

# **New trend in teaching contemporary Japanese literature: the case of multidisciplinary courses on Fukushima disaster**

**De Pieri Veronica**

## **要旨**

ここ数年の間に、文学作品は従来の活字という枠を越え、新たな創作の様式を展開してきた。

多和田葉子や和合亮一のように朗読パフォーマンスを得意とする作家が現れ、その朗読パフォーマンスの研究なしに彼らの作品を理解することはできなくなった。特に2011年以降は、福島第一原発事故に関する作品の発表を精力的に行っている。

このような文学作品における新たな傾向は、現代日本文学教育の見直しを迫るものである。学生に多角的な視点から作品を理解させるためには、特定の作家や文学ジャンルではなく、特定のテーマに焦点を当てた学際的な教育コースの奨励が求められる。

本投稿論文では、共通のキーワード「3.11（2011年3月11日の大震災）」をもとに、文学、映画、漫画、アニメという様々な芸術分野を研究対象として取り入れた、カリフォルニア大学バークレー校（2013年）や、モントリオール大学（2015年）で行われたコースの実例を紹介する。

また、従来の教育法を見直し、特定のテーマに対する多角的な視点を養う革新的なアプローチを図ることの重要性を提示していく。

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## **1. Introduction**

In the last few decades the literary practice has been transcending its field of competence to explore other artistic areas. According to this trend, highly noteworthy in Japan, the literary work is no more limited to printed media only but has developed into other forms of artistic production among which literary performances have their key role.

A similar trend can be encountered in Western tradition too. The authorial choice to take advantage of the literary form of the essay as a chance to raise questions about the ongoing social and political problems is totally not anew. More often, essays served as an opportunity to reflect upon current literary movements or author's literary production. From this perspective the essay represented, however, only an exercise in style in addition to the authorial poetic or fictional works. The artistic field involved remained the same, namely, the literary field. On the contrary, the examples of authors who broke the artistic barriers to live out new artistic experimentations can be count on one hand: Cervantes, Shakespeare, Racine, Brecht, Pirandello are just a few examples in Western literary tradition whose success among the public, despite their different nationality, testifies the triumph of their artistic innovations during centuries, especially the combination of poetry, prose and theatrical plays.

It is exactly the relation between literature and drama representation that is taken into account when talking about “literary performances” or “performing literature”. Authors like Tawada Yōkō and Wagō Ryōichi

have made their trump card in performing their literary works in front of an audience to the point that a study on their literary production can not ignore an investigation on their lively performances too, especially considering the social commitment they expressed regarding the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident. These public appearances on the stage, usually during events and conferences promoted on the theme of literature or 11th March 2011 earthquake have achieved resounding success among the audience. Authors usually read out loud selected poems or brief essays, often realised specifically for the occasion; sometimes they are also supported by music accompaniment. These lectures (*Lesung*, according to Tawada's busy schedule)<sup>1</sup> are anything but passive: by changing intonation and gesture to intrigue the audience, authors put in place a real performance in which the main actor of the play is the author himself. Moreover, along with the topic of the event, these literary shows give voice to authorial efforts to persuade the spectators that a popular political involvement is all the more necessary. The popularity of this “performing literature” has become remarkable to the extent that a transposition into books or a sound recording have become highly demanded, especially in Wagō Ryōichi's case.<sup>2</sup> This marketing strategy is opened to criticism although its positive aspect should be recognised: it enables further reading of the work in question, otherwise lost along with its unique live performance.

The phenomenon of the “performing literature” in Japan suggests the need to upgrade the approach of teaching contemporary Japanese literature in order to provide students with a 360° overview of the literary production of authors. In this regards, the promotion of multidisciplinary courses focused on a special theme rather than a particular authorial figure or a literary genre is to be preferred.

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<sup>1</sup> Official site: [http://yokotawada.de/?page\\_id=28](http://yokotawada.de/?page_id=28)

<sup>2</sup> Official site: <http://wago2828.com/#top>

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This brief research offers a panoramic of courses held by University of California Berkeley and Université de Montréal in 2013 and 2015 respectively; both courses were developed around different artistic fields involving literature, movies, manga and anime, under the common denominator of 3/11 (11th March 2011 disaster) as an investigative keyword. The attempt is to demonstrate that a shift from the traditional teaching courses to an innovative approach ables to offer a multifaceted perspective on a particular theme is all the more necessary to better investigate this new trend in authorial literary production.

