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# Ruins for the future:

## Critical allegory and disaster governance in post-tsunami Japan

### ABSTRACT

In 2011 a tsunami over 20 meters high struck Japan's northeastern coastline. Along with causing close to 20,000 deaths, it destroyed many buildings, leaving behind a landscape of ruins. In the years since the disaster, various groups in Japan have interpreted these ruins as a way to work through "what went wrong." Some pointed to local officials' failure to properly prepare for the disaster, as well as the form of economic development that they had promoted. Others, however, particularly state officials, argued that the ruins of failed development reveal something that can be used to stimulate economic recovery and legitimize further development. Ironically, these groups mobilized the debris of "progress" to advance progress itself, complicating theories of recent ruins as "counter-sites." This shows that actors can construct and leverage the truth content of ruins in support of the very ideologies and processes that caused their ruination in the first place. [3.11, disaster, governance, materiality, modernity, ruination, Japan]

**O**n a hot summer's day in 2012, a man in Tōhoku, the northeastern region of mainland Japan, offered to drive me to my lodgings. I was heading to Minamisanriku, a coastal town in Miyagi Prefecture, just south of where he had a small shop. On our way, he suddenly announced a detour and headed toward a four-story building a short distance from the waterfront. As we approached, I saw that only the uppermost level had windows. On the lower floors, gaping holes with broken window frames allowed glimpses of what remained of the ravaged interior. He said this was a high school; apparently, during the tsunami that had struck the coastline 12 months earlier, some 50 people had survived by taking refuge on its roof. He drove on but stopped again and again to show me similar sites—damaged buildings, piles of debris, trees dead from saltwater—and told me how some buildings' contents had been removed, leaving empty spaces. Conveying what the disaster meant to him seemed inseparable from narrating the stories of these ruined places.

At my destination, Minamisanriku's Shizugawa District, I would soon encounter the most famous of these devastated buildings: the ironically named Disaster Prevention Center (see Figure 1). There are only a few firsthand accounts of what happened there, including a book by the town's mayor at the time, Satō Jin (2014).<sup>1</sup> On March 11, 2011, known today as "3.11," he was chairing the town council's monthly meeting when a violent earthquake struck. The shaking lasted several minutes. Knowing a tsunami would follow, he hurried to the Disaster Prevention Center, which housed the administration's Crisis Management Office. When he arrived, Satō got word that Japan's Meteorological Agency had estimated the earthquake's magnitude at 7.9 and that it was predicting a tsunami about six meters high. Satō calculated that the seawalls guarding the waterfront could block one that size. But when wreckage began flowing

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Figure 1. The ruins of the Disaster Prevention Center in the town of Minamisanriku, Japan, 2015. (Andrew Littlejohn)

down the river next to the center, he realized that the tsunami was bigger than expected. He ordered everyone to the roof. As he ascended, Satō saw a cloud of yellow dust rising from the direction of the sea. Suddenly, the adjacent town hall broke apart and smashed into the center. Water cascaded over the roof, hurling him into the emergency staircase.

Satō remembers nothing of almost drowning in the tsunami. When the water receded from the staircase, he found that of the 53 people who had been in the building, only 10 had survived. Unable to climb down, the survivors spent a freezing night on the roof, huddling for warmth around a small fire made of wooden debris lit with someone's cigarette lighter. When dawn came, it revealed a landscape of devastation. "Roofs, wall coverings, pillars, furniture, signs, nets, buoys, bicycles" (Satō 2014, 43) lay mixed together among the few structures that still stood. Satō

wrote about how, in the days and weeks that followed, he was repeatedly assailed by visions of that morning landscape. Before the disaster, central Minamisanriku had been home to buildings—like schools, the hospital, and local government offices—that represented the town's modernity; now, in their ruination, they seemed like testaments to what Satō (2014, 107) called the "terrible mistake" (*taihen na shitten*) of allowing or encouraging residential development in lowlands that were inundated during past tsunamis.

### Critical allegories

Many people in Japan immediately labeled the tsunami a natural disaster, or *tensai*. In Satō's narrative, however, he portrays it more as an epiphenomenon of history, especially the history of inappropriate development that created the

town's vulnerability. This perspective reflects a critique that social scientists, including anthropologists, have long been leveling against geophysical theories of disaster. According to this critique, catastrophes befall populations that have been rendered vulnerable to them by social, political, and economic systems. Accordingly, they are best understood not as abnormal or extreme events but as manifestations of existing societal fault lines and development ideologies. As Oliver-Smith et al. (2016, 20) write, such disasters are "actually being generated" by the "normalcy" of "long-term misinformed development"—such as locating high schools and crisis-management facilities in areas known to have been inundated during tsunamis.

In the last decade or so, disaster ethnographers have examined the ruins of what they label "misguided development," which they criticize for its role in generating "natural" disasters (Angell 2014; Dawdy 2006, 2010, 2016; González-Ruibal 2008; Hastrup 2010; Schäfers 2016; Wilford 2008; Xu 2017). Many of these critiques, like the wider literature on ruination that they form part of, build on the ideas of Walter Benjamin (1998, 178), who claimed that ruins are the material equivalent of allegories: they are figures that can be interpreted to reveal deeper truths.<sup>2</sup> Modern ruins, for example, reveal truths hidden by modernist aesthetics and material-spatial orders. His "allegorical way of seeing" contemporary ruination underpins a mode of critique that I call "critical allegory." This entails interpreting recent ruins to reveal and deconstruct the phenomena whose failures produced them, along with the suffering they entail. In both the ethnographic and interdisciplinary literature, these phenomena are typically capitalism, development, and state power. To give one example, Shannon Dawdy (2006, 720) argues that the ruins left by Hurricane Katrina disclose the "structures, both fragile and enduring, that [lay] below" and created the differentiated vulnerability of the storm's victims.

Modern ruins function in such narratives as "counter-sites" (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 467), where such structures manifest and can be challenged. Even when some conservative or regressive potential is acknowledged, they remain "too uncanny" to domesticate. Ruination transforms things representing modernist "dreams of reason," like development, into testaments to their supposedly inevitable failure (González-Ruibal 2011, 163). But as I show in this article, actors with various personal and political-economic interests, including the Japanese state, mobilized different ideas about what "truth content" (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 468) was revealed by ruined things (particularly buildings), thereby resurrecting dreams of reason in post-tsunami Tōhoku. Although I discuss several buildings, I focus on Minamisanriku's Disaster Prevention Center because it was so iconic and because there was great controversy surrounding it. Certainly, some residents saw its destruction as revealing the past faults of modern devel-

opment, but many others, including officials, argued that the fraught histories that such buildings reveal should be harnessed in support of further development and progress. By examining these conflicting positions, we can see how ruination reveals its "pragmatic functions" (Kahn 2019, 471): how people on the ground and state actors mobilized critical allegories to reconstruct modes of development and protection oriented toward the future.

