenge of the atomic, at this moment in Japanese history, it is the secular rather than the religious, the role of the human rather than the divine, that is dominating the discussion.

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Notes

- ¹ For the role of religion in American Cold War science fiction novels about nuclear apocalypse, see (Scheibach 2021).
- ² Adorno's assertion—"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—is the most famous, but Susan Sontag added the scourge of cancer to the list of things that should not be referred to metaphorically (Sontag 1978).
- ³ Okinawa is also often written in *katakana*. See for example, (Shindō 1999).
- ⁴ Shigematsu is speaking through a fictional alter-ego in his novel *Map of Hope: The Tale of 3/11* (Kibō no chizu: 3/11 kara hajimaru monogatari, 2012).
- ⁵ Many atomic-bomb victims have been denied government health care for their medical problems because of their inability to prove the cause was radiation. Ishikida writes about this and postwar legislation guaranteeing health care and medical allowances for atomic-bomb victims (Ishikida 2005, pp. 47–48).
- ⁶ The above translation is based on the English language version with minor revisions.
- ⁷ The translation above is my own from the original Japanese. The essay is also available in English translation, see *To Rui, Once Again* (Hayashi 2017).
- ⁸ For example see the discussion in *Fukushima Fiction* (DiNitto 2019, p. 2).
- ⁹ I ran separate Boolean searches in Google by year on each of the terms in the following configuration: "福島AND [each of the victim terms written in Sino-Japanese characters]." All terms showed significant increases when searched in Google for "all sources" and when the search parameters were limited to "news" sources. The number of hits for the "news" searches were lower in overall volume, but still very high in terms of percentage increase over time.
- ¹⁰ See *Newsweek*, 3 April 2011, as cited in Victoria.
- ¹¹ Some nuclear victims recognize the equivalent potential in the term *hibakusha* to reach beyond Japan to include global victims of nuclear bombs and testing, nuclear power plant accidents, and depleted uranium munitions. See for example Hitomi Kamanaka's film *Hibakusha at the End of the World* (Hibakusha, sekai no owari ni, Kamanaka 2003).
- ¹² The numbers above reflect a search for "all sources" in Google. The results for "news" sites only are 140 for 2011 and 4160 for 2021.
- ¹³ See, "Japan–Canada Literary Exchange The Impact of the Pandemic on Society and Creativity: Perspectives from Writers from Japan and Canada" The talks were sponsored by the Japan P.E.N. Club and The Japan Foundation, Toronto, and were made available online on 30 March 2021. <https://jftor.org/japan-canada-literary-exchange/>.
- ¹⁴ For more on this controversy see (Miyamoto 2017).
- ¹⁵ See the conversation between Azuma Hiroki and Takahashi (Nyūzu No Shinsō: Daishinsai to Bungaku No Yakuwari. Gesuto Takashashi Gen'ichirō 2012).

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