



# *Confronting Marginality: human and nonhuman resilience in the landscape of disaster*

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**ABSTRACT:** The March 2011 Tōhoku triple disaster reinforced an already liminal space inside Japan. The region of Tōhoku, historically considered at the margins, was once again framed as a marginal space separated from the Japanese ‘centre’. However, the physical area of the disaster acquired new figurative dimensions allowing for an artistic and cultural response to the events of March 2011 and to the national narrative of fast recovery. In the novel *In the Zone* (2016) by Taguchi Randy, the abandoned and marginal landscape of the exclusion zone assumes the characteristics of a space for survival and renovation. The human and nonhuman characters challenge their social and physical marginality through the continuous movement in the exclusion zone and across several physical and figurative boundaries. Furthermore, in this liminal space, bodily acts—such as laughing, dancing, or singing—become a way to build resilience and recover from previous traumas. This paper concludes that the novel *In the Zone* constructs the disaster as a positive trope engendering recovery from past traumas and confronting national discourses on the environment, women, and marginal communities.

**KEY WORDS:** nuclear disaster; environmental literature; liminality; women’s writing; Japanese literature; environmental trauma



## INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2011, the coast of Tōhoku, north-eastern Japan, was hit by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake. This caused a devastating tsunami that severely damaged the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant. As a result of an explosion in the reactors, radioactive material leaked and contaminated the surrounding area.

Japan, along with the rest of the world, witnessed this event with apprehension as it represented the second most dangerous nuclear accident after Chernobyl, in 1986. However, after the initial outpour of solidarity and support to the people and areas affected—proclaimed by the now famous slogans of *Kizuna*,<sup>1</sup> and *ganbare nippon* (“Hang in there, Japan!”)—Tōhoku was once again pushed into a liminal space, both geographically and politically. The disaster has been regionalized, geographically limited to the affected area (Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt 22).

In a bid to obtain the hosting of the 2020 Olympic Games, the Tokyo government launched a campaign to promote the safety and security of the Japanese capital based on its physical distance from the area affected by the Tōhoku disaster. However, these discourses proved detrimental to the positioning of Tōhoku, both with respect to the rest of Japan and the world at large. In Japanese history, Tōhoku has long been considered a marginal region, both economically and geographically. Tōhoku has, for a long time, survived as an agricultural region and when Japan began the construction of several power plants, rural regions—such as Tōhoku—were willing to accept them in their jurisdictions as they represented new possibilities for employment and governmental subsidies (see Hara; Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt; DiNitto, *Fukushima*). Yet, with the disaster, this marginality was once again highlighted as a result of the economic dependency on agricultural production, which was damaged by the radioactive contamination of the soil. Moreover, with the decision to host the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, the region of Tōhoku and 3.11—as the disaster has rapidly become known—slowly faded from social consciousness. Discourses on security and safety supplanted the struggles of survivors effectively hiding the disaster from society.

In addition, people from Tōhoku started being openly discriminated against for fear of radiation contamination (see Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt). The people of Fukushima affected by the disaster have been considered new *hibakusha*, therefore establishing a clear parallel with the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This connection has been reinforced, as DiNitto notices, by the use of the *katakana* phonetic alphabet to write Fukushima, a practice used only for other two cities in Japan: Hiroshima and Nagasaki (“Literature” 25).

It is in this context that the arbitrarily defined twenty-kilometre radius exclusion zone, with its borders and the limits imposed for entering it, assumes the characteristics of another border, a marginal space in an already marginal part of Japan. The zone, as it is often referred to, is a space of liminality, but it is not a static one. It is fluid and almost

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<sup>1</sup> The Japanese *kizuna* can be translated as “bonds”, “(emotional) ties”, “connection”. The Japanese *kanji* for *kizuna* was voted *kanji* of the year on 2011 (see Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt).



suspended in time. Thus, this suspension allows for an artistic and cultural response to the trauma of 3.11.