Recent ruins are not straightforward evidence of the past negations, violence, or inequalities that created contemporary geographies (Gordillo 2014, 11). They are, rather, polysemous sites that can promise or forestall possible futures (Schäfers 2016, 229), gather new publics, and create new fault lines. This depends on how they enable people to articulate critique in relation to different understandings of what the crisis was that created them (or, in this case, the disaster). As Janet Roitman (2012) points out, people use the concept of "crisis" to demarcate past "moments of truth" when people supposedly made decisions that created a negative teleology. By asking and answering the question *What went wrong?* they demand that we break with this past and thus propose a different future. But "in marking out a 'moment of truth' in this way, certain questions can be asked while others are foreclosed" (Roitman 2014, 93)—including the question whether the present state of affairs results from things going wrong or from normalcy itself. Crisis and disaster, in other words, are "not intrinsic to a system or the result of a teleology," but are "rather a distinction that produces meaning" (93). Ruins are critical sites where such meaning can be produced because, as Frida Hastrup (2010, 101) argues, once the wave has withdrawn or once the earth has stopped shaking, "the [disaster] is its consequences."

The pragmatic functions of ruination are evident in how various actors in Tōhoku constructed different truths "revealed" by the center regarding "what went wrong" (or different critical allegories). These understandings created diverging critiques, and thus different moral demands for transcending or overcoming what happened. Some of the demands played out in ways that revealed past failures, but most, paradoxically, worked to divert attention from unsustainable development. As a consequence, the ruins of past dreams of reason are being mobilized to buttress contemporary political economies, resulting in ruinous futures for regions like Tōhoku.

A major driver of this process was officials' invocation of *coming* catastrophes, by which they meant to protect the region's prevailing mode of development. Thus, in Japan as elsewhere, contemporary governance increasingly hinges on anticipation (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009). Disasters, and especially the threat of their recurrence, play a crucial role in providing regimes with opportunities to expand or reinforce their power (Choi 2015, 287). Yet gaps between people's everyday anticipatory practices (or "anticipatory states") and official futurities often render a regime's

authority fragile, as Vivian Choi (2015) has shown in Sri Lanka. In Tōhoku, officials worried that eroding memories of the tsunami after 3.11 would produce such a gap, weakening public support for the government's plans to rebuild and protect the coastline. Preserving the ruins caused by the tsunami could counteract this, they suggested, by embedding allegorical objects (the ruins) in people's daily lives and thus justifying both more security infrastructure and more modernist disaster governance. The irony is that this very infrastructure will likely make more probable a different kind of ruination.

In what follows, I elaborate on these claims, drawing on research conducted for a larger ethnographic project on how tsunami survivors negotiated Japan's post-tsunami reconstruction. This involved more than 16 months' solo fieldwork in Minamisanriku and its environs, including an 11-month stint in 2014–15. During this field stay, I soon learned that the Disaster Prevention Center's future was a taboo topic. People often confided their views to me, however, perhaps because as a white, Western male, I appeared to be outside what Paul Lewis (2018, 2) calls "local gossip circles." Late in my fieldwork, the town held a public consultation on the building's future. To better understand the full spectrum of perspectives, I obtained the 664 handwritten, anonymized submissions via a freedom-of-information request. Much of the argument that follows is based on what I found in them, alongside excerpts from my field notes and interviews. Quotations from the public consultation are designated "PC," followed by the document's official number (there are no page numbers). All translations are my own.

Before turning to this material, I first provide a short historical overview of Tōhoku's coastal development, before and after the disaster. The predisaster period produced the buildings later ruined in the tsunami, but at stake in the battles over those buildings' fates were the contours of the postdisaster future. The next three sections elaborate on how three broadly defined groups mobilized the Disaster Prevention Center in grappling with the paradoxes raised by reconstruction. The first were relatives of those who had died there, who wanted to erase the building (I refer to them simply as "relatives of the dead"); the second were residents seeking to stimulate the economy through disaster tourism; and the third were officials and consultants promoting rebuilding based on public works. I do not imply that these groups' views were either discrete or homogenous. For example, some relatives of those who died favored retaining the center. But the correlations were strong enough to warrant generalization: although the public consultation was anonymized, most submissions claiming a connection to the dead favored demolition. Across the sections that follow, I trace how ruined buildings were transformed over time from objects revealing multiple, individual traumas to

vehicles of collective memory and, finally, to warnings for future generations. In concluding, I ask what these transformations reveal about destruction's evolving pragmatic functions in an era when governments worldwide are increasingly trying to shield their favored development model from its ruinous consequences.

### Concreting the coastline

Today, Japan's municipalities are struggling to maintain the concrete modernity constructed during the latter half of the 20th century, when many processes characterizing modernization accelerated or intensified (González-Ruibal 2008, 247). After World War II, a construction boom dramatically transformed rural areas. Historians locate the roots of this boom in Japan's colonization of Korea, Taiwan, and Manchukuo. Many of the engineers involved in building roads, railways, canals, and bridges abroad became involved in "nation building" (*kokudo zukuri*) at home (Steele 2017). Despite the US occupation's restrictions, Japan was by the mid-1950s producing twice as much concrete as it had been before the war. Production increased further thanks to a national plan for "restructuring the Japanese archipelago" (McCormack 2001), pushing the allocation of the national budget for public works to 43 percent by 1993 (McCormack 1995). Much of the money went to pork barrel (*reiki yūdō*) and ill-conceived development projects in rural regions, whose municipalities embraced them because they provided a powerful economic stimulus.

Many projects profoundly altered Japan's shorelines. From the mid-1970s to the 1990s, 90 percent of tidal wetlands were drained, and half the nation's coastline was concreted over (McCormack 2001). In Tōhoku seawalls were built after an earthquake near the Chilean coastline triggered a tsunami that struck the region in 1960. This caused more than 100 deaths and severe damage to Japan's coastal properties. When the walls prevented a smaller tsunami from inundating the region in 1968 after the 7.5 magnitude Hyūga-nada earthquake, it reinforced the notion that in the future "there would be no threat of tsunami" (Shuto and Fujima 2009, 270). This encouraged further development in coastal towns such as Minamisanriku. Trust in seawalls explains why the school I visited on my first day was built in an earlier tsunami's inundation zone in 1977. It explains why homes, factories, and shopping arcades were erected on reclaimed land so close to the ocean, and it explains the hubris that led the town's government in 1995 to also locate its Disaster Prevention Center in an area that had been inundated during previous disasters.

