

being dead otherwise



anne allison

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A stone marker for disconnected dead at
Tama Reian Cemetery, Koganei, Tokyo

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To Yoshiko

For all you have taught me, shared with
me, and accompanied me in

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In a stream of new enterprises catering to death, this one washes and pulverizes human remains. Called a “bone business” (*hone-ya-san*), the company is small and sits quietly in a residential neighborhood in Tokyo. But things are active inside. Boxes of cremains from all over the country stand high in the main room. Posted straight from the crematorium or dug up from ancestral graves and destined for reburial in an urban cemetery, the ashes have traveled here to be further compacted. Whether to be scattered in the sea (*sankotsu*) or interred in a high-rise columbarium, bone fragments are sent to be ground into fine powder (*funkotsu*). This is a delicate process, the owner tells me, displaying the mortar and pestle he uses in the final step.

The body, in death, reformulated for changing times, reflecting a landscape where the dead don’t necessarily wind up where they used to: in a family or ancestral plot in the ground, attached to a Buddhist temple passed down for generations, and tended fastidiously by patrilineal kin. This was once sanctioned by law in a genealogical principle that sutured the nation-state to the continuity of the imperial system incarnated by the emperor. But alongside reforms in the postwar “democratic” constitution adopted in 1947, the grave went from being a place to memorialize ancestors to a place for an individual’s eternal rest. Since then, a number of factors have contributed to dismantling this family-based mortuary system even further: urbanization and sped-up lifestyles, an aging population with low birth rates, decreasing rates of marriage and cohabitation, the rise of Japanese citizens living and dying alone, and a shift away from long-term employment to more irregular

jobs. For many today, relying on family members to bury the dead in graves in the countryside and to tend to them after that is no longer realistic.

But to be untended at death provokes the specter of disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*) who wander the earth, deprived as they are of a “home.” As attested to by the endless stories these days of abandoned graves in the countryside and city dwellers whose remains go unclaimed after dying alone, their bodies discovered long after the fact (a phenomenon called lonely or solitary death), this is a real possibility. And it generates unease around death. But this, in turn, is being met by a wave of creative, commercial, and civic interest in what is a new politics of the dead: forging ways of handling the deceased less reliant on the ancestral grave, familial caregiving, or management by someone else.

We die alone and in a specific moment in time, biologically at least. But what happens to the dead after that—as material remains and as a presence maintained through memory, mourning, ritual, care—depends on others. How this relationship is undergoing radical change in the context of twenty-first century Japan is the subject of this book. Between the dead and their relationality with others.

Being dead otherwise. Recomposing decomposition in terms of how, where, and with whom one winds up after death.

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acknowledgments

This book has been both hard and wondrous for me. About death(s) that pain the soul. But about trappings of life that accompany or embroider the dead as well. The voice of the priest greeting ancestors in the homes of his parishioners during Obon, the care of the cleanup workers gently removing the belongings of those who have died alone in their homes, the craft of the bone crusher lovingly completing the last step of his job with a mortar and pestle. I have been fortunate, in the long years conducting this research, to have had so many working in the intimate work of deathcare in Japan open their jobsites to me. I am grateful for their generosity as I am to that of all the Japanese who shared with me their ways of thinking about, dealing with, and managing (or not managing) ending plans. This is such personal terrain, embedded as it is in the (be)longings we have with others, including material (and nonmaterial) things. This project has been deeply enriched by all those who have been so willing and open in speaking about these matters with me. This includes dear friends (and my dearest Japanese friend, Yoshiko Kuga), close colleagues, my great partner and sons, a loving sister, the best editor ever (Ken Wissoker), smart students, all those who have encouraged this project with invitations to write or present on it, and an energetic core of fellow “death gals”—researchers as compelled as I am by this scholarly topic. I have learned so much from you all. And though “I” may not be overtly present in all the writing and stories that follow, to me, this is the most personal of all my scholarly endeavors. The journey I have taken here is, truly, my own journey in threading the edges of life and loss that I am still embarked on. It is also my response to what some have called the need to

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go beyond what they lamentingly see as the turn to the “suffering slot” in anthropology. This book is about death. But it is not about turning away from life—life can surge in and around biological ends. Rather, I see something like hope approaching, if not quite arriving, in the turn toward new ways of “being dead otherwise.” This is what I aim to bring to the page here.

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And my special thanks, always and forever, to Charlie.

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introduction

The wake, held at nightfall, surges with mourners. A smaller but sizable crowd gathers the next morning for the upscale funeral in a hall filled with white chrysanthemums and designer photos of the deceased distributed throughout. Filing past the open coffin and lighting incense to the spirit of the deceased at the Buddhist altar, mourners gather outside for the casket to be loaded onto the hearse. Close relatives and friends now accompany the body to the crematorium, where, after final goodbyes and a short respite in a room with cool drinks, they reconvene an hour later in the furnace room. There they greet what has emerged: bone fragments and ash strewn across a gurney still radiating heat. Observing the cremains, the mourners approach the cart where, maneuvering a set of chopsticks, they join in moving a fragment from one tray to another. “Picking the bones” (*kotsuage*), a ritual of intimacy and respect, involves touching, seeing, and being with a loved one as they transition into something else. After this comes a communal meal shared between mourners, priests, and the deceased, whose ashes are now in an urn.

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Or, another scenario: after the mandatory twenty-four-hour after-death waiting period, the corpse is taken directly from the hospital to the crematorium instead of to a funeral hall, where the bereaved would otherwise assemble for the wake the night before and the leave-taking (*kokubetsushiki*/告別式) the next morning. At the crematorium only immediate family convene. The ceremony there, quite barebones, is officiated by a staff member or Buddhist priest for a much lower price—as little as three thousand dollars versus up to ten times that amount for a fuller affair. At the crematorium the family is unlikely to engage in bone-picking or to hold on to the cremains for the traditional forty-nine days of Buddhist mourning during which the spirit is in transit from this world to the next. Instead, the urn will be deposited immediately: buried in the ground in a cemetery or placed inside an ossuary or in a high-rise locker or automatic-delivery-style columbarium—options becoming popular these days for their convenience and low cost. Such a “direct ceremony” (*chokusō*) takes place—hospital to crematorium to burial ground—all in one shot.

Or, consider this possibility: the deceased, a bachelor without children or close relatives, makes his own burial arrangements ahead of time. His death in a long-term-care facility triggers the stages of his prepaid plan. First the body goes to a holding room, then to a crematorium, and finally to a collective burial spot under cherry trees, to be interred as commingled ashes. Having chosen one of the different options in the burial grounds operated by the nonprofit organization he joined a number of years ago, the deceased will be memorialized by a collective ceremony held annually for all members who have died that year and before. As done in life, members often attend these rituals as well as the regularly held get-togethers for the future deceased to get to know one another while still alive. After cremation, ashes go into the earth alongside not family but “grave friends” (*haka tomo*)—the ties of affiliation that have been formed by virtue of membership in this alternative burial association. As advertised by the promotional brochure, interment in these burial grounds does not depend on having family or a successor. But “no one is lonely” by virtue of being interred alongside others as well as among the host of cherry trees.

