Recall This Book 100
March 11, 2023
Ryo Morimoto (EF, JP)

Elizabeth Ferry: Greetings everyone and welcome to another episode of *Recall this Book*. I'm here with my cohost, John, and today we're really happy to welcome Ryo Morimoto to our show. Hey Ryo, how are you doing?

Ryo Morimoto: Good. How are you?

Elizabeth Ferry: Ryo is an assistant professor of anthropology at Princeton University. He's also, I feel compelled to say, a PhD from BRANDEIS and he has a forthcoming book in June 2023 from the University of California Press entitled *Nuclear Ghosts: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone*. And he's going to talk about that with us today. So, Ryo if you could kind of just get us started telling us a little bit about the project and what you learned.

Ryo Morimoto: Yeah, well, thank you so much. Thank you for having me, it's exciting. And as Elizabeth mentioned, I went to Brandeis for my PhD and then, I guess half of this project was conceived while I was a PhD student there and I have to say, things changed a lot. And I think this is what this book brings is that last decade of the Fukushima accident and then done so ethnographically. So, it's been a very interesting project to me and also a sticky one in the sense like how long one can do ethnography of a one specific field, and what does it mean to stay with the same group of people? In my case it was the eight years, I think, which made it very difficult for me to actually write this book.

And then Covid for me was a saving grace in a sense of finishing the project because I was not able to visit the area. And that finally made it possible for me to write something about it. So, that gave me a lot of time reflecting on what is it that I did in that area, and in particular, I think the book really on talks about like what, what does it mean to write

about the people against the sort of imagination of the public and I think, the introduction, I was honored to share with john and Elizabeth. I think I spent a lot of time talking about myself actually, describing what is it that that I brought to the field and what happened as a result of the long-term engagement with a group of people in the region.

So, I think that the weird thing about this book is that as much as it's motivated around talking about the triple disasters that happened in 2011 and aftermath, but it's a lot about the not directly related to the disaster, but more of the afterlife of the disasters. And what does it mean for us to approach something as a disaster which conventionally looked at as an event, but what happens if we approach disaster as a process and constantly shape shifting, phenomena that people actually live along and live with? So, to briefly kind of summarize my book, I think, you know, it's a very sort of, I don't know, unexpected kind of story that I'm trying to tell in the book. So, if people maybe like find it, oh, I want to learn about the Fukushima accident, they might not get what they're looking for. But I think, you know, when I was writing it, I was actually really thinking about how can I betray potential readers expectations here and I kind of took a pride of that as my ethnographic work of Fukushima.

John Plotz: I really like that formulation of the disaster as something other than an event, because that's something I've been thinking about that in terms of thinking about the Anthropocene and earlier, moments of human Monstrosity, including, for example, the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and that distinction between understanding something as momentary and unfolding as event and unfolding as a kind of ongoing structure. Would you say that's the is that the crucial move in your book to try to think about this as extension over time?

Ryo Morimoto: Well, I think in Disaster Studies, and especially in anthropology, I think people have been really looking at

disaster as in-process as opposed to an event. So, that perspective is not anything new. I think if anything that what's new is that I'm really thinking about process not in terms of the short term of the window of say a year or two, but here I'm kind of like describing what I've experienced through the last eight years after the accident, especially in between 2013 and in 2019 and 2020. So, in that sense, I think the process here, to me is not the kind of process you will think like, okay, what if like we focus on like, the year long journey of the resident. But I'm kind of saying like, no, that's not necessary process in terms of how we can understand these still ongoing disasters that happened in 2011.

John Plotz: One way you crystallize that beautifully is through your you have an anecdote and I bet it's a continuing theme for the book, but in the introduction of the anecdote of the Geiger Counter which I understand you have with you very exciting. But so, do you wanna maybe just remind us of what you say about the, you know, your own experience bringing a Geiger Counter with you into the to the zone? Yeah.

Ryo Morimoto: So, the Geiger counter was a critical object for me from the beginning to the end to be honest. And partly because that radiation is not something you can immediately experience, it's beyond human sensory area and we need some technical assistance to be able to sense or even to experience, right? And much of what happened after the accident was that we had to rely on these technological devices to understand what you're potentially a familiar environment, right? So, there was a lot of discussion around this technological device as a way to sort of access the objective facts about the post fallout Coastal who Kashima, the area where I studied. But at the same time, the resident's relationship with Geiger Counter shifted over time. That is like even though each household was given a Geiger countered by the city or municipality office.