In this article, the liminal zone of the disaster is looked at through the novel *Zon ni ite, In the Zone* (2016),<sup>2</sup> by Taguchi Randy. The characters of the novel are positioned in the physical margins between the apparently uninhabited area of the exclusion zone and the living spaces right outside its borders. They move in and across the zone challenging its perception as a lifeless and abandoned area. Furthermore, the area of disaster acquires positive characteristics as it comes to represent not only past cultural traumas (see Alexander) such as 3.11 or the two nuclear bombings. Instead, it turns into a space for recovery. In opposition to Rachel DiNitto, who argues that Taguchi, by not clearly identifying the victims and survivors of 3.11, makes the story entirely about her character, Hatori Yōko (DiNitto, "Literature" 32)—who can be read as an alter ego of the author herself who travelled to the zone after the disaster—this paper demonstrates how this does not take away from the survivors' experience. The first two chapters of the novel—those having Hatori Yōko as the main character—set the zone as a fluid space in which traumas can be overcome. The first section of this paper demonstrates how the zone allows for the connection between the trauma of 3.11 and other personal traumas lived by the characters, engendering possibilities for recovery. Hatori is also forced to confront her own motivations for visiting the zone, bringing to the fore the issue of 'witnessing', exposing her inability to bear witness to the survivors' sufferings. Hatori's shortcomings, however, generate possibilities for the direct survivors to tell their own stories of trauma, without them being appropriated by others.

Stories of personal traumas, when brought into the zone, allow the characters to cross the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Thus, this crossing of boundaries permits the acknowledgement of nonhuman pains and reconfigures the human not as a privileged category in regard to suffering, but rather as a part of a network of bodies and ontologies (see Vinci 7).

The nonhuman is also present in the second section of this paper, in which the analysis of the novel highlights patterns of resilience. Descriptions of the nonhuman are frequent in *In the Zone* and signs of sufferings are associated with presence of natural and environmental recovery. To this, human bodily acts are often connected. In particular with relation to gender, the novel deconstructs the association with male active role and female passive role in recovery efforts and in the aftermath of disaster.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The novel *Zon ni ite*, which can be translated into English as "In the Zone", has been published in Japanese in 2016. It was originally comprised of two parts, then collected in the 2016 edition. There is currently no available translation of the novel. In this article I will refer to the novel with the English title.

<sup>3</sup> See Luft's "Racialized disaster" (2016). According to Luft, gender is not only a way to understand how *bodies* are affected by disaster, rather it can become a framework to analyse the political, social and economic responses to a disastrous event. In the article, Luft "seeks to uncover the gendered production of and consequences for social processes that run through and beyond gendered bodies. [...]" (8) Her article is "an analysis of the gendered rules, laws, and institutional arrangements that produce and are produced by disaster." (8)



It is in this context that bodily acts become a way to challenge the marginalization of the gendered female body.

## TRAUMA AND LIMINALITY: CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN THE SPACE OF DISASTER

The novel *In the Zone* is a collection of four independent chapters, revolving around the experience of the 3.11 disaster. The first two chapters, “Zon ni ite” (“In the zone”) and “Umibe ni ite” (“On the seashore”), share the same main characters, Hatori Yōko and Kudō Ken’ichi.<sup>4</sup> Hatori is a thirty-nine-year-old writer who travels to the exclusion zone close to the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant and explores it with the help of the evacuee Kudō Ken’ichi, who lived inside the now hazardous area. The third chapter, “Ushi no rakuen” (“Cows’ paradise”), has a first-person male narrating voice describing his experience with cancer treatment—therefore radiation treatment—in the wake of the 3.11. In this chapter there is a strong opposition between the use of radiation as a possible cure for a disease such as cancer, and all the positive results it can engender, and radiation seen as polluting and harmful. The last chapter in the collection, “Morumotto” (“Guinea pig”), describes the life of two women, Toki-san and the narrating female voice, who live in a semi-permanent exclusion zone called “Nekosoko” (“Cat Bottom”). In this last part, the experience of life is described as very physical and there is a strong insistence on dancing and singing that highlights the connection with the nonhuman.

