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Affective dark tourism encounters: Rikuzentakata after the 2011 Great East Japan Disaster

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the case of Rikuzentakata, a town almost completely destroyed by the 2011 tsunami provoked by the Great East Japan Disaster. It shows how the town has directed some of its recovery efforts toward the development of a specific form of post-disaster tourism. Two main strategies implemented by the local authorities are analyzed in detail: first, the celebration of Ipponmatsu, or the Miracle Pine, a symbol of resilience in the face of devastation; second, the promotion of Rikuzentakata as the 'Hiroshima of the North'. Both these discourses were based on the engineering and the apprehension of specific affective post-disaster atmospheres and perceived by residents and local authorities as key for attracting international visitors. Our analysis highlights how a politics of affect built around the tsunami has been spatialized and grounded using material landmarks (The Miracle Pine), but also narratives of hope and resilience based on comparisons with Hiroshima. Such affective atmospheres, we conclude, were planned and performed as an attempt to facilitate cross-cultural communication and allow visitors to contemplate death and disaster on their own terms, while at the same time involving them in a broader processes of healing from trauma and recovery for Rikuzentakata and its residents.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Rencontres affectives du tourisme noir: Rikuzentakata après la catastrophe de 2011 au nord-est du Japon

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute du cas de Rikuzentakata, une ville presque entièrement détruite par le tsunami de 2011 provoqué par le séisme de la côte pacifique au Japon en 2011. Il montre comment la ville a dirigé certains de ses efforts de relèvement vers le développement d'une forme spécifique de tourisme de l'après-catastrophe. Deux stratégies principales mises en place par les autorités locales sont analysées en détail: tout d'abord, la célébration d'Ipponmatsu, ou du « pin miracle », un symbole de la résilience face

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à la dévastation; ensuite, la promotion de Rikuzentakata comme une « Hiroshima du Nord ». Ces deux discours reposent sur la conception et la perception d'atmosphères affectives spécifiques de l'après-catastrophe et sont perçus par les résidents et les autorités locales comme pièces essentielles de l'attraction des visiteurs internationaux. Notre analyse met en évidence comment une politique de l'affect construite autour du tsunami a été spatialisée et fondée en utilisant les repères matériels (le pin miracle) mais aussi des discours d'espoir et de résilience fondés sur des comparaisons avec Hiroshima. Nous concluons que de telles atmosphères affectives ont été planifiées et mises en œuvre dans une tentative de faciliter la communication interculturelle et de permettre aux visiteurs de contempler la mort et la catastrophe à leur façon en même temps qu'ils s'impliquent dans un processus plus large de guérison d'un traumatisme et de relèvement pour Rikuzentakata et ses habitants.

Encuentros de turismo de duelo afectivo: Rikuzentakata después del gran terremoto de Japón oriental en 2011

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el caso de Rikuzentakata, una ciudad casi completamente destruida por el tsunami de 2011 provocado por el gran terremoto de Japón oriental. Muestra cómo la ciudad ha dirigido algunos de sus esfuerzos de recuperación hacia el desarrollo de una forma específica de turismo posterior al desastre. Se analizan en detalle dos estrategias principales implementadas por las autoridades locales: primero, la celebración de Ipponmatsu, o el pino milagroso, un símbolo de resistencia frente a la devastación; segundo, la promoción de Rikuzentakata como la 'Hiroshima del norte'. Ambos discursos se basaron en la ingeniería y la aprehensión de ambientes afectivos específicos posteriores al desastre y fueron percibidos por los residentes y las autoridades locales como clave para atraer a visitantes internacionales. Este análisis resalta cómo una política de afecto construida alrededor del tsunami se ha especializado y asentado usando puntos de referencia materiales (el pino milagroso), pero también narrativas de esperanza y resiliencia basadas en comparaciones con Hiroshima. Se concluye que tales ambientes afectivos fueron planeados y representados como un intento de facilitar la comunicación intercultural y permitir a los visitantes contemplar la muerte y el desastre en sus propios términos, mientras que al mismo tiempo se los involucra en un proceso más amplio de curación del trauma y de recuperación para Rikuzentakata y sus residentes.

Introduction

On 11th March 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake hit the region of Tōhoku, in Japan. The earthquake was followed 30 min later by a massive tsunami, whose waves overcame the protective 'tsunami walls' along the coast and swept up to 6 km inland provoking almost 16,000 casualties (Japan National Police Agency, 2018) and virtually erasing entire towns from the map (Yamamoto et al., 2015). The tsunami caused also a meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, the most severe nuclear accident in history after

Chernobyl. Despite Japan being very advanced in terms of seismic hazard prevention, the sheer size of the event came as a total surprise (Kerr, 2011) and the post-disaster recovery has been hugely challenging (Matanle, 2011). International tourism in the region, and in Japan as a whole, plunged steeply since the tourists feared the exposure to dangerous levels of radiations. For the global audience watching the unfolding of these events through newscasts and the Internet, Japan had suddenly become unsafe. However, while Tōhoku has always been considered a rural and relatively secluded region, attracting very few tourists compared to other parts of Japan, already in 2012, with the first set of short-term recovery efforts underway, some towns began developing new tourist projects, inviting Japanese and foreigners to visit and help in the recovery.

In an effort to show support, during a hot, humid mid-August day of 2016, I (the first author) visited the Fumonji temple, in Rikuzentakata, while the *obon*, the festival of the dead, was taking place. The garden in front of the temple was punctuated with hundreds of statues of different size and shape, and many more were in the process of being realized: at least 10 people were at work, hitting, shaping and refining blocks of stone. For 1 week every summer, anyone can participate in the *Gohyaku rakan*, an event during which people carve their own *rakan*, a statue of a disciple of Buddha, to commemorate the victims of the 2011 tsunami. I worked on my own sculpture for 2 days as well, alongside fellow researchers from Tōhoku University and many local residents. As I walked in the garden during a break from chiselling my own sculpture, I saw *rakan* shaped like cats, dogs, Christian angels, men and women with tea cups, glasses, flowers, and even one reproducing John Lennon. Koyo Kumagai, the monk in charge of Fumonji, explained that many people in Rikuzentakata and the nearby towns have lost someone in the disaster: realizing these sculptures was a way for them to mourn and remember their loved ones. In fact, each sculpture represented a person who died in the tsunami, and the workshop was planned to continue every year until all victims had their own *rakan*.¹ The *rakan*-carving workshop was first organized in 2013 with the explicit purpose of 'providing a place to express and share emotions and thoughts on the natural disaster', as well as producing a memorial site, as it is explained on the dedicated Facebook page (Resilience for Future in Rikuzentakata, 2013).

Later in the afternoon, I took a stroll with my finished sculpture, n.328, and chose a spot in the garden for it. Some people around me were carefully carving their own sculpture, others were silently walking around, a few simply contemplating. A peaceful atmosphere was created by their presence, while visitors not involved in the workshop walked to the temple to pay respect to their ancestors. Completing my *rakan* and leaving it to rest on sacred ground was a powerful experience. It made me wonder how that experience was felt by the residents, whose personal connection with the people memorialized with this practice was much more profound (see Figure 1).