**2. Daniel O' Neill's post-3/11 course, University of California Berkely (USA)**

Daniel O' Neill, currently associate professor at UC Berkeley (California) was assigned to the Contemporary Japanese Literature course during the 2013-2014 academical year. He proposed to his students of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures an interdisciplinary course where literature had the main role. Here is the evocative title: "Mediating Disaster: Fukushima, Before and After".<sup>3</sup>

The course, that I myself had the pleasure to attend, was structured in two weekly meetings for a total of 15 weeks during the spring semester (2014); each week offered to students the possibility to get in touch with authors belonging to different artistic fields, as announced at the best in the description of the course: "The course considers the different literary, social and ethical formations that arise or are destroyed in disaster. It explores how Japanese literature and media, before and after 3:11, attempt to translate the un-representable, and in so doing, to create a new type of literacy about 1) trauma and the temporality of disaster, 2) precocity, community and the public sphere and 3) sustainability and ecological scale."

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<sup>3</sup> The handout of the course is unfortunately not available online. For further inquires please contact directly professor O'Neill at <http://ieas.berkeley.edu/faculty/oneill.html>

It is worth mentioning that the first approach to 3/11 disaster was handled by professor O'Neill by investigating Japanese *genbaku* past, as to say, the atomic bombing experiences by Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their transposition into literary works. The first section of the course was actually devoted to “Atomic Bomb Literature, History and Politics” and explored both poetic and fictional representations of August 1945 through the literary works by two *hibakusha*, Hara Tamiki and Ōta Yōko. Along with authoritative critical references, the course took into consideration also Imamura Shōhei's movie *Kuroi Ame* (“Black rain”, 1989) and Nakazawa Keiji's manga *Hadashi no Gen* (“Barefoot Gen”, 1973-74). This trend continued in the second section of the course, entitled “Cinema and Trauma Theory” in which the theme of the atomic bombings was extended to analyse the well-known *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, both in its movie (1959) and literary versions (1995). During this two weeks a particular emphasis was dedicated to the field of trauma studies. The third part of the course can be considered as the heart of the whole study project. Under the straightforward title “Writing After 3.11” this section evaluated the collection of short novels called *Sore demo sangatsu wa mata* (in its English translation *March was made of Yarn*, 2011) as an exemplary work in post-Fukushima perspective, also promoting a particular case study about Wagō Ryōichi's poetical tweets.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in this phase the course provided a brief overview of manga responses to the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi. The fourth section of the course was devoted again to cinema field: “3.11 Cinema, Precarity and Hope” offered the chance to compare *Himizu* in its manga and film portrayals. The next section was focused on “3.11 Media and Activism” especially involving podcast, social networks and political movements in facing post-Fukushima scenario. Works by critics as David Slater, professor at Sophia University,

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<sup>4</sup> For further considerations about what I called *net-poetry* by Wagō Ryōichi, please refer to my article published by Ca' Foscari University “Annali” under the title *Wagō Ryōichi's Net-poetry and the Revolutionary 'Shared Literature'*, available at: <http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni/riviste/annali-di-ca-foscari-serie-orientale/2016/52/wago-ryoichis-net-poetry-and-the-revolut/>

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were taken into account too. The last stage of the course draws its conclusion by stressing the importance of “Disasters and the Documentary Impulse”. The emphasis given to photography and documentary films as a possible way to represent 3/11 aftermath was also strengthened by the possibility to talk directly to the film director Atsushi Funahashi who presented his notable *Nuclear Nation* (2012) during a symposium entitled “Reframing 3.11: Cinema, Literature, and Media after Fukushima” organised and held by Berkely University. In this occasion students got also the chance to get in contact with some of the authors studied during the semester, professor Slater included. Finally, the course concluded with a very last section entitled “Precarious Japan” in which students were encouraged to a mutual exchange of perceptions and comments about the course and the topics covered.

As this quite long description reveals, the strong points in the course promoted by professor O’Neill are detachable in the interdisciplinarity of the study program under the common denominator of “3/11”. On one hand, a red string can be identified in the comparison of literature, manga and movie fields: while Fukushima literary responses were analysed by keeping in mind *genbaku bungaku* influences,<sup>5</sup> both in poetry and novels, manga studies followed a similar trend by comparing the portraits of *hibakusha* in *Barefoot Gen* and in the surrounding area of Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant. The different approaches of fictionalised movies and documentary movies in representing the radioactivity zone of Hiroshima and Fukushima inspired deeper considerations about the cinematographic techniques required to depict such catastrophes. On the other hand, the benchmark to social networks and political movements as typical phenomena of the current era dominated by global media represents the innovative perspective given to this Contemporary Japanese Literature course. Last, but not least, a particular remark should be addressed to the

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<sup>5</sup> 原爆文学 usually translated as “literature of the atomic bombings”.

great opportunity to familiarise directly with scholars involved in post-3/11 studies during the symposium promoted by professor O'Neill in primis.

