

Drawing Disaster: Reflecting on Six Years of the Popoki Friendship Story Project

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Abstract

This article reflects on six years of the Popoki Friendship Story project, a drawing project begun soon after the 2011 triple disasters in northeastern Japan. Unlike narratives of disaster focusing on the spectacular and research using positivist methodologies, the stories collected through this project center on feeling safe. The stories introduced here show the efficacy of art-making for disaster support, community building and disaster awareness education, suggesting that art-making and body/sensory memory are important for accessing alternative expressions of disaster. Expressions of body and sensory memory through art and art-making not only help the artist to reflect on her/his experience but also help others to achieve a greater understanding of what it means to *feel* safe. The stories also reflect that disaster erases some borders and creates new ones, and demonstrate that the experience of disaster is multidimensional over time and space. It is suggested that long-term support is necessary and that the alternative expressions collected over time are useful for disaster awareness and risk reduction education.

Keywords : Art-making, body/sensory memory, connection, disaster awareness, Great Northeast Japan Earthquake, Popoki Peace Project, Popoki Friendship Story, tsunami, narrative, stories

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“Moral imagination is the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.” (Lederach 2005: ix)

In a truly peaceful world, what might the aftermath of natural disaster look like? What lessons can be learned from the Great Northeast Japan Earthquake that can help our moral imagination of a more gentle, expressive and understanding world? Can the world of the Popoki Friendship Story project contribute to that learning? This article will attempt to respond to these questions.

The 11 March 2011 triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, nuclear meltdowns) is probably best known and remembered for the explosions and meltdowns that occurred in three of the reactors at the Fukushima No.1 Nuclear Power Station. The implications of the nuclear accident are grave and it will be years before it is under control. But the tsunami that reached as high as sixteen meters in some places also destroyed many communities along the coast of northeastern Japan, killing more than 20,000 people. Some 2000 people still remain missing. Today, more than six years later, people around the world remember the spectacle of the tsunami, but the communities it destroyed are largely forgotten by the outside world. Recovery is slow, and in the midst of predictions that an even bigger disaster will occur within thirty years, many individuals and communities are grappling with how to build/re-build and what it means to be safe.

Less than a month after the triple disasters, I went for the first of what would be many visits to the region devastated by the tsunami and began what became known as the Popoki Friendship Story project. While originally intended to be a support effort for the first months after the disaster, it has become an ongoing effort using art to support community building and share stories of disaster. The purpose of this article is to share this methodology, show the importance of art and narrative in post-disaster situations, emphasize the need for long term support and think about implications for the future. It will begin with an introduction to the project along with descriptions of some of the drawings and stories, followed by a discussion of our work as a feminist, narrative, community-building and disaster awareness education project. It will conclude with reflections of the work of these six years and the implications for the

future.

(1) The Popoki Friendship Story Project

Less than one month after the disaster, I was invited to join a group exploring possibilities for voluntary support in Miyagi Prefecture.¹ My contribution to this group was based on the work of the Popoki Peace Project which uses critical thinking and expression in working for peace.² In thinking about what Popoki could do in the disaster area, I wanted to create a space for children that would allow them to express their concerns but also be a place for sharing stories and interaction among children and adults, particularly their parents or guardians. My personal experience of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake taught me that body memory is important; even today my body responds with fear to sounds and sensations that are similar to those I experienced, even when I know that there is no reason to be afraid.

I wanted to make an inclusive place where all emotions - fear, grief, confusion, anger, joy - would be welcome. With such a big disaster, I knew that support would be necessary for a long time and that the burden of support would fall primarily on local agencies and volunteers. The program had to be easy for others to implement, help to promote communication and build connection, and be flexible enough to use under almost any circumstances and in different time frames, serving as a one-time diversion, repeated event or anything in between. Given the expense of transportation and Popoki's limited budget, it also had to be affordable. In short, it had to be: (1) based on Popoki's philosophy, theory and methodology; (2) multi-directional, allowing for connection over time and space rather than simply a one-way message of support to the disaster area; (3) focus on the local but also make the global visible; (4) open and accessible to anyone/everyone; (5) sustainable but flexible so that it could last for as long as necessary but respond to changing circumstances; and (6) inexpensive.

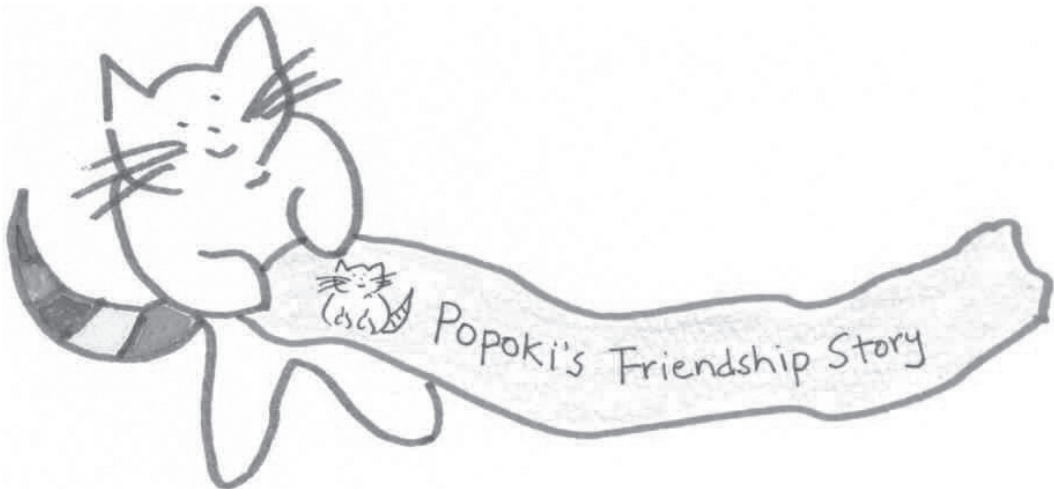
With help from other Popoki Peace Project members, I made a long cloth (45cm x 500cm) with a large drawing on one end of Popoki, the Peace Project's symbol cat with the rainbow tail (Photo 1), and bought some inexpensive colored pens. I simply stretched out the cloth in evacuation centers or wherever there were people gathered and invited them to draw. The length made it unusual and attractive, especially to children. The width made it possible to gather around and draw from any angle.

