

The ghosts of Ishinomaki

space, hauntings, and the materialized absences of disaster

Annaclaudia Martini

I visited the northern prefecture of Miyagi, in the Tohoku region of Japan for the first time in 2016. On a hot summer day, I stopped for dinner in the city of Ishinomaki. I was coming from nearby Ogatsu, where, together with another researcher, I interviewed an American artist that transformed tsunami debris into art. Passing through the city centre on our way to the central station, I thought something looked eerie, out of place, but I couldn't put my fingers on it. The day after, I talked about it with a Japanese colleague, who did extensive research in Ishinomaki. She said that now the city looked much better than before, but that even after the rubble and debris were removed, many places in the centre remained vacant and abandoned, as people relocated elsewhere. It did not help, she continued, that in 2012 the municipality had to remove all streetlights for a while, because people were scared. "Scared of what?", I asked – to which she replied matter-of-factly: "Of ghosts".

On March 11, 2011, the coast of Tohoku was hit by a triple disaster: a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, a tsunami of unprecedented strength, and the consequent meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The tsunami caused almost 20.000 casualties, washing away people, trees, cars, and buildings alike. Ishinomaki, a city of 140.000 people, was the worst-hit municipality, racking up almost one quarter of the total number of casualties. A business owner who was forced to close in 2020 explained that: "Even before, it used to be quite lonely. But there were even fewer customers after the disaster and we simply could not carry on".¹ In the area around the main station, about one-third of the buildings are still empty lots, or parking lots. An American resident I met in 2016, who moved to Ishinomaki right after the disaster, told me: "When I arrived to Ishinomaki, you could definitely tell how tall the waves were, because there were lines from how tall the water came on the buildings and they went up about three meters".

Maddern and Adey claim that "the twenty-first century has so far transpired as a century of haunting; of irregular, unexpected and (un)anticipated events that appear to be 'beyond the real'".² But also of traces of times past, of people, politics, emotions, that are left behind and intrude on the present, confounding, aligning and colliding with it.³ Ishinomaki was a city of ghosts even before 2011: it faced depopulation, aging residents, and a lack of prospects for the youth – as with many other areas of rural Japan. Emigration, paired with an increasing shift from labour-intensive industries to knowledge and technology-based production, brought about economic stagnation, inertia, and abandoned buildings. Even those who decided to stay after the disaster were displaced, as the massive reconstruction projects moved entire neighbourhoods towards the suburbs, far from the water – and the risk of tsunami. With new communities forming in the suburbs, the city centre remained empty, a ghost town of shuttered businesses and houses, haunted by the traces of the 2011 disaster.

In 1993, Derrida coined the neologism *hauntology*⁴ as a play on the word's near homophone (in

Annaclaudia Martini is Assistant Professor in Human Geography at the University of Bologna, Italy. Her academic interests include geographies of affect, critical geographies, post-disaster tourism and heritage studies, and spectral geographies. She works with disaster-hit communities in the Tohoku region of Japan, looking at post-disaster tourism, affects, and community resilience.

annaclaudia.martini@unibo.it

French) *ontology*, implying that any ontology is always already unstable, haunted, something that is no longer present, but still has an effect even after it is gone. Cities, and especially cities that bear the wound of disaster, can be haunted by the non-present presence of the spatial and temporal other, a dyschronic spectre that is neither fully present nor completely absent. Haunted places suggest space-times in which past, present and future co-exist and interact in unpredictable ways, evoking incompatible times and places. In hauntology, says Fisher, “we can hear the time-wound, the

chronological fracture, the expression of the sense, crucial to hauntology, that ‘time is out of joint’⁵

Ishinomaki is haunted, possessed by the ghosts of the 2011 disaster, but also by a time past in which the city prospered, the social and infrastructural choices that caused such massive casualties during the disaster and the individual and collective guilt that comes with it, as well as by all the potential futures that will never be