By considering manga, cinema and social media as an evolution of narrative discourse, professor O'Neill developed a multifaceted program which offered a first thought-provoking overview of the artistic responses to 11th March 2011.

### **3. Kimura Saeko's post-3/11 course, Université de Montréal (Canada)**

Kimura Saeko has been professor at Tsuda College, Faculty of Liberal Arts (Tōkyō) since 2013. Her first study on the literature responses to 11th March 2011 is entitled *Shinsai bungaku ron*. (“A theory of the literature of the catastrophe”, 2013)<sup>6</sup> and covers different artistic fields involving poetical, fictional and manga portrayals of 3/11. Upon invitation of Centre d'études de l'Asie de l'Est at Université de Montréal (Canada), professor Kimura was asked to take charge of the Comparative literature course, the “Littérature du Japon contemporain” on behalf of the Department of Literatures and Languages of the World (second semester of 2015).<sup>7</sup> This intensive course lasted only one month and half, two meetings per week. Following the same approach of her *Shinsai bungaku ron*, the study program set as goal the comparison of different aesthetic responses to 3/11 catastrophe by taking into consideration analogies and differences among distinct artistic fields: “In this course we will read, discuss, and debate Japanese aesthetic responses to the combined disasters of March 11, 2011. We will examine various media such as novels, films, manga, poems and photos, focusing especially on the Fukushima nuclear meltdown and the

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<sup>6</sup> Complete title: 『震災文学論。新しい日本文学のために』 *Shinsai bungaku ron. Atarashii nihon bungaku no tameni* (“A theory of the literature of the catastrophe. For a new Japanese Literature”), Tōkyō: Seidosha, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Handout of the course available online at [http://cetase.umontreal.ca/fileadmin/Documents/FAS/CETASE/Documents/1-Programmes-cours/plan-cours/H15AES2021KimuraSyllabus\\_\\_2\\_.pdf](http://cetase.umontreal.ca/fileadmin/Documents/FAS/CETASE/Documents/1-Programmes-cours/plan-cours/H15AES2021KimuraSyllabus__2_.pdf)

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possibilities for its representation.” The suggested bibliography, divided into Japanese, French and English references, included also a section devoted to DVD of documentary films discussed during the course.

The schedule mirrored professor O'Neill's solution as far as it was articulated in 12 thematic sections, starting from an introductory lesson in which the English *March was made of Yarn* was presented as the fundamental literary book for the course. The ice was broken by investigating the limits of manga representation of Fukushima nuclear accident. The second section of the course was devoted to the literary production only: by choosing the symbolic role of the bear figure as a keyword of post-3/11 literary investigation, works by Kawakami Hiromi, Miyazawa Kenji and Tsushima Yūko were analysed along with a rediscovery of Ainu tradition. The third meeting entitled “Imagining nuclear meltdown and radioactive contamination” proposed further considerations about literary connection between Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings and Fukushima nuclear fallout through the works by the writer Tawada Yōko and the anthropologist Maya Morioka Todeschini.<sup>8</sup> The next stage of the program continued analysing Tawada's social commitment in describing post-Fukushima situation by suggesting a comparison with the documentary film called *The Land of Hope* (2012) by the film director Sono Shion. Although the fifth lesson was entirely focused on the fictional and non-fictional responses to 3/11 by Takahashi Genichirō, the provoking title “Can we laugh at such a horrific incident?” anticipated the ethical question regarding the representability of catastrophe, making this stage the strong point of the whole study program. Remarkable was also the decision to give space to victims's experiences of 11th March by comparing documentaries, photos and poems in the next section entitled

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<sup>8</sup> For further investigations about Tawada's literary responses to 11th March, please refer to my article published for the online journal *Loxias 54* : « Doctoriales XIII » under the title *Dystopia as a narrative keyword: Tawada Yōko's responses to Japanese 3/11* and available at <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html>

“Listening to the voices of people in the affected areas”: a great deal of the credit should go to the intuition of bringing together different artistic expressions in order to analyse them in relation to their narrative potential. Similar approach which emphasised the interest in the usage of language in cinema was promoted in the eight lesson of the course when further investigations on documentary movies were conducted. Before concluding the program, additional comments about Hiroshima and Fukushima mutual denominator of cities exposed to radiation were developed especially considering Nobel prize Ōe Kenzaburō’s political engagement for a no-nuke world. The last two sections of the course resumed the role of literature in depicting 11th March disaster by focusing on the representation of the earthquake, first, and on the tsunami, then. In this phase interesting comparison with Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) were prompted in order to converge the attention on trauma and its transposition in literature. A midterm presentation and a final wrap-up section finally made the end of this intensive schedule.