Because it was fabric rather than paper, we could adjust the length and configuration to meet any situation, drawing on the floor, tables, chairs, laps or any other available space. People gathered around the cloth, and as they drew, they talked to one another, sometimes for the first time.



(Photo 1: Popoki)

The drawing of Popoki immediately provided something to talk about and meant that even on fresh cloths, no one had to make the first marks. Because Popoki and the cloth drew people together and helped them to begin to communicate and share stories, we named it the Popoki Friendship Story project.³ A simple idea turned out to be an immensely powerful tool for community building.



(Photo 2: The Popoki Friendship Story logo)



(Photo 3: Kamaishi City 2011 After the 11 March 2011 disaster, the Popoki Peace Project thought about how to help. The solution: Peace cat Popoki on one end of a long cloth and felt pens. The Popoki Friendship Story was born.)



(Photo 4: Kamaishi City 2011 On the floor of a gym in a school-turned-evacuation center, children draw intently. Someone has drawn a tsunami on this cloth. The cloth becomes a space for everyone - children, adults, and volunteers - to draw, reflect, and share their stories.)



(Photo 5: 2011.8 Six cloths (30m.) filled with drawings at a festival for displaced children from Minami Sanriku. Photo: Saito Masashi)

At first, all we had to do was stretch out the cloth and people would come over to see what we were doing.⁴ Not only children, but also adults would come to look and to draw. Later, as people moved out of evacuation centers and into temporary housing, we could hold workshops for drawing in housing community centers or other central locations. As people's lives gradually became more settled, we began to hold exhibitions of previous drawings and offer opportunities to contribute new drawings, as well as holding story-making and other workshops. Exhibitions allowed people to find their own drawings on cloths made earlier. Looking at their own and other people's drawings, people would often share stories of how things have or have not changed since those drawings were made.⁵

The cloths travel in and outside of Japan and have drawings from throughout Japan as well as such diverse places as Britain, Marshall Islands, Czech Republic, Indonesia, Philippines, Fiji, Uganda and Guam. There are now more than 40 cloths, each of which bears stories of disaster, fear, safety and support. Every drawing has an artist, and every artist has a story. While the media gives us images of particular

kinds of ‘disaster survivors,’ these cloths bear witness to the full range of people affected directly and indirectly by disaster as well as the uncertainty of living in our modern world.⁶



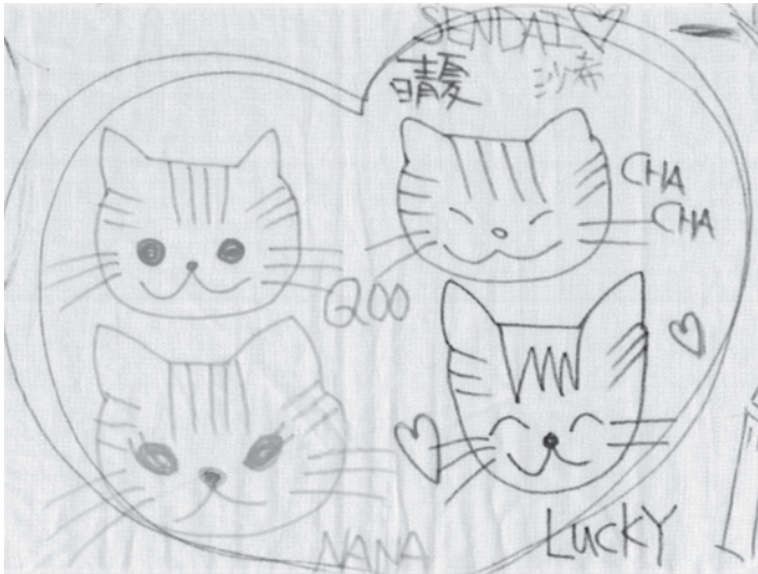
(Photo 6: Majuro 2015.12 The journey of the Popoki Friendship Story is not confined to Japan or disaster areas. Women from Bikini Island share their stories of yearning for home and of what makes them feel safe. Sharing stories across borders is an important part of our goal: building community, enhancing recovery and living peacefully together.)



(Photo 7: 2015.1 Students at the University of the South Pacific (Fiji) express their feelings and concerns about climate change.)

Some early drawings and stories

The first drawing was made by a high school student who smiled and laughed as she consulted with her grandmother and friends about how to draw four cats (Photo 8). They discussed the characteristics of each cat and how to write its name. Afterwards, the girl told me that the cats had been washed away in the tsunami. Her happy attitude had disguised her pain. It was soon after the disaster, and many people in the evacuation center were grieving for lost friends and loved ones. I realized that Popoki's cloth might have given her a chance to mourn for her lost pets at a time when it was difficult to do so publicly (Arahama, 2011.4).



(Photo 8: The cats)

The high school girl left, and soon a little girl came to draw (Photo 9). She quietly drew a face, crossed it out, and then drew it again, over and over (Photo 10). When asked who it was, she told us it was her teacher. According to her grandmother, the little girl did not appear to be seriously affected by her experience of the disaster and never spoke about the tsunami, living in a school gym, or not being able to attend her pre-school. Her drawing suggested otherwise (Arahama, 2011.4).

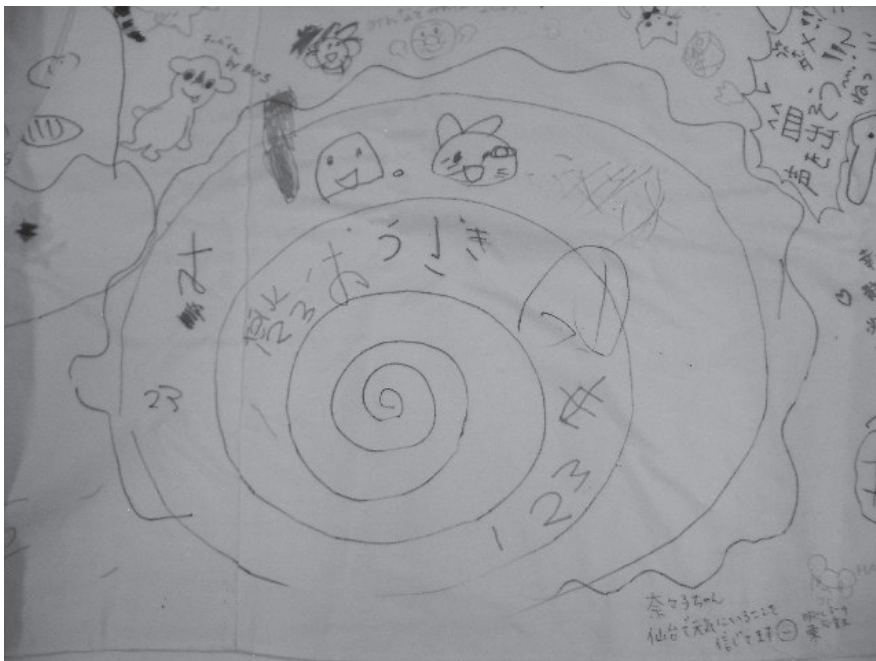


(Photo 9: The young artist)



