Ecological Reparation | Edited Collection

The Cosmoecological Workshop: Or, How to Philosophise with a Hammer

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Introduction: A Metaphysical Catastrophe

And suddenly the world began to quake. The ground trembled. Soils liquified under the smooth covers of asphalt. Modern infrastructures were bent, dented, upended. Buildings moved to the rhythm of their crumbling dance. Those inside ran out, when they could. Others succumbed to the collapse. The rumbling noise filled the air. Amidst the turmoil, hundreds of meters of coastline fell off a cosmic cliff, dropping vertically by over half a meter. The Earth itself trembled, shaken, literally knocked off its axis. Days have been shorter ever since. The Pacific Ocean shrivelled a little. And Japan, whose northeastern region of Tohoku was closest to the epicentre, was moved thirteen feet closer to North America. With a magnitude of 9,1 M_w, it was the biggest earthquake to have struck the archipelago, and only the fourth most powerful in the history of seismology. And yet it only took six minutes. Six. The planetary blink of an eye, making it present that most things happen in the break, through the cracks, *with the tides of time*, through the resonance of events: 'point of view on a point of view, displacements of perspective, differentiation of difference' (Deleuze, 2004: 200). For indeed, the earthquake that struck northeastern Japan on 11th March 2011 turned out to be but a prelude, a foreshock of its own, a call to another kind of intensity whose response washed it all away. This was what seismologists call an underwater megathrust earthquake –a name that could belong just as well to geology as to poetry– and the thirty-nine-meter tsunami that it summoned flooded the entire area, ravaging it all in a two hundred square mile range. The dark wave truly devoured everything: almost 20,000 people died, countless other critters saw their lives brought to a sudden end, and over 45,000 buildings were destroyed. Among those who survived, 4.4 million households were left without electricity, over 340,000 people were displaced, and suffered from food, water, shelter, medicine, and fuel shortages for a long period of time afterwards, even when considerable material efforts were deployed to restore infrastructures in the wake.

The tsunami precipitated ripples of its own. In the first instance, of course, the devastation of energy infrastructures brought about by the tsunami triggered a total blackout at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, disabling the reactors' cooling systems thereby resulting in the meltdown of their nuclear cores which in turn led to hydrogen explosions and the attendant radioactive plume that, together, constituted the seminal events of the nuclear disaster that still persists up to this day. The collapse of infrastructures –and of political imaginations– in turn strained the state's disaster response, desperately seeking to reassert the most tenuous semblance of modern sovereignty as it scrambled to repair or confine the broken reactors under pressure from shareholders of the energy sector itself, who insisted on the imperative of saving the reactors as assets for future use. Unable to mend what had been broken beyond repair, the Japanese government cordoned off a 12-mile radius around the plant as an evacuation zone which led to the displacement of 154,000 residents. And yet, the catastrophe of radioactive contamination knows no sovereign borders, whether spatial or temporal. It only took about ten days for radioactive substances to become detectable in Tokyo's tap water, thereby implicating incalculable numbers of people, animals, plants, and manifold ecological relations in different manners and varying intensities.

Indeed, we must tragically go further. For if the ripples of this ongoing and unfinished breakdown upended human and other-than-human modes of living in and around the archipelago in such a way that, to quote writer and activist Sabu Kohso (2020: 19), 'living is becoming equal to struggling against such hazards and the regimes that impose them', it is equally the case that they affected manifold *modes of dying* as well. Six months after the tsunami, the region of Tohoku experienced a veritable profusion of ghost stories, sightings, experiences, possessions and hauntings in and around the devastated area. 'A young man' –reporter Richard Lloyd Parry (2017: 99) writes in his wonderful *Ghosts of the Tsunami,* which chronicles some of the personal, social, and political effects of the tsunami– 'complained of pressure on his chest at night, as if some creature was straddling him as he slept. A teenage girl spoke of a fearful figure who squatted his house. A middle-aged man hated to go out in the rain, because of the eyes of the dead, which stared out at him from puddles.' Alas, these were not isolated events:

> A civil servant in Soma visited a devastated stretch of coast and saw a solitary woman in a scarlet dress far from the nearest road or house, with no means of transport in sight. When he looked for her again, she had disappeared.
>
> A fire station in Tagajo received calls to places where all the houses had been destroyed by the tsunami. The crews went out to the ruins anyway, prayed for the spirits of those who had died – and the ghostly calls ceased.