It is commonly believed that in Japan emotional recovery from trauma can be hindered by cultural norms and rules aimed at holding back anger, rather than expressing it (see Araki & Wiseman, 1996; Gulz, 1992). For Nelson Graburn, 'Japanese culture is said to foreground a surface of culturally and situationally appropriate expressions, *tatemaie*, but to securely conceal the *honne*' (Graburn, 2012, p. 51), or inner truth, especially to outsiders (see also Ishii, Vargas, & Vargas, 2011; Kato, 2000). Dr. Kanatsu, a Japanese-born professor based in the U.S. accompanying a group of college students, told me that Rikuzentakata is a place where you can experience the power of *fubenjikko*, or 'doing without saying', a quiet tenacity that refuses strong emotional expressions



Figure 1. Rakan statues at Fumonji temple, Rikuzentakata, Japan. (Photo by A. Martini).

such as anger or violence (Rikuzentakata, 16/08/016). The act of carving a *rakan* to memorialize the 2011 disaster may thus be seen as a performance aimed at confronting negative feelings and unspeakable pain that would otherwise remain unexpressed. The town of Rikuzentakata has however looked at other possibilities to voice its residents' painful memories and heal the trauma. One of the most important initiatives in this respect has been that of framing stories, experiences and material remnants of the disaster in forms that would possibly attract international visitors. In this article, we discuss how tour guides and members of the community involved in tourism in Rikuzentakata have deliberately engineered and performed affective landscapes aimed at eliciting catharsis, empathy, pity and other manifestations of affect in the tourist, in order to help the local communities to recover from the trauma. In particular, we analyze how the local municipality has developed a specific form of 'post-disaster tourism' (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012) in order to achieve several distinct objectives: to support the local economy, to become an internationally recognized hub for those interested in this kind of disaster, and to alleviate a sense of trauma and loss among the local communities. We also suggest that such landscapes of disaster are eventually understood by international tourists in line with their own cultural background and through familiar affective processes of attunement and resonance.

It is not uncommon for tragic and death-related events to be appropriated and used for entertainment or education purposes. Visits to places of death, disaster and atrocities are notoriously referred to as 'dark tourism' (Foley & Lennon, 1996). This facet of the tourism experience has often been accentuated by the media and portrayed as motivated by intrusive curiosity or morbid interest. However, tourist motivations for visiting places of death and disaster are not always straightforward, and death is not always associable with the macabre (see Muzaini & Minca, 2018; Ong, Minca, & Felder, 2015; Stone, 2013; Stone &

Sharpley, 2008). Some destinations can indeed strategically appeal to the tourists' fascination with death, but also to their desire to memorialize and witness. While emotions have received some attention in tourism and dark tourism studies (Nawijn & Biran, 2018; Robinson & Picard, 2012; Tucker, 2009; Waterton & Watson, 2014), affect has been mostly side-lined, with the few notable exceptions of research focussed on specific forms of affect like hope and empathy (Tucker, 2009; Buda, d'Hautesserre, & Johnston, 2014; Willis, 2014; Buda, 2015; Pocock, 2015; Tucker & Shelton, 2018).

This article thus intends to contribute to existing debates in dark tourism studies by arguing that affect can elicit strong emotional reactions in tourists visiting dark sites and contribute to significantly shape their experience. Thinking of sites of dark tourism in terms of 'affective geographies' (see, among others, Davidson & Bondi, 2004; Pile, 2010; Thrift, 2007) may help incorporating novel perspectives on the subjective, often side-lined, elements of those sites: their atmospheres, the subtle political value of affect in designing and interpreting post-disaster landmarks and practices, and the fine-tuning of the visceral, affective cross-cultural resonance that can result in healing processes for both tourists and local communities. In engaging with debates on the geographies of affect, we follow Sianne Ngai's suggestion that emotions differ from affects not in quality or kind, but rather in the degree of intensity (Ngai, 2005, p. 27). We do so inspired in particular by the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), Ben Anderson (2006, 2014), and Derek McCormack (2008) and their emphasis on the existence of diverse active intensities in affective endeavours, often marked by intersubjective charge. Following this line of thought, affect in dark sites like post-tsunami Rikuzentakata is presented here as generating relations of power and specific politics of place that tend to be (re)produced through narratives, performances and material landmarks.

The article is structured in four distinct sections. First, we outline its theoretical underpinnings compared to the relevant literature on dark tourism and the geographies of affect, while explaining our methodology. Secondly, we discuss how plans for tourist development have been presented as a strategic response to the impact of the tsunami in Tōhoku, and the town of Rikuzentakata in particular. In the third part we thus examine more in detail how tourism has been engineered, negotiated and apprehended in Rikuzentakata in order to solicit affective responses using disaster narratives, on-site performances, and the celebration of tangible landmarks. We conclude by arguing that, while local tourist operators tend to frame their stories and experiences in ways that may evoke affective responses in the tourists, at the same time these stories and experiences also offer to local communities an opportunity to communicate the traumatic event to others and build new geographies of affect based on empathy, catharsis and hope as attempts at healing and as a promise for a better future.

Dark tourism and affect

The term dark tourism, coined by Foley and Lennon (1996) to define tourist visits to places of death, disaster and atrocity, in the past 20 years has gained relevance in tourism studies (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Lisle, 2007; Miles, 2002; Seaton, 1996; Sharpley & Stone, 2008; Skinner, 2012; Stone, Hartmann, Seaton, Sharpley, & White, 2018). Another term at times used to refer to this subfield is 'thanatourism', described by Tony Seaton as 'travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic

encounters with death' (Seaton, 1996, p. 236). The two terms are often used interchangeably by scholars of tourism (Tarlow, 2005) and coexist with an array of other labels: 'negative sightseeing' (McCannell, 1976), 'black spots' (Rojek, 1993), 'milking the macabre' (Dann, 1994), 'fascination with assassination' (Foley & Lennon, 1996), 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), 'difficult heritage' (Logan & Reeves, 2009), 'tragic tourism' (Lippard, 1999), 'morbid tourism' (Blom, 2000), 'grief tourism' (O'Neill, 2002), 'fright tourism' (Bristow & Newman, 2004), 'atrocities tourism' (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005), 'battlefield tourism' (Seaton, 1999), 'holocaust tourism' (Lennon & Foley, 2000) and 'disaster tourism' (Ashcroft, 2000). Post-disaster tourism is sometimes conflated with dark tourism (Tucker, Shelton, & Bae, 2017). In cases like the one investigated here, however, disaster and post-disaster tourism are preferred terms, with the understanding that such tourism creates new 'dark' attributes, based on disaster, in sites that were not attracting tourists beforehand (Biran, Liu, Li, & Eichhorn, 2014). The blurred boundaries of such definitions point to a sort of 'post-disaster dark tourism' (Prayag, 2016, p. 157) that 'highlights the links between tourism and the issue of disaster recovery, whether it is recovery of the tourism industry per se or the social and economic recovery of the place more broadly' (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 307).