Or, another prospect: three weeks after death, the body is discovered because of the smell of its decomposition and the buzz of flies outside the door. The landlord calls in the police, who find the corpse among clutter and garbage strewn inside. Estranged from family and friends, living on welfare since losing his job years ago, the deceased has died a “lonely death” (*kodokushi*). The only relation the local municipality can track down

is a sister who refuses to claim the remains, saying the siblings have been disconnected for years, so the municipality will bear the responsibility and cost for handling the corpse. The body is sent to the local crematorium, then the ashes are interred in a designated Buddhist temple where there is a special plot and shrine for the disconnected (*muenbo*). Meanwhile, the landlord shoulders the expense of commissioning a special cleanup service to repair and restore the apartment to an inhabitable state. It is a massive job to remove the detritus of the lonely death, the numbers of which are rapidly rising these days—as are those of special cleaners who give witness to the life expired there.

.....

As can be seen by this range of possible outcomes—the first becoming less and less common, the others rising in frequency—there are different ways of dying and being buried in Japan today. And as the example of those who end up in graves for the disconnected attests, this is a matter that demands some kind of social response. Even though (or particularly because) a corpse represents the not-ness of a life once there and now gone. That, rather than discarding them, the living have chosen to keep some portion of these remains as tribute to the dead in their midst, has been customary practice since at least Neolithic times, twenty thousand years ago. Differentiating us from animals, this is an act that philosophers have long taken to be constitutive of humanity: holding onto a remnant of those now departed in honor and recognition of the place they once held in the community. For Hegel, making houses for the dead signaled the onset of both memory and symbol-making, uniquely human capacities that extend us beyond biological survival and the temporal here and now. The ability to imagine an otherwise is harbored here. Whereas “houses for the living are mere shelter, structures for preserving life; a tomb is the work of the symbol-making architect” (Hegel, quoted in Laqueur 2015, 90). And to treat a dead body “as if it were ordinary organic matter” (4) is to deny its very humanity—what Thomas Laqueur in his cultural history of mortal remains calls a universal cultural logic.

In his anthropological study of death, Robert Hertz (1960) outlined the three main elements involved in mortuary practice: the corpse, the living survivors, and the deceased on their passage to somewhere or something else. The status of the dead is at once liminal and precarious, and caring for the dead depends on those still living who embark upon doing so at the site of the corpse. This entails a relationship between the living and the dead conducted around the material remnants of the deceased—a substance

that, in the process of decomposition, indexes the present absence of a life once here and now gone. As Hertz pointed out for the Dayak of Borneo, the liminality of the corpse troubled the order of things, indicating a spirit in transition from this world to the next. But once the flesh had sufficiently dissolved, leaving bones neatly white and discrete, the dead were reburied closer to the living, who took solace in the belief that the departed had now arrived at their final destination (somewhere else). Hertz proposed that ritualizing the dead is a mechanism that reconstitutes, by reconfirming, the ongoing life of the community. Though a member has physically departed, those left behind are reminded of the ties they share that enable livelihood to continue. By honoring, but differentiating, the dead, a symbolics is enacted to a social/human enterprise that traverses the spectrum of existence and transcends any biological or temporal part. And by making a space for them to dwell among the living in a home all their own, the deceased are accorded the recognition that they (still) matter in this constellation, now stretching as it does to another plane.

Inherently social, the Hertzian model of a “good death” depends on others who attend to the material remains and spiritual aftermath of the dead, giving the departed the aura of belonging to those who remain behind. In the absence of this care, the deceased become something other than honored dead. These are the ungrievable, in Judith Butler’s term, with lives that fail to matter; something less than human, as Antigone believed when sacrificing her own life to bury her brother in defiance of the king. As recorded by anthropologists from Robert Desjarlais (2016) observing diasporic Tibetan Buddhists to Scott Stonington (2020) studying northern Thai villagers and Sarah Wagner (2019) talking to Americans dealing with MIAs from the Vietnam War, a “bad death” is lonely and cold; unwitnessed, untidy, unadorned. This happens when someone dies far from home, estranged from family and friends; in sudden or painful circumstances; or has remains that go untreated, unrecovered, unnamed (Walter 2017). The opposite is being given a place of sorts among and by the living: remains that are tended to and a reminder of the deceased beyond the earthly existence of an individual. Entailing ritual care, this is not only social but constitutive of a sociality that many see as the essence of humanity itself—taking care of life beyond its existential or instrumental utility.

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What happens when the dead can no longer be assured of such places among the living? And when the institutions governing the biopolitics of

life-making become ever less resourceful in managing, or ensuring, those in the making of death? And when none of this is the exception—due to circumstances like war, being marginalized in life, or falling on hard times—but is becoming generalized, even normalized, for a community at large?

Being Dead Otherwise contemplates this necrosociological condition through the lens of Japan at the start of the twenty-first century. As the familial model that once handled mortuary arrangements is coming undone, the ranks of those bereft of the social others who once cared for the dead are on the rise. Signs of this appear daily in the news: abandoned urns on the trains, corpses of the lonely dead going undiscovered for months, the carcasses of ancestral tombs standing empty in rural cemeteries, unclaimed remains interred in tombs for the disconnected. More palpable still is a sense of urgency and unease around the need to prepare one's ending arrangements ahead of time, or to "close" ancestral graves and move the contents somewhere else to avoid the fate of winding up as "disconnected souls." New disposal methods with different (or no) provisions for mortuary care abound these days in what is a booming "ending industry" catering to a population less and less likely to have a predesignated grave or care providers to tend to the dead once there.

If the dead once relied upon the connections of others to avoid becoming a disconnected soul, how is the sociality and governance of mortality today changing away from family, intimate relations, and sometimes human mortuary care altogether? In such new age trends as outsourcing grievability to a company or interring ashes in an automated crypt, do we see a desire to innovate on ritual grieving or a willingness to let it go? What does it say—about a nation-state, a people, an individual once alive and now dead—when the management of grievability is in question? Do any of these social units really need grievability, in other words? What happens without it, or when grievability gets performed by a robot or by and for the self?

Being Dead Otherwise interrogates the interpersonal entanglements of death, considering Japan as a case study of possible futures in the weaning, transforming, and redesigning of others in the management of the dead.