As construction proceeded on the center, however, Japan's concrete boom was drawing to a close. Economic downturn saw public works expenditure halve in the late 1990s, as a government led by deficit hawk

Junichiro Koizumi shifted focus—as was reflected in one of its slogans—“from concrete to people” (Mulgan 2013). Not all people benefited equally from this shift, which was characterized by limited decentralization and central-government austerity. Construction had stimulated the rural economies, but many people saw its waning, coupled with the abolition of tax-revenue transfers from the cities, as the state “cutting off and throwing away” (Love 2013, 114) these areas. Since then, state spending on public works has continued to fall; in towns like Minamisanriku this has contributed to economic contraction and led young people to find work in more prosperous cities, shrinking the local population. As a result, some of these towns and villages cannot sustain their aging populations and infrastructures. Even after the disaster, they were already beginning to resemble what Ōguma Eiji (2013) later called “ghost town[s] covered by the concrete of public works.”

After the 3.11 tsunami, there arose the question of how to redevelop these towns and protect their residents from future disasters. This provided certain people within Japan’s weakened construction state the opportunity to capitalize on the catastrophe and resurrect public works approaches to development. For example, Nikai Toshihiro, the former minister of economy, trade, and industry, argued that “concrete protected people’s lives” (Mulgan 2013): the answer was bigger walls, longer and higher river embankments, and ever more “hard landscaping.” Shortly after the disaster, the Liberal Democratic Party returned to power and promised 25 trillion yen toward these efforts, much of it earmarked for giant seawalls (Ōguma 2013, 1). Many of my interlocutors believed that the main beneficiaries would be the five politically connected construction companies—known as the “general contractors,” or *zenecon*—that had built much of the coastline during the previous boom. Cash-strapped municipalities, however, welcomed the opportunity to stimulate their damaged economies by letting government money trickle down to local contractors.

Despite these immediate benefits, many survivors opposed the plans to further concrete the coastline. On the one hand, they disputed the plans’ rationales. Some argued that seawalls had not protected anyone on 3.11. Rather, they had created unforeseen hazards by promoting overdevelopment and obstructing views of the sea. They pointed out that many residents had not evacuated—and thus died—because they didn’t see the tsunami or had trusted the infrastructure. People also chafed at the top-down nature of reconstruction. Rebuilding plans typically claimed that local people were leading the recovery, but all too often, according to my respondents, it was a process wherein limited choices “came down” (*orite kuru*) to them from the prefectural and national government. These choices, focused as they were on hard infrastructure, neglected other issues that people cared about, such as how to rebuild economies that had been suffering even before the tsunami hit.

Nikai Toshihiro’s claim that “concrete protected people’s lives” (Mulgan 2013) highlights how, even during this early postcatastrophe stage, key players were mobilizing the narrative potential of materiality in their arguments about what to prioritize in rebuilding. Such arguments intensified in the years that followed. As the rubble was cleared away, the ruined structures that remained became increasingly visible, and these buildings, or shells of buildings, became ever more prominent in debates over the politics of reconstruction. Some residents and government officials gradually came to advocate preserving many of them, including the Disaster Prevention Center. Indeed, outside Minamisanriku, the center came to be heralded as the main symbol of the disaster itself. But for the relatives of those who died there, its meanings were more specific and more personal. It is to these people, and their relationship with the structure, that I now turn.

### “If it hadn’t been there”

In critiques inspired by Benjamin, ruins often reveal or allegorize the failures of higher-order processes like modernity, development, and progress. In Minamisanriku and its environs, however, many of the ruins came to be characterized by more specific, local stories about what happened there and why. In the school I visited on my first day, for example, the roof was habitually locked; when water reached the fourth floor on 3.11, people could flee higher because one of the teachers had a master key. By contrast, at an elementary school south of Minamisanriku, 84 teachers and children died when they fled to part of the grounds designated as safe but later inundated. These diverging conditions seemed to resist singular narratives. As the mayor of Sendai, Tōhoku’s capital, said during a committee meeting, ruined structures “all have different circumstances.” She added, “They are not ‘general’ but ‘specific’ things [and] what one can read [*yomitoru*] into [them] varies heavily according to one’s knowledge and experiences” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2014, 2). Understanding the roles they played in the politics of reconstruction requires that we attend first to this specificity and variability.

I began learning what people read into the Disaster Prevention Center early in my fieldwork, when a regular drinking partner living near it asked if he could draw me a picture. Above a rough outline of the building’s girders, he traced a number of lines emanating skyward. “These,” he told me, “are people’s souls rising, like waves of energy. Whenever I look at the center, I see them.” The 43 people who died in the building included a woman who continued broadcasting evacuation warnings even as the wave hit. Most of the deceased were local government officials, including her; a few were residents of the surrounding areas who had believed a building called the Disaster Prevention Center would surely be safe. In the aftermath, most of their bodies

were found. Some were never recovered, however, leaving their families without a sense of closure.

It soon became clear that the latter had a particularly complicated relationship with the structure. Believing that the souls of their loved ones remained there, some would visit to offer prayers at a small, makeshift altar kept scrupulously clean by an elderly resident. Others avoided the center. If passing it on an errand, a community organizer told me over coffee one afternoon, some people would hurry by, averting their gaze. This was because seeing the building brought them pain. Their hearts would race and blood pressure rise, he said. Such feelings are described in the following letter submitted as part of the public consultation:

We who saw the tsunami will never be able to forget. We lost our houses, lost all of our things. But for those of us who lost people (our relatives) on top of this, nothing remains but suffering. . . . Although I can't see [redacted] anymore, when I wonder what they felt . . . When I think how painfully, painfully they must have suffered while being washed away, my chest seizes up. . . . When I see [the Disaster Prevention Center], that day comes back to me. (PC 148)

As this and other letters show, visions of the tsunami and the friends and relatives people lost would “rise before their eyes” (*me ni ukabu*) whenever they saw the building. This forced them to repeatedly relive the event; the ruin became “the past in the present” (Gordillo 2011, 163), both evidence of the disaster and a remnant of it.

Some people's suffering was intensified by their belief that this past had been avoidable. Like ruins elsewhere, the hollowed-out buildings in Minamisanriku seemed to disclose “moments of truth” (Roitman 2014, 93), or perceived turning points when decisions were made that affected the contours of the disaster (in this case, who would live and who would die). Some of these I have already mentioned, such as the decision to create hazard maps marking as safe areas that had previously been inundated (and whose future inundation was thus foreseeable, as Sendai's High Court would rule; *Asahi Shimbun* 2018). In the case of the Disaster Prevention Center, most people focused on choices made by Mayor Satō before the tsunami struck. He was at fault, some claimed, because he should have evacuated staff to higher ground after the earthquake. On two occasions groups of relatives formally accused him of causing death by negligence, arguing that “if [he] had ordered [staff] to flee in the time between the earthquake and the tsunami's arrival, surely everyone would have escaped” (PC 167). The police dismissed these claims, citing lack of evidence (*Sankei News* 2016).