> A taxi in the city of Sendai picked up a sad-faced man who asked to be taken to an address that no long[er] existed. Halfway through the journey, the driver looked into his mirror to see that the rear seat was empty. He drove on anyway, stopped in front of the levelled foundations of a destroyed house and politely opened the door to allow the invisible passenger out at his former home.
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> At a refugee community in Onagawa, an old neighbour would appear in the living rooms of the temporary houses and sit down for a cup of tea with their startled occupants. No one had the heart to tell her that she was dead; the cushion on which she had sat was wet with water. (2017: 99-100)

Indeed, this wasn't simply a 'natural' calamity, the total breakdown of infrastructures, or the inadvertent destruction of an environment. If it constituted a veritable *ecological* disaster it is not least because, as Félix Guattari (2001) reminded us, environmental ravages can never be dissociated from the destruction of social ecologies through which modes of living and forms of dying are woven together, just as the devastation of such social ecologies cannot be separated from the domain of subjectivity, the personal and collective experiences of grief and grievance, of loss and desolation that the wave left in its wake.

And in the case of The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, through the ripples of the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster, it was the world itself that quaked: upending ecological as much as cosmological arrangements, it tangled humans, animals, plants, and soils, but also of the spirits of the living and the dead, in a metamorphic process that left no one and no thing unscathed (Savransky, 2021a). Indeed, it is precisely in this sense that a group of activists writing in the aftermath of the various metamorphic processes set into motion by this ongoing and heterogeneous catastrophe characterised it as nothing short of a 'metaphysical incident,' one whose consequences have transformed 'the very fabric of our reality' and upended not only myriad habitats but their very modes of habitation, the composition of the world, and their ways of living and dying. 'How', they powerfully asked, 'to compose a collective after such an event? How is the relationship with the cosmos affected? How to go on living after such a catastrophe?' (Les éditions des mondes à faire editorial collective, 2018: 19). Thinking in the wake of this disaster, in the presence of these and other resonant questions, and alongside some of the practices and experiments that were born in response, in this chapter I hope to experiment with some of the lessons they together might be capable of yielding when it comes to thinking about questions of 'ecological reparation'. How to think the ecological work of reparation when it is the very *arts of living*, the collective modes of valuation by

which lives become worth living and deaths become worth living for, that are in question? How is a cosmos recomposed?

I wager that exploring these questions itself demands a transformation of our philosophical habits, perhaps rediscovering something of what Nietzsche (1997) called 'philosophising with a hammer': not in order to prolong the critical gesture of smashing our idols but so as to craft thought immanently, with a tuning fork, experimenting with stories and practices whose resonances and reverberations make other ways of living and other modes of earthly habitation perceptible. Which is to say that, if as Nietzsche would argue, we always have the thoughts, beliefs, and values that we deserve given our way of being and our modes of living, perhaps the task in the wake of breakdown is that of consenting to the genuinely pragmatic challenge, not just of making other modes of living thinkable, but of experimenting immanently with living one's way into other modes of thinking (Savransky, 2019, 2021b). In order to elaborate on this speculative proposition, I relay the story of a number of practices developed by collective of priests of various denominational faiths who, in the wake of 3.11 disaster and in spite of the slow violence of Japan's own process of 'modernisation' which saw both the psychologization of ghosts and the centralization of care practices as part of the Meiji government's project incorporation of western structures and institutions of statecraft (Ivy 1995, Figal 1999), nonetheless gave themselves over to an experimentation with forms of 'spiritual care work' in an effort to tend as much to the survivors of the tsunami as to the ghosts of the dead. Their efforts, which revolved around the creation of a mobile café that would offer various forms of spiritual care to those affected by the wave, involved what I would characterise as generative, partial, improvisational forms of cosmoecological reparation: not the attempt to restore the modern terms of order, to render life resilient to disaster, but that of carefully reweaving modes of living and of dying otherwise from the interstices of the catastrophe, of experimentally recomposing a cosmos on a ravaged earth.[1]