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Twenty-first century Japan is undergoing radical, rapid flux in attitudes and practices regarding death. Having "no place to go" (*ikiba ga nai*) rather than a grave already reserved is a possibility for an increasing number of the population. And the shards of family tombs that, no longer tended to,

now stand abandoned constitute as much as 40 percent of the edifices in some rural cemeteries (Kotani 2018). This reflects a spatial problem in a land-poor country, particularly in cities, where plots in desirable cemeteries are exceedingly scarce and exorbitantly priced. But the scarcity at hand has more to do with relationality: the lack of others to be buried alongside or to care for one's remains and spirit once there. When family lines die out or kin stop maintaining graves or move far away, ancestral plots become "empty" (*akihaka*), and the contents are soon removed to be reburied in tombs for the disconnected. But the to-be-deceased face more challenges still. With the country's high aging and low birthrate demographics, death rates exceeding birth rates every year, and increased "singlification" of households and lifestyles, the still dominant familial model of death making leaves many in a quandary at the end. This is true particularly, but not only, for those without spouses, successors, or the financial wherewithal to enter a family grave. Without finding an alternative, a final resting place with some kind of ritualized care over time, these dead will wind up as disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*)—an unpleasant prospect that raises the specter of hungry, wandering ghosts.

Such a situation is hardly the way it used to be in Japan. People once lived in close proximity to the dead. Caring for the ancestors in graves that were usually in nearby domestic shrines where offerings, including food, were given daily was part of everyday routine. This continued, by custom and religious practice, for thirty-three years, until the dead were thought to have transitioned into ancestors. By that point, others were likely to have died and be on their way (to the "other world"), too, stitching the dead into the fabric of life and premising care on a principle of continuous regeneration. A temporality of "eternity" depended on exchanges of ritual—serving the ancestors and then being served by one's own descendants and becoming an ancestor as well—that were wedded, in turn, to a very specific rubric of and for social reproduction: a national-patriarchal structuring of belonging that dictated (and delimited) relationality through the patrilineal familial system (*ie*). The Meiji Constitution stipulated that all citizens be entered in the Family Registry in terms of patrilineal identification: family name (birth name for men, married name for women), order and position in family (hierarchized by gender and age), dates (of birth, marriage, and death), addresses, employment, and property.¹ The law also designated the grave (*ohaka*) as the material and symbolic seat of the patrilineal *ie* system, which became the ideological bulwark of the imperial nation-state throughout its militaristic buildup to establish, then lead, an

East Asian empire that ended disastrously. That architecture, grounded in a sociopolitical order at once close-knit and abstract, culminated—and also started—in the sacredness of the ancestral grave. Passed down from generation to generation and often, though not necessarily, located in a cemetery at a Buddhist temple to which the family was attached as parishioners (as all Japanese were once mandated to be), the grave was both owned and maintained by the patrilineage, with all the hierarchies and norms embedded therein.

With Japan's defeat in the Pacific War and its subsequent American occupation, the *ie* system was officially dismantled. In the “democratic” constitution of 1947, which decoupled religion from the state and remade citizenship around the individual versus the status of being subjects of the emperor, the grave shifted status as well. From the place where ancestors are accorded respect, it became the place where the individual eternally lives. A host of changes were triggered in the process of rebuilding the country and reorienting national priorities from militarism to economic (post)industrialization: urban migration, a shift away from agriculture to wage-based employment, households becoming more centered on the nuclear versus extended family, and an ethos of hard work and productivity implanted within the “social factory” of the family and consumerism. The 1950s were a period of hunger, a friend in his seventies whose family moved from Shikoku to Tokyo recalled. But by the 1960s, Japan's future—its period of high economic growth and rise to being a global superpower with the second largest economy in the world—was already on the horizon. But what this took, and demanded, of citizen-workers and mother-taskmasters was an incredible intimacy of hard work. Exacting and extracting performativity from everyone meant fortifying the individual self: honing the skills, discipline, and record needed to do well by the aspirational measures of a “good life” (graduation from a reputable university, employment in a prestigious company, marriage to a suitable spouse, and children primed to reproduce all of the above). Quite a different orientation from the duty and affection accorded the ancestors. That, gravitating around the grave likely to be hours away from the cities where a majority of Japanese currently reside, becomes increasingly hard to keep up.

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In the early years of the new millennium, I was finishing up a project on Japanese techno-toys and waves of media-mix character franchises: Power Rangers, Sailor Moon, Tamagotchi, and Pokémon.

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The postwar period was effectively and affectively over by then. The Japanese dream of hard work marked by steady marriage, lifelong employment, and the private ownership of “my home” and “my car” crashed in 1991 along with the bubble economy—the speculative real estate and stock market—launching an economic decline that has lingered ever since. Kids, whether grade-schoolers, teenagers, or young adults—were said to be feeling the shift from an era of clear futures to one where even high achievers couldn’t be sure of what they would attain. The 1990s was the “lost decade” in which companies folded, longtime employees got sacked, and those coming of working age often failed to secure the kind of long-lasting (“regular”) job they had been brought up to believe was both theirs and all that mattered. As this “lost generation” segued into another (and another), Japan’s era of exponential growth and inflated speculation downshifted into one more of postgrowth, symptomized by domestic concerns over Japan’s aging population, declining rates of both marriage and childbirth, and predictions of a labor shortage in the future (without any signs of a national willingness to open up its borders to foreign migrants). A mood of hopelessness swept the country, punctuated by the sarin gas attacks on Tokyo subways in 1995, the Hanshin earthquake in Kobe the same year, and reports of troubling social problems linked to loneliness, isolation, depression, and despair (such as a peak of 33,000 suicides in 1998, a rise in school refusal and youth social withdrawal, and an awareness of adults living and dying alone that volunteers brought to attention during the Hanshin earthquake).

One term for describing the times was “emptiness,” as in horizons of expectation getting emptied out. But as a number of the designers of the toys I interviewed in the early 2000s said of their products, they saw the youth they were targeting as encumbered by something else. Not bereft of the hopes they ought to see realized, but deprived of something more capacious, and soulful, in the way of hoping itself. Tajiri Satoshi, the designer of the original Pokémon Game Boy game, for example, felt that youth, even before the crash of the bubble economy, were being so excessively programmed to industriously perform that their capacity to enjoy and sense the world (as well as others and also themselves) was severely constrained. It was to introduce them to another way of being that he created the imaginary universe of pocket monsters, modeled after the natural world of insects that he had grown up enchanted by (Allison 2007). As religious scholar Nakazawa Shinichi argued in the book he wrote about Pokémon, the playscape recrafts something from Japan’s traditional past: an animist worldview in which humans can forge meaningful connections to gods,

ghosts, and monsters, which are as viable as any life-form. For a lonely child anxious about their performance on a test, playing and bonding with a Pokémon can be healing: repairing what has been taken from and lost by children in the course of (post)industrialization (Nakazawa 1997).

I developed the notion of “techno-animism” through the ethnography I did with users, designers, and parents of children who play with such digital products as Tamagotchi. Techno-animism is the lifeform generated between, and beyond, the binarism of human and machine (Allison 2007). As the inventor of the Tamagotchi intended, what the user invests in the way of energy, labor, and care (birthing and raising the virtual pet) is key to both the game play and the connection that is formed. This makes for a relationship at once continuous, contingent, and everyday (slipping into the Tamagotchi’s death when a player’s attentiveness lets up), not simply an object that the user manipulates and owns. Part of the fabric of what Philippe Descola and others consider to be the ontology of animism—a fluidity and interdependence between physically heterogenous entities—the vitality offered by these techno-toys was frequently reported on as the affective attachment provided to kids (Descola 2005, 328). Said to be “soothing” (*iyashi* in times of anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness, adults turned to digital companions as well. Tamagotchi was a huge hit with women in their twenties and fifties.