But by the time I arrived in the field, which was in the summer of 2013, most of the residents didn't use a Geiger counter. And I appeared with a Geiger counter and they would look at me as like, “oh, you must be from outside.” I was like, “how do you know”, it was like, “well of course you're holding Geiger counter, who would hold Geiger counter in this area?” But I was still new, I was still very concerned, especially given the information about outside about the state of Fukushima to me was like, well, if you don't use a Geiger counter to understand this space, how else would you know? Especially to sort of fact check what the state or the electric company is telling you.

Elizabeth Ferry: You describe it even more strongly as not just people are kind of perplexed by you having it, but they don't really like it, right? They don't really like that, you have it, they don't really like its presence and they're sort of, you know, you recount when saying, you know, what difference would it like, let's say it has a high reading, what does that actually mean? And I think that's just very interesting in terms of, you know, a whole bunch of experiences that that people have about the relationship between these objects that supposedly measure, you know, stuff that is important to our bodies and health,

John Plotz: But also, what about mask wearing during the pandemic? I mean, it's not exactly analogous, but there's this shibboleth quality, you know, where your semiotically announcing something as well as protecting yourself.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

Ryo Morimoto: Well, you know, one interesting thing about the Geiger counter that I came to experience in the field was that once you have it you actually want to see higher score, right? Which is very different from wearing masks. So, usually it doesn't fluctuate, right? So, radiation is naturally present regardless of where you are, you get some amount of reading. Because if the number doesn't change, it gets really

boring. Because people are like, “well, nothing is changing. What's the point of having this stuff, you know, even if it's a little bit higher than the average or you know what's considered safe, right?” If it says it's 1.2 all the time people lose interest. But what happens is that, you know, because of the help has spread of the contaminants across space, it's possible for you to be able to, you know, go and find what they call, hot spots, right?

So if you are very attached to your Geiger counter and consider that that as a way of knowing that both fallout Fukushima, what would happen is that you end up going to areas where people might not go due to their concern about higher level of radiation, Right? So for local residents, sometimes the outsider like myself coming with the Geiger counter signaled, okay, there's another individual who came to look for the dangerous area where we might not go because we've done this already. We know that's why we're not going to these areas, but the problem for them was that these outsiders, the one who would go into those, areas, nobody goes and report the readings to outside saying that could look what I found in Fukushima and it's not my subjective experience, but this objective device is telling that it's dangerous there.

So these technological devices at times, especially in the beginning of my fieldwork really draw where I went in Fukushima and those places are what the media represented often time as the iconic sort of sites of Fukushima.

Elizabeth Ferry: Sacrifice zones. Yeah. I mean, is it also that because this is connected to the broader argument of the book I think, that the Geiger counter by having the Geiger counter as a point around which interaction happens. It's sort of placing them as they're being defined as victims of this nuclear accident, right?

Ryo Morimoto: Yeah. I mean, the Geiger counter is smart in the sense that detects something we can, but at the same time, the only thing it's able to tell is that there is a radioactive source nearby, right? It doesn't say where exactly the sources are or what they are. So, it could be radiation - the isotopes that were produced during the Cold War weapons program, you know, which all of us live with. Or maybe it came directly from Fukushima or maybe it's actually the residues from the Chernobyl accident, right? So, it kind of started giving a really like black and white view of the state of the world based on the presence or absence of the radioisotope, the contaminants in the area.

Elizabeth Ferry: But sort of with no divorce from history.

Ryo Morimoto: Exactly, no context or nothing else.

John Plotz: Can I can I go back to that question, the way you began Ryo, about the Geiger counter is that it tells you something you can't experience. Like we don't have any empirical sensoria available. So, we create this prosthetic sensing device instead. Is your understanding of it that once we create that device it becomes like a 6th sense, I guess? Like it gets internalized, prosthetically incorporated into our sensoria? Or is it something more unnatural or estranged? I mean, are you seeing it primarily as a way of amplifying or augmenting? Or are you seeing it as like a, I don't know, like a deceptive signal that that is outside of the bodily experience.

Ryo Morimoto: Yeah. So, I guess I should clarify that the kind of radiation I'm talking here is considered low level, right? The kind of radiation exposure that would not have any immediate physical biological effect. The cases from Hiroshima Nagasaki or other places people could directly basically damaged from the high intensity radiation, which case like it's sensible, but the level is low enough that would not affect your biological entity immediately. That's when

things become a little bit grey, right? How how long can you be exposed and not?