Most publications in both the broader field of dark tourism and in disaster tourism studies tend to identify supply and demand factors (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), provide multiple case studies (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Dann & Seaton, 2001), focus on tourism industry recovery and marketing/rebranding (Mair, Ritchie, & Walters, 2016) and analyze motivational elements in tourists (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Recent research in dark tourism has however denounced the predominance of descriptive and 'applied' approaches (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011) by urging the need to acknowledge the political, ethical and emotional implications of dark places. Affect is still largely ignored in this literature (Light, 2017), with a few exceptions (Buda et al., 2014; Tucker, 2016; Tucker & Shelton, 2018), despite the fact that a close scrutiny of the affective layers of dark tourism sites may potentially help reconcile the negative ethical stigma often attached to this form of tourism with the sense of necessity felt by some tourists to visit such 'attractions' (Robinson, 2015). Understandings of affect in dark tourism practices may in fact represent a constructive way to respond to the crowd of negative stereotypes characterizing such practices in popular discourses, normally reproduced by the media and identifying dark tourism as a morbid or immoral activity. These stereotypes tend to underplay the potential role of dark tourism in educating the visitors about past and present tragic events but also in vanquishing grief, in evoking empathy, catharsis and hope, and in healing from trauma. Theories of affect may thus enable us to 'formulate a more complete understanding of the elements that influence the kinds of experiences that are created in destinations' (d'Hautesserre, 2015, p. 78), and that produce 'particular "worldly orientations", emotions and moods' (Tucker & Shelton, 2018, p. 67).

In human geography, affect is often treated in line with Ben Anderson's definition as a 'processual logic of *transitions* that take place during spatially and temporally distributed encounters' (Anderson, 2006, p. 735). Each transition is accordingly felt as an intensity that exists in-between places, people and objects, and that can attach and permanently alter the meaning of almost anything (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003, p. 62). Affect, in this interpretation, is characterized by being provisional, blurry, unfinished, unconstrained by defined boundaries, and thus not clearly divorceable from emotions, thoughts and the

body (see Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Harrison, 2007; McCormack, 2008; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016). Such characteristics, however, do not render affect irreducibly non-representational and other-than-conscious: while it moves between individual and collective bodies, affect emerges both in unpredictable and deliberately constructed circumstances, as a set of unbridled potentialities that can be harnessed, steered and consciously registered as emotions (see Massumi, 2002; Shouse, 2005; Thrift, 2007). Within this line of thought, Anderson (2006) exemplifies the flow of interconnections between emotions and affects using the example of hope to define a 'layer cake' model. In this model, hope exists in three modalities: (1) as affect, that represents a flow of hope (the first, deepest, noncognitive layer); (2) as a feeling, as a sense of hopefulness (the second layer, precognitive, that lies between affect and emotion), and (3) as emotion, that is, an actually expressed hope (the third, cognitive layer) (Anderson, 2006, p. 747). Affect flowing in to dark sites can move from one modality to the other in often subtle, unspoken ways, not easily brought into representations because 'certain spectacular or horrific events and encounters escape their retelling' (Laurier & Philo, 2006, p. 353), as they engage with the unspeakable (Willis, 2014). At the same time, affect does not bear 'the spectre of a psychological individualism' (Richard & Rudnycky, 2009, p. 57) present in emotions. These 'dark' sites indeed have the potential to provide powerful affective experiences and are often constructed by tourist operators with the intention to obtain such effect (Weaver et al., 2017). Dark tourism broadly invites people to acknowledge our mortality and the fragility of life, often appealing to discourses of moral, spiritual and ideological reward (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010, p. 189).

There has been a tendency, in some declinations of affect studies, to elide the ethical and political domains of affect, portraying it as mute attunement to specific environments (Barnett, 2008), thus overlooking its potential as an analytical framework for understanding sociospatial processes (Ansaloni & Tedeschi, 2016). Affective space, argues Clive Barnett (2008, p. 190), 'emerges as a medium for the inculcation of various hateful, hopeful desirous or respectful dispositions', which are not passively received, but actively accepted, or refused, since reconfigured by the feeling subject. In dark tourism sites, the modulation and regulation of affect is thus often actively engineered by tourist operators, institutions and the media (including the social media) to reorient and (re)organize the event of death or disaster and make it accessible to visitors. Causevic and Lynch (2011, p.781) call it 'phoenix tourism', a form of tourism in which, after a conflict, the meaning of a place is reimagined and designed to fit the new tragic circumstances for which it gained attention. In some ways, this process shows similarities to that related to heritage-making and the management of heritage experiences (see, among others, Light, 2007; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Both negotiate political intensities inscribed in many tourism ventures and in 'the social, historical, cultural and political contexts in which atmospheres emerge and dissipate, and the attunement of some to become absorbed within them' (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015, p. 252). In places where tourists are confronted with landscapes charged with remnants of death and disaster, atmospheres are constitutive of how movement in space is experienced (Brown & Pickerill, 2009) and are 'geopoietic', in the sense that they generate and are generated by place through the interaction of bodies and affect (Adey, 2015). Material remains, narratives and landscapes are therefore saturated with affect in a messy and contingent way (Ahmed, 2004), creating topographies of death and disaster situated in a politically

oriented space permeated with agency, expectation, objectives, social and community ties and memories (Barnett, 2008; Duff, 2010; Muzaini & Minca, 2018; Ong & Minca, 2018). Tourists can thus attune to a 'vibe', a mood, an atmosphere (Ash, 2013) and create associations between various material entities. 'Affect', as Kavka suggests, 'is material that matters' (2008, p. 33), and in specific atmospheres this material potential transpires by holding a series of opposites in a relation of tension (Anderson, 2014) that can, partially and subjectively, resonate, be perceived, acknowledged and manipulated. In a recent article where they discuss post-disaster tourism in Christchurch, New Zealand, Hazel Tucker and Eric Shelton suggest that 'whilst narratives of loss and hope offer a repertoire of possible touristic performances, however consciously or unconsciously enacted, they also provide a figurative analytical frame for examining possible affect-generated action. These narratives provide a temporal context for smaller-scale stories and link them firmly to the production of affect and mood' (Tucker & Shelton, 2018, p. 73). Successful dark tourism is thus deliberately assembled in ways that make visible how tourists are expected to read the site in question (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016), even though they do not experience affect in the same way and with the same intensity (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Places are in fact never intrinsically dark (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Light, 2017).