As I became aware when finishing my book on Japanese toys and their global trendiness, a sense of precariousness was gripping the country in the new millennium. While rooted in jobs, this extended much wider and deeper into the everyday. Activist Amamiya Karin, who used the word “precariat” to refer to young Japanese, called it the “pain of life” (*ikizurasa*) (Allison 2013). Once primed to expect and aim for long-term relationships that equated with security—in the workplace, marriage, and a home filled with material acquisitions and children—Japanese adults now found themselves in a different temporal order, one marked more by irregularity and flexibility than by permanence and continuity. Almost 40 percent of workers (and over half of all women workers) are irregularly employed today, thirty years after the bursting of the bubble economy, meaning they lack the security, status, and perks of steady employment. Fewer adults marry or have children these days, citing economic insecurity as the prime reason why.

The phrase I kept encountering in my study of precarity, used to refer not only to jobs but to the unease and unsettlement experienced more generally, was *ibasho ga nai*, meaning the absence of a place where one feels comfortable and at home. Alongside this were the tropes of the moment, much cited by scholars and commentators trying to grasp the sense of these post-bubble

times: hopelessness and futurelessness which referenced something at once temporal, spatial, and socio-existential. As labor historian Genda Yūji (2013) described, it was the loss not merely of job but of purpose and belonging that troubled so many un(der)employed who consequently became disconnected from others, isolated, and withdrawn (solitary nonemployed persons, or SNEP). Lacking hope, seeing no future, unstitched from hominess made with someone(s) else. Even the college students I interviewed at a high-ranking university struggled to answer the question about futurity: few were sure what theirs would be, and only one in twenty thought Japan's future might promise something better, if different, from the past. But the sense of uncertainty triggered anxieties not only about how to make a living that was sustainable into the future but also about something quite different involving temporality and sustainability. What became the subject for the current book, like all my research projects, came to me in the field.

As I returned every summer for further fieldwork in Tokyo, I was struck by how often I heard the phrase “no place to go” (*ikiba ga nai*) in reference to mortuary planning. Starting around 2015, this was a topic that came up surprisingly often when talking with acquaintances and friends. Frequently this involved aging parents and pressing decisions to be made about burials in the not-so-distant future. But many people, I found, were also contemplating their own circumstances, and not only those middle-aged or older but also younger adults in their twenties and thirties. This matter obviously generated anxiety: worry over how (best) to manage multiple considerations and also how not to burden others after one has died (Long 2001).

Consider, for example, a childless couple where the husband is a second son (thus not eligible to enter his family grave due to the rule of primogeniture). The two want to be buried together but don't know where that will be. Meanwhile, they would like to relocate the woman's mother, aging and sick in faraway Shikoku, to their home in Tokyo. But, as the mother is currently the sole caregiver to her husband's ancestral grave and leaving would mean abandoning his spirit and those of the ancestors, she has refused. Where the mother will be buried in the end, and what will become of the father's (and his ancestors') ashes when their caregiver is gone, are worries that keep this woman up at night.

Or the middle-aged single woman who tends to her parents' family grave, where she assumes her sister, likely to predecease her, wants to be buried. But, as neither has a successor, she imagines that should she enter

the grave as well, no one will be there to manage it nor to pay ritual visits. The thought of the grave falling into disarray disturbs her deeply, as does the thought of no one visiting her own grave—or paying respects to her parents—in the future.

Or the aging couple with children and grandchildren whom they don't want to bother with the upkeep of a grave or visitations to it. As they have not yet purchased a plot and cannot enter that of his family's grave (he's also a second son), they are seeking a simple arrangement for just the two of them. It must also be affordable as the man lost his private business in 2008 and is still working at a part-time job. Though they are concerned, their attitude is pragmatic.

For all these folks, it was managing not only the whereabouts of the dead but also the wherewithal of tending to them (in the way of Buddhist memorials, *kuyō*) that presented a problem. For home, even as a final resting place, depends on connections with others. Without that, where one is housed (as in tombs for the disconnected, *muenbo*) cannot be considered homey at all. A problem—what some have dubbed an “unrelational society” (*muen shakai*), pointing to a degeneration of Japan's collective sense of relationality and outcome of its hypercapitalist, hypermodernist trajectory—of not honoring the spirits of the dead and not maintaining the spirituality of Japan(ese) more broadly. This is an emptiness somewhat different from the loss of aspirational hopes (for middle-class abundance, high economic growth, long-lasting jobs, and “my homes”) so mourned in the lost decades that have stretched to the current moment. This one materializes instead in abandoned ancestral graves in the countryside, the rising numbers of lonely deaths in the cities, and the barrage of media and commercial messages advertising all sorts of mortuary services to help a population increasingly “without anyone else to depend upon.” What it traffics in is a currency of care rather than that of jobs, careers, lifestyles, or goods—care one needs (but doesn't have) from someone else and care that is now being sold, transacted, and reimaged in the new marketplace of endingness (*shūkatsu*) that has blossomed in the twenty-first century.

As with techno-toys like Pokémon and Tamagotchi, one sees that the promise that such necrosapes offer their users is a vitality of connectedness to heal and soothe the anxieties of being stranded and alone in a temporality lasting for eternity. In the energy circulating around the preparedness and planning given to it, death is productive: of a marketplace, of an array of new-style workers and jobs, and also of practices and activities that allow otherwise anxious to-be-deceased to take “anticipatory action,”

to use Ben Anderson's (2010) term, to ward off the possibility of a bad death. This efflorescence of interest around endingness also displaces concern elsewhere in the national landscape about futurity, sustainability, and the country's failure to socially reproduce. Devolving upon death, something life-like animates ending planning these days: what I call necro-animism. Interrogating what precisely this entails, who benefits and who doesn't, and how both governance and care of the dead gets increasingly enwrapped in new sorts of human, nonhuman, and technological arrangements, I question how this both rehearses and reframes the sociology of death.

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The activity around death these days both stems from and reconfigures the dire issue facing so many: having no final resting place nor caregivers to provide for one there. A problem of space and social capital, it is also one of temporality: of, to rephrase two Japanese scholars among many, "no future" for the dead. As religious scholar Mori Kenji (2014) has put it, Japan is facing a crisis in its failure to handle the dead. The dead are no longer cared for, and the living no longer care to care for the dead, a problem he calls the absence or refusal of others. Without intimates to join or to be cared by after death, the grave is either not an option or becomes a dumping ground in a collectivized, anonymized mass plot, more a wastebin than cipher of or for ongoing relationality. Something dies here, beyond the mortality of the deceased—the very soul of Japan, Mori believes, in a future that will be haunted by its loss.

