Ryo Morimoto
Nuclear Ghost: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone

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Nuclear Ghost: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone examines the aftermath of Japan's 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Ryo Morimoto focuses on individuals who decided to stay or to return to Minamisōma (a coastal city in Fukushima Prefecture), despite the potential risk of radioactive contamination. Morimoto traces "the residents' hopes and desires to live and die well in the city" (22), asking how affected individuals attempt to live in Minamisōma, especially amidst narratives that rely on "technoscientific definitions of radiation exposure as the only legible metrics of the nuclear accident" (ibid.). These questions are explored via different case studies, such as an examination of

life amidst decontamination practices (chapter 7) or the changing relationships between humans and contaminated fauna (chapter 9).

Morimoto's aim is to go beyond the "collective enchantment with radiation exposure" (22), which, according to the author, overshadows the picture of Fukushima, while victimizing residents of Minamisōma in their recovery. As the author argues: "*Nuclear Ghost* is a call for us to suspend our fixation with radiological damage in order to narrate the ongoing livelihoods under threats of chronic low-dose radiation exposure" (22). In terms of praise, the book provides unparalleled views of the everyday life of Minamisōma's residents through rich ethnographic description. Morimoto is also a skilled writer who provides a vivid description of the catastrophe. As opposed to academic works couched in scientific jargon, the book is pleasurable to read and can attract a wider readership. However, as a scholar equally working on Fukushima, I have come to disagree with the theoretical position championed by this work (Polleri 2021). These disagreements surround a limited conceptualization of victimhood, as well as the unintended consequences of Morimoto's call to suspend radiation damage focus, which too closely align with the aims of the nuclear lobby.

First, Morimoto starts his book by claiming that he has failed to encounter people who defined themselves as "victims" (4). This led him to argue for a shift from the "study of 'nuclear victimhood' to 'atomic livelihoods'" (25). In doing so, Morimoto creates a dichotomy between nuclear victimhood and atomic livelihoods, where the former becomes associated with negativity. However, it is important to remember that nuclear victimhood is not de facto a passive state, but also a productive force that historically generated demands for radical political changes, especially within Japan. A deeper exploration of the texture of victimhood *within* post-Fukushima Japanese society, such as highlighting the role of committed victims (*tōjisha*) trying to evacuate from Fukushima (see Löschke 2021), would have allowed a more nuanced complexity of nuclear victimhood. Furthermore, the absence of "victims" is a direct consequence of methodological choices, stemming from the author's focus on elderly people who decided to return to Fukushima and for whom radiation health risk is not always the main factor of concern. As such, I see a discrepancy between the book's main argument and the empirical data that support it. In other words, do ethnographic materials *only* gathered from a community that wishes to remain in Fukushima provide the grounds to sustain a general call for suspending radiation-damage focus? I do not believe they do. As with most ethnographies, the extreme local focus of the book is what provides a strong contextual understanding, but it also represents a double-edged sword that hampers the theoretical ambitions and claims of the author.

Second, a call to suspend focus on radiation damage too closely aligns with the aims of the nuclear lobby to normalize the aftermath of nuclear disasters, even though the author disavows this position. Similar calls already exist within the notion of "radiophobia," which claims that the fear of radiation is more damaging than radiation. Radiophobia has long been promoted by members of the nuclear lobby to downplay the consequences of contamination, while impeding financial compensations for victims (Stawkowski 2017). By stressing the fact that radiation is "extremely harmful socially, politically, and psychologically" (239), it remains unclear as to how Morimoto's work differs from the narratives of the nuclear lobby, which argues for a similar thing. At times, Morimoto reproduces a similar ideology, by writing that the "actual primary health effects have not come from radiation itself" (8), or that "the physical risks of living in the area are

lower than anticipated and there are no medically and statistically significant cases of chromosomal damage" (239). At other times, he distances himself from this logic, by claiming that "my stories might appear to some to be underplaying the decision of those who left the region and the potential adverse effects of radiation exposure and thus spreading a radiation-tolerant, pronuclear perspective. That is not my intention" (6).

However, beyond typical phrases claiming that his goal is "not to downplay the harm from the routinized low-dose radiation exposure" (9), Morimoto never goes on to fully develop the danger of the similarity between his call and the nuclear lobby's. While he attempts to put accountability back on the nuclear actors, by calling the Fukushima disaster the "TEPCO accident"—the electric utility holding company responsible for the disaster—the aim of his naming convention still "signals the core of [the author's] ethnographic project, which aims to decenter the radiation-centered narrative to instead explore the local, more granular conditions surrounding 3.11" (2). Again, such a position has historically been endorsed by members of the nuclear lobbies who equally stressed the importance of local connections after a disaster to avoid costly policies of evacuation. Not theorizing the dangerous similitudes between these positions remains the major shortcoming of the book. In the end, the book should be read as a situated ethnography of the daily life of Minamisōma residents and their effort to navigate the disaster. Yet, a call to suspend radiation damage might not find a strong match with some anthropologists working on nuclear-related issues.

References

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