In the next sections we thus apply this perspective to our specific case, to a post-disaster context where trauma healing and economic recovery seem to be addressed by the same broader narratives and set of interventions, in order to elicit forms of affect in the visitors and, with them, the local residents. The ethnographic material discussed in this paper was collected from March to September 2016 in the Prefectures of Miyagi and Iwate, part of the Tōhoku region. In the overall project, we have interviewed local residents, tourists visiting the area and tourist operators at all levels: local tour guides, representatives of local, regional and national governmental institutions, NGOs and international travel agencies advertising tours in the disaster-hit towns. Roughly 65 participants were involved, using structured and semistructured interviews. Not all interviews were conducted in Rikuzentakata and were about this town. In the analysis that follows we therefore mainly consider the 30 interviews conducted in Rikuzentakata or nearby; however, we try to corroborate our main argument, when necessary and appropriate, also with interviews collected elsewhere. In addition to that, the first author took part in 10 tours aimed at international tourists and conducted participant observation during the whole period spent in Japan. Material on the disaster and the recovery was also collected at the IRIDeS (International Research Institute for Disaster Studies) Archive for the 2011 Disaster, at Tōhoku University. Other online material was collected from Facebook pages, blogs of tourists, websites of travel agencies and individual tour guides, as well as the regional and national websites advertising tourism in the area. The questions asked in the interviews were purposefully aimed at eliciting open and story-telling type of answers, in order to invite the interviewees to share their thoughts, opinions, emotions and offer a narrative of their own experience. Amongst the topics covered in the interviews were: the history of the town before and after the disaster; the recovery plans in relation to tourism; the expectations of the tourists; and the future of tourism in the broader region. Overall, we adopted a narrative approach to analyze all the related textual material, following the idea that tourism destinations are brought into being, shaped and negotiated also by being framed and narrated to visitors

(Edelheim, 2015). We analyzed our ethnographic material paying particular attention to instances in which emotional feelings were expressed. Most importantly, by weaving together the ‘threads’ emerging from many of the interviews, we have tried to identify narrative patterns that referred to actions, practices and bodily responses clearly related to moments of affect and to the atmospheres of the post-disaster landscapes involved. Complementing this material with field notes and participant observation allowed us to gain insights into some of the complex affective responses that characterize these experiences and the way they are narrated and performed (see also Tucker & Shelton, 2018).

Disaster tours in Rikuzentakata

Rikuzentakata is a quiet, rural town of around 20,000 people in Northern Tōhoku, a region considered as *inaka*, a rural area marked by depopulation, backwardness and isolation (Ivy, 1995), and excluded from the main tourist routes in Japan. Before the disaster, the town attracted some domestic tourism because of its beautiful beaches, and its shore-side forest made of 70,000 pine trees. In 2011, the tsunami washed away 80% of the buildings and took the life of almost 2000 people. As Shunsuke Kumagai, a tourism officer at the nearby municipality of Kesenuma, recalled:

When the earthquake occurred, I was waiting for the *shinkansen* (bullet train) at the station. All *shinkansen* stopped, the telephones weren't working, so I was worried. I managed to reach Kesenuma by bus. When I arrived there, the city was on fire, the sky was hell ... The bus driver was from Rikuzentakata and told me: ‘The city disappeared’. I couldn't imagine what he meant at the time, but after about one week I went there. As he said, the city disappeared. I still remember this scene very well. I was working in tourism at that time and I felt that our work was powerless in the face of such a natural disaster and thought “How can I work in such a situation? How can we ask the people to visit here?”. (Kesenuma, 26/08/2016)

The efforts of the country in the first few years after the disaster were focused, at all levels, mainly on the recovery: cleaning the debris; resettling the people who lost their houses in temporary accommodations; constructing seawalls, levees and rebuilding entire towns on elevated ground; restoring the local communities; implementing new policies, programs and institutions (Iuchi, Johnson, & Olshansky, 2013). The recovery, however, has moved slower than expected. As Anthony, a U.K.-born travel journalist, recalled:

(my) first impression of Tohoku was that the transportation services were lacking, making it difficult for non-car users. For the town of Rikuzentakata, I was initially shocked by how empty it was. I expected the town to be more re-developed 5 years after the disaster, I was surprised that no new buildings at all have been set up in the old town centre'. (Rikuzentakata, 31/05/2016)

According to the Japan Reconstruction Agency (2017), as of November 2016 around 134,000 people were still displaced, and 50,000 in temporary homes—mostly prefabricated structures intended to last just 2 years. Some of the delays stemmed from a shortage of construction workers and materials. Workforce and materials were diverted to the massive repairs of the Fukushima nuclear plant that employed up to 10,000 workers daily, and to construction projects for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (interview with

former volunteer Amya Miller, Tokyo, 4/06/2016). The implementation of these projects has marginalized the Northern prefectures of Miyagi and Iwate, the ones hit the hardest by the tsunami. This very fact, when coupled with the highly contested top-down projects imposed by the National Reconstruction Agency (Iuchi et al., 2013), has exacerbated in the local communities a feeling of abandonment that was present long before the disaster.

A few months after the tsunami, hotel managers reported the sparse presence of occasional curious tourists and numerous international volunteers in the area (Muskat, Nakanishi, & Blackman, 2015). By the end of 2012, some of the municipalities began to show interest in developing tours targeting domestic and international visitors, as well as other experiential activities aimed at combining stories of disaster and recovery with more traditional activities such as fishing or *soba* (buckwheat) harvesting. To render the Tōhoku region visible in a positive way in the international media, the central government initially invested in a series of marketing campaigns: *Get Back, Tōhoku*, promoted by Japan Railways, and *Welcome to Fukushima*, promoted by the Japan Tourism Agency in collaboration with local organisations. Often, foreign residents in Tōhoku were paid to advertise the region through Facebook, blog posts and Youtube videos such as the *Go: Tohoku* channel.² In these campaigns, the region was described as a mysterious, beautiful destination that evoked the idyllic image of *furusato*, a rural, idealized 'native place' representing a spiritual home to all Japanese people (McMorran, 2008). By advertising Tōhoku, the wider aim was to show that Japan was safe and had entirely recovered from the disaster, with the intention of rebranding the country's tarnished image especially after the Fukushima accident. Stefan, CEO of *Japanguide.com*, a very popular website among internationals seeking comprehensive and up-to-date information on traveling to Japan, also stressed this necessity: 'While there are locals who don't like to see tourists taking pictures of ruins, I am convinced that tourism is overall extremely useful and important to the region. Not only in an economic way but also for the region not to be forgotten' (Skype interview, 03/08/2016).