The four chapters, even though not linked by characters, are connected by the traumatic experience of 3.11 and its aftermath. All the characters, in a way or another, lived through the disaster and are trying to come to terms with its effects on their lives. At the same time, the disaster and the radioactive contamination of the area acquire the characteristics of a positive space. A space in which people are allowed to discover resilience and recover from their traumas—not only the experience of 3.11, but also seemingly unrelated personal traumas.

Hatori Yōko, in the first instance, presents the reader with the issue of bearing witness to an event that did not directly affect her. She is a writer from Tokyo and decides to explore the zone. In her explorations accompanied by Kudō Ken’ichi she carries a Geiger counter to evaluate the level of radiation, but when asked why she is travelling to such a hazardous area and what she wants to see there, she is unable to give a clear answer. She is reticent about her own motives and she is not able to find an explanation to the reason behind her need to ‘see’ the zone. She is challenged by other characters, several times, regarding her decision, and her answers are never clear nor direct. In both her travels to the zone, Kudō asks if there is something specific Hatori wants to see, but in the end, he is the one suggesting possible itineraries and driving to the farms or the temporary shelter they visit. In some circumstances, Hatori’s profession as a writer is brought to the fore, and she is asked if she will write about the zone and

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<sup>4</sup> Japanese names are rendered in the Japanese manner, giving family name first and given name second. So, for example, in the case of Hatori Yōko, Hatori is the family name and Yōko the given name.



the conditions of the survivors. Again, she is unable to bear witness to the suffering of the human and nonhuman affected by both the natural and human-made disaster.

- You are Hatori Yōko, right?
- [...]
- Yes...
- You are a writer right? I heard that from Mr. Kudō.
- Yes
- Would you join our action? We are promoting a campaign to protect the children from radioactive contamination. [...] We want more people to know about it.
- Unfortunately, I am a novelist, I don't write non-fiction. [...] Though, I am sorry, I am not useful. Well, I am not well known. (Taguchi ch. 2)<sup>5</sup>

Hatori is hesitant, she seems to have no confidence in her ability to speak or write about what she is experiencing in the zone. She does not have words to describe the event. She feels as if she is not enough and her contribution—as an author of fiction—will not be useful to support the survivors in their struggle to have their sufferings recognized.

Cathy Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), discusses how trauma is an unresolved experience. Caruth argues that trauma derives from the inability to fully understand the traumatic experience in order to resolve it. Trauma “resist[s] simple comprehension” (6). According to Caruth, trauma has a temporal dimension as it is an ongoing and repeated experience that the survivor keeps bringing to memory without ever fully addressing it. Following Caruth, deeply connected to the experience of trauma, is the concern of how to bear witness to a traumatic event, how to see and show the event. In trauma, it is paramount to be able to not betray the past, as Caruth puts it (27), but she also suggests that it is precisely with an “act of seeing, in the very establishing of a bodily referent [that it] erases [...] the reality of the event” (28). In the case of Hatori, it is exactly her inability to write—therefore, to ‘see’—and to discuss her experience of the zone that creates a space for the traumatic event to be addressed. She refuses to bear witness to what she is seeing, in order to allow the direct survivors of 3.11 to tell their stories. Hatori does not usurp the narrative of the traumatic event of disaster, as a result, preventing the erasure of the reality of 3.11 and protecting the survivors from standardized narrations. Hence, Hatori creates a distance between her experience of the zone and that of those affected by the disaster, allowing them to speak. She does not take their voices away, but rather lets them recount their experiences of trauma, marginality and resilience.

In the novel, however, trauma is not only the one suffered as a result of the triple disaster that hit the Tōhoku region in 2011. Despite being a prominent feature throughout the four chapters, the characters are also survivors of previous traumatic events.

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<sup>5</sup> All the quotes from the novel *In the Zone* presented in this article are my translations of the Japanese original.