A few people also wrote letters to the consultation pinpointing turning points further back in time. Much of the center's surroundings had been erected during the post-war construction boom; the building itself was built at the

boom's tail end, in 1995. A submission to the public consultation recalls this:

When I think of the deceased, the center itself looks like a grave, and I feel sick with regret. If the center hadn't been in that place . . . People were skeptical of it at the time, but they built it in a place inundated during the Chile earthquake and tsunami [in 1960], right next to a river, knowing that a tsunami's nature is to move up rivers. (PC 67)

In contrast to those blaming Satō, this letter suggests a critique in which the building becomes an allegory of inappropriate histories of development—development that the mayor himself called a “terrible failure.” It recalls Brett Walker's (2013, xii) point that the tsunami struck a highly engineered space: one that directed and channeled the wave, placing some people more in harm's way than others (and thus rendering the disaster not “natural” at all). Trust in seawalls enabled this development; the same trust also explains why Satō (2014, 30) did not evacuate: Why worry, he wrote, when the tsunami “should be within the range that could be stopped by the seawall?”

But for most of those who identified with relatives of the dead, reconstruction provided an opportunity to compensate for the failures that the building allegorized, failures both general and specific. The building had to be demolished because, they believed, it would impede reconstruction (*fukkō no samatage ni naru*). “Right now, the town is buzzing with talk of reconstructing a new town,” one resident wrote. “But if the Disaster Center is left as it is, reconstruction will be meaningless. I want to see the new, changed streets” (PC 59). Those supporting erasure asked for a monument to be erected in its place, similar to the commemorative stones (*ireihi*) erected in waterfront hamlets after the devastating 1933 Shōwa Sanriku tsunami and the 1960 Chile earthquake and tsunami. This would supplant the building's negativity with a “symbolic aesthetics,” which “displac[es] the anguish of life with images of stabilized harmony” (Koepnick 1996, 69). Once the town was overbuilt with new, changed streets and memorials, the traumatic event would appear concluded and transcended, its lethal consequences and survivors' suffering “once and for all calculated, listed, and engraved in stone” (Hastrup 2010, 103).

There was a problem, however: some people in the town were already discussing preserving the center. To ensure that this did not happen, relatives seeking the center's demolition intervened in the debate by expressing how the building made them feel. Initially, they appealed to local politicians with whom they had connections. Later, several formed a lobby group called Relatives of the Dead for Disassembly (*Kaitai wo Nozomu Izoku no Kai*; see *Kahoku Shimpō* 2014). In both cases, relatives sought to suspend

deliberations by appealing to something beyond or before politics (Jeffery and Candea 2006, 289): the pain that the center's allegorical negativity engendered in them. During interviews with major regional and even national newspapers, a representative called this pain something "we cannot escape from" (*Kahoku Shimpō* 2015). A local dignitary and former mayoral candidate made the gravity of the situation clear in an interview with a regional newspaper. "The relatives of the dead are suffering," he said. "The sadness of losing your family cannot be healed. . . . They stand before the stage where it is debated whether to preserve the center. The mayor and the town authorities must face them" (*Kahoku Shimpō* 2015). Just as crisis narratives evoke moral demands for better futures, in this rendering the pain that relatives felt constituted "a moral demand to respond to [its] expression" (Cavell 2007, xi).

In summary, for many of those related to the 43 people who died at the Disaster Prevention Center, the building became a "counter-site" (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013, 467). Its ruination allegorized specific failures of coastal governance, revealing critical truths about the particular circumstances that condemned survivors' loved ones. Most of the relatives cited recent failures, like Mayor Satō's alleged dereliction of duty during the tsunami. A few also cited older problems, such as the decision to build a crisis-management facility in an area where previous vulnerability to tsunamis was no secret. But this did not lead people to retrospectively condemn draining and developing vulnerable coastal wetlands. Rather than rejecting development, many survivors yearned for "new development" (*arata na hatten*; PC 419), reviving postwar promises to urbanize and order coastal space (Yarrow 2017, 568). Preserving the ruin would not only condemn them to relive the disaster every time they lay eyes on it, but it would also demonstrate how the desired present had not yet arrived. "Although it's not good to forget the past," one letter concludes, "the most important thing is moving forward, from a today where that past remains, to tomorrow" (PC 183).

Emphasizing their victimhood, some relatives of the dead tried to move decisions about the center out of the political and economic spheres. At first, it seemed they would succeed. In September 2012 the town council voted to demolish the building out of respect for relatives' feelings. The next year, Mayor Satō announced he would ask the prefecture to dismantle it. Other survivors, however, sought to overturn this decision. This led to what Ryo Morimoto (2012, 266–71) calls "a struggle of interpretants," during which "differently registered and re-elaborated memories of the past" produced counterclaims over what ruination referenced, what affects this produced, what those affects did to relatives, and what they *could do* for Tōhoku's precarious economy. Through this struggle, ruined buildings like the center slowly acquired less personal and more generalized meanings.

## Leaving things as they are

Those favoring preservation knew that they faced an uphill struggle, given the views held by many relatives of the dead and their supporters. They had seen what happened in the nearby city of Kesennuma, where a fishing trawler had been swept inland and became iconic because it contrasted so surreally with the surrounding streets. Some residents and the local administration had wanted to build a memorial park around the boat in hopes that it would stimulate tourism. But, to the government's chagrin, the vessel was dismantled after a public consultation showed that 68.3 percent of residents favored demolishing it because it made them remember "that day." Perhaps because of this, preservationists in Minamisanriku adopted an indirect strategy premised on shifting the terms of the debate. Instead of advocating "preservation" (*hazon*), they supported a proposal that Miyagi Prefecture take control of the center until 2031. They claimed that this would allow residents more time to deliberate on its fate. Meanwhile, they put forward other ideas about what and whose experiences the building revealed.

In 2015, I attended a town council debate on whether to reverse the earlier demolition recommendation and endorse prefectural control. Both national and local media were present; some relatives of the dead sat watching the proceedings. The motion to endorse was sponsored by a young politician who had been elected after the tsunami and who had championed the cause of keeping the center intact. He began his opening speech in a conciliatory tone. "I am well aware that no small number of relatives of the dead and other residents desire demolition," he said, making it clear that he had no intention of ignoring these feelings. He continued, "Shouldn't we stop placing all the burden on relatives, and make this the entire town's problem?" As he carried on speaking, his tone became more strident, and during the fractious debate that followed, he finally snapped. "The Disaster Prevention Center," he said, "is not the exclusive property of relatives of the dead." Many others echoed this language in the public consultation. For example: "[The building] belongs to the town, and the townspeople. I want [the relatives of the dead] not to forget [that] many died outside the center" (PC 95).