While Mori fears that the death of death in a Hertzian sense (ritualizing the dead and according them an ongoing place among the living) is underway in Japan, the religious scholar Shimada Hiroshi actively encourages it. Advocating the abolishment of mortuary customs as anachronistic in hypermodern, hyperurban Japan, *o (zero) sō: assari shinu* (Zero funeral: dying throughout), published in 2014, was a bestseller. Who needs a funeral or a grave, he ponders, in times so focused on the present and the individual as these? But Shimada's thinking also rests on the unjust nature of the current system, which still relies on having either patrilineal kin or the financial means (or both) to carry things out. The socially or financially precarious are far more at risk of abandonment at the end. And these ranks of disconnected dead are rising—unkind to them and egregious on the part of the country as a whole. Mori Kenji (2014), too, acknowledges that what has been the customary system, dependent on what he calls the "modern Japanese family," is riddled with both biases and gaps. Yet he sees nothing adequately

replacing it—not even the new hybrid Buddhist-commercial operations that offer “eternal memorial” to substitute for the familial others that the dead are increasingly unlikely to have. Grievability requires something more authentic or reliable than this, he believes: an eternity of care assured by the bonds of duty and blood rather than the marketplace. Or, for people lacking the former, the state should step in: make the promise of a secure grave among the living—the marker of dignity for the dead—a constitutional right of all citizens.

Both Shimada and Mori Kenji see Japan as having no future for the dead and as a place that has no place for its dead on the horizon. But, for both of them, such a scenario rests in the investments in and failures of a very specific social model: the patriarchal, patrilineal form of belonging and caring for others. This model, one should point out, is not only increasingly outdated but was always already delimited in who and what it actually embraced. Queer theorist Lee Edelman has pointed out that political orders grounded in the reproductive futurism of capitalistic nation-states geared to expansion, extraction, and continuous growth invariably return to a notion of the heteronormative family built on the image of the child (2004, 2). This relegates those without such patriarchal, patrilineal ties to “no future,” as does a death-making system in which ancestors’ care and the path to becoming an ancestor oneself depend on a narrow genealogical template with the burdens and hierarchies this envelops. As long ago as the 1930s (at a time of natural disasters and economic unrest) this system failed to protect as much as 30 percent of the dead, who were consequently relegated to plots for the disconnected (Bernstein 2006). A plan to design public graves that would alleviate this problem and accord everyone the same dignified fate (in keeping with Marxist politics) was proposed in 1932 under the name “eternal tomb” (*fumetsu no funbo*) (Bernstein 2006). Though never built, it was based on the awareness not only that those without families are at risk but that the family model itself produces the precarity of possible abandonment in death. For when death making is premised on this, those with lines that die out, or whose family members are unable or unwilling to manage the task, or who are subordinated or marginalized by the system itself are left stranded.

Recognizing that there is a crisis of care worldwide, one spurred by overreliance on kin relations, which almost everywhere means overreliance on women and those least (otherwise) valued, the feminist members of the Care Collective released a care manifesto arguing for a new standard of care that would “promiscuously” treat everyone and leave no one behind.

“We have surveyed care at the scale of kinship because, within the current arrangements, it is all too often inadequate, unreliable and unjust. If care is to become the basis of a better society and world, we need to change our contemporary hierarchies of care in the direction of radical egalitarianism. All forms of care between all categories of human and non-human should be valued, recognized and resourced equally, according to their needs or ongoing sustainability. This is what we call an ethics of promiscuous care” (2020, 40). Promiscuity of care, in the sense of discriminating against no one (for lacking successors or relatives) and providing a service incorporating different elements, parts, and beings (rather than the standard family grave), is what Japan’s new business in endingness promises. Filling in the gaps of a system no longer available or adequate for an increasing fraction of the population, the market offers replacements and alternatives for the kin once counted on to carry out the job. In doing so, an attempt is made to offer a modicum of security with a place to go and care to replace the ancestral grave and the family members tasked with tending to it. The desire is to avoid a “no future” of abandonment. As one alternative burial site advertises, “no one buried here is ever alone;” the dead and to-be-deceased belong to the community of the site as well as to the groves of cherry blossoms within which everyone finds their resting place. Rites are performed that, establishing their own temporality through actions with material objects in a set space (Willerslev, Christensen, and Meinert 2013), acknowledge and accompany the dead. In this case, it is an annual memorial service for all those already interred to which the to-be-deceased are invited as well. Even more popular is the service of Buddhist prayers (*kuyō*) conducted by the resident priest at facilities connected to a Buddhist temple. This, too, has a built-in temporality; it is usually done for thirty-three years, though it is called “eternal” in reference to the ongoing eternity that is the promise of the genealogy-based ancestral grave.

The care being sought to relieve one’s anxieties about being stuck and placeless after death is conjured by new imaginaries and new forms of imagined communities today. No longer is the nation-state taming the fear of death by generating belief in the collective continuity of the nation, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has written about the handling of mortality during modernity with a timeline still hued to progressive betterment in the future. Today, when confidence in the future has broken down, a constellation of crises (nuclear, climatic, economic) brews uncertainty, and fragmentation and montage have replaced the linearity of grand narrative, something different has emerged. In the temporality of post-

modernity, when a sense of collective futures or fates has become vaguer and far less tied to the authority of the nation-state, immortality is invoked through different means. Pursued through new medical breakthroughs, marketing fashions to ward off the effects of aging, exercise regimes, or migratory pursuits embarked on to enhance one's life prospects (albeit somewhere else, far from family and home), immortality is "regularly conferred and destroyed, through media, culture and emergency rehearsals, rather than assumed to follow the linear life-death-immortality trajectory as it did during the era of modernity" (Heath-Kelly 2018, 32). And, as in the case of mortuary management in Japan today, it means not putting one's hopes for final resting plans in the hands of others, to whom—as fellow ancestors—one is assumed to belong as in a collective continuity of patri-lineage and nation-state. Rather, it is bringing the temporality of mortality into the here and now, where, through anticipatory planning, one winds up handling things for oneself ahead of time. An imagined sociality of quite a different order. Borrowing from Bauman and writing from a perspective of critical security studies, Charlotte Heath-Kelly proposes that the Euro-American governments she has studied adopt a similar anticipatory strategy of bringing the future into the present in their handling of possible futures that are uncertain but would be calamitous, such as terrorist attacks. Through reenactments, rehearsals, and precautions, governments engage rather than disarm mortality by the security policies and strategies they implement. And, by promoting resilience, governments ask the populace to embrace the possibility of danger lurking in the crevices of an everyday, where the future and the world are so unclear. By doing so, Heath-Kelly suggests, "Life is now used to defeat death, as it were" (2018, 33).