(Photo 10: "Teacher")

Some of the early drawings revealed fear. One child drew a nuclear power plant; many drew what looked like a giant wave or tsunami. One drawing of a tsunami was so frightening that others were careful to leave space around it when they made other drawings. Eventually, a small child drew cats on it, and then others began to come close again (Photo 11). Several months after the tsunami, a five-year old boy contributed a line of super-heroes. They were small and, he told us, not very strong, but could change their shape and keep those around them safe. Did they do that by fighting? "No, they had long swords but they didn't hurt anyone. They just protected peoples' houses" (Otsuchi-cho Denshokan, 2011.8.17).



(Photo 11: "Tsunami")

Not all of the drawings were sad. On that first day, a group of lively junior and senior high school students began by drawing their “favorite things,” laughing as they drew all the foods they liked and contrasted them to their evacuation center diet of instant noodles and packaged food. They went on to draw animals and plants, all looking happy and safe, as well as their favorite super-heroes. In the atmosphere of communal living spaces after the disaster, there was little room for expressions of personal desire. Parents were busy trying to arrange living spaces and put their lives back together, and had little time for superheroes or zoo animals. The cloth gave these young people an opportunity to express their desires through art, and through laughing together (Arahama, 2011.4.10).

Of course, many people, especially men,⁷ were reluctant to draw themselves, but usually encouraged others, especially children, to participate. In contrast, adult volunteers, particularly women, after being assured that they were welcome to participate, seemed quite happy to draw, and many commented that the process of drawing had helped them to reflect on their experiences and to feel more grounded (Otsuchi-cho and Kamaishi-shi, 2011.5.2-5 and Sendai 2011.4.10). Some adult evacuees contributed written messages such as “I love Otsuchi,” “We will wait forever for you to come back” or “I will get a house!” but others wrote messages of anger such as “Return Otsuchi!” One child wrote, “The tsunami is stupid” (Otsuchi-cho, Kamaishi-shi, 2011.5). These messages were in clear contrast to the image projected by the media portraying disaster victims from northeast Japan as stoic and placid.

Sometimes when people, particularly adults, were reluctant to draw we suggested tracing the outline of their hand on the cloth. One dramatic example of this occurred in the waiting room of a clinic in Miyagi Prefecture in February, 2012. Elderly people were sitting and waiting for their turn with the doctor, and the cloth was spread out on a table in front of them. After a period of chatting and looking, one woman agreed to contribute the outline of her hand. Another followed suit, and then another. Each drew his/her hand, considering where to place it and what colors to use. Gradually, as their hands began to connect on the cloth, so their conversation began to become more personal. At first, conscious of the presence of volunteers from other places, they spoke politely in standard Japanese, but gradually they slipped into their dialect and began sharing stories of their tsunami experiences not with us, but with each other. It

had been almost a year since the disaster, and while not necessarily good friends, these people knew one another, and had seen each other occasionally during the year, but had never shared what had happened to them on that day (Ogatsu-cho, 2012.2.6). Another illustration of the alternative space created by the trust and open atmosphere of these activities is that people talked about crime and fear, topics that are generally not discussed, at least not in public. “There was so much crime and looting during those first three days (before outside help came). Some people say they were so frightened that they are afraid to ever come back here again” (Otsuchi-cho, 2011.12.28).⁸

As time passed, the content of the drawings began to change. In September 2012, we participated in a flea market, inviting people to draw things that were important to them. A chiffon cake, drawn by a woman who runs a café in a temporary shopping center which opened in the spring of 2012, represented hope, recovery, communication – and the fear of being forgotten. “If people buy and enjoy this cake, they won’t forget about us” (Otsuchi-cho, 2012.9, K.N.). A sunflower drawn by a Kobe University student volunteer represented a story shared with her by a survivor who had a sunflower plant with five blossoms, each of which opened at a different time. She told the young volunteer that there was a lot that had to be done to put her life back in order, but it had to be accomplished one step at a time. Drawing the sunflower helped her to reflect on the gap between her desire as a volunteer to help and the harsh reality of life in Otsuchi-cho. The image of the flower helped her to put into words her frustration and questioning about the meaning of what it is to be a volunteer. One of her peers said that drawing made him feel connected to others who had drawn, making him feel a part of the community. That feeling made him anxious to share his experiences with others at home in order to make sure that they did not forget the situation in the disaster area, and that our work was important because it reminded people in the disaster area that they have not been forgotten (Otsuchi-cho, 2012.9).

Some people, children as well as adults, prefer words to drawing. A particularly dramatic example comes from work in Kumamoto after the 2016 earthquake. We held a drawing workshop in an evacuation center several months after two powerful earthquakes had destroyed Mashiki Town and heavy rains had caused very serious

landslides in nearby areas (Photo 12). A young boy joined our workshop. According to his family and center staff, before the disaster the boy had been very quiet, serious and well behaved, but from the moment we arrived, he was disruptive. He used loud and often obscene language, pretended disinterest and was generally uncooperative. Gradually, Popoki drew him in and by the time we got to drawing on the cloth, he was ready to be involved. He asked if he could write rather than draw, and then contributed the following.

Kumamoto was horrible. Lots of people were missing and lots of people were killed, and there are still lots of people in evacuation centers, aftershocks of M.6 or M.3 or M.5- happen and we don't know when landslides will happen and who will be crushed, and everyone will die, everyone will leave, and it's lonely, and I wasn't hurt. I haven't died yet so if it's OK with you I'd like to see you!!" (Mashiki Town Sports Center Evacuation Center, 2016.7).