These arguments offered an expanded idea of who had the most right to identify with the structure (and thus whose voices mattered most in the debates about its future). But doing so required altering what the ruination referenced, replacing individual, personal losses with a more generalized, communal sense of loss. The following submission to the consultation demonstrates this:

[The center] is a place where we can pray for the many people who died during the disaster. . . . The people who worked in the hospital, who worked in the care

home, the fire brigade, those people gave their lives to protect us. Thanks to them, we were saved. [Unclear] was not at fault. The fault lay with a disaster so huge that we couldn't imagine it. (PC 2)

As this excerpt shows, it was the tsunami that linked the center to Japan's other sites of disaster. Although some of the submission's text is redacted, the author appears to contest narratives that yoke the center's ruination to site-specific failures of governance or development. Instead, the author suggests that the state of the center and that of other ruined buildings derived from a tsunami "so huge that we couldn't imagine it."

In this person's mind, the event itself figures differently: it is not a series of individual traumas resulting from specific turning points but a single, collective experience—and the tsunami's excess was itself the catastrophe. In this "blame the event" (Olson 2000, 278) narrative, the damage wrought on the building is attributed a more indexical quality. You can grasp the tsunami's scale, people said, from how high its destruction reaches. Similarly, the complete obliteration of everything but the building's steel "skeleton" (*honegumi*) testified to the wave's extraordinary force. According to one letter, the result is that "when you stand in front of that center, your eyes look up to the height of the tsunami, [and] you experience [it] with your body. . . . [The building's] form expresses everything, without words; people can understand all about the tsunami's horror" (PC 204).

Many believed that this horror would endure, ensuring that coming generations never forgot what happened "that day." Thus, in seeking to preserve the building, some residents sought to shape a future in which the fraught events of 3.11 would be progressively overcome. If the crisis occurred because the town was struck by a tsunami whose scale exceeded all expectations, then a better future meant ensuring that people would never be caught off guard again. This made preserving ruined things not only thinkable but imperative. "Conveying the enormity of the damage to future generations," a submission summarized, "necessitates forms in which [that damage] remains" (PC 129)—like the Disaster Prevention Center. When coming generations, ignorant of the tsunami, stand in front of the building, they will understand its ferocity and remember those "sacrificed" (*gisei ni natta*).

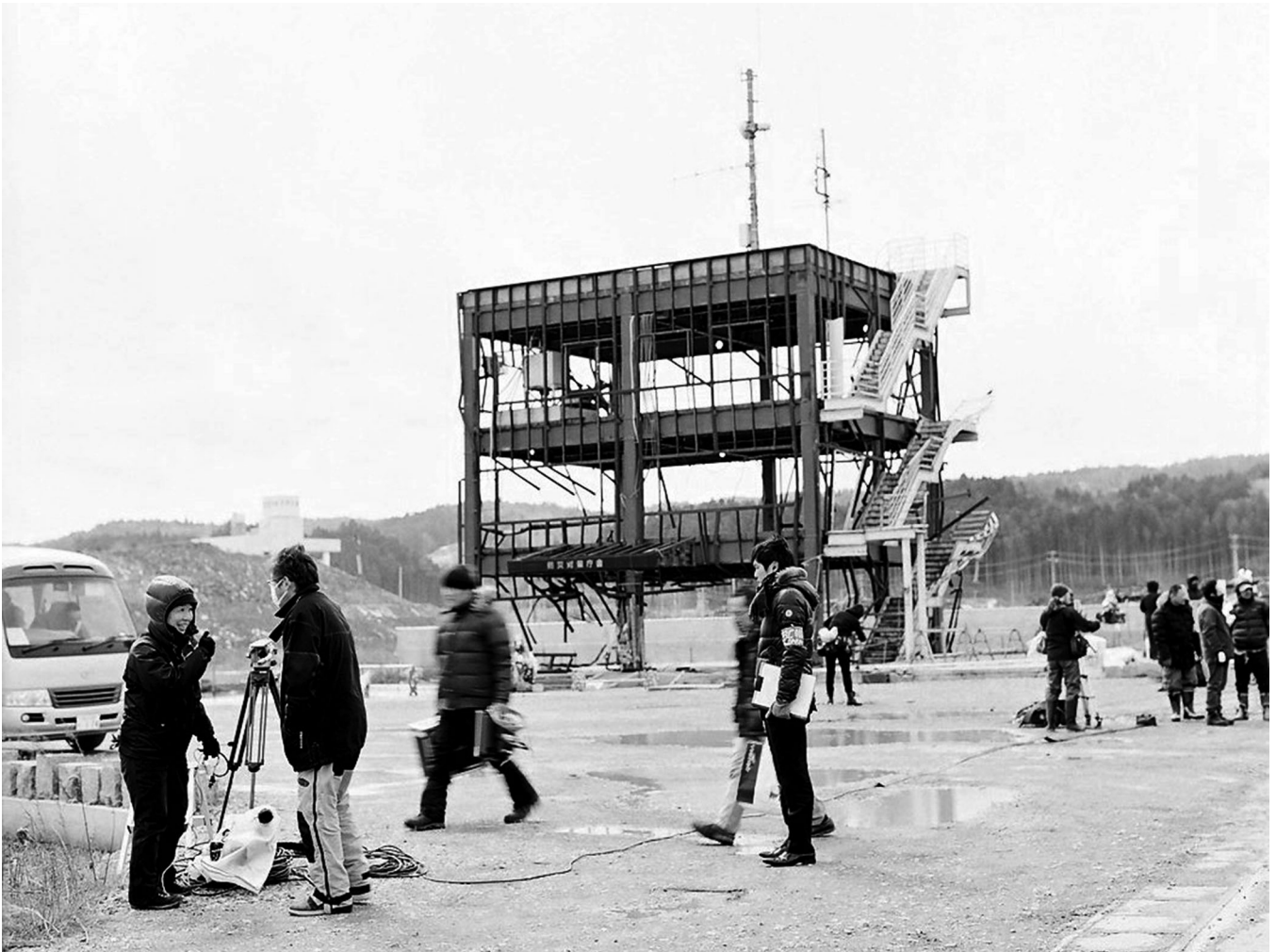
Some residents had other reasons for supporting preservation, however. During my time in Minamisanriku, I often visited a hamlet on the outskirts of town. When I first went there, survivors were still burning debris in makeshift fires by a large, ruined water gate overlooking the waterfront. Behind this, pieces of broken concrete lay toppled in a marshy pool created by subsidence. During hot summer nights, I would hear frogs singing in the pool from my room overlooking the harbor. It was many years before the hamlet's rubble was fully cleared, but when I visited in 2020,

the place that I knew had transformed. The water gate had been disassembled and the frog pool concreted over by new river embankments. At the inn where I stayed, the proprietress told me her business was suffering as reconstruction wound down and the construction workers left. Her face crumpled when I asked what she thought of the hamlet's new look. "We should have left things as they were [after the tsunami]," she said. "Then tourists would have come here to see it."