In the third chapter, for example, the narrating male voice is a survivor of lung cancer who around five years before 3.11 underwent surgery to have one lung removed. However, after the disaster, in May 2011, he is having a relapse and it becomes necessary for him to start the treatment again. "The probability of recurrence within five years from the surgery was high, and I was prepared, but it was a shock, after all" (Taguchi ch. 3). The narrating 'I' is facing an interesting opposition between the positive use of radiation as treatment with all the possible benefits deriving from it, and the more widespread fear of radioactive pollution and contamination in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster of 3.11. Therefore, he is experiencing a double trauma, the one deriving from "that terrible earthquake" (Taguchi ch. 3) and the one originating in his experience of cancer and its relapse with the constant threat of death. His trauma is embedded in time and its reappearance shortly after 3.11 highlights what Caruth calls "*crisis of life*" (7, emphasis in the original). That is, the sense of instability generated by the "unbearable nature" of the traumatic event and "the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). The feeling of trauma is not only the experience of an event that is inexplicable and brings about the fragility of human and nonhuman life, but also the impossibility to understand how survival occurred. Surviving cancer, witnessing a nuclear disaster and, shortly after, experiencing cancer treatment once again places the narrating 'I' face to face with his own "*crisis of death*" (7, emphasis in the original) but, at the same time, forces him to recognize the failure in coming to terms with the conundrum of survival. Moreover, as Willig and Wirth argue in reference to cancer patients, the diagnosis, as it forces people to face their own mortality, displaces the patients in a liminal space in between the healthy life they had before and the consciousness of their own approaching death (Willig and Wirth). Liminality is often understood as a transitional space between a former and a new position and is characterized by ambiguity (see Willig and Wirth; Pastor and Kent). In the case of cancer patients, it seems to develop into a sense of suspension (Willig and Wirth 334). In the novel, this liminality often takes the characteristics of a blurring of boundaries between the human and then nonhuman. The narrating 'I' of chapter three meets, in Tokyo, a female evacuee from Fukushima, and her memories of her farm and the cattle she had to leave behind when evacuating seem to provoke the dreams of the narrating 'I'. "I dreamt of cows. Or perhaps I should say, surprisingly, I was a cow" (Taguchi, ch. 3). Similarly, when Hatori travels to the zone in chapter one, "In the zone," she refers to a similar feeling: "Are the boundaries between animals and humans getting ambiguous here?" (ch. 1).

Liminality is also related to the space of trauma. A physical landscape, as Pastor and Kent argue in the case of German memorial sites of Nazi's concentration camps, engenders a feeling of liminality as it allows to recollect the previous trauma that developed in that space. Furthermore, liminality is also generated by the contrast between the natural landscape and the recollection of trauma (Pastor and Kent). In the exclusion zone created after 3.11, this liminality of the space of trauma is also evident. The zone is set as an empty space, in direct contrast with the supposedly non-contaminated world outside of its boundaries. This differentiation is clearly set by referring to the most basic needs of the human. Before entering the zone, Kudō tells Hatori: "In the zone there are no convenience stores. No water, no food, there is nothing



you can put into your mouth” (ch. 1). The zone is an empty space where there seems to be nothing left. Also, in this quote we could see a reference to food contamination, which was one of the main concerns right after the disaster. In addition, the idea of contaminated food breaks still another boundary, that of the body. Food, which can be seen as a symbol of domesticity, becomes a hazard, another way through which radiation enters the body and breaks its supposed integrity, reminding us of the pervasiveness of radiation (Harada).

In the words of Taguchi herself, “the zone is actually a land that nobody knows yet. It is an indeterminate, mysterious place. It has become an uncomfortable place even for people who have lived there since before it became the zone” (Taguchi qtd. in Yuki 93). To Hatori, this suspension has something almost nostalgic to it. The liminality of the zone allows for the blurring of other boundaries, not only those between the human and the nonhuman, as it has been mentioned above, but also those between life and death. “Here [in the zone], it is a sort of halfway to the world of the dead. A suspended place, it is somehow nostalgic. It feels as if I can almost meet my older sister who passed away” (Taguchi, ch. 1).

Other boundaries that are crossed, are also those between the outside and the inside of the zone. In order to enter the exclusion zone, the characters need a permit that is then presented to police officers at a checkpoint placed at the limit of the twenty-kilometre zone. The boundary is physical, but at the same time porous as there are no barriers or physical impediments blocking the passage from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’. And with the zone presented as uninhabited and devoid of life, this crossing seems to represent a movement from life to death. The moment of entering the exclusion zone turns into a rite of passage, through which the characters are admitted into a liminal space.