'Consolation for the Spirits': Repair and the Aporetics of Reparation

What perhaps makes efforts to attend to the subtle acts of care that constitute repair especially generative today is precisely their commitment to think from the perspective of a 'broken world,' affirming the ways in which breakdown 'disturbs and sets in motion worlds of possibility that disappear under the stable or accomplished form of the artifact' (Jackson 2014: 230). In their oft-cited, neo-Heideggerian approach to the question of repair, Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift (2007)

[1] For a resonant and very generative take on the politics of repair and recuperation in the context of post-crash politics in Portugal, see the thoughtful reflection by Sánchez Criado (2020).

note that Heidegger's philosophy presupposes a world given ready-to-hand that implicates human beings in tasks and processes around things, such that it is the thing itself that 'discloses a world', that shapes the manner in which its own material, those that are concerned with and implicated in its use, and the environment in which these various forces are emplaced, become assembled together. But of course, just as Heidegger himself did, Graham and Thrift are quick to note that things aren't always so 'ready'. In fact, it is precisely when that readiness isn't given, when the worlds they disclose break down, that the thing itself reveals its powers and as such becomes the object of attention, that it demands to be thought. Breakdown, on this account, is the event of a figure/ground reversal where the previously smooth and unproblematic background of a universe of things becomes disturbed and is thereby foregrounded, simultaneously calling on the work of repair whilst opening up, in the course of the operations that are assembled in response, a new distribution of affordances and alternative modes of reassembling the world. 'It is in this space between breakdown and restoration of the practical equilibrium', they argue, 'that repair and maintenance, makes its bid for significance.' (Graham and Thrift 2007: 3)

Yet everything changes when breakdown implicates not only the world-disclosing thing (a technological device, a body, a form of infrastructure, or even an environment) but the very fabric of reality as such– that which a multiplicity of beings collectively and differentially compose, in which they divergently partake whether they like or not. For here no reversal is possible: both figure and ground become implicated in a radical metamorphosis that leaves no being, no relationship, and no established set of values, untouched. It involves collective modes of living and dying in active processes of decomposition no amount of *Dasein* can transcend, in losses no amount of mourning can atone for, in a runaway transformation no practical search for equilibrium can hope to restore. What might 'repair' mean then, when the world itself falls apart, when it is no longer a question of readying it back to hand, when the very collective modes of valuation and earthly habitation become both instrument and object of an irreversible collapse? Perhaps it is then, here, that the notion of 'repair' reencounters the aporetics of 'reparation', that of the radical incommensurability between destruction and redemption, between loss and compensation. 'How does one compensate for centuries of violence', ask Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman (2005: 2), 'that have as their consequence the impossibility of restoring a prior existence, of giving back what was taken, of repairing what was broken?' Best and Hartmann ask this question in relation to and in the interstices of the ruin and wreckage of slavery, but something of this question –which makes the crucible of a life lived in loss perceptible– resonates with those questions raised by the living and dead in the wake of the waves of sorrow that flooded the region of Tohoku in the months following the devastation.

For indeed, to say that most things happen in the break, through the resonances of events, is also to say that the earthquake and tsunami were their own aftershocks to other foreshocks, that the

devastation was not so much originated as compounded by them. If the profusion of ghosts in the wake of the tsunami was an unsettling event, this was not least because, despite ghosts enjoying a long cultural and symbolic history in the archipelago, the Japan in which ghosts made themselves present in such powerful ways was one which had already undergone its own processes of social, cultural and ecological attrition and slow violence (Nixon 2011). Indeed, since the Meiji period, Japan underwent a process of 'modernisation' that involved not only an ambitious financial and infrastructural development program, but also the invention of new knowledges and other belligerent operations that turned ghosts and their stories into signs of superstition and backwardness, into obstacles that the modern state sought to eliminate through a mix of legislation, education and intervention (Ivy 1995). As the responsibility and possibility of care was wrested from the practices of local practitioners and became centralised, administered by governmental authorities guaranteeing, through modern knowledges, the promise of individual well-being and the maintenance of the health of the population, ghosts were refashioned, de-realised, turned into elements of a nervous symptomatology 'that could be explained and thus controlled with a newly coined language that represented a newly constructed knowledge' (Figal 1999: 29).