Tourists certainly flocked to the Disaster Prevention Center, which had become a favorite of national media soon after the disaster. I witnessed this firsthand on the event's fourth anniversary, in 2015. Television crews from all the major networks descended on the plaza surrounding the building. As they jostled for positioning (see Figure 2), photographers hovered around the plaza's outskirts hoping to snap residents visiting to offer prayers. On normal days, perhaps because of all the media coverage, tourist bus after tourist bus would stop by the structure. An astute resident described how the visitors would "look at the center, feel the terror of the tsunami, shed tears at the words of their guides, then buy gifts in the shopping center and elsewhere, have a meal, stay overnight in the town, and go home" (PC 76). A local guide summarized to me the conclusions that some drew: "If you asked their thoughts on what to do with the center, I think most people in the shopping mall would favor preservation" because of its magnetic draw.

The guide's comment must be understood within the long-term struggles I described earlier. As with other municipalities in Tōhoku, Minamisanriku's fortunes followed the decline of public works construction in the early 1990s. Government efforts to revitalize such areas have never tackled the root causes of their depression. Local administrations lack the power, and national government is more invested in promoting the "leaner," neoliberal economy that is partially responsible for impoverishing rural Japan. In lieu of state support or fiscal transfers, policy makers argue that such areas should mobilize their cultural resources to boost tourism from urban centers (Love 2013). But because many regions have overlapping or near-identical traditions, religious practices, and foodstuffs, this has the unintended consequence of locking towns and villages into a zero-sum game of differentiation, each struggling to monetize its variations on common cultural practices and products. Minamisanriku has been playing this game since before the tsunami, which is one reason why its rebuilding strategy has focused so heavily on tourism. Many residents I spoke to, however, were skeptical that the town could really distinguish itself. As one told me,

When people talk about tourism in Minamisanriku, the things they say, it's always about the same staples: there's a beautiful ocean, bountiful nature, and



**Figure 2.** In the town of Minamisanriku, Japan, television news crews prepare to broadcast from the plaza in front of the Disaster Prevention Center on March 11, 2015, the anniversary of the 2011 tsunami. (Andrew Littlejohn)

delicious seafood, that kind of thing. But if we're talking about seafood, next door you have Kesennuma, and in Ishinomaki there's the number one port in Japan, and then if you head further south from there, you have the famous oysters of Matsushima. So, whichever way you look at it, we're losing when it comes to produce, losing when it comes to products.

Against this backdrop, some argued that preserving the Disaster Prevention Center was "necessary for activating [*kasseika*]" the stagnant economy (PC 73) because it would differentiate Minamisanriku from nearby towns. A few even claimed that losing the building would be a death knell: "The name of Minamisanriku will be forgotten, and money won't come into the stores" (PC 513).

Most consultation submissions that made preservationist arguments did not mention such tourism. But the

shift in the center's meaning to encompass not only past victims but also "coming generations" favored those who supported preserving the center for economic reasons. It would clearly be not just the townsfolk who would come to gaze on the structure. Recognizing that visitors gravitated toward the building and the horror it generated, some residents argued for embracing "the opinions of [those] from outside" (PC 359). A consultant to the prefecture bluntly acknowledged that "people from the disaster regions don't want to see disaster remains . . . but people from outside want to learn about the disaster, so they come and look" (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2013, 3). If the center was "a ruin for humanity, and not the property of a segment of the deceased" (PC 247), then, morally, their objections should neither impede it from drawing these visitors nor occupy a privileged position in debates over its future.

The contrast between these positions recalls the tension that Morimoto (2012) describes between two ways of responding to a catastrophe's "excess of signs." The first, which he calls trauma, condenses the effects of interpreting these signs inwardly, producing "beings of history" with divergent, individualized memories (like the relatives of the dead). The second, culture, re-presents the past by replacing particular contents with generalized ones, generating a "chain of interpretants outwardly, producing progressively *historical beings* with common memory" (Morimoto 2012, 265–70). He argues that struggles between these differing regimes characterize the postdisaster milieu: by stipulating the interpretive grounds of signs, they shape what the disaster itself was. These struggles, I suggest, work to situate ruins at the heart of where crisis and critique coalesce. By arguing that buildings like the center represent not discrete, particular failures but the tsunami itself, preservationists sought to replace narratives of individual disasters with a common memory of *the* disaster that they could then use to ward off future events and, in the case of Minamisanriku, the town's current decline.

Comparable cases suggest reasons for skepticism toward this strategy. For example, Le Mentec and Zhang (2017) have shown how visits to the "earthquake relics site" in Wenchuan, China, fell as memories of the 2008 disaster receded, calling into question the sustainability of rebuilding economies around disaster tourism. Bridget Love (2013, 121) goes further: "No initiatives of local branding or heritage renewal," she writes, "seem adequate to overcome the demographic and economic decline" that comprises the region's legacy of "uneven development vis-à-vis Japan's center." After 3.11, attempts to realize such renewal have paradoxically required that survivors continue living among the ruins of that development—leaving things unreconstructed, as the inn proprietress said, so that outsiders would come and see. This might ensure that coming generations never forget the tsunami, but advocating turning places into "disaster remains towns" (*shinsai ikō no machi*) would, ironically, also justify new policies that further burden the future.

### Ruins for the future

Preservationists relocated "what went wrong" not in development or bad planning but in the tsunami itself. This mirrored efforts by political elites to cast the event as a natural rather than an anthropogenic disaster (Gill, Slater, and Steger 2015, 16–18). Unsurprisingly, those pushing a geophysical explanation included government officials and their advisers who wanted to resume rather than criticize public works-based development. Although not all preservationists agreed with the officials' "hard" reconstruction plans, such officials came to support the preservationist argument. They believed that keeping ruined things would em-

bed what Morimoto (2012, 267) calls "semiotic arguments" for greater development in coastal spaces. It was some time, however, before officials and those advising them recognized this political potential.

In the first two or three months after 3.11, government actors seemed to view ruined buildings as little more than a hindrance to recovery. We can discern this from the language that they and their contractors used when talking about damaged buildings and infrastructure. Most telling is how they collapsed them into a single general category, "disaster waste" (*saigai haikibutsu*), which was also used for smaller, more fragmented items of debris (Ogawa 2015). The only value that disaster waste had—if any—lay in the concrete and steel that could be salvaged for reconstruction. In Minamisanriku alone, contractors burned or recycled more than 664,000 tons of waste in 2012 (Ōta and Endō 2014, 1). This included 36 ruined buildings, among which were the remains of Shizugawa's public hospital and fire station. The old town literally became raw material for the new.