(Photo 12: 2016.7 Mashiki Town)

After reading the above, the boy's family and friends said they had no idea he had been feeling that way. Perhaps something would have happened to make people pay attention to him anyway, but Popoki's cloth certainly helped. Popoki cannot offer therapy or counseling, but can create safe spaces for expression which can lead to and encourage local intervention.

Some later drawings and stories

By 2013, people had moved into temporary housing and some were beginning to move on with their lives. Temporary shops had been set up in Otsuchi-cho, but the center of what had been the town was just dirt. Debate was continuing about raising the ground level and building a new 14.5m. sea wall. Nothing seemed to be changing very much and many people were growing tired and frustrated. Some, especially those with school-aged children, were thinking of leaving or had already left.



(Photo 13: Otsuchi-cho 2015.2 Exhibitions and workshops are spaces where we share drawings and stories. At workshops we share, learn and create new stories of being safe, feeling safe or sharing/re-creating important places.)

We continued to invite people to draw and share their stories, and began to do exhibitions and workshops (Photo 13, 14, 15). Adults grew less willing to draw, and the content of the drawings by both adults and children began to change. At the beginning, almost all small children had drawn Anpanman, but they began to draw other things, too. Drawings of things or people that had been lost began to be replaced by things from everyday life and anime or media characters.



(Photo 14: 2015.2 Exhibit in Otsuchi-cho)

ネコのぽーぽきと一緒に 体も心も 元気に動かしましょう

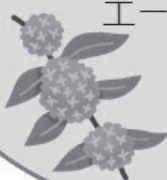


10月7日(金)

エールサポートセンター

8日(土)

子ども夢ハウス



簡単なヨガ
おしゃべりをしながら
布に絵や言葉を描きます



前回の2月には、
シーサイドタウンマストで開催しました。



《問い合わせ》 つどい ~大福の人とまちを育む~

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(Photo 15: Poster for an exhibition)

In Otsuchi-cho, both children and adults also drew salmon and other symbols of their town. They also began to share stories of World War II. Some older people had experienced two or three tsunamis, as well as the war. Many said that although the tsunami was terrifying, there is always someone who will come to your aid, but war is much worse. War is everywhere, and there is no one anywhere left to come and help you (Otsuchi-cho, 2014; Miura; 2015; El Support Center, 2016.10; Michimata).



(Photo 16: 2016.10 Otsuchi-cho. "War is much worse than a tsunami." Michimata Taizo)

At exhibits, parents would watch their children draw for a while and then look at the cloths being displayed. Often, they would comment that Popoki's spaces were different from most other voluntary support projects. One mother described it as being "warm, friendly and real, different from the false gaiety of many other programs" (Otsuchi-cho, 2014.2). People would be happy to find their own drawings on the cloths displayed and often those discoveries would lead to comparisons between how it was then and how it is now. As time passed, fewer and fewer people would say

it was better.

The stories and drawings showed that there is a gap between what people are told or understand to be safe and how they feel about safety. We began to focus our workshop and other activities on “feeling safe.” When people were at a loss as to what to draw, we often suggested they share something that made them feel safe, and that perhaps might make others feel that way, too. The first few years were filled with stories about running away to high places, and then to having disaster plans and saving yourself before worrying about others. Gradually “feeling safe” began to address revival of local culture such as dances, festivals, language and industry. Some people drew houses, the ones they had lost and the ones they hoped to build, and shared stories about their families. Some older women drew salmon and included poetry (Otsuchi-cho, 2016.2). A young boy drew the portable shrine used in festivals (Otsuchi-cho, 2017.2) and a high school student drew the local festival, saying he was planning to stay and practice dancing for the festival rather than going to college (Otsuchi-cho, 2015.8).

Many people began to share drawings and stories about community. We could see new divisions forming in the social fabric of the town based on what had been lost. The death of loved ones and the loss of homes and businesses were given a kind of legitimacy that was not afforded to those whose houses had not been washed away, or who had not lost family. The cohesion and togetherness of the early days changed into unspoken borders and barriers.

One woman did not draw, but shared her story. She told us how she stood on the hill outside their house and watched the tsunami lick the back bumper of her husband’s car as he rushed up the hill to safety. The tsunami did not come up as far as their home, and at first she spent her time trying to make food and help affected people in her neighborhood, using whatever she had on hand in her home as she had little access to emergency supplies. Eventually she grew tired, and began to wonder why she had been so lucky while so many others suffered so much. She stopped going out and would not talk with others, even those who before the tsunami had been close friends. She asked, “How can you feel safe without community?” (Otsuchi-cho, 2016.10: K.Y.). Another woman told us how she no longer says ‘hello’ to acquaintances but instead just bows because if the person is grieving, s/he might find the tone of the

hello offensive (Otsuchi-cho, 2015.10: K.M.).⁹ Someone drew a yellow house, and told us that it was the target of controversy because some people thought it was too cheery (Otsuchi-cho, 2016.10: K.M.). A pediatrician shared with us that children in Otsuchi-cho had traditionally been a bit wild, but they had been very quiet and obedient since the disaster. Now they were finally beginning to misbehave (Otsuchi-cho, 2016.10: M.M.).

As we returned again and again to Otsuchi-cho, our relationships with people there deepened, and they began to add new details to their stories. There began to be a visible difference between those who thought recovery might be possible, and those who felt that things might never change, at least not for the better. People began to express frustration, anger and exhaustion. In general, voluntary support activities slowed after three years and even more after five, but Popoki continues his visits. More and more people express their gratitude for our visits and fear of being forgotten. One friend greeted us with, “I’ll miss you since you won’t be coming any more” (Otsuchi-cho, 2015.8: K.N.) and cried when we assured her we would come again. A photographer shared with us her feelings. “Everyone will forget there that there was a town here. I am recording it so they will know” (Otsuchi-cho 2015.8: I.Y.). We learned that an important part of feeling safe is to feel you have not been forgotten.¹⁰



(Photo 17: 2016.10 Otsuchi-cho “The tsunami came all the way up to the transformers on the electric poles. We should paint lines on the new ones so that no one forgets.” (I.Y.))