In Japan, too, the playing out of worst-case scenarios repeats often in what can be a surprisingly raw realism: stories and images of rooms where the corpses of the lonely dead have been discovered and the piles of stuff once hoarded are now decomposing along with the flesh. Whether in the news, photo exhibits, or materials used to promote one or another service in the ending business, I have seen such footage often, as I am sure many Japanese have as well. This not only unsettles viewers but also incentivizes them to follow what has become a mantra of these necro-animistic times: "prepare ahead of time." This renders the future actionable by what can be an entire regimen of activity in the here and now: plans made for everything from cleaning one's residence to arranging one's will, inheritance, and interment. What geographer Anderson calls a "presence of the

future” takes place in workshops, information sessions, and also—a popular trend—keeping “ending note” journals of plans, thoughts, and desires regarding one’s personal (*jibunrashii*) endingness. All of this anticipatory action is taken to tame, and mitigate against, the possibility of a no future as disconnected or abandoned dead. Bringing death into the present where one can “put one’s affairs in order while still living” (*seizen seiri*).

When the catastrophic future being imagined is the next terrorist attack, this raises an issue of security that is handled by state governments in a governance of the future, calling on “actionism” of a very particular sort (Aradau and Munster 2012, 98). The case is different in Japan when the catastrophic deaths being imagined are due to the ebbing of the very familial (marital and parental) ties that the government still clings to, endorses, and attempts to get young people into by a series of policies that never seem to work. Still wedded to an ideology of reproductive futurism, failing though it is (as seen by the decline of childbirth, marriage, and the overall population of Japan since 2006), and without the legal and constitutional imbrications it once had in what was a national genealogical system (*kokka*), the nation-state no longer plays a major role in the governance of death making. This leaves the care of managing remains and ritualizing or grieving for spirits to promiscuous others. Examining this work, of the making of death in the face of the unmaking of family, is the focus of *Being Dead Otherwise*.

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In the book I explore the choreography of death in the face of its de- and recomposition: when the retreat of the social hands once responsible for it leave more and more people susceptible to dying and being dead alone. In doing so, I attempt to make an intervention into the premise of what constitutes a good death—being accompanied into and beyond death by the living—by questioning the lines along which relations between self and other, living and dead, might align in other directions. For not only in Japan is the sociological grammar of caregiving the dead getting challenged on any number of fronts. The Japanese situation may remain unusual in the form and degree to which disconnected death is likely to occur at home rather than far away, as is the risk for so many global migrants today. Yet Japan provides a critical case study into what happens when postmortem care by intimate others becomes unrealizable, abandoned, or innovated upon in what can be radical ways. These include outsourcing death work to a robot, taking on the job of managing it by oneself ahead of time, and

raising the possibility of abandoning the custom—of marking and memorializing the deaths of humans—altogether.

Using contemporary Japan as my lens, I follow three thematic lines of inquiry into the precarity and possibilities of death making that speak globally and temporally to current times. These are (1) the work done by workers handling the remains of disconnected dead (stranded dead), (2) the work done by individuals when assuming the role of intimate others in managing their own mortuary arrangements (self-death making), and (3) the work done by forms of mortuary arrangement non-dependent on intimate others or, sometimes, on humans altogether (necro-animism). My emphasis throughout is on the work itself that drives death making, and on the effects and affects of death making in the absence of intimate others.

1. *Stranded dead* are the deceased who are unacknowledged and unmourned by intimate others at death: a social and existential state that is also referred to, in Japan and elsewhere, as “lonely death.”² Following the Hertzian point that the dead leave a wound in the fabric of the social that compels a ritual response—memorializing the ending of (a singular) life and the ongoingness of life in the living left behind—I ask: What kind of wound is incurred in the case of a stranded death, and what happens to it? Constituting an “ambiguous loss” (Boss 2000), this death-form may be intentional, as for those “disappeared” by the Argentinian military (Rosenblatt 2015) or as the threat of such a death is used as a deterrent to migration by the US government—or due to personal circumstances or the lack of intimate relations, as is the case with lonely death in Japan.³ I am interested here in the response given to such deceased by those handling their remains who may constitute the only, or last, humans to touch them. Paying attention to the touch of this materiality itself (Ingold 2007), is there a certain vitality residing in the remains of those unidentified and unmourned, as forensic scientist Clea Koff (2004) has said of something still stirring in the bones when she pieces together such human fragments? This can make the response, when done with care, akin to the “adornment of washing, arranging, and tending of remains done by kin when mourning” (Davis 2017, 239, referring to the work of Seremetakis 1991). In the “practical work” of forensic scientists trying to identify the bodies of drowned migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, the “tinkering” they do engages body parts at the level of the persons to which they once belonged. Imparting “relationality” of a sort (M’charek and Casartelli 2019, 738–39).

The work, in this case of cleaning up the remains of stranded dead, is what led one Japanese worker to make miniaturized dioramas of the death

scenes she finds at the start of a job. As described in chapter 6, Kojima Miyu does not exactly intend these to be memorials to the dead. But her miniatures are crafted to both linger with and acknowledge the life now passed of “dead unrecognized by anyone else.”⁴ A touching of, but beyond, the materiality of beings who die unknown, unidentified, and unmourned—a state that, given the precarity and uncertainty of the times, is on the rise globally, with massive migrations, climatic disasters, and food and housing insecurity of so many. Drawing on, and in dialogue with, the writings of other scholars working on (the workers who work on) abandoned or unidentified dead, I contemplate this condition of the stranded dead throughout the book.⁵ What kind of disturbance does this leave behind, in whom and in what, and (how) does the touch of attending to the material remains of stranded dead constitute a form of death work by other means or hands—as I argue that it does, or might?

2. In what a recent anthology of Japanese scholars (Suzuki and Mori 2018) calls Japan’s new “era of family-less dead” (イエ亡き時代の死者), the risk of a disconnected death is well understood by a public once used to relying on kin for mortuary preparations. But what could be a crisis, and is for some, has also fueled ways of producing structures of care to replace familial ones. In the booming ending industry that has emerged over the last twenty years, the individual, acting as a consumer, is increasingly taking up the role of organizing, arranging, and paying for mortuary care ahead of time (while still alive). I call this *self-death making*. And it has some salutary effects. For example, as feminists (and others) in Japan have noted, shifting responsibility for death work away from family can free people from a system long tied to the duties, hierarchies, and labor of a patriarchal sociopolitical order that has been burdensome and exclusionary to women and to a number of men (Ueno 2015; Yamada 2014; Inoue 2012). The obligation borne by the family (and, disproportionately, by women) to shoulder so much in the way of care (of children, elderly, diseased, incarcerated) extends to the United States and many other countries far beyond Japan, as feminists working on care ethics such as political theorist Kathi Weeks (forthcoming) have pointed out. Demanded here is a “more capacious notion of care” (Care Collective 2020, 41) that would mean attending to the needs of one another in ways that decenter, and find alternatives to, what has been—in the United States, Japan, and just about everywhere else—an exclusive reliance on the family.⁶ For Weeks, this would mean not simply better families but a society that depends far less, if at all, on the family to be the life support of its citizens. In calling for the “abolition” of family, she

joins the Care Collective in seeking to broaden and diversify care provision/providers by a notion of “promiscuous care” (Care Collective 2020, 40).