However, despite these investments, the government's strategy was often non-aligned, if not in open conflict, with the position of the local communities (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015). According to many of our interviewees, the local residents wanted to move beyond the *furusato* and wished to create an experience that acknowledged the positive characteristics of their town, but also capable of highlighting the painful process of trauma and recovery. As Hiroko Uenohara, a volunteer tour guide in the Tōhoku region, explained:

There is a gap between government and locals. The government announces their ideas to the rest of the world, but we listen and ... that's not always true (sic). We want to tell (people) the real conditions. So please, come to visit the affected areas and look at the lives of those who are suffering ... That is why we do guided tours in affected areas. Visitors come here ... to know the facts, how the locals were affected, how they are feeling, what they are going to do, and go back home and speak to their neighbours and families. (Sendai, 15/04/2016)

Since 2013, local communities and local travel agencies have been offering regular tours of the post-disaster area. These focus on the disaster as a symbol of resilience, a hope for future generation and a means to address misunderstandings about the event that

international visitors might have. Rikuzentakata was, and remains today, by far the most committed town to become the symbol of the 2011 tsunami and a hub for international tourists interested in learning more about the catastrophic event. Shortly after the disaster, the Mayor appointed American-born volunteer Amya Miller as Rikuzentakata's public communication director. Together they envisaged a strategy to improve the town's visibility and distinction, in order to attract more volunteers but also tourists interested in visiting during and after the recovery. The campaign they launched was centred on a strong, powerful story, concerning a unique landmark: a survived pine tree. On 11 March 2011, all pine trees that once surrounded the beach were uprooted by the violence of the tsunami, except one. The surviving tree remained as a solitary symbol of resilience in the face of nature's fury, and was named *Ipponmatsu* (Solitary Pine), or Miracle Pine. Miller has thus made sure that the 'story of the pine' would be picked up by all major media, national and international, including The Japan Times,³ The Guardian,⁴ Al Jazeera,⁵ BBC,⁶ CNN⁷ and The New York Times.⁸ This campaign and the related media coverage put the town on the radar of international tourists interested in visiting the disaster area. The town's tourism strategy was manifold: first, to coach the local population who had never interacted with foreigners in the past to act friendly and welcoming; second, to use the conventional and the social media to attract national and international attention; third, to have English-speaking staff involved in tourism-related matters; fourth, to accept everyone who would come.

In the following section, we thus reflect on how disaster tourism in Rikuzentakata was designed and implemented by local residents and tourist agents. According to some of the interviews, this process has also constituted a means for the survivors and the local communities to confront the trauma and the loss caused by the tsunami, and a potential process of healing. Through the valorization of specific landmarks such as the Miracle Pine, and the promotion of narratives depicting Rikuzentakata as the 'Hiroshima of the North', tourists were offered an experience aimed at allowing them to perceive, interpret and translate in their own cultural framework the affective atmosphere emanating from the post-disaster geographies of this region.

Constructing affective atmospheres

Since 2012, local travel agencies in Rikuzentakata, often managed directly by the municipality and involving members of the community, have been offering tours of the post-disaster area, highlighting the tragedy and unpredictability of the tsunami, but also the resilience of the Japanese people. For example, the English language flyer available at the Kobe Earthquake Memorial Museum about a documentary directed by Atsunori Kawamura entitled *The Great tsunami in Japan: Reflecting on the 2011 disaster* did not highlight so much the loss and the destruction, but rather the possibility of being 'Empowered by a new mission: To educate future generations' (Chikata & Kawamura, 2015). The personal testimonies in the documentary, stated the flyer, 'show the power of life and hope in the face of unparalleled devastation' (Chikata & Kawamura, 2015). Terms such as education, hope, testimony and resilience occurred relentlessly in post-disaster tourism discourses, where different geographies of affect were constructed around the realization of specific real-and-imagined tourism spatialities capable, at one time, of commemorating the disaster *and* celebrating the recovery. To possibly appeal to

a growing number of (especially international) visitors, the municipality has thus crafted narratives and sets of practices performed around specific landmarks capable of evoking affect and of promoting engagement with what Waterton and Yusoff (2017, p. 7) would describe as the ‘animacies and ambience of material worlds, and the inscriptive qualities of our sensibility to them’.

Miracle Pine: understanding disaster, the ‘Japanese way’

Rikuzentakata has developed a tourism circuit that included several places of interest: the Fumonji temple, and its *rakan*; a carpentry and folklore museum; Topic45, a building devastated by the tsunami but still standing and a tsunami museum, amongst many others. However, as noted above, the strategy of the town in terms of tourism development, media dissemination and popular imagination has revolved around one particular landmark: the *Ipponmatsu*, or Miracle Pine. Visitors can catch a first glimpse of the *Ipponmatsu* as soon as they enter the city. Whether arriving by bus or by car—the only means available to reach Rikuzentakata—after a sudden turn at a crossroad, it becomes visible: a long, lean silhouette against the backdrop of the ocean (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ipponmatsu (miracle tree) in Rikuzentakata, Japan. (Photo courtesy of Flavia Fulco, Sophia University, Tokyo).

The omnipresent pine tree has been reproduced in the media infinite times as the symbol of a solitary survivor standing amidst utter destruction (McCurry, 2013). When we asked a survivor, a woman in her thirties, what was her favorite place in Rikuzentakata, she answered without hesitation that it was the *'Ipponmatsu*, a monument of hope for the Japanese, but also for the foreigners who come here' (Mrs. Satou, Sendai, 07/09/2016). It did not matter that the pine was killed by salty water in 2012. Thanks to private donations, a metallic rod was inserted into the tree, and synthetic leaves and branches were added to it. This is a typical case in which material and aesthetic elements of a unique landmark were purposefully designed to contribute to specific discourses fraught with layers of affect (Stroud & Jegels, 2014) and connected to 'material and signifying representations, as well as the remembered, anticipated and experiential' (Sumartojo, 2016, p. 544). The preservation of this landmark has arguably helped to solidify the collective memory of the event, while providing continuity with the past and immediate access to the affective sphere to which its story is normally connected (Good, 2016). Another survivor in Rikuzentakata, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed that one of her biggest fears is the new seawall, because everyone trusted the previous one, and that is why many died. But, she added, '... now I can look at the tree (the *Ipponmatsu*, located in front of the seawall) and I want to keep having faith' (Rikuzentakata, 7/09/2016). The atmosphere of tragedy and hope was picked up also by tourists. Susumu, a college student from Hofstra University, in the U.S.A., confirmed that:

Out of all the photos I took, the image of the miracle tree is the one that interests me the most. It is astounding that one tree managed to survive a massive force such as a tsunami and stand tall five years later. I not only took a photo of the massive pine tree, but also of a mural created by a very famous Japanese cartoonist dedicated to the pine tree. It shows the pine tree standing tall next to a bright sun. To me, it captured the symbol that the miracle tree had become and gives hope to the people in the area. (Rikuzentakata, 16/08/2016).