As a result, many of those afflicted by loss, grief and the emergence of ghosts in the wake went on to consult doctors, psychologists, and social workers in search for support, to repair what had been broken, to restore their selves to a prior existence, to bring themselves back to health. To no avail: modern health care practices had nothing on the ghosts whose presence became patently felt in the wake. This in turn led people to try and quell unhappy spirits by seeking help from priests and healers of various denominational faiths. And while their responses were marginally better, many of them did not know how to care for ghosts or for those who contended with them, and some did not even care (Takahashi 2016). Instead, their concerns revolved mostly around theoretical and theological questions associated with what in scholarly circles became known as the 'ghost problem': questions as to whether these ghosts really existed; what correspondence, if any, they bore with the Buddhist realm of the *hungry ghost;* or whether these stories could simply be the product of superstition or delusion, a substantiation of the Devil, or apparitions of the Holy Spirit (Lloyd Parry 2017). Confronted with the impossibility of effective forms of care, their concerns turned instead to the attempt to articulate forms of theoretical repair: seeking explanatory frameworks that could restore the conceptual brokenness out of which ghosts' unsettling presence emerged, to a prior state of good theological sense.

Yet it is also out of this broken cosmos, in the incommensurable break between the irredeemable event of grief and the imperative impossibility of reparation, that a singular collective of priests from Buddhist, Shinto and Protestant faiths, led by Reverend Taio Kaneta, risked a form of experimentation with stories and practices that sought to affirm other ways of living and other modes

of earthly habitation in the wake of the devastation.[2] This wasn't easy. Above all, it required not explaining the metamorphic breakdown away but instead daring to take the catastrophe seriously, with all its grief and sorrow, as the very broken world they now inhabit, and the very means by which to revaluate living and dying on these islands. The catastrophe had changed everything. As such, theoretical questions about the nature of ghosts were not the right questions to pose, for 'what matters', Kaneta said, 'is that people are seeing them, and in these circumstances, after this disaster, it is perfectly natural. So many died, and all at once. At home, at work, at school– the wave came in and they were gone. The dead had no time to prepare themselves. The people left behind had no time to say goodbye. […] The dead are attached to the living, and those who have lost them are attached to the dead. It's inevitable that there are ghosts.' (Lloyd Parry 2017: 100)

The collective of priests came to this realisation only in the wake of their own direct confrontation with the aporetics of reparation: by slowly learning to affirm the incommensurability of the immensity of loss and the imperative impossibility of careful consolation. After being consulted by several people with cases of ghost possession, they decided to perform a ritual march to the coast, through the devastated town of Shizugawa. During their march, 'the landscape through which they walked was broken, and corrupt with decay. Bulldozers had cleared ways through the rubble, and piled it into looming mounds of concrete, metal, wood and tile.' But the heaps had not been completely searched, and the area was suffused with the smell 'of dead bodies, and of mud. There was so much rubble', Kaneta recalled, 'and mementoes of people's lives still lying around on the ground. We had to take care where we stepped to avoid trampling on photographs.' (2017: 224). The procession of priests roamed through the devastation, carrying a placard bearing the characters meaning 'Consolation for the Spirits'. As they passed through workers and machines trying to sort out the debris, they began to worry that, rather than helping in the efforts of restoration, they had become 'an unwelcome obstruction to the clean-up operation.' (2017: 224) Yet there were ordinary people there as well, looking for the bodies of their loved ones. And when 'they saw us marching past', Kaneta told Lloyd Parry (2017: 224), 'they turned and bowed their heads. They were praying desperately to find their loved ones. Our hearts were so full when that happened. I have rarely been more conscious of suffering.' It had been the aim of these priests to sing sutras and hymns as they marched, but amidst the rubble, their voices failed them– none of the hymns seemed right, the sutra came out in screams and shouts:

> 'And when we got to the sea,' said Kaneta, 'when we saw the sea – we couldn't face it. It was as if we couldn't interpret what we were seeing.' […]

[2] They, of course, were not alone in this. For other experiments in the wake of the Fukushima Nuclear disaster see the accounts by Sabu Kohso (2020) and Mari Matsumoto and Sabu Kohso (2017).