Yet Shizugawa's disassembly also brought new anxieties to the fore. Some people claimed that residents would forget the tsunami if its traces were erased. Memories were already "weathering" (*fūka*), they said, drawing direct parallels between fading recollection and vanishing ruins and debris. Academics advising the government were particularly concerned about this, since support for redeveloping the coastline and protecting it with seawalls hinged on people's internalizing dominant accounts of what had gone wrong and thus what policies were needed. Without local support, plans for reconstruction risked stalling or even failing. In Miyagi, officials knew that dissent was growing, particularly toward the construction of seawalls. These trends highlight how the state's attempts to use the threat of future disasters as leverage for its policies sit in tension with citizens' own practices of anticipating events, and their beliefs about how to—or even if they should—protect themselves. "Security articulates differently," Choi (2015, 300) writes, within the "material and social conditions in which many continue to live." Traces of the tsunami proved useful for officials because they embedded objects into these conditions that reminded people what had gone wrong and what might go wrong in the future.

In 2012 several influential bureaucrats and academics who were concerned about "weathering"—including Ima-mura Fumihiko, a well-known tsunami modeler and seawall advocate—convened a working group at Tōhoku University to discuss preserving ruins in Miyagi. "This catastrophe," they wrote in a press release, "will also, as time passes, necessarily recede from people's consciousness. At that time, what can continue warning future generations [are] real things [*honmono*] showing clearly that 'the tsunami came to this place, reached this height'" (3.11 Shinsai Denshō Kenkyūkai 2012, 1). Anything "bearing traces of the earthquake and tsunami" (5), they wrote, could be preserved,

including toppled buildings; damaged houses; broken seawalls; displaced boats, cars, and train carriages; and even temporary graves.

They eventually released a list of buildings and items, identified through their own surveys, that they felt had good prospects for preservation. Instead of “disaster waste,” they labeled these things *shinsai ikō*. The most literal translation is “disaster remains,” understood, according to Mayor Satō (2014, 222), as “buildings and topographies left behind in the disaster areas.” The phrase’s first recorded use occurred several months earlier, in the regional newspaper *Kahoku Shimpō*. Cultural sociologist Ogawa Nobuhiko (2015) hypothesizes that it originated in academic circles because it resembled Japanese archaeological terminology. Popularized by the working group at Tōhoku University, among others, it soon became the default media term for ruined buildings. By conjoining *disaster* with *remains*, the phrase implies an indexical relationship. Its use in this context also marked a significant shift in how government officials—and, later, the public—valued such indexes. As Ogawa (2015, 75) explains, unlike *waste*, the first character of *ikō* recalls the intransitive verb *remain* (*nokoru*) and the transitive verb *keep* (*nokosu*), producing an easy semantic slippage between “things that remain” and “things that should be kept.”

Whatever the value of ruined buildings, keeping them required financial support. This was soon forthcoming as the state began reevaluating the meaning of ruination. In November 2013, Japan’s Ministry of Reconstruction decided it would fund each affected municipality to preserve one *shinsai ikō*. Shortly after, the governor of Miyagi Prefecture announced that he would establish a committee of experts to visit, evaluate, and rank nine candidates for preservation in the prefecture, including Minamisanriku’s Disaster Prevention Center. Alongside reviewing these sites, the committee was tasked with fleshing out the definition of *shinsai ikō* (and thus the narrative of “what went wrong” that the term implied). In a report released in 2015, they set out three criteria based on the nine structures they had evaluated: whether it was a building, an object, or a topographical feature, they wrote, all *shinsai ikō* must be things showing “traces of the tsunami”; should be used to offer prayers for the dead or be useful for preventing and reducing the scope of future disasters; and must be conserved in situ rather than removed to a museum or other location (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 3).

The first criterion expanded the referentiality of ruined things beyond any single town or hamlet’s experiences, echoing the argument that the center was a “ruin for humanity” (PC 247). But instead of providing competitive advantages locally, the preserved things must become objects whose value “transcends their areas” (*chiiki wo koeru*), in the committee’s words. By networking them with each other, as well as with museums and databases, the

state could minimize differences between individual interpretations of the disaster and promote a more collective narrative (Morimoto 2012, 267). In this narrative, damage to particular buildings’ structure, surfaces, and positioning represented the individual “claw marks” (*tsumeato*) left on coastal space by a single tsunami whose violence had transcended all imaginable boundaries.

Accordingly, there was no need to litigate responsibility: if the tsunami was beyond expectation, nobody could be held responsible. Hatamura Yotaro, professor emeritus of engineering at Tokyo University, explained this in a book published shortly after the disaster. Instead of blaming people for failing to anticipate the unimaginable, he wrote, we should focus on what “lessons” (*kyōkun*) the disaster can teach us (Fisch, forthcoming). Miyagi’s expert committee adopted the same perspective: ruins provide lessons on how lives can be protected and risk managed. Most notably, they demonstrated the need for “a disaster prevention and reduction mind-set” (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 3), that is, an anticipatory state that prioritizes safety through tsunami-resilient town planning. As Ōguma (2013) notes in his analysis of post-3.11 reconstruction, similar claims were used to justify everything from seawall and embankment construction to moving residents to higher ground. Rebuilding plans “that allow no leeway for questions are [being] facilitated and implemented [in the name of] respect for human life” (Ōguma 2013, 24), he writes.

This recalls the committee’s second criterion: utility for preventing and mitigating future disasters. Unlike premodern or colonial ruins that manifest more “classical” aesthetics, *shinsai ikō* had value for elites that did not lie in their staging modernity’s break from the past (Gordillo 2014, 8) or in cultivating nostalgia (Steinmetz 2008; Stoler 2013). It lay, rather, in foreshadowing disasters to come. Certainly, the sites became an archaeological record of towns that existed before the tsunami, but more importantly they revealed the fate that would befall people if they rebuilt “the same houses and towns that will be washed away” (Iokibe 2016, 277) by the next tsunami. The past they display, in other words, is not even past. It is a possible future, immanent in reconstructed landscapes, that might actualize if residents do not center their lives around risk-management ideologies premised on anticipating coming catastrophes.

Given how disaster management is embedded in politics, it is unsurprising that Miyagi Prefecture supported preserving only those buildings that were already under its control. Initially, the expert committee believed it could suggest additional sites, such as Minamisanriku’s privately owned Takano Hall. In later meetings, however, officials informed them that only buildings proposed by the prefecture were eligible. Anything requiring alterations to reconstruction plans, like seawall locations, was also off the table. But official plans did not require passing over or demolishing sites that supposedly demonstrated governance failures,

as in New Orleans (Dawdy 2010) and Sichuan (Xu 2017). Even places where governance failures had been successfully litigated—like the elementary school where many children died—would be accepted for preservation. The Disaster Prevention Center was the only building to receive the committee's highest grade: its ruination, the committee declared, demonstrated so forcefully the tsunami's "destructive force" (*hakairyoku*) that it should be preserved through any means possible (Miyagi-Ken Shinsai Ikō Yūshikisha Kaigi 2015, 225).