## HUMAN AND NONHUMAN RESILIENCE: GENDER AND NATURE

*In the Zone* is a novel of resilience. The characters, as demonstrated above, are all survivors. Some of them survived the disaster of 3.11, moving to temporary shelters and enduring the risk of radioactive exposure, others faced personal traumas and those became intertwined with the trauma of the disaster. Nonetheless, both the human characters and the nonhuman ones are showing signs of resilience and recovery.

Resilience, despite its various characterizations across research fields and practices, is often defined as the ability of an ecosystem to recover after a disturbance that has generated losses (see Lake; Wiig and Fahlbruch). There are of course critics of this definition who argue that to recover from a disturbance would imply a globally recognized status of normality to return to (see for example Gunderson). However, the definition mentioned above is apt for the case study at hand. I would not argue that in the novel the environment and the human are going back to a supposed pre-disaster state of normality, but rather that they are finding new ways to recover in the now contaminated environment. The novel approaches both human and nonhuman trauma, and by acknowledging and validating these sufferings offers a way to illuminate



paths towards resilience. Representations of the nonhuman are abundant. Nonhuman sufferings are often exemplified by descriptions of dying or dead cattle—abandoned in the zone after the disaster and not cared for because of the high radiation level—and as Vinci argues:

the dying nonhuman animal [...] assumes a new life [...]. Such [...] testimony compels us to read the nonhuman animal in ways confounding, disorientating, estranging, evoking in the audience-witness (character and reader) a gap, a wound *in* which or *from* which one might be able to disengage oneself from the exploitative norms of wound culture and become attentive to the elusive pain of the nonhuman animal. (183, emphasis in the original)

Furthermore, nonhuman sufferings and traumas become intertwined with signs of resilience. Scenes of nonhuman trauma and suffering are often contrasted with depictions of resilience and nonhuman survival. Far from being a void space, the zone is described as thriving nature—this could also be a reference to the once famous sceneries of Tōhoku—and animals in particular, despite the invisible presence of radioactive contamination, are surviving. There are often mentions of stunning green grass, plants are growing everywhere and insects and their sounds are a constant presence in the novel. Interestingly, in the chapter “Ushi no rakuen”, the evacuee from Fukushima, Mamiko, mentions the presence of a spider in the exclusion zone as a symbol of balance:

Spiders are balance. There are creatures that the spider eats, and there are creatures that eat the spider. When there are spiders, the balance of the creatures of the grassland is just right. Therefore, I was happy when I found a spider. Nature is doing well, I think that it will be alright... (Taguchi, ch. 3)

The character is here explaining how the presence of a single spider turns for her into the representation of balance and recovery of the environment after the disaster. The environment is finding its own way to survive despite the trauma it endured, so, according to Mamiko, there is still hope. The invisible and impalpable nature of radiation means that even though the character cannot perceive it, her surroundings and the nonhuman life she witnessed are most likely contaminated with high doses of radiation. Nevertheless, the presence of the spider engages the possibility for future recovery. Likewise, the narrating ‘I’ in the same chapter, experiences a similar scene when he himself travels to the zone to see Mamiko’s farmland, currently abandoned. The male narrating voice witnesses the trauma of the nonhuman, left to die in a highly contaminated area. Only one cow is still alive, one so emaciated that it can barely stand and moo. However, when leaving the farm, the presence of a small spider in the grass—accidentally found after a fall—turns into a sign of resilience. A similar scene is presented in chapter one. Hatori and Kudō also arrive at a farm, and here again, after the strong smell of rotting carcasses, a sign of resilience is presented:

Slowly stepping over the soaked carcasses and going towards the calling voice I saw a black cow standing absent-mindedly on the hay. Even though she was thin, she looked well. She





looked at us, raised her head and moaned. "It is really a cow!" "A cow, indeed," and we laughed. (Taguchi, ch. 1)