Kimura Saeko’s program had the merit to investigate many literary works focused on the 3/11 theme offering the opportunity to dig up Japan’s *genbaku* past in a new post-Fukushima perspective. Moreover, trauma studies and ethical concerns were taking into consideration when dealing with the reproducibility or un-reproducibility of the catastrophic experience, regardless of the artistic areas involved. In this context, other appreciations should be addressed to the choice of extending the study program to different fields of study like manga, cinema and photography. The common keyword of investigation, namely, the three-fold catastrophe of 11th March 2011, was adopted successfully to compare the different aesthetic approaches to the representation of catastrophe.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Professor O’Neill and Kimura’s courses point out similar strategies to explore post-3/11 artistic responses. Both courses underlined the strong relation elapsed among literature, manga and cinema, although a particular

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remark should be addressed to professor Kimura's solution to add photography to the artistic fields taken into account. The interdisciplinary quality of both courses stress the mutual influence of the above-mentioned artistic fields in terms of aesthetic solutions adopted in representing the catastrophe. Although professor O'Neill course appeared as a better structured program with only a few topics of discussion, professor Kimura's course had the merit to investigate a wider number of literary works as well as documentary movies.

However, it is thanks to the comparison of literary, manga, cinematographic and photographic techniques that the courses revealed a common interest shared by the different art fields in describing 11th March. By identifying analogies and differences among the various artistic expressions, a common narrative denominator was discovered: the potentiality of language took different forms to convey the same message of the aftermath. Writing, drawing, filming and photo shooting represented different escapotage to give voice to the same discourse. O' Neill and Kimura's courses had the virtue to affirm clearly this truth to the extent that this common thread of post-3/11 studies was worth to be evaluated as a topic for an academic Contemporary Japanese Literature course.

The connection between Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing past was also analysed under a new light in relation to the literary responses to Fukushima nuclear meltdown, as well as rediscovered in manga and documentary films. It is remarkable to notice that both courses underlined the Japanese *genbaku* experience as a *fil rouge* which connects the three cities that experienced radioactivity exposition. In this way students's attention was also turned to the literary genre known as *genbaku bungaku*, still hardly accepted as a canonical genre by the Japanese *bundan* sounding a critical role for its doubtful aesthetic value.

Kimura's course gave widely space also to the ethical debate around the morality or immorality of taking stance in front of catastrophe: authors's political engagement was considered as part of the reasons under their social commitment through a piece of work like literature, manga, films and photography usually associated by collective imagination to amusement and entertainment. The educational value of these artistic fields emerged as the moving engine for authors's involvement in the discourse.

Likewise, O'Neill's decision to consider social movements as well as social networks's role in the post 11th March scenario reflects the importance that media studies have gained among academics. This innovative stance also leads to a wider perception of 11th March catastrophe which transcends Japan national borders to become a global problem for a worldwide concern. In this regards, further considerations should be addressed to the symposium organised by professor O'Neill and held by UC Berkely. These two days of full immersion into post-3/11 studies represented without doubt the perfect stage to share, discuss and propose further contributions on the topic in accordance with the different fields of competence of the participants. The mutual exchange of comments, ideas and opinions on the theme between scholars and students should be regarded as a great value of the course which contributed to a deeper understanding of 11th March artistic responses.

This investigation opened with a brief dissertation about the evolution of literary production which has been surpassed canonical boundaries to explore other artistic expressions. The case of the "literary performance" by Tawada and Wagō constituted an example of the interdisciplinarity of this authorial production conceived as a blend between literature and drama. In a conventional - better to say, traditional - teaching course on their production, the study would be merely focused on their literature in the form of printed media, with a consequent loss of chances to interpret their performances too.

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What professor O'Neill and Kimura's literary courses underlined was, on the contrary, the possibility to take into consideration any artistic fields performed by authors thanks to the choice of giving preference to the narrative discourse shared by the different artistic fields rather than a mere literary approach. The perspective changes completely and offers occasions to reflect about authorial engagement in politic affairs, social movements, relationship with fandom and so on: all variables that actually influence authorial production also in terms of editorial marketing.

To open up Japanese Literature courses to a similar trend does not only mean to provide students with the most completed overview about authorial production. It also entails to create real chance to experience directly this new evolution of the literary field. In this sense, the renovation of the traditional study program should follow the path of Daniel O'Neill and Kimura Saeko's intuitions, in order to offer to the students a broad knowledge that answers at best the demands of today's globalised world.

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