To answer your question: think the interesting thing here is that, a device like this and the possibility of extending sensory actually end up kind of producing the standard language with which people might be able to communicate about something beyond their senses, right? So, there's a good thing about like, okay, we need to have some objective standard as a way to address something not immediately visible. I think all of us experience in the case of Covid, the science came to provide some sense of objective fact with which to study equality, air quality index or something like that to help us to kind of relate to this thing.

But the other issue is that if that mode of knowledge or even the language around it becomes the hegemonic way of understanding a particular environment or area, that's when the issue comes, that's kind of like referring back to what Elizabeth was talking about, how focusing on only this kind of thing might end up a light in the way that people experience their place or the cultures and history, right? Because this objective thing comes, well actually area is contaminated, and people said, "yeah, but still like I have family here, I'm very connected to this culture." You know what I mean? So, I think that the problem came from the scientific-ation of the accident, you know, in the aftermath as the only way to talk about what happened in Fukushima and I think that's what my book is really trying to get at: what are the things that we have missed as a result of in a way comforting our own sort of sense of fear of the invisible, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, so you said in your description of the book just now, you talked about writing against the media coverage and also I really like the way you put this as sort of betraying your reader's expectations, not disrupting them, but betraying them. I like that. And maybe even your own expectations because you described your own entrance into

the field is in that way as well? But can you talk a little bit about the way the Memorialization of the event, which has come to be called 3/11, like it happened on March 11th, this episode is airing right around then, and what does that do? I mean, that's not exactly scientific-ation, that's some other kind of occasion happening. But can you talk a little bit about that?

Ryo Morimoto: Yeah, so, when I was doing PhD, I was really focusing on how people go about memorializing or even commemorating 3/11 and I think I focus a lot more on like what kind of material object people might go about using this to represent, especially in the case where you cannot even see the object, right, that might have to be commemorated or memorized. But after I graduated and kept on working with people there, I think my understanding of memorialization changed a lot partly because you know, I kind of wrote this in the intro too, is that my commitment to really understanding or even treating people like people, that is, even the local residents who directly experienced the disasters and in its aftermath, their memory constantly kept changing their understanding, their relationship to the disaster changed over time.

So even the local residents actually resist often time of fixating. What was that 3/11 to them, right? Or they even sometimes said like, no, that's not as important now because of Covid. So, one of the ideas I'm trying to toy with in my book, is this Japanese understanding or relationship to the disaster, there's one sociologist who kind of coined the term called “between disasters”, that is that we're constantly living in between more than one disaster and each given moment, right? The example is that the people in Fukushima are currently going through a global pandemic, but the reference point is like 3/11. Right? So, they're kind of like constantly doing back and forth between what is about these new disasters that we experienced in that relates to the old one or the other way around. So,

commemoration or memorialization of the disaster really is contextual here in the sense like what's happening in the present or what they anticipate will happen in the future, affect the way they want to remember the event in the past.

John Plotz: So, I have, that's such a great formulation, I have actually a couple of different questions about that. Ryo maybe you can pick which one. So the first one was one I sort of was trying to lead up to earlier, which is the specificity of whether how the afterlife of Hiroshima and Nagasaki fits in here, because I understand obviously memories can't be indefinitely long and that is something that happened in only the living memory of very few people, but I wonder how much it frames the encounter, but then just to your more general point of the formulation that you gave, which I think of as like we're always fighting the last war, you know, that in any given present day experience, you only bring to bear the last one. There's a wonderful book by Paul Siant Amour called *Tense Future*. I don't know if you know it, but it's basically about how people living in the interwar period was understood already as an interwar period, even before World War Two took place. Like in other words, that you live with the awareness not just that we had the great war, but that having had the great war, we're going to have another. And I would just love to hear your thoughts about how that relates to your point about the iterative structure of these things? Like if it's not one damn thing, it's another.

Ryo Morimoto: Well, I guess it's not - I don't necessarily consider as iterative of more of the mathematical sense of like you know there is some regularity because one of the things that I was very surprised to find in the region through my fieldwork was that the kind of past that the people choose to sort of reactivate is very nonlinear. So, for example, you know one of the chapters I started talking about the persimmons as the fruit and the local people kept talking about the importance of persimmons and I was like why is it important when you're talking about 3/11? It turned out that particular fruit bear the history of internal migration

from one region to another that was propelled by the past historical disaster or the famines in the region.