To reach the *Ipponmatsu*, the tourists have to slowly walk through a construction site, following a narrow, serpentine path in the barren landscape, punctuated only by the sound of construction workers and of the waves against the new seawall. The gigantic conveyor belt that transports soil from the nearby hill to the coast, aptly named the 'Bridge of Hope', casts a shade on a good portion of the ground nearby. After a few minute walk, the tourists are presented with a panel showing a picture of the former pine tree forest. Here the guides normally stop and invite everyone to look at the picture. Then the tourists are left to watch in awe the panel, and the solitary tree in the distance. Mako, a young Japanese woman from a volunteer guides group named *Gozain*, suggested that when she takes people to the disaster-hit coast, she first tells them the story of the tsunami, and then explains that, on that exact point, 5 years earlier, thousands of people died. Tourists, she continued, usually remain silent, to reflect on the tremendous force of nature:

It makes you think of Judgment Day, because it is a desert, barren place. I tell them something about life before the earthquake. There were so many houses, and people living their daily lives. Some were farmers, others were fishermen, and I tell them about the strong community that existed in this area. So, they try to imagine how the life was before, here, and they experience maybe a kind of feeling they can't explain. (Sendai, 15/06/2016)

This impossibility to explain might be referred to the communicative action of affect that often resides outside the domain of language but is still visible in embodied practices (Richard & Rudnyckj, 2009). One common practice that tour guides utilize to make tourists 'understand' the post-disaster context is that of showing them pictures of the area before the tsunami, often with only brief explanations, in order to let them 'feel' the magnitude of what happened. In other cases, affective responses are evoked involuntarily through bodily senses *on site*. An American participant in a tour for example recalled: 'The sound of construction and the sight of the giant bridge used to transport soil from the mountains around the area are the images I remember the most' (Anonymous, Rikuzentakata, 16/08/2018).

The act of remaining silent and reflecting on the magnitude of the disaster is thus often part of a deliberately constructed practice on the part of the tour guides, aimed at affording access to a volatile and transitory atmosphere. During one tour with 4 American high school teachers, one woman in her forties spent a long time in silence in front of the Miracle Pine. When she joined the rest of the group, she mentioned something that happened to her just before coming to Japan. She was in her house and, despite having looked everywhere, she could not find her young daughter. Worried sick, she finally found her, standing perfectly still and silent over the toilet bowl. The daughter explained that the previous day they had a drill to instruct kids on how to react in case of a mass shooting. The woman was horrified by the possibility of something like that happening and perceived a connection between her own traumatic experience and the unexpected violence of the tsunami. Such moments of resonance are explained by Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas (2017, p. 52) with the fact that experienced traumas can be 'both timeless and literally difficult to place', resulting in possible slippages of memories and feelings that may stimulate involuntary memories. Involuntary memories 'are unpredictable and contingent ... enmeshed in sensation and vague intimations of previous atmospheres, they are slippery to pin down, to describe and represent' (Edensor, 2005, p. 837). Attuning to the affective atmosphere of a place can in fact create a resonance that emanates from a dynamic combination of built environment, place and people and involuntary memories, and that makes affect perceivable (Sumartojo, 2016). These involuntary memories may resonate with something that happened in a different place—as in the case of the teacher—or may emanate from memories of what has happened in the area at the time of the disaster. Another American college student, for example, explained how, when visiting Rikuzentakata, all he could think about

... was the videos of tsunami water just flooding into the streets of the town in the area, and cars and rummage being washed away by the waves [...] The entire time I was trying to image how the locals felt when the tsunami came into their town. Did they run to upper ground? Was the site where I am standing now submerged in water that day or was there a home here? Did families see their loved ones get washed away before their eyes? Such thoughts would run through my head while touring the town'. (Anonymous, Rikuzentakata, 2/09/2016)

These tangible landmarks, corroborated by narratives and on-site practices routinely repeated with every new group of tourists, aim at creating a choreography 'directed' by the tour guides (see Edensor & Holloway, 2008) that produces and reproduces a specific

post-disaster landscape. This process of worldmaking, however, at times may not be purposefully or consciously produced. Nevertheless, it may still ‘include the production of particular “affect” or “mood”’ (Tucker & Shelton, 2018, p. 68). Such performances on the part of the tour guides are thus not affective in themselves, but they may foster the conditions for the possibility of affective reactions since they are intentionally aimed at making the visitors feel a unique atmosphere that intensely and deeply engages them (Anderson, 2014). The stark contrast between images of the past and the present is thus purposefully (re)constructed on-site, using the iconic power of the monumental presence of the solo pine tree, to elicit affective responses in the tourists. The story of the *Ipponmatsu*, as narrated by tour guides and the media, and the staging of the memorial site are apparently so effective because they succeed in creating a resonance that goes beyond the 2011 disaster and embrace something far-reaching and universal: an affective feeling of hope. After a moment in front of the tree, the tour guides tend to shift to stories about the survival of the tree, a tree that mirrors the survival of the city and its people, at one time commemorating the past event and celebrating hope in the future. In line with this deliberate attempt to connect post-disaster tourism with a broader affective politics of hope Rikuzentakata began to be strategically promoted as the ‘Hiroshima of the North’.

Hiroshima of the North

More than 6 years after the disaster, the coastal expanse of land that used to be downtown Rikuzentakata is still a flat, barren terrain. ‘It took us more than 5 years to get back to our normal life, and many people are still not yet there. It is going to be a really long way’ declared Aya, a tour guide of the independent tourism association Marugoto⁹ during a tour in 2016. When asked by a tour participant how long the recovery may take, she disclosed that even though the Municipality’s prospect was 8 years, ‘there is no possibility to finish by then ... They decided on that timeframe because if they say 10 years or more, the people ... their hope will decline’ (Rikuzentakata, 07/07/2016). A broader ‘politics of hope’ and the deliberate construction of narratives that would foster and harness hope have been a common fixture in many Japanese discourses concerning times of crisis during and after the Second World War, and posttsunami Japan is no exception (see Leheny, 2018; Mullins & Nakano, 2016). Historically, Japan’s reaction to disasters, at all institutional levels, has been that of invoking hope as a sentiment able to transform people’s pain and anger in discourses of peace and resilience, and in this way propel change and renewal (Kimura, 2018). In 1952, Shinzō Hamai, at the time Mayor of a still devastated Hiroshima, proposed a Reconstruction Plan in which the city would be rebuilt as symbol of peace, and expressed his hopes ‘that when visitors from abroad come to Japan they will drop by in Hiroshima’ (in Schäfer, 2015, p. 354).

Such attitude and similar wording have been mirrored in Rikuzentakata, now promoted as the ‘Hiroshima of the North’. In one of our encounters, and in many interviews that she gave to international media outlets, Amya Miller has declared that ‘the Miracle Pine is a powerful symbol for the town and it conveys a message of hope, akin to the Hiroshima Dome’ (Rikuzentakata, 09/09/2016). As Dylan, a young American who works at the Municipality to promote international relations, similarly remarked:

... the tsunami was a horrible disaster, but at the same time it gives this town an amazing opportunity to build a new city from scratch ... I do think we have the potential to be Tōhoku's version of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where people would come in 50 years, 70 years, 100 years, to learn about the history of what happened here and pay their respect. (Rikuzentakata, 09/09/2016)

Hiroshima has a heavily charged past. By associating the two cities, tourist operators use a metaphor that reaches in and through the post-disaster landscape, and arguably produces a 'broader restorative truth' (Hoskins, 2010, p. 272) aiming at establishing affective connections between the dramatic past of Hiroshima and the present tragedy of Rikuzentakata. As Anthony confirmed, 'visiting ... the Miracle Pine reminded me of similar visits to former disaster zones such as Hiroshima' (Rikuzentakata, 31/05/2016). Narratives of hope and survival at the Miracle Pine, when enmeshed with the overarching narrative of Rikuzentakata as a Northern Hiroshima, annihilated and reborn from its ashes, arguably allow to explore not only how stories move through landscapes, but, more broadly, also how these storied landscapes move people or inspire 'historical empathy' (Modlin, Alderman, & Gentry, 2011, p. 5).