We also went new places and Popoki made new friends, or renewed friendships with old ones. Mothers who evacuated because of radiation consistently expressed despair even as they drew their children’s faces, fresh foods and flowers. Many of these mothers had left Fukushima Prefecture and/or northern Kanto out of concern for their children, leaving their husbands behind. They felt they had been forced to leave, even though their evacuation was not compulsory. Others, primarily mothers, were those living in Fukushima City who wanted to leave but for a variety of reasons could not do so.¹¹ They consistently express concern about how one can really know whether something is safe, and say that perhaps there is no way to really feel safe.

(2) Disaster Discourses and Disastrous Discourses: Why Popoki Friendship Story is important

Disasters are terrifying, but they are also exciting and spectacular. The YouTube videos of the 11 March tsunami are fascinating as they are terrifying. Unlike those videos and accompanying accounts of dramatic survival, the drawings and stories on Popoki's cloths do not focus on the spectacular. They also are not objective, chronological, and temporal narratives of events. Some use modes of expression that are not verbal or easily understood; some stories are silent. They are important stories because they reveal not only what people think or say (or do not say) about disaster, but also what they feel. Unfortunately, stories like this often get lost, or are never told, or do not have an attentive audience, perhaps because they are overshadowed by the measurable and/or spectacular. Silence, whether by intention or default, is important.¹²

At the beginning, people staying in evacuation centers were both busy and bored. Many things needed attention, but most entailed red tape and waiting. Under normal circumstances, people might occupy themselves while waiting by chatting, having a snack or drink, making a phone call, sending messages, doing errands, reading, or watching television, but these activities are severely limited at times of disaster.¹³ Popoki's cloth entertained young people but also provided a bit of distraction for adult evacuees who felt pressured to be doing things but had to wait. The cloth also provided a small personal space in the crowded conditions of evacuation centers or temporary housing. For some, drawing was a chance to reflect and relax in the midst of chaos.

Popoki Friendship Story project is many things and can be analyzed and theorized in many overlapping ways. Here I will try to show four different perspectives: Popoki Friendship Story as a feminist project, a narrative art project, a community building project and a project for disaster awareness/risk reduction education.

Popoki Friendship Story as a feminist project

Since the 1980's, feminist scholars have worked hard to make visible the centrality of women in security issues, and to challenge the positivist, masculinist and heteronormative foundations of the discipline. Feminist scholars challenge these

foundational narratives “not only because they tend to reduce phenomena to predetermined categories, or because they re-inscribe modern discourses on the subject, but because, when they do so, they reinforce social hierarchies” (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 135). Among these are assumptions about binaries and the power relations based on masculine/feminine dichotomies associated with them. The concept of emotion is linked with, and helps to maintain, this gender ideology. “In identifying emotion primarily with irrationality, subjectivity, the chaotic, and other negative characteristics, and in subsequently labeling women the emotional gender, cultural belief reinforces the ideological subordination of women” (Lutz 1998: 54-55). In this conception, emotions are connected with the body, a hormonal/nervous response to stimulation over which humans have little or no control, although in many gender stereotypes, men are presumed to be capable of exerting more control than women. In Western conceptions, emotions are considered to be universal, a natural phenomenon that goes beyond the bounds of cultural difference to link us as human beings.¹⁴ As such, emotions are seen as being what make people human. At the same time, emotions are also a threat – something uncontrolled, irrational, and unpredictable – and as such they cannot be trusted.

Positivist methodologies which emphasize scientific knowledge and ways of knowing tend to juxtapose the prediction and prevention skills of technocratic experts against chaotic natural occurrences. In working to prevent future damage, there is no room for feelings or emotion, only facts. Narratives and stories of disaster reflect the general reliance on accepted positivist ways of knowing – how we understand and relate to our world, or, to borrow from Marysia Zalewski, “methodology – the *ology* of method,” which tantalizes us with the offer of solutions as to how to explain social reality, but in fact “inhibit recognition of all the exclusions and sacrifices required in order to tell a single story” (2006: 45). It is not merely a question of what story to tell, but one of knowledge and power. Disasters are particularly ripe for positivist methodologies focusing on scientific explanations and solutions.

Foucault cautions us to be aware of what kinds of knowledge we disqualify in the name of science. He asks, “Which speaking, discoursing knowledge – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you then want to ‘diminish’ when you say, ‘I who conducts this discourse is conducting a scientific discourse and I am a scientist?’”

(Foucault 2001: 72). Foucault is suggesting that our understanding of, and demand for, “social scientific analysis” immediately disqualify certain types of knowledge and privilege. Among the first to be disqualified are the ‘feminized’ ways of knowing – feelings, sensations, and body/sensory knowledge. As Sylvester points out, although metaphors from the fine arts are used to describe behavior in international relations, “Social science guardhouses face away from the “irrational” senses, convinced that these are unreliable knowledge sources” (2006: 201-202).

Popoki challenges gender binaries and positivist views of the value of different ways of knowing. The commitment to inclusion in all activities means that along with other kinds of diversity, gender diversity is expected and welcomed. For Popoki, gender sensitivity does not mean just the inclusion of women or making them visible; it means challenging unequal power relations that prioritize particular ways of knowing and modes expression. One of the most important concepts that Popoki questions in this way is security and the idea that being safe also implies that people will feel safe. Giving voice to the feeling of being safe independent of the so-called reality of safety is essential for recovery from the trauma of disaster. This understanding lies at the heart of Popoki Friendship Story as a feminist project.



(Photo 18: 2015.3 Women share their stories at a senior center in Otsuchi-cho.)

Popoki Friendship Story as a narrative project

In addition to being a feminist project, Popoki's narrative approach to security challenges positivist approaches through the creation of spaces for alternative discourses which affirm the importance of emotion and alternative modes of expression. Narratives¹⁵ and stories¹⁶ are important because they are contextual and reveal the complexities and multiplicities of perspectives. "Approaching security" (or disaster) "as narrative changes what one sees and what security means" (Wibben 2011:86). The meaning of security is further changed if we focus on the body, senses and emotions to include feelings of safety, anxiety and fear (Ahmed 2013).

Narratives and stories are important in creating and maintaining discourses. According to Foucault, discourses are,

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and

relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 1987: 108).