So, there was a big famine that happened like 200 whatever years ago. And then in a particular area basically asked for people to move from other part and all these poor people in the farmers from other regions moved. But they wanted to bring some aspect of their former life to the new area. So, they just stuck this persimmon branch into the daikon radish which is moist and to walk across the mountains. So, like once they told me about this type of it makes sense. Why is it that they want to remember that particular thing as opposed to, for example, the story of like some of their family member working for coming because they're a pilot and stuff like that.

And then this kind of leads to your first question about the connection to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many fishermen residents do not want to have much association with Hiroshima and Nagasaki because it's very written with stigma as a very, you know, iconic image of dehumanization as a result of radiation exposure and they don't want to be really kind of associated with that. And initially the Hiroshima and Nagasaki people didn't really make a connection with Fukushima partly because they are the most enthusiastic supporters of nuclear energy after the war kind of stuff.

So, there's a historical dimension, but the current, the present moment, I think the collaboration is begun to flourish partly because of the common issue of Asian population that is that there is the increased loss of the group of exposed populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it's becoming like an origin task to pass down the memory of the atomic age into the future. So, for them the most sort of relevant point is like the 3/11 and then the national sort of experience of radiation exposure. So, I think again the new event is really reshuffling the ways that nation or even the local communities imagine in the way that to sort of

shift the way that we can kind of memorialize this more recent past.

Elizabeth Ferry: And would you describe that as a shift? Maybe this is oversimplifying, but there's a way in which the Fukushima case is sort of about living with disaster, right? Whereas the sort of iconic and kind of dehumanization comes from the sort of dying with a disaster, right? And those images, very searing images, I can totally imagine why they would want to distance themselves from that particular way of being represented. But is it kind of like dying to living with or something like that?

Ryo Morimoto: So, I think Japanese people are negotiating with their relationship with radiation exposure. and I think the Fukushima case might be very unsettling to many of us because it actually provides potential cases of that we could actually live with a certain level of radiation, which is a kind of structural position that might be very difficult to accept given the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Right? So, I think the balance between Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima, more of the icons of the structural position kind of creates a difficult sort of negotiation process and hence like I felt like in my introduction, I had to be very careful about my sort of presentation of okay, let me show you how people lived with radiation. But it doesn't mean that I'm kind of like a pro-nuclear person trying to defend, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: So maybe that's a good moment to shift to a sort of more general question around studies of suffering or disaster or violence within anthropology. And I think more broadly too there's kind of a conversation, it's maybe a reaction against former ways of representing these kinds of things, somewhat of a feeling that there's a certain even in sort of calling out these kinds of dehumanizing events and motives that the account of them can also participate in its own kind of dehumanizing or that there can be a sort of voyeurism or attention to the abjectness. And I see your study along with a number of other studies. And actually, I my own work on

gold mining participates in this conversation as well about sort of moving away from that kind of notion of the object or the victim. I'm curious what you think. Yeah.

Ryo Morimoto: So, I think that's really central project of thinking about especially in my case is that, you know, I work with sub discipline within anthropology, anthropology of disaster. Where the topic is basically talking about people who might have suffered or are still suffering, right? So that question about what kind of things that I will write about with regards to the community I worked with was the back of my head all the time. But also, my interlocutors themselves have been bombarded by the media or the researchers, writers, documentary filmmakers, you name it right? Like after the accident they all came to basically in a way extract the dramatic stories of radiation exposure.

So, I was always looked at by the local residents that I'm another one of them who came to basically exploit the dramatic stories to tell to outside and never come back. So, I was always being mindful about okay what does it mean to write about disaster here? And also somebody like Paul Farmer really talked about writing of sufferings and Haiti, stuff like that. His solution was kind of like talking in terms of I was one of them in a way I had the privilege to be part of this reconstruction and stuff. And then my case was like well record this of what I did or how long I stayed. Ultimately, I was not a resident there. People always made the decision, I mean distinction saying like well you can leave if you if you want to, but we can't. That's what makes us different.

Also like those people are funny and interesting beyond talking about the disasters, right? Most of the time I spent like watching tv together and saying something. So, I was like how can I talk about this as part of my disaster anthropology? So, I think I wasn't coming from the theoretical kind of position of how can I write against those literature? But I think I was like how can I write about what

I actually experienced without like pretending like there's some interesting information there because that kind of commitment already said well I'm selecting and saying that something is more important than others.