As seen in Japan, one alternative to family-brokered deathcare is as signing or allowing individuals to take this activity on themselves. While tethered to the neoliberalism of “self-responsibility” (and the financial resources this requires), the new culture of attending to ending preparations opens up a zone—temporal, social, aesthetic—in which the individual makes the “craft of dying” (Lofland 1978) an activity carried out by, but also for, the self. Afternoons spent designing one’s own coffin, making a scrapbook of one’s memories, deciding between burial options, and updating one’s daily “ending notes” can generate “creativity” around loss and an energized “yielding” to the becoming-of-death (Daneley 2014, 58–59, 122). I have also heard this called “self-care” when the orchestration of death work is directed not to the ancestors but to oneself, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Considering the implications of this rearticulation of deathcare away from familial others and onto or by the self—for Japan/ese but also beyond—is what I see as one of the major contributions of this book.

3. Rituals have long been central to death making in Japan and everywhere else. Largely shaped by Buddhism, mortuary rites (a large part of the religion in Japan) are somewhat mechanical in nature and today can be facilitated by a range of substitutes, prostheses, or actual machines (Rambelli 2018; Duteil-Ogawa 2015).⁷ *Necro-animism* is what I call Japan’s wave of new-style craft and activities of endingness in which mortuary arrangements are being carried out by a range of actors and means, blurring the borders of self and other, human and nonhuman, person and thing. With a tradition of folk Shintō along with other folkloric and Buddhist trends, a highly modernized everydayness is infused with animism in postindustrial Japan. Following those who treat animacy as less a property of nature or life than as a “dynamic transformative potential of an entire field of relations” (Ingold 2006, 10; also Descola 2013, xix), I agree with John Clammer, who, speaking of new religions in Japan, sees animism as less worship of nature per se than a pursuit, at once pragmatic and possibly political, of getting things done in an “experiential, active and everyday relationship to creatures and things in nature” (2004, 87).⁸ The getting done of death making today is carried out in the shadow of precarity; the rituals of the grave and of kin caregiving the dead are becoming remnants of the past. But, rather than abandon death work altogether or resign oneself to the fate of becoming an abandoned dead, the turn, for many, is to something(s) else that harbors spirituality or hope. It may be robotic priests, automated graves (as dealt

with in chapter 8), or the mixing of cremains into wearable pendants. As the director of the company that started memorial diamonds in Japan has said, he was motivated to create a “beautiful trace of himself” that would both last over time and alleviate the need for his wife and children to visit him in an ancestral grave. The deceased ontologically shifting into something blending object, person, relationality, life, and death (Duteil-Ogawa 2015, 233).

This is my final provocation in the book: considering new ways and manners of tending the dead that go beyond the availability, or ontological form, of human/intimate others. While resorting to robots or automation may seem like the endpoint of death making for humans, I suggest something else. I see the willingness and desire to uphold the treatment of the dead and spirits as mattering to those still alive. This is a refusal to accept the death of death in a Hertzian sense by continuing to make a place among the living, within life, for the dead.

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Following this introduction, the book is arranged in three sets of paired chapters and concludes with a final standalone chapter and short epilogue.

HISTORIES

Given the inherent ambiguity of being dead—the absence of someone once present whose corpse is a material reminder of the immateriality that the deceased is now becoming—the work of death making is complex and ambiguous itself. Contours of how this has been handled across Japanese history are traced in chapter 1, “Ambiguous Bones: Dead in the Past”—more a history of the present than an exhaustive historical account. Returning to the present, I lay out the topography of mortuary trends in Japan today in chapter 2, “The Popular Industry of Death: From Godzilla to the Ending Business,” by considering how the threat of dying alone is driving a new industry and marketplace in endingness. New alternatives to the family grave are rolled out in what is now an annual convention for those in the cemetery and funeral industry. Called *ENDING* (Ending Exhibit), this is held in Tokyo Bay—the site from which Gojira was stirred into action on the cinematic screen in the early years following the war. Another figure, from a different era, turning danger into a source of popularity.

PREPARATIONS

As the old relations of death making fall apart, new socialities and subjectivities are emerging around care and self-care for the dead. In chapter 3, “Caring (Differently) for the Dead,” I consider the social politics of the familial model: what it presumes, whom it includes and excludes, and how the sociality of ancestors is both ritualized and rehearsed at key moments such as Obon. Starting and ending with two different versions of an Obon ceremony (to honor the dead), the chapter tracks alternative burial arrangements when care work for the dead is disarticulated from the family and rearticulated by either the self or nonfamilial others. The stress placed on anticipatory action in the present—on planning and preparing for one’s ending plans—is taken up in chapter 4, “Preparedness: A Biopolitics of Making Life Out of Death.” The activity around self–death making can be both pleasurable and intense, which I explore through various activities and practices that call upon the responsible individual to micromanage their ending while still alive so as to avoid the distasteful prospect of becoming a disconnected spirit once dead. The role played by lonely death—a phenomenon used to incite a moralism and politics around ending–actionism in the present—is addressed as well.

DEPARTURES

This pair of chapters shifts the temporality of death away from anticipatory planning to dealing with the material remains after the fact. Staying with the focus on death making, chapter 5, “The Smell of Lonely Death and the Work of Cleaning It Up,” looks at one of the newest genres of companies that has arisen in the last two decades under the umbrella of the ending market (*shūkatsu*). Selling the services of ordering, cleaning up, and disposing of the belongings left behind by the deceased, these companies are also commissioned when a lonely death has been discovered after the body has been decomposing for what may have been a long time. Encountering both the smell (of what I call an unsocial death) and the rot from hoarding—as the press often reports about these cases—cleanup workers are the ones who deal with the mess of deaths and dead like this. As is argued, this work is not only manual cleanup but also affective labor, caring for the living by removing such unseemly matter but also caring for the dead by according them what may be their last, and only, form of memorial. Chapter 6, “Departing: The Handling of Remaindered Remains,” considers what happens

to the handling of remains and to the lines by which the materiality is regulated and distinguished in the face of shifting necro-sociology in Japan today. Through the lens of four different situations—bone-picking by intimate others, unclaimed remains in a municipal city hall, the ashes (as well as “leftover ashes”) that come out of crematoria, and a bone-crushing business—I look at the trend toward downsizing and dematerializing remains. But, as I note throughout, there is considerable resistance to getting rid of remains or memorial rituals altogether. What precisely is this that lingers, or haunts, this land where lonely death, abandoned graves, and unclaimed remains are all rising (some say precipitously) at the same time?