Again, the same scene is repeated at an ostrich farm. First, the two characters see carcasses and remains of ostriches, only to discover that one survived and it is lively enough to start chasing Hatori. In this case as well, the two burst into a laugh that seems to be almost liberating. A response to the unexpected presence of live animals after witnessing their trauma and death. It is exactly through this laugh as a powerful bodily act that it is possible to understand the resilience of the human. Laughter, according to Pailer *et al.*, "is one of the most fascinating human functions, a non-verbal, bodily response to a conflict of perception as well as a discharge or relief that acts as satisfactory solution for the subject who experiences such a perpetual conflict" (8). Laughter then is a response to the uncertainty of the zone, and to traumatic experiences connected to it. Laughter becomes a tool to overcome feelings of loss and fear and it helps to start the process towards recovery. Laughter—and other bodily acts such as dancing or singing—are also a way of coping with displacement (Lamb and Hoffstaedter) and creating connections in liminality. As I have argued above, the exclusion zone is a suspended space, an in-between that does not allow those inside it to feel at ease. Therefore, the zone is a space of displacement, both in a physical but also psychological sense; it is a space in which people experience liminality. In this context, laughing—and other bodily acts—becomes a coping strategy to acknowledge displacement and trauma in order to challenge feelings of marginality.

Bodily acts as a response to marginality acquire a particular meaning when looked at from a gendered perspective. In the aftermath of disaster, the response and recovery discourses are often characterized by gendered expected behaviours. Elaine Enarson argues that 'women' and 'men' are expected to behave according to traditional gender norms during recovery efforts, so 'men' are seen taking leading roles, while 'women' are forced into passivity to re-establish the stereotype of the 'heroic men' and 'dependent women' (Enarson). Even though Enarson's analysis does not further problematize the dichotomy between 'men' and 'women', her study expands on the social construction of disaster as a gendered space. If the roles of 'men' and 'women' in disaster are the result of social constructs and norms, then *In the Zone* illuminates how female characters can reappropriate the marginality socially associated with them, and use the space of disaster as a productive way to challenge their dependent role and build resilience. This is particularly evident in the last chapter, "Morumotto," where the narration focuses on two women living in a semi-permanent exclusion zone in the mountains of Tōhoku. Toki-san and the female narrating voice are illegal residents of an ex-hippie commune in the mountains, called "Nekosoko" ("Cat Bottom"). The area is polluted: "It's contaminated here, something's happened, you know" (Taguchi, ch. 4). The two women come from positions of marginality. Toki-san used to be a dancer in her youth and then moved to the hippie commune where she has lived for more than forty years; while the narrating voice was diagnosed with a new kind of depression. Furthermore, as single women, they occupy a marginal position in Japanese society, in which women's role is still associated with motherhood and family duties. Both characters freely choose to live



in the semi-permanent exclusion zone. For Toki-san, Nekosoko is a place of memories and it has a connection with the members of her hippie commune who moved to Okinawa; while, for the narrating voice, it becomes a way to leave the city and escape the challenges imposed on her by her status as a single woman suffering from a mental illness. Despite moving to a highly contaminated area, the narrating voice reconstructs herself as an active subject through her life in Nekosoko. By the end of the story she has been living there for seven years, and before leaving, after Toki-san passed away, she realizes that “the seven years I spent at Nekosoko were my real life” (ch. 4).