And also like to me the ghost figure really helped me to make the distinction you're talking about that is that this particular informant who is actually the only person who mentioned their experience or you know whatever in the area as nuclear ghost. Nobody else says that right? But in the same sort of context she was the one who said “if you're holding a Geiger counter you must believe in something invisible right?” You know like looking back I can tell that she was just like fooling with me right, as an outsider. But at the moment I was super confused, like what do you mean? Without this you want to know? So the nuclear ghost you're talking about must be the radiation that neither of us can experience, right? Which the story comes to tell a different story, but I think the figure of ghost here is doing a lot of work for me. Hence I guess the title Yeah.

Then I really have to kind of go back to my origin, so to speak, of upbringing what I knew about ghosts, right? So, in Japan that ghosts are not unusual figures. People actually constantly live with and they talk about it right? But one thing that's important in terms of the way they conceptualize ghosts is that the ghosts are shape-shifting figures. They constantly shift shapes, right? That's the only thing. And I also like they basically appear because they have some message, right? It's not necessarily a moral message or anything. It's just that we know that they have some message and until we receive them, they won't go away. They change shapes to kind of try to communicate to us something. To me that sort of a figure really spoke well with the kind of things happening in the area. I mean they can be scary, there are very scary types of ones to the very cute, he wants to whatever have you, that they basically the very basic definition is like they're shape shifters.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, so this has been a marvelous conversation and maybe this is a moment when we can think of some recallable books; that is a book or something else that might suggest to our listeners other directions to go with this conversation. So John, I don't know if you have one and want to start?

John Plotz: I do. I have a really quick one. It's a book called *Roadside Picnic*, which is a science fiction novel by the Russian brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, who are very influenced by Karel Čapek and Stanislaw Lem and it actually spawned the movie *Stalker*. So, if you know the Stalker movie by Tarkovsky, but it's about an area called The Zone, which is the area in the science fictional world where aliens have landed. And only a few sort of basically dodgy criminals go into the zone, but they have their own code of conduct. And it's essentially a mafia novel set inside the zone about, you know what it means to be an insider, one of the people who's willing to go into that space, which is actually very deadly.

So, it's not a perfect match in some ways, but it's kind of about yeah, it's about living with two different ways of encountering the same world. And actually, there's a very popular video game, which I think was called *The Zone*, which is based on it, which came out after Chernobyl. So the novel is pre-Chernobyl, The movie is pre-Chernobyl, but then after Chernobyl, the video game really literally eyes the connection to the Chernobyl area. So that's I think it's a fascinating genealogy.

Ryo Morimoto: Yeah, well, I was I was kind of thinking about saying *After Dark* by Haruki Murakami, but I will change it to *1QA4*, which is also by Murakami. But this is the kind of novel that we actually kind of there we dated talk about the Japanese experience of dealing with this called terrorism of the subway attack, right? But the story is doing a couple of things, one of which is the dimension I explore in my book, which is to kind of like think about what if we don't kind of

consider there is not a big difference between what's considered real or surreal, right? and then the figure of ghost to me is doing that kind of work of really not distinguishing these two. And in the novel there is sort of a description of the scene where the protagonist entered into parallel world, where you would know that in it imperil world because there are two moons. That's the only thing different from the world and that's the kind of way that the residents really experience the city after the accident. That is that outsider coming in and turn into a different city, but along wisdom, but they're seeing two moons there. And while the residents only seeing one moon. So, you know, so I think that that book maybe really speaks to my project here.

Elizabeth Ferry: So I was gonna I was thinking of the novel *The Ghost Road* by Pat Barker, although now that we're talking more about ghosts, I think there seems to be multiple kinds of ghosts of course but that's it's set in World War One and it's about, it has kind of a set of parallel stories. Pat Barker's trilogy combines fictional characters with historical characters and in this one there's both this sort of idea of the ghosts that are kind of present in the war and in the trenches. At one point she describes moving people as ghosts in the making. But the other thing that makes me think of is there's a long part of the novel that follows the anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers on an anthropology and an ethnographic field trip with a group that is intensely involved with ghosts. So there to there are multiple kinds of ghosts.

Well, great, we will make sure to provide links to these things on the website and also to your forthcoming book. And I think we're just ready now to thank our listeners and to thank you Ryo so much for joining us.

John Plotz: Yeah thank you.

Ryo Morimoto: Thank you.

Elizabeth Ferry: And to say goodbye. *Recall this Book* was founded by John Plots and me, Elizabeth Ferry. It is sponsored by Brandeis University and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English department. We are eager to hear your comments, criticisms and thoughts. If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate and review us on apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us here at *RtB, t*hanks for listening.