MACHINES

In the seventh and final chapter, “Automated Graves: The Precarity and Prosthetics of Caring for the Dead,” I consider the possible trajectory of moving the grievability of human dead to a nonhuman register: that of machines carrying it out in the face of a care-deficit of intimate others. Looking at a new-style urban columbarium that deploys an automated delivery system to move remains from a warehouse (where they usually reside) to a handful of graves (for visitation, but only if someone actually visits), I explore the space-time compression afforded these places that, compacting thousands within a relatively small space, are at once affordable, convenient, and aesthetically pleasing. Users include those without family members but also families who move the contents of ancestral graves in the countryside to this cheaper, easier-to-manage site in the city. In both cases, as with all those interred there, all deceased are given memorial (*kuyō*) by the resident Buddhist priest and have the premises, including the signature graves, attended to with utter diligence and care. No one falls into abandonment, in other words, even if their remains sit forever in the warehouse. The structural logic of such a grave park rests on what I argue is a prosthetics of sociality: just-in-time grievability that stretches, rather than gives up, the human commitment to find a place for the dead among the living. The implications of such alternatives for those who might otherwise become disconnected dead, and for a Japan that, losing its old system of care, may be becoming a place that has no place for its dead (as a number of Japanese scholars and practitioners have already argued), are profound.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 1 Following Japanese custom, I list Japanese names family name first throughout the book. If individual preference or convention is Western ordering, however (such as Marie Kondō, who is known that way throughout the world, and my friend Yoshiko Kuga), I use that order.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Meiji Constitution was instituted in 1885.
- 2 As in a front-page article in the *New York Times*, reporting on the skyrocketing rate of such deaths among homeless people in American cities: Thomas Fuller, “As Homeless Age, Cities See Surge in Lonely Deaths on the Street,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2022, 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/us/homeless-deaths-los-angeles.html?searchResultPosition=1>.
- 3 For more on the US policy of “prevention by deterrence,” see De Léon 2015.
- 4 “Lonely death” (*kodukushi*) is also referred to as “solitary death” (*ko-ritsushi*) or “death unrecognized by anyone else” (*kizuite moraenai shi*) (Yoshida 2010).
- 5 As dealt with by such scholars as Eric Klinenberg (2002) for the heat wave in Chicago in 1995 that killed 485, including 170 who died all alone; Jason De Léon (2015) for migrants who, trying to cross the Sonoran Desert into the United States, die in record numbers; and Sarah Wagner (2019) for the 4 percent of fatalities of US soldiers in the Vietnam War that remained unaccounted for, the condition of strandedness at death can take place either far from home or within a home shared by nobody else. More (scholarly, humanitarian, and political) attention has been paid to strandedness far from home: those whose bodies remain unretrieved or unidentified far from

home, leaving family members in an ambiguous state between mourning and hope. As Wagner notes, rituals are hard to perform when “there is nothing of the dead to bury or care for” (2019, 1): an absence that can incite incredible investments of money and labor to retrieve even a fragment of the deceased—which the American government has made to find, and repatriate, those MIA from the Vietnam War. To identify and possibly retrieve remains is the work of forensic science, done to provide closure for family members as well as to discover and document the circumstances leading to stranded death(s) in the first place.

A nascent body of critical scholarship on forensic science includes that by Jason De Léon (2015), Adam Rosenblatt (2015), and Sarah Wagner (2019); and by feminist scholars extending forensics into care like Elizabeth Davis (2017) and Amade M’charek and Sara Casartelli (2019). For the latter, the craft and attentiveness of forensic workers perform an act of humanization: a “becoming human of bones” as Davis puts it (2017, 229). Davis also points to the temporalization of remaking a different kind of relationality after death out of bone fragments. Working on exhumations undertaken to recover missing bodies from both sides of the civil war in Cyprus between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, she calls this a “time-machine” of ethico-politics that makes it “possible to think of a future not in teleological terms (of reconciliation, for example) but of becoming something different in the present which may also mean something different in the past” (2017, 237). Other forms of workers may also engage in reknitting bones into relational subjects of new sorts. Aslihan Sanal, for example, tracks anatomists in Turkey who, in using abandoned dead at mental institutions as medical cadavers, accord them a new social status (and “new time frame”) in their position now serving humanity (2011, 137). Similarly, an Okinawan photographer tries to remake the relational order of the recently discovered bones of Japanese soldiers who died at the end of the war. As examined by Chris Nelson, Higa Toyomitsu was compelled to “listen to the bones” and make them beautiful and whole again by the “aesthetics of unity” performed by his art (2015, 155). But this is not to honor the imperial militarism by which they died, which he opposes. Rather it is to honor the dead in terms of a humanity that he (and other Okinawans) are much more able to share.

I have been influenced by all these scholarly strands in the work that follows, particularly chapters 6 and 7 on the stranded dead and those who work on their remains.

- 6 As they recognize, this requires building institutional infrastructure to support different and wider networks of care. For Weeks,

- this would include a minimum guaranteed income, shorter working hours, universal health care, and more affordable housing (2021, 17).
- 7 Buddhist rites have long been facilitated by machines, as Fabio Rambelli has noted about the important role played by materiality throughout the history of Buddhism in Japan (2007). Machines to produce prayers—prayer wheels, early mechanical devices (*karakuri*), and *shakuhachi* flutes used to draw out and spread Dharma in a form different from the visual—were made and used by the beginning of the Tokugawa Era (Rambelli 2018).
 - 8 In her book, *Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan*, Shoko Yoneyama (2019) makes a similar argument. She traces efforts made to put “life” (*inochi*) at the center of modernity as a way of dealing with industrial disasters in Japan. Examining three key figures who have embraced different animist traditions in their environmental activism in postwar Japan, Yoneyama focuses on the concept of life they use to “repackage and reinterpret industrial problems in an attempt to produce something new” (2). This kineticism, where “super-modernity and intangible cultural heritage” meet, she calls the space of “grassroots Japan” (3).

CHAPTER 1. AMBIGUOUS BONES

Epigraph: Shinmon Aoki’s *Coffinman* was originally published in Japan in as *Nōkanshi nikki* (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 1991, 94, 95).

- 1 Kinki region, Kantō, Chūgoku.
- 2 Burakumin, the class assigned these professions, were legally emancipated from nonhuman status by the Meiji Constitution but are still discriminated against today (Hankins 2014).
- 3 Japanese native culture: *Kokugaku* (National Learning) or Yanagita’s *Shin-Kokugaku* (New National Learning) are based less on doctrinaire Shintō scholarship than on the oral traditions and practices of rural Japanese.
- 4 The continuing relevance of the *obasuteyama* story has been related to me by many of my Japanese friends. Once, a friend and I encountered a roadside display featuring it as a landmark for the town we were driving through on the highway.
- 5 The six forms of existence are heavenly beings, humans, titans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell dwellers.
- 6 “Reverse-style memorials” (*gyakushū kuyō*), done in advance of death and arranged by the person themselves, were commonly practiced, at least by the elite, in the ninth century. Intended to accrue merit for