The narratives and stories of disaster that form the core of “disaster discourses” provide particular versions not only of what happened but also of who is in need of, and entitled to, support. Disaster discourses tend to focus on the spectacular and measurable and not the emotional. When emotions such as fear are addressed, it is generally in the context of having been overcome. The emphasis on these “masculine” presentations tends to further devalorize the “feminine” side of stories and to create borders of legitimacy among disaster survivors such as those described earlier. Only the most legitimate get public recognition for their stories, and gradually the rest get hidden.¹⁷

Most people will never directly experience a major earthquake, tsunami or other “spectacular” event, but they will certainly see them and encounter the stories of the survivors through media portrayals, photos and videos. In presenting these “spectacles,” the role of the viewer or audience is very important. For example, Garlick, in a discussion of the meaning of the audience in art, suggests that art “requires not merely a creator but also an audience who will receive the work, and who will thereby allow it *to work*” (2004: 123, emphasis in the original). Citing Foucault, Leisenring (2006: 308) describes how survivors unconsciously form identities as survivors, disciplining themselves to conform to institutionalized images.¹⁸

Because disasters can happen anytime and anywhere, passing on the knowledge gained during crises is very important for mitigating future disasters and creating a safer society. The legitimacy assigned to particular kinds of stories told by particular survivors and collected in particular ways influences the way future disasters will be viewed and handled. Audiences are important because of their expectations for, and responses to, stories they consider to be worthwhile.

The drawings on Popoki’s cloths force us to question our expectations as an audience. They have the potential to change the relationship between what we see and what we know, and help to draw our attention to the less spectacular aspects of disaster. Because they are not bound in time and space, they challenge temporal

understandings of narrative as chronological.¹⁹ Moreover, some of the stories from Otsuchi-cho gathered over the six years since the disaster challenge the idea that feelings of safety and/or positive feelings such as hope accompany recovery and move simultaneously in the same unilateral direction. Recovery might move incrementally forward, but feelings move in many different directions, sometimes even in contradictory ones.



(Photo 19: 2015.10 Sendai. Moving ahead means leaving something behind – who will tell the stories of these tsunami victims, and what stories will they tell?)

Popoki Friendship Story as a community building project

Popoki uses art as a means of expression and communication. Popoki's friends come from around the world and the cloths have been created in many different places. One advantage of art-making is that it does not necessarily require people to speak the same language. This aspect of the project helps to fulfill the initial condition that it focus on the local while also making the global visible.

The Popoki Friendship Story has shown that art-making is empowering, as it gives voice to those who do not, or cannot, speak of their experiences. At the same time, it legitimizes silences and the choice not to speak. Furthermore, expressions of body/sensory memory allow for different configurations of time and space. This, combined with drawing, allows for expression of, and reflection on, changing situations and boundaries. The stories told in this way are perhaps illogical and emotional, but allow for voices which might otherwise have been marginalized or ignored to be heard, assuming we are interested in listening.

The Popoki Friendship Story project has provided an opportunity for numerous people in a wide variety of situations to express themselves. Theoretically speaking, this methodology helps people to understand themselves and their experiences. Art-making can “be presented as a platform for the negotiation and construction of meaning, where meaning is emergent from hermeneutic and critical cycles of reflective practice” (Grushka 2005: 356). In disaster and post-disaster situations, art is not only important for what it expresses, but also for the processes of self-reflection and negotiation in which the artist engages while in the process of art-making.²⁰ The result of art-making is important as a visible record of the reflective process, but the initial emphasis of the project was on art-making as a means for both helping people to reflect on their situations and for enabling expressions of ideas or feelings for which they might not have had words. However, the passage of time and the relative stability of people’s lives have allowed the role of the cloth as a visible record to grow in importance.

Popoki’s activities help adults to express things they might not feel comfortable talking about or are unable to put into words. It also provides a space for alternative story-telling that does not conform to requirements that it be logical, chronological, temporal, or even understandable. For children, the cloths are a space for self-expression and often for gaining the attention of adults. These expressions and stories are created by, and refer to, individuals. But Popoki’s activities are more than individual stories or drawings.

The space of the long cloth allows for art-making as a space for building relations and creating community. The process of drawing on the long cloth is communal; people look at one another, they converse, they draw alone but they also draw

together and collaboratively. And as they draw, they listen to conversations around them and look at what has already been drawn. This process is not always collaborative, but collaboration frequently occurs. Perhaps the most important kind of collaboration is children and adults working together.²¹ Popoki's work is about building a supportive, inclusive community and we found that art-making is extremely effective for fostering communication through expression.²² The drawings are not sufficient for creating community, but are an important first step toward connection. They might also help to foster moral imagination and contribute to the creation of a common vision of what kind of community is both possible and desirable for all.



(Photo 20: 2015.8 Otsuchi-cho. Visiting faculty from the University of Guam share their impressions on Otsuchi-cho community FM radio.)

Popoki Friendship Story as a disaster awareness/risk reduction education project

Recently, it seems that almost every day there is news of a new disaster somewhere in the world, and Japan is frequently a victim of extreme weather events. There is no way to prevent these events from occurring, but it is often possible to reduce the damage through risk reduction measures. One way of conveying the necessary information is through disaster risk reduction (DRR) education, but it is very difficult to get people to take the problem seriously enough to take action. Popoki Friendship Story can contribute to education for disaster awareness through helping to spread information, maintain ongoing interest and through developing empathy.

Popoki's work emphasizes exchange and communication. Many of the Popoki Peace Project members are students, including international students.²³ Some of them take advantage of the opportunity to travel to Otsuchi-cho or other communities in the disaster area and gain firsthand experience with Popoki Friendship Story cloths and stories. Others help to host guests from the disaster area when they visit Kobe. Interviews and other activities related to the publication of the monthly "Popoki News" also provides opportunities for learning and thinking about disaster. Involvement in these activities probably makes people more aware of disaster and of how they can make themselves safer. Of course, knowledge does not necessarily lead to action.

What makes Popoki's approach unique in terms of education for DRR is its feminist perspective combined with a critical and creative approach that promotes both knowledge and empathy. Disaster risk reduction measures generally call for identifying vulnerable communities in order to ensure their safety needs are met. Popoki focuses on subjectivity and communication, encouraging people to express their concerns rather than emphasizing the need to be stoic. While some communities are certainly in need of particular kinds of assistance, Popoki fosters resilience by encouraging people to communicate and to help one another.