> 'We realised that, for all that we had learned about religious ritual and language, none of it was effective in facing what we saw all around us. This destruction that we were living inside – it couldn't be framed by the principles and theories of religion. Even as priests, we were close to the fear that people express when they say, "We see no God, we see no Buddha here." I realised then that religious language was an armour which we wore to protect ourselves, and that the only way forward was to take it off. (2017: 225)

The Cosmoecological Workshop: Spiritual Care Out of a Broken World

Taking the armour off was not a matter of abandoning faith, however. It was not a question of consenting to the catastrophe of a secular reckoning, or of resigning themselves to the sheer impossibility of crafting a response. On the contrary, taking the armour off precisely meant giving to this catastrophic breakdown the power to affect them, to transform their thoughts, values and practices, to let themselves become affected in such a way that might render them capable of activating a regenerative response from the very incommensurability of the break that was now their present. Indeed, if I here make a case for the need and possibility of learning to 'philosophise with a hammer', of not seeking theoretical answers that might tell us how to live but to experiment with revaluating our values by living our way into other modes of thinking, it is because this is precisely what these priests found themselves engendering in their unflinching efforts to recompose modes of living and modes of dying worthy of the broken situation to which they sought to respond. Faced with a devastation that was as much ecological as it was cosmological, what the collective of priests improvisationally composed was nothing short of a *cosmoecological workshop*: experimenting pragmatically, across the worlds of the living and the dead, with the possibility of nurturing collective ways of living and dying otherwise from the interstices of the catastrophe, of seeking to recompose a cosmos on a ravaged earth[3].

Indeed, what they literally set in motion was a mobile café which, in a triple play with words, they decided to call *Café de Monku: Monku* being the Japanese word for 'complaint'; *Monk,* the English term for priest; and Thelonious Monk, the name of the jazz pianist and composer whose improvisational music would accompany their practices. 'The dissonant and loose tempo of Monk's music', Kaneta (2015) suggested, 'accurately expresses the disaster victim's hearts.' The initial goal was nothing more but also nothing less than to make 'a space where people can relax in the midst of

[3] For an account of the radical pragmatism dramatised by this collective of priests, see Savransky (2021a).

the rubble!' And so would the *Café de Monku* travel around the devastated area, nurturing a milieu in which those who had survived the wave could gather together around tea, coffee, and cakes, share their stories and sorrows, raise their 'complaints', and collectively remember the dead. In addition to tea and cakes, the priests would offer exercises, humour and massages; music would be played, flowers would be laid; sutras and hymns were offered to those who benefited from them; and they would infuse the air with the scent of incense. The survivors, many of whom were at that stage living in temporary shelters, were invited to sit and string Buddhist rosaries as the priests inscribed and blessed memorial tables with the names of the dead. And of course, they would occasionally perform rituals and techniques devoted to caring as much for those who had been possessed and as for the ghosts who made themselves felt through them (Yōzō 2015).

It was in the indeterminate course of fabricating this cosmoecological workshop that the collective of priests came to learn how to tend to the living and the dead, to compose modes of living and dying otherwise in the wake. Indeed, they learned that, though death awaits us all, it matters what modes of dying precipitate one's end, such that, when 'people die violently or prematurely, in anger or anguish, they are at risk of becoming *gaki*: hungry ghosts, who wander between worlds, propagating curses and mischief.' (Lloyd Parry 2017: 103) And thus, they also learned to discern the presence of ghosts in the suffering of the living, which in turned enabled them to develop practices thanks to which they could hold a veritable conversation with the dead. Strikingly, they discovered that not all ghosts that made themselves present in the wake of the tsunami were of those the wave had washed away. For some, the problem was that the tsunami had taken *their living* away, leaving no one in the world to look after them in their death. And not all of them knew they were dead. Among those that Kaneta sought to help was Rumiko Takahashi, a young woman that had been repeatedly possessed by ghosts. Indeed, in his spiritual care work with Rumiko, Kaneta consoled over twenty-five ghosts that spoke and made themselves present through her. Among the first was the ghost of a middle-aged man who, through Rumiko, 'despairingly called the name of his daughter. "Kaori!" said the voice. "Kaori! I have to get to Kaori. Where are you, Kaori? I have to get to the school, there's a tsunami coming."' (2017: 247). The man was on his way to pick Kaori up from school when the – very late– tsunami warning was triggered, and the wave caught him driving along the coast, carrying him and much else to the bottom of the sea. As Lloyd Parry (2017: 248) relays their exchange:

> The voice asked, "Am I alive or not?"
> "No," said Kaneta. "You are dead."
> "And how many people died?" asked the voice.
> "Twenty thousand people died."
> "Twenty thousand? So many?"

> Later, Kaneta asked him where he was.
> "I'm at the bottom of the sea. It is very cold."
> Kaneta said, "Come up from there to the world of the light."
> "But the light is so small," the man replied. "There are bodies all around me, and I can't reach it. And who are you anyway? Who are you to lead me to the work of the light?"

The conversation, Lloyd Parry tells us, 'went round and round for two hours' until at some point Kaneta asked him to consider the consequences of his own mournful wandering on the suffering of his host: '"You are a father. You understand the anxieties of a parent. Consider this girl whose body you have used. She has a father and a mother who are worried about her. Have you thought of that?" There was a long pause, until finally the man said, "You're right" and moaned deeply. Kaneta chanted the sutra. He paused from time to time when the voice uttered choked sounds, but they faded to mumbles and finally the man was gone.'

It is this improvised configuration of doings and modes of care that the collective of priests developed in response to the imperative impossibility of reparation in the wake of cosmoecological devastation. Practices, as they called them, of 'listening to the heart': diligently and attentively enabling stories of suffering to be told, even when they profoundly challenge the thoughts, beliefs, and values that one holds dear, while carefully reweaving those tales and addressing them to the future. 'Don't think,' says Kaneta (2015) in an emphatic call to arms that dramatises the gesture at the heart of their practices, 'Feel!! Creation and Act!!' Indeed, it was only by feeling their way into another mode of thinking, by attending to stories of suffering as much from a personal as from a cosmic perspective, that they were able to reweave and repurpose a Buddhist concept, *jita funi* –which translates as 'self and other: undivided'– to reweave relationships amongst the living and the dead. And they did so by making it perceptible that this 'universe wraps everything up inside it, in the end. Life, death, grief, anger, sorrow, joy. There was no boundary then, between the living and the dead.' (Lloyd Parry 2017: 222).

Café de Monku proved highly successful, making the spiritual care work an essential emergency response to the invisible devastation of a life lived in loss in the wake of ecological disaster. But neither practices of listening to the heart nor the reactivation of this Buddhist concept were capable of repair if by that we understand a piecing back together, a restitution of what broke down, a return to a world that had collapsed.[4] The dead did not come back to life, and neither did the

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[4] There are in this sense possibly generative resonances to be explored, between the practices nourished by *Café de Monku* and a traditional craft technique for broken ceramics, known in Japan as *Kintsugi* and dating from the late sixteenth century, which is characterised by rendering both the

living go back to theirs. The aporetics of reparation pressed on in the incommensurable break between grief and restoration. ‘This’, Kaneta (in Lloyd Parry 2017: 242) said, ‘is consolation. This is understanding. We don’t work simply by saying to people, “Accept.” There’s no point lecturing them about dogma. We stay with them, and walk with them until they find the answer on their own. We try to thaw the frozen future.’ Out of the brokenness of their world, the priests’ cosmoecological workshop began to repair something else. Philosophising with a hammer amidst the resonance of events, they and those that joined them at the *Café de Monku* began to learn how to tell their stories otherwise, to regenerate their collective capacities to think, feel, and imagine, to reweave modes of living and dying in the wake of the catastrophe, to pragmatically recompose a cosmos on a ravaged earth.

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object’s history of brokenness and the transformative operations of repair visible and sensible rather than pursuing restoration through erasure. While a full discussion of *Kintsugi* and any possible connections to *Café de Monku* exceeds the scope of this chapter, see the article by Keulemans (2016) for a thoughtful conceptualisation of the craft.

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Notes