Ishinomaki is haunted, possessed by the ghosts of the 2011 disaster, but also by a time past in which the city prospered, the social and infrastructural choices that caused such massive

casualties during the disaster and the individual and collective guilt that comes with it, as well as by all the potential futures that will never be. After the disaster, national and local institutions focused on reconstruction and recovery, with slogan such as “Smile Japan”, and “Gambarou Ishinomaki”.⁶ This forward-thinking, positive spin on the disaster came too soon for many in the tsunami-hit communities, allowing no time for the bereaved to mourn and make sense of the trauma. When a community is not ready to move on, but pressed to do so, this stress and pain can keep returning as spectres of memory and history, forming a fracture, a coexistence of different imaginaries across time and space, leaving something once was, and still is, there. In certain places, absence is so profoundly visible, so evident and palpable that even empty spaces evoke crowded imaginaries and performances of memory.⁷

Especially for those in the community who moved to the suburbs, as well as for visitors, experiencing the tethering atmosphere of downtown Ishinomaki means to suddenly be put in the presence of ghosts. Jytte, a Danish journalist I interviewed, visited the city in 2014 and said: “I think that city has a lot of potential (. . .), but it seemed like the city was kind of a ghost city. We almost didn’t meet anybody on the streets and that was strange. It was strange to be in a city like that. It was empty!”

People move to the suburbs to feel safe, but also to forget, to avoid having to look at the area destroyed by the tsunami. This however only exacerbates the ghastly feeling of abandonment and dilapidation perceivable in the city centre. Derelict places, abandoned places, places that are perceived as “nothing” or “void” can be the source of vibrant memories and intense affects and attachments. Memories and embodied and virtual engagements are acts of place-making and place-dissolution at the same time, where ghosts and materialised absences simply refuse to disappear. Ishinomaki’s centre exists as a liminal place, a metaphor of not only the people who died, but also the city that died as it changed shape, expanded and contracted in unpredictable ways, losing touch with the community that was supposed to inhabit it. This suburban sprawl was already in place before the disaster, but it accelerated after 2011, compounded with the loss and trauma of the tsunami and its casualties in the city. The borders of trauma, just like haunted places, continuously move, disappearing and reappearing, appropriating space, and blurring the boundaries of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, adhering to no definition or binary opposition.⁸ The hustle and bustle of daily life has moved, leaving an empty space that is charged, intense, an interstice that makes space for ghosts to appear.

At times, the only way people can manage pervasive and persistent collective trauma is to make sense of it, and one of the ways in which communities made sense of the disaster and its traces in the

city was by making what is absent insistently present, by unfolding presence and absence out of one another, recognising, verbalizing, and ultimately narrating the experience of being haunted.⁹

Since 2011, ghost tales have spread throughout disaster-affected areas. There have been reports of ghost sightings and even of people being possessed by ghosts of the tsunami.¹⁰ While some do believe that ghosts exist, and are an expression of the power of *kami*,¹¹ most people believe they are affective, materialized representations of the trauma of the people disturbed or possessed by them. These stories are hardly new: they emerge from old folktales that are recontextualized, repurposed, and brought back from mythical into present time, expressing themselves as a tension between absence and presence in the city. I have heard many versions of the same story: it is always a ghost pushing through the threshold, stuck in-between, either with unfinished business or for not having been laid to rest properly. It is the story of the streetlights: a few months after the disaster, residents started calling the police at night, claiming that they were seeing people, sullen-looking and drenched in water, under the streetlights in the city centre. The calls were so many, and so unnerving, that the municipality found no other solution but to remove the lights. But it is also the story of the ghost of an old woman, deceased in the tsunami, who kept going back to her neighbours' house and sit down for a cup of tea. The cushion that would be left out for her was soaked in seawater every time her visits were over. And in nearby Tagajō, one fire station received incessant calls until a crew of firefighters drove to the ruins of the caller's house to pray for the dead.