In addition to the opportunities for learning about disaster and developing empathy for survivors through art-making and sharing drawings, exhibiting Popoki's Friendship Story also provides many chances for learning and sharing through art viewing. Many people tell stories as they look at what others have drawn. One man, for example, told us about the dead animals he had seen and the eleven cats he had

rescued and a woman who said she would not tell her story looked at the drawings and began to speak of her child who had been lost in the tsunami (Otsuchi-cho, 2013). Each person has a different story to tell, and is attracted to different drawings and/or different cloths.

Many of the stories shared are different from what is reported by the media and some comprise counter-discourse. One participant commented that, “What made the biggest impression on me was finding there are so many different people and stories” (Otsuchi-cho, 2012.2.9: A.S.). Another, an active supporter of the Popoki Friendship Story project, found he was unable to draw because in order to do so, he had first to think about his own role and feelings of instability and impotence in the face of the disaster (Otsuchi-cho, 2012.9: T.T.).

One technique used by Popoki to draw out stories and develop empathy among the listeners is to ask questions invoking the senses. These questions often enable people to talk about aspects of their experience that they might otherwise have left out, or to remember things that they may have forgotten. It also makes room for stories that include emotion. For example, asking the color of the tsunami prompted people to use color to think about how things have changed or to share knowledge about signs that a tsunami was approaching.²⁴ In talking about the visual memory of the tsunami, almost everyone commented that they would feel anxious or uncomfortable if they could not see the sea. The following is a typical comment.

They are planning to build an 18 meter sea wall here. It won't have a gate, because the last one couldn't withstand the tsunami. Instead it will be like a huge hill in the sea. They say it will protect us from tsunami, but it will totally block the view of the sea. I can't feel safe if I can't see the ocean. (Mikadon, Otsuchi-cho, 2012.9.8)

These sensory descriptions are useful for conveying the meaning of the tsunami and for fostering empathy in the listener. In turn, empathy makes it more likely that people will pay attention and engage in behaviors that might help to save their own lives as well as those of others.



(Photo 21: Otsuchi-cho 2015.8 What does it mean to lose your place? How can we help people to create new communities in the places they have lost? Through Popoki's Friendship Story we have learned the importance of place and of walking and learning together.)



(Photo 22: 2015.2 Otsuchi-cho. Learning about the tsunami. People who made it up this hill survived.)

Conclusion

This article reviewed some of the work and stories collected by the Popoki Friendship Story project. The project is based on drawing and stories. Initially, the conditions for starting a project were that it had to be based on Popoki's philosophy, theory and methodology, be multi-directional, focus on the local but also make the global visible, be open and accessible, sustainable but flexible and relatively inexpensive. These conditions have basically been met. The ongoing project emphasizes creativity and expression through its focus on art-making and storytelling. Use of cloths drawn in many different places and participation by international students helps to give each program a global dimension, although the focus is primarily on the local. The simplicity of the project makes it easily accessible to anyone who is interested. While initially conceived as something to last a couple of months, the fact that it is ongoing speaks to its sustainability and ability to respond to changing circumstances. The project itself costs very little, but transportation costs are very high.

Popoki's work can be analyzed from several different perspectives. The rejection of binaries and emphasis on alternative ways of knowing in collecting stories make it a feminist narrative project. As the process leads to establishing and deepening connections, it can be seen as a project for community building. And as exposure to the stories and involvement in those networks helps to develop interest in disaster and empathy toward those affected, it is also a project for disaster awareness and risk reduction education.

Taken together, the Popoki Friendship Story cloths reveal a story of disaster as seen from a multiplicity of directions and perspectives. The drawings appear random and chaotic, providing a valuable record of the "unspectacular" side of disaster. The use of art-making provides opportunities for alternative modes of expression, often allowing people to express what they do not, or cannot, say in words. The stories change over time and place, helping us to understand that feelings of recovery and safety are not unilinear and do not necessarily progress in the same direction all of the time. These changes speak to the necessity for long-term support and remind us that while many things may be gained, moving forward also entails leaving something behind.

Today, most of the spaces devastated by the tsunami are still wide open areas, many of which are in the process of being filled and raised. Some have begun to have houses on them, but it is hard for someone who did not know them before to imagine that they were once places where people lived and worked. In the words of one of Popoki's friends, "I can't imagine how it was because everything that is supposed to stay the same is not the same. How can you live your life if you can't rely on things that are supposed to always be there to actually be there?" (Otsuchi-cho, 2012.10.13: T.T.). Unfortunately, we live in a world where the unexpected and unthinkable happen; security and safety cannot be completely assured. Acknowledging and addressing fear are important in order to help people be able to help themselves and others if and when the need arises. This is one way the Popoki Friendship Story helps to stress the importance of disaster awareness and taking action for risk reduction.

Coping with disaster and building resilient communities requires moral imagination, the ability to imagine how it might be while recognizing the present reality. In the context of disaster, this means building inclusive networks for communication that are multi-dimensional and do not rely solely on speech and "objective" understandings of safety. Gendered hierarchies and positivist methodologies prioritize these so-called scientific ways of knowing, leaving the more chaotic, emotional stories aside. The stories collected on Popoki's cloths help to challenge these understandings, especially conventional versions of security that conflate safe with secure. Huge amounts of time, money, and effort go into trying to make infrastructure more disaster resistant, but people are not generally asked whether that infrastructure makes them feel safe. If we are to create safer societies, both more peaceful and more resilient to disaster, we need to pay attention to emotion and body memory, both as personal experience and as social phenomena. If we dare to open up our discussions to include emotion and pay more attention to the potential of art, art-making, and expressions of body/sensory memory, we can equip ourselves with a whole new range of tools that can help in the building of safer, more peaceful, and more resilient communities.