The connection to Hiroshima also vehemently implies plans to make the town a symbolic site projected to last in history, driven by a permanent iconic presence that somehow has the same function of the Hiroshima Dome: the Miracle Pine. Dr. Kanatsu, when asked about what left the biggest impression, explained that:

You have to stand on the place to "feel" the magnitude. First, the ruins teach us the magnitude of the power of tsunami. Although it is understandable that some people hate to see it, for human beings collectively it is essential to preserve ruins like the Hiroshima's atomic dome. Second there is an amazing attempt to create new towns, and therefore communities, as artificial as Las Vegas. One has to see the yellowish colour of the soil transported there and appreciate what it means to "remake" or "restore" community. (Rikuzentakata, 16/08/2016)

The imaginary that emerges when these two sites are superimposed in narratives of disaster belongs to a geography that is reconfigured as a porous amalgam of sensations, practices and fragments of affect and memory coming together in the concept of 'Hiroshima'. This process in fact implies for Rikuzentakata the perspective of recovering and becoming a city more successful than it was before the disaster; all this, however, is performed in a background context that also vaguely echoes an atmosphere of nuclear danger (implicitly induced by the silent presence of the devastated nuclear plant in Fukushima, far away but often clustered together in media narratives about tsunami towns like Rikuzentakata). Lastly, but perhaps more importantly, Hiroshima is affectively invoked as a promise of a good future associated to tourism development. From our interviews, it clearly emerged that the local population understands international tourists as a key source of psychological relief and social and economic recovery.

Cross-cultural interpretation of affect

For many Japanese, according to our local interviewees, it may prove difficult to communicate to Westerners their reflections on death, trauma, loss and pain, since they may have different cultural ways of expressing and perceiving emotions (see also

Athanasiadou & Tabakowska, 1998; Wierzbicka, 1997). Such differences in expressing emotions was seen by some as something that may potentially hinder for many survivors the possibility of sharing their experience effectively with international tourists. One tourist, for example, after attending a tour in which a survivor narrated his personal story, declared that he was negatively affected 'by the lack of apparent effort to speak to the group as a whole. He (the survivor) focused his eyes in one corner and stuck with it' (Municipality of Matsushima, 2016). Other tourists also felt a wrench in communication, which they attributed to cultural differences in expressing feelings. Yao, a Chinese tourist, said that '(she) felt like, they don't look like people showing their real feelings. But you know, they are Japanese, and Japanese people always pretend everything is ok' (Sendai, 11/08/2016). However, this is not always the case, as one of the volunteer guides of Gozain, when describing one of his tours, recalled:

It was a winter day ... and they [a father and daughter he was guiding] came in a very luxurious limousine. They asked us: "what is the feeling, what is the scene, after the tsunami?" They meant the tsunami survivors, what they feel, what they think. And I answered, "It's anger, anger against the tsunami." (Mr. Satou, Sendai, 15/06/2016)

As confirmed by Dr. Kanatsu, 'people were angry, but, they largely accepted their fate, and started thinking about what they could do in that moment. This is a key aspect of Japanese culture, whether one likes it or not, something that many non-Japanese fail to understand' (Rikuzentakata, 16/08/2016).

In a situation in which different manifestations of emotion were perceived as a potential limitation in the communication between tourists and residents, affect has emerged as a more appropriate means to negotiate meaning and memory between these two groups. Affective elements, according to Barnett (2008), are inherently relational, and therefore more open to the potential of perception, interpretation and translation across groups who identify themselves as 'culturally different'. In such relational, subtle and fuzzy moments of affective awareness in a Japanese context of disaster, international tourists involved in those tour were in fact not merely passive recipients of atmospheres and affects intentionally 'performed' by the tour operators, but actually contributed to cocreate them through their actions, responses and expectations (on this, see Sumartojo, 2016). Affective resonances 'engineered' by Japanese tour guides and institutions were arguably somehow apprehended and incorporated by the tourists in their own respective 'cultural frame', (re)structuring and reconfiguring the ways in which individuals make sense of places of conflict (Laketa, 2016, p. 662) or, in our case, disaster. What emerged during our fieldwork is that, by attuning and resonating with specific forms of affect, tourists were simultaneously interpreting the meaning of the Miracle Pine and the narratives, practices and materialities attached to it. The atmosphere produced through these encounters in sites of trauma amongst affective narratives, practices and landmarks allowed in fact the tourists to experience what Miceli Voutsinas defines as 'a kind of "feeling truth" for visitors', which is 'vital to representing that which is "unrepresentable" and unknowable: trauma itself' (2017, p. 94). As Andrea, a German tourist, attempted to explain:

I imagine having tourists here can be difficult. It's just [...] something really bad happened there and you just take it and live it as a tourist and that is just ... it's this idea that makes

you start to feel bad. Because you want to see, and want to experience ... I can't reconcile that. (Andrea, Rikuzentakata, 18/07/2016)

However, despite these difficulties, international (disaster) tourism was genuinely conceived as an opportunity for residents and survivors to tell their story and have their story known outside of Japan. To help overcome trauma the tourists were expected to go back home and communicate, on their own terms, those stories of disaster and trauma. The main page of the TohokuNow! website, a joint project initiated to promote tourism in English for the towns of Rikuzentakata, Minamisanriku and Matsushima, accordingly read: 'the presence of international visitors is a powerful reminder of relevancy' (TohokuNow!, 2016). The purpose of such narratives and strategies was to create a bridge of communication, in which tourists were directly involved in the atmosphere of tragedy and hope that emanated from the (disaster) site and perceive its profound affective charge. As part of these recovery plans, international tourists were conceived not only as witnesses, but also as participants in the realization of a new, hopefully bright future. A survivor in the nearby town of Ofunato described how for her the process of healing percolated through small acts of normalcy:

I'm very happy that I can vacuum my place every morning! I couldn't do it at the temporary housing because I was worried the noise might have disturbed the neighbours. Now I have breakfast in the fresh morning air! I feel that I'm living again calmly and comfortably. (Mrs. Hirayama, Ofunato, 29/08/2016)

These small, familiar sensations, however, are complemented by active efforts in sharing her experience with other residents and with the tourists. For this reason, she tells her stories at the local market:

Rather than telling them what we lost, I try express how grateful I am for their help; I know people come from far away for us, they use their time for us. They help and support us not only physically but also mentally. I like to express how much I'm grateful for this. (Mrs. Hirayama, Ofunato, 29/08/2016)

Post-disaster tourism has thus emerged here as a complex, meaningful encounter between the tourists and those involved in its organization and promotion in Rikuzentakata, who had to deal with an extremely sensitive, nuanced and reflexive constituency (Rittichainuwat, 2008). The path to healing from material and emotional trauma, the recovery of a collective sense of self, and the memorialization of the disaster for future generations were thus intentionally incorporated, through the performance and the enactment of the affective atmospheres described above, in layers of diverse by somehow unifying discourses of hope and resilience.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the case of Rikuzentakata, a town almost completely destroyed by the 2011 tsunami provoked by what is known as the Great East Japan Disaster and shown how the town has directed its recovery toward the development of a specific form of post-disaster tourism. We have focused in particular on two main strategies implemented by the authorities: first, the celebration of *Ipponmatsu*, or the Miracle Pine, a symbol of resilience in the face of devastation; second, the promotion of

Rikuzentakata as the ‘Hiroshima of the North’. Both these discourses were based on the engineering and the apprehension of specific affective post-disaster atmospheres and perceived by residents and local authorities as key for attracting visitors, especially international, interested in the disaster. Our analysis has highlighted how a politics of affect built around the tsunami has been spatialized and grounded using material landmarks (The Miracle Pine) and associated tourist practices, but also narratives of hope and resilience based on comparisons with Hiroshima. Such affective atmospheres, we have argued, were planned and performed as an attempt to facilitate cross-cultural communication, with the hope that the local modalities of post-disaster trauma recovery and place reconstruction might be perceived and interpreted by international tourists through processes of attunement and resonance. Affective transitive capacities have thus been deliberately activated and stimulated in order to overcome the limitations imposed by cross-cultural communication between the survivors and the tourists. Storytelling in Rikuzentakata covers basic facts but, most importantly, it includes also personal stories told by guides or survivors. Our fieldwork has revealed that the ways in which these stories were received and apprehended by tourists was indeed seen by many residents as a means to overcome trauma and depression, and essential for their long healing process (Muskat et al., 2015). Tour guide Marife, a Filipino woman who has lived in Rikuzentakata for 22 years and survived the tsunami, claimed that sharing her story with tourists:

... makes me feel relieved. I feel so very fine because I shared my feelings with them and I am sure that they were trying to understand, and they tried to be in my shoes in their mind, how I felt five years ago. I want my listeners to cry, and to listen. (Rikuzentakata, 07/09/2016)

What is more, the post-disaster narratives performed in Rikuzentakata comprise a selective set of spatial practices and a specific geography of remnants that are potentially challenged by what tourist may actually do to respond to the affective atmospheres proposed by the tour operators. According to Emma Willis, in sites of death and disaster visitors are inevitably caught in ‘the tension between the perceived sacred quality of trauma and the profane aspect of deadly tourism ... [since] the tourist approach seeks to endlessly replay the traumatic event’ (Willis, 2014, p. 4). The performances at play, while not always deliberately constructed on affect, may nonetheless provoke unpredictable and often non-representable affective reactions, often associated to ambiguities and tensions that pervade also many dark tourism practices and experiences (Martini & Buda, 2018). Despite the actual impossibility of ‘performing affect’, what we have witnessed in Rikuzentakata is that the official tourist narratives and practices were at the origin of a series of unintended ‘effects’, including the possibility of an ‘affective appreciation’ on the part of the tourist of the relationship between what was present and what was absent, what was visible and what was indeed invisible in such post-disaster landscapes. What has also emerged from our analysis is that, by translating the atmosphere of disaster, trauma and recovery in their own cultural frame, some international tourists have arguably acted as witnesses *and* participants to the survivors’ pain and, at the same time, commemorated the victims while helping with the recovery (see Biran et al., 2011; Rittichainuwat, 2008). As Radica, a tourist from Trinidad and Tobago, summarized, ‘I guess, in a sense, you can say that the media will show you

the results of the disaster, but you can't understand it until you actually see it with your own eyes. The experience was surreal' (Yuriage, 15/08/2016).

Remembering disaster is always a powerful political act (Dyson, 2006): in the case illustrated here the reproduction of collective memories was performed everyday (Rigney, 2008) by and for the survivors and the tourists, in an atmosphere recreated on-site via a politics of affect and a specific set of narratives that aimed at allowing visitors to contemplate death and disaster on their own terms (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010). At the same time, this atmosphere was intentionally produced to involve the tourists in a broader process of healing from trauma and recovery for Rikuzentakata and its residents. This case shows that analyzing the 'power of affect', even when the affective atmosphere are deliberately staged by the tour operators, is key to the understanding of tourist practices in sites mark by such a painful past. Dark and post-disaster tourism studies, we claim, can thus significantly benefit from the incorporation of affect in their analytical frameworks. A profound engagement with questions of affect may in fact allow to interrogate the inherently ambivalent pathos that inevitably characterizes sites and practices of this kind, often triggering unpredictable reactions such as shock and anger, but also wonder and excitement (Martini & Buda, 2018). Sites of death and human sufferance in fact entail, as noted Emma Willis, a complex role of presence and spectatorship, often related to a sense of being at loss, not so 'much [because of the] sadness that comes from seeing something profoundly moving, but rather [because of] the unease of not knowing how to respond' (Willis, 2014, p. 6). Negotiation of painful pasts, ethically problematic situations, politically oriented discourses on memory and heritage (Godis & Nilsson, 2018), can in fact produce 'strong emotional and affective reactions—such as pain, fear, empathy, catharsis—from locals as well as visitors' (Martini & Buda, 2018, p. 2). While we recognize all the difficulties in communicating pain and suffering to tourists in a place like Rikuzentakata, and in finding appropriate and respectful ways to memorialize disaster, we would like to argue that only by fully engaging with the importance and the ambivalence of affect in such tourist experiences we may be able to appreciate how such post-disaster landscapes somehow speak, through their multiple narratives and the related materialities, of what is otherwise unspeakable.

Notes

1. In 2017, thanks to donations from other parts of Japan, the Gohyaku rakan project was completed with 569 statues carved in Rikuzentakata, and roughly 1000 sent from other parts of Japan (see also <http://www.kahoku.co.jp/tohokunews/201708/2017081933009.html>).
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmUc4bjEMKc>.
3. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2015/03/07/travel/rikuzentakata-looks-future-new-tourism-ventures/>.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/japan-miracle-pine-tree-tsunami-rikuzentakata>.
5. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/03/201239122211138361.html>.
6. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35781593>.
7. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/04/16/japan.tree.hope/index.html>.
8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/world/asia/22missing.html>.
9. <http://marugoto-rikuzentakata.com/>.

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