After the disaster, many bodies were not found, making it impossible to mourn in socio-culturally accepted ways, thus disrupting the culturally appropriate order of life: the spirits not crossing the threshold cause a profound fracture in the texture of place. According to a resident of Ishinomaki who I interviewed in 2017, "a lot of people said to have talked to ghosts. I asked them and said that some of them didn't realize that they had died. So they were still like, walking home. But the difference was that the faces were pale white and they were drenched in salt water". The loss of place — their place in the world, their body, their spot at the burial ground (if the body was not recovered) — is at once local and physical as well as linked to a distant and vast cosmic geography from which the dead is precluded until action on part of the living is taken to address this concern. Without a place, these ghosts become hauntings in the liminal interstices of the urban infrastructures in Ishinomaki — a materialization of the affective language in which trauma is embodied, transmitted and released in disaster places. Ghosts are expression of social dynamics of multivocality in places and a stand in for the materialization of trauma. Hara Takahashi, a professor at Tohoku University who interviewed health practitioners and priests regarding ghost apparition and possessions after the disaster, concluded that their experiences left the strong impression that the deceased had not fully passed to the other side; rather, they were living their afterlives in the same space as the living, blurring the boundaries of these two places.¹² Morgan Meyer argues that because the felt absence of the deceased matters, the dead themselves are turned into matter: their absence is performed, materialized and objectified in order to make them present in the city.¹³

To speak of ghosts and hauntings serves an important social function. Ghosts are "a crucible for political mediation and historical memory";¹⁴ a social figure that can stake a claim for those who are not acknowledged. Ghosts and haunting are not coherent; on the contrary, their power comes from their deconstruction and disruption of preconceived notions of linearity — of time and space — by interrupting, over-determining, pointing in different directions at once.¹⁵ Ishinomaki is filled with those invisible stories and their affective charge. Not only the dead, but mourning itself, mourning for a lost place and a lost time that can never be again, have a weight. Against our will, hauntings show what is still missing, the invisible that needs to be addressed, the "endings that are not over".¹⁶ The secret of the ghost, writes Davis "is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future".¹⁷

Endnotes

- 1 The Asahi Shinbun (March 8th, 2021) Reconstruction of Ishinomaki: Big dreams, but old woes remain. Available at: <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14223201>
- 2 Jo Frances Maddern and Peter Adey (2008) Editorial: Spectro-geographies, *cultural geographies*, 15(3), pp. 291-295, p. 298.
- 3 Tim Edensor (2008) Mundane hauntings: Commuting through the phantasmagoric working-class spaces of Manchester, England, *cultural geographies* 15(3), pp. 313-333.
- 4 Jacques Derrida (1993) *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge.
- 5 Mark Fisher (2008) No Future 2012, *k-punk blog*. Available at: <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/010368.html>
- 6 *Gambarou* is a complex expression to translate. It can roughly translate as "Be strong, Ishinomaki!" or "Good luck, Ishinomaki!" It relates to the general idea of putting in the hard work to obtain a desired result.
- 7 Tim Edensor, op. cit.
- 8 John Tulloch (2017) The haunted spaces of 7/7: Memory, mediatization and performance, in: Christina Lee (Ed.) *Spectral Spaces and Hauntings*, pp. 19-39. London: Routledge.
- 9 Verne Harris (2015) Hauntology, archivy and banditry: an engagement with Derrida and Zapiro, *Critical Arts*, 29, pp. 13-27.
- 10 Richard Lloyd-Parry (2017) *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone*. New York: MCD.
- 11 Gods of the autochthonous Shinto doctrine.
- 12 Hara Takahashi (2016) The ghosts of tsunami dead and kokoro no kea in Japan's religious landscape, *Journal of Religion in Japan*, 5(2-3), pp. 176-198.
- 13 Morgan Meyer (2012) Placing and tracing absence: A material culture of the immaterial, *Journal of Material Culture*, 17(1), pp. 103-110.
- 14 Avery Gordon (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 18.
- 15 Steve Pile (2005) *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*. London: Sage.
- 16 Avery Gordon (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 139.
- 17 Colin Davis (2013) État présent: Hauntology, spectres and phantoms, in: María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (Eds.) *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, pp. 53-60. New York: Bloomsbury.