(Photo 23: 2011.9 Graduation, Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University)



(Photo 24: Miyagi Prefecture 2011.8 Popoki Friendship Story: Sharing stories for a brighter tomorrow. How about sharing your story? Photo courtesy of Saito Masashi)

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Endnotes

- 1 The trip to the Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture area including Arahama and Yamamoto Town near Fukushima Prefecture was sponsored by Kobe City, Coop Kobe and the Kobe YMCA. For a record of the first six months of the project please see Alexander (2012^c).
- 2 I began the Popoki Peace Project in January, 2006. The symbol and energy behind the project is Popoki, a cat with a rainbow tail (See Alexander 2007, 2009^a, 2012^c, 2014). The project seeks to use the whole body and entire range of physical, sensory and emotional capabilities to foster critical thinking, critical expression and action for peace (See for example Alexander 2009^b, 2012^c, 2012^b, 2018 (forthcoming), Wada 2011, and the project website, <http://popoki.cruisejapan.com>).
- 3 The name came from the discovery that 1) behind each drawing lies a story, 2) that drawing is often accompanied by chatting and sharing that can help to form friendships, and 3) that the long cloth and its drawings connect people in a variety of ways.
- 4 People in evacuation centers were interested in our project, but of course one reason they gathered was that they did not have much else to do.
- 5 Otsuchi-cho, Iwate Prefecture is the main focal point for these activities. We return at least once or twice a year for workshops and exhibitions. Exhibitions usually include about ten cloths, some from the location of the exhibition and some from other places in Japan or abroad. Often international students participate, and we try to include cloths from their home countries. This facilitates not only international exchange but also understanding that disaster happens everywhere.
- 6 For example, an Indonesian student participated while studying in Kobe and took a cloth when she returned home and asked people to draw feelings of being safe to share with Popoki and his friends. Indonesia has also suffered from tsunami and earthquake disasters. Exhibits including this cloth help people to think of other countries and disasters in comparison with their own situation.
- 7 Needless to say, gender differences affect the ways people respond to disaster and their behavior in post-disaster situations. In general, as time passed, there were fewer men than women in the evacuation centers when we were there in the daytime, and women were generally more open to engage with us. For men who were present, masculinity often limits the ways they express themselves and the variety of activities in which they are willing to participate. This is not limited to drawing. A spontaneous stretching exercise session led by a Popoki Peace Project member at a gathering for local and temporary housing residents had almost all of the women participating, but most of the men contented themselves to watch or make small, unobtrusive motions (2012.5.3, Rikuzentakata).
- 8 This conversation also elicited a story about a group of people who arrived soon after the tsunami in a bus. There were dressed as volunteers, but they had come to steal anything they could find that was worth anything (Otsuchi-cho, 2011.12). Another example is stories of people chopping fingers off of corpses to take rings (Sendai, 2013.3).
- 9 Dr. Mamoru Michimata told us in October 2016 that people are only just beginning to be able to talk with others without first worrying about whether that person had lost family or close friends (Otsuchi-cho, 2016.10). Many others told us that they still feel uncomfortable.
- 10 So many people express the fear of being forgotten. It is probably well-founded. Even in Sendai, a city seriously affected by the tsunami, just two years on we were told, “it is only ten kilometers away, but it is like a different world. Here in the middle of the city, it is as if

nothing ever happened. Everyone has forgotten about it” (Taxi driver, Sendai, 2013.3.11). Outside of Japan, people seem to be aware of the Fukushima nuclear issues, but not of the earthquake/tsunami situation.

- 11 Some reasons for not leaving in spite of concern over radiation might be financial, concern over losing jobs, children not wanting to change schools, different levels of concern among family members, not being willing to separate families or leave older relatives behind, threat of divorce, disapproval from friends and/or relatives, lack of support and/or feeling too despairing to have energy to find a place to go.
- 12 Some people need time before they share their stories. One friend who had worked with us since 2012 shared her story for the first time in 2016 after listening to the reflections of Popoki members after spending several days in Otsuchi-cho. This person had lost her home, business and several family members (Otsuchi-cho, 2016: I.Y.). She continues to add details every time we meet.
- 13 There was no power, water, or mobile phone service after the disasters. Several people in the tsunami-devastated area in Sendai spoke of two worlds existing side by side; one with ‘things’ and normal lifestyles and the other devoid of ‘things’ and with no money to buy them. A girl needed a flute to re-join her school band and wanted to know if 3000 yen (about \$30.00) was a good price. Women’s organizations talk of not only the lack of privacy in evacuation centers but also the lack of spaces where women (and children) could gather and talk freely (Miyagi 2012).
- 14 Lutz (1998) refutes this assumption, showing how emotions are culturally constructed. (Also see Lutz & Abu-Lughod 2008, Ahmed 2013).
- 15 Bal (1997: 9) defines narrative text as having three layers: text, story, and fabula.
- 16 Stories are a kind of narrative text that are “experience-rooted but creatively reproduced (and) whose meaning is realized by specific communities” (Stone-Mediatore 2005: 5).
- 17 In the case of the 2011 disasters, one particularly important border is whether or not a person lost their house and/or close relatives. Those whose houses were not washed away are not considered to be, *and often do not consider themselves to be*, “legitimate” survivors, even though they may have suffered greatly (see Alexander 2012^a).
- 18 Leisenring (2006: 308) looks at victimization, describing how survivors of domestic violence dislike being called “victims” because they feel it makes them seem powerless, even though use of the term was begun to contradict assumptions that women who were targets of sexual violence had “asked for it”. Masquelier (2006) makes similar comments with regard to use of the term “refugee” to describe survivors of Hurricane Katrina. These terms invoke images of pitiful and powerless people which deny survivors of agency. Also see Alexander 2012^a.
- 19 One woman, for example, on learning that the cloth would be displayed, added the words, “Grandfather, we will wait for you forever” to her earlier contribution (Otsuchi-cho, 2011.5.3).
- 20 One participant in an activity held in September 2012 commented that he realized when he picked up the pen that he was unable to draw. The act of trying to draw helped him to recognize his own confusion and sense of instability. Another participant commented that Popoki Friendship Story has helped her to reflect on her own experience in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and to realize that although she had never acknowledged it, she continues to be affected by the trauma of that event (2016.10).
- 21 Tanner (2010) discusses the importance of listening to children who have experienced disaster in the creation of disaster education curricula.
- 22 This work uses art, but it is not art therapy and we do not attempt to analyze the artist based on his/her drawing on the cloth. Ahmed (2006) suggests that while art therapists focus on analyzing the results of children’s artwork after disasters, NGO workers and others without expertise in child psychology can successfully employ art as a technique by focusing

on the importance of the process of art-making.

23 In 2016, we created our first multi-lingual disaster vocabulary guide to help with cross-cultural communication.

24 “My grandmother always talked about dust before a tsunami” (Otsuchi-cho, 2011.8.17: Iwama Shoten).