“Nekosoko was a place that has disappeared from the map of Japan. A place where people cannot live. A place that did not exist” (ch. 4). As it is made clear in this quote, the place deep in the mountains where the two women live alone is considered an extremely marginal area even though not directly into the twenty-kilometre exclusion zone. When Nekosoko is declared a semi-permanent exclusion zone, the area gets closed and cordoned off with barbed wire. The two women are passing from an already marginal position to further marginalization, as they continue to live in an area deemed not suitable for human life, completely outside of society, so much so that Nekosoko does not even get postal deliveries anymore and the people living outside the exclusion zone refer to Toki-san as “the witch”, positioning her even further away from society. Their exposure to high doses of radiation makes them *hibakusha*, once again reaffirming the association between the radiation contamination after 3.11 and the one after the nuclear bombings, and reiterating the women’s positioning at the fringe of ‘normal’ society. Nevertheless, the two women use their bodies to challenge their own marginality and reappropriate their position in the semi-permanent exclusion zone. The act of dancing and singing becomes a way for them to assert their communal living and communicate with the nonhuman. The narrating voice describes Toki as follows: “The name is Toki. She lives self-sufficiently in the heart of the mountains in Fukushima, and she dances” (ch. 4). Dance is an act performed in several occasions, also without apparent reason, but it is often in connection with the nonhuman surroundings. They dance and sing every morning for two hours, they dance and sing an apparently nonsensical song after seeing insects flying around an old beech tree, they dance and sing when they gather mushrooms in the forest:

When hunting for mushrooms, Toki-san dances around them, pretending to be poking a fierce beast with a spear. For a matsutake mushroom this big, we dance before hunting it out of respect. So the two of us danced around knocking down the mushroom with “eya, eya, eya,” and the forest gave us the mushrooms. (ch. 4)

The relation with their surroundings is characterized by the acts of dancing and singing, in a way that could become almost shamanic, but in the novel always free of any spiritual connotation. Dance and songs are a way for the two women to assert their own independence and reappropriate their role as active subjects in the aftermath of a disaster. They do not accept to be positioned as victims, and they reappropriate their socially defined marginality by connecting and living with the nonhuman, breaking once again the constructed boundaries between the human and its nonhuman others.



In this chapter as well, the indeterminacy of the zone and its positioning at the margins allows for the experience of border crossings. This is made explicit when Toki-san tells the narrator to become a cat: “when you wake up, do like a cat, stretch yourself, eat like a cat from the plate, wash your face like a cat, sit like a cat, behave like a cat” (ch. 4). The transformation is not a physical one, but again, life in the zone permits the blurring of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Likewise, this blurring of physical bodily boundaries arises through the act of eating. If in the first chapter Kudō Ken’ichi describes the zone as a space void of anything edible, referring to the all-permeating radiation contamination; in “Morumotto,” Toki-san and the narrating voice live of what they can gather from the forest and that has most likely high doses of radiation. They are often described as cooking and eating vegetables grown in the area. Radiation then is entering their bodies, breaking the physical boundaries of the human body and once again those between human and nonhuman.

## CONCLUSION

The novel *In the Zone* is a work that forces the reader to readdress their understanding of disaster and environmental contamination. The novel connects the trauma of 3.11 with past personal traumas each character experienced and exemplifies quests for recovery. Human and nonhuman characters are resilient and they are recovering in a way that is opposing the national discourses on cultural and national trauma. Through the blurring of several boundaries in the exclusion zone, the characters are able to redefine their own positioning in the aftermath of disaster and coming to terms with their own traumas. 3.11 is framed as an event allowing the characters to reposition their traumas in a broader framework in which sufferings of the human are connected with those of the nonhuman, developing a communal system for resilience.

The zone also becomes a space in which the characters can reappropriate their own marginality. This happens in particular through bodily functions such as laughter, dancing and singing. For socially marginal women, such as Toki-san, these acts can challenge the ‘traditional’ gendering of disaster. Appropriating marginality means coming to terms with traumas and developing a space for building resilience outside of the socially constructed norms of behaviours.

Framing the zone as a positive space for resilience and recovery outside the normative social patterns creates a counter discourse to the national rhetoric of fast recovery. The zone can be a space in which boundary-crossing challenges the marginalization of the Tōhoku region and of those affected by 3.11 and the subsequent radiation contamination. In the space of disaster, all sufferings are acknowledged and valued, not only the human ones. The liminality of the zone, with its inherent ambiguity, supports the developing of a sense of shared trauma and shared recovery that goes beyond the human. The body also turns into a liminal space where the inside human can merge with the outside nonhuman reappropriating a socially constructed marginality. The zone is then a challenging construct that can support the development



of a positive marginality, allowing its inhabitants—human and nonhuman—to reappropriate their suffering and develop resilience to overcome traumas.

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