In 2015, Mayor Satō announced that there would be a public consultation on whether the town would accept the prefecture's plan to preserve the center until 2031. On June 1, he published the result: almost 60 percent of residents were in favor. At the end of the month, Satō announced that the town would reverse its previous demolition order and hand over temporary control to the prefecture. According to a pro-preservation activist I spoke to, this was tantamount to permanent preservation. Today, the center joins a number of other *shinsai ikō* across Miyagi, including Okawa Elementary School, a police box (*kōban*), and a ruined railway platform. In neighboring Iwate Prefecture, the ruins of a broken seawall, which failed to protect residents, have also been preserved.

Between these nodal sites, gone is the debris that Mayor Satō gazed at on the morning after the tsunami. On the land that it had buried sit new industrial zones; in front of these rise new and higher seawalls, which officials claim will protect the town. When I last visited in 2020, many of the seafood-processing operations earmarked to occupy these zones had already opened, and the local economy had largely recovered from a more than 60 percent drop in 2012. But this recovery resulted mostly from the construction boom that benefited local contractors. As reconstruction winds down, the predisaster recession will likely resume. More troubling for future revenues is the ongoing population decline, as people of working age continue to leave for the cities. Local government figures project a fall from 14,333 residents in 2014 to as few as 4,360 by 2060—about the same time the seawalls, built to last some 50 years without maintenance, will become a new financial burden.

Without a tax base to maintain boom-era construction, ruination appears inevitable for towns like Minamisanriku—even without another devastating tsunami. Ironically, as Nagamatsu Shingo (2018) has shown, greater expenditure on "hard" development coincided with a steeper rate of population decline; the more public works there are, we can conclude, the more likely it is that they will eventually succumb to erosion or abandonment by towns that cannot maintain them. Many residents, as I have said, hoped that preserving ruins like the center would help offset future losses through stimulating disaster tourism. Yet, while the concept of *shinsai ikō* is the best hope for economic revival in rural towns like Minamisanriku, it

is also being used to support a development model that accelerates these towns' present and future decline. "At this rate," Ōguma (2013, 25) wrote in his survey of coastal reconstruction, "a ghost town covered by the concrete of public works may arise" in places like Minamisanriku. This future is already visible in the growing number of abandoned houses (*akiya*) across the town. Of course, even in such scenarios, "respect for human life"—the justification behind public works—will have been served, Ōguma concludes. "After all, nobody dies in a ghost town" (25).

### Conclusion: Building ruins on ruins

In his reflections on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin (1999, 258) describes modernity as one, ongoing catastrophe: a "storm called progress," which propels us blindly into the future while piling wreckage upon wreckage behind us. Inspired by his writings, anthropologists have increasingly focused on interrogating and theorizing this storm through what it leaves in its wake. "Countless places the world over," Gordillo (2011, 158) writes, "are drenched in debris of progress." Filtered through Benjamin's allegorical way of seeing, this appears to lay bare both development's failures and those of other modernist ideologies, undermining the latter's symbolic architecture. Ruins function in these analytical narratives and theoretical treatises as critical allegories whose power derives from supposedly disturbing "attempts to cleanse, banish ambiguity and order the memory of space" (Edensor 2005, 845).

In contrast to these scholarly analyses, narratives in Tōhoku mobilized the tsunami's ruins to support various agendas for the region's recovery and redevelopment. The results of this complicate the "critically deconstructive orientation" (Yarrow 2017, 585) that recent ruin studies bring to their objects. During a debate on the center's fate, one town councillor echoed their claims when he said, "The [building] that stands there speaks no lies." Such objects, however, function in polysemous ways, and mobilizing them requires making them say what we want (Schönle 2006, 652). Depending on their particular experiences and interests, some residents did so in critically deconstructive ways, arguing that buildings like the center allegorized specific failures of governance. But other residents and officials claimed that "disaster remains" (*shinsai ikō*) spoke less of particular failings than of a tsunami whose remaining traces could support flagging economies and justify progressive public works. These narratives about "what went wrong" eclipsed how the present state of affairs derived from modern Japan's urban and rural development, which created the disaster's conditions of possibility as well as the economic conditions that made preserving its ruins popular. At the same time, struggles over the meaning of ruined things not only revealed the past but also participated in forming new societal fault lines.

Other places bearing the residue of past traumas have seen similar struggles (Dawdy 2006; Low 2004; Xu 2017). In New York, for example, some wanted to preserve what remained of the World Trade Center, against the wishes of nearby residents (Sturken 2004, 315). In Sichuan, the Chinese state removed, concealed, or covered any ruins that disturbed its narrative about the 2008 earthquake (Xu 2017, 488). Today, most of these sites are gone, and what remain are fragments, like the small piece of wall preserved at Oklahoma City's otherwise conventional bombing memorial. Such objects and their treatment might lend credence to the idea that modern ruins are too personal, too fragile, and too politically charged for official projects (Dawdy 2010, 774). In post-3.11 Japan, however, the *most* controversial objects are now key elements in the disaster region's symbolic architecture. Since 2011, ruin preservation has spread in Japan as a political-economic technology. For example, after a magnitude 7 earthquake struck rural Kumamoto in 2016, the prefecture retained no fewer than 31 ruined buildings and topographies to warn future generations and to attract tourists (Kumamoto Prefecture 2019).

In disaster scholarship, reducing risk has been framed largely as a strategy to protect existing development models from their negative consequences (e.g., Oliver-Smith 2016, 75), such as rendering coastal populations vulnerable to tsunamis. Indeed, risk-reduction policies can enable further development, as has been the case in Japan. A unique aspect of how Japan dealt with the postdisaster wreckage lay in how officials, and some residents, recognized the role that ruination can play in the temporal and affective politics of anticipation (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 247). The imperative to reduce risk can also be challenged when gaps emerge between the anticipatory states of regimes and their citizens. By helping to close the gap, the disaster remains, or *shinsai ikō*, are—paradoxically—being used to protect the very ideologies that enabled their own and their region's ruination. As disasters increase in frequency worldwide, we may well see similar trends outside seismic states like Japan. The United States, certainly, is no stranger to the idea that *imagined* future ruins can be effective political technologies (Masco 2008). There and elsewhere, those who champion development may also realize that critical allegories do not only testify to modernity's failures: they can also be alibis for building new ones.

## Notes

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1. With the exception of published authors and people whose names and stances are already public (for example, as a result of media reports), I have anonymized the names of all people and places within Minamisanriku and the surrounding municipalities.

2. For example, Martin Heidegger (2009, 19) writes that an allegory "makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other." On allegory's relationship to truth, Zahid Chaudhary (2009, 86) argues that it "seeks to express a truth that might otherwise be inexpressible. This is its philosophical claim—it speaks the truth."

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