Geographies of affect in places of death and disaster: Tohoku, Japan, after 3.11
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8.1 INTRODUCTION
The aim of this thesis was to use the framework of geographies of affect to analyse the felt experience of international tourists, tourism workers, and locals in post-disaster towns in Japan that are developing tourism. Post-disaster tourism is, in academia, broadly conflated under the term ‘dark tourism’. So far, the affective aspects of the dark tourism experience have not yet been studied. The felt aspects of the experience of tourists, tourism workers, and locals, in particular the subtle vibes, moods, and atmospheres defined as affects, show a more positive and often overlooked aspects of the phenomenon of dark tourism, often associated with (and judged as motivated solely by) morbid curiosity and stereotyped nosy and disrespectful tourists. This thesis presents how affects in dark tourism, indeed, can be a means for economic recovery, psychological recovery from trauma, and a way for tourists to experience a deeply felt connection with places. This has relevance beyond the progression of academic knowledge in geographies of affect and dark tourism. It can also foster better policies for the development and management of tourism in post-disaster places, as well as a better understanding and communication efforts between national private and public institutions, and disaster-hit communities.

Okawa elementary school.
In this concluding chapter, I start with an overview of the key findings from preceding chapters. Then, I reflect on issues of methodology, ethics and positionality in section 8.3, and conclude with section 8.4.

8.2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS
Each of the preceding chapters discussed facets of the correlation amongst dark tourism (often referred to in this thesis as its specific sub-group of post-disaster tourism), geographies of affect, and heritage. Previous research on dark tourism has overlooked affect and, in particular, geographies of affect, as a viable framework to study places of disaster. Affect is often difficult to identify and describe, and appropriate methodologies to study it are subjective and contextual. While a few articles have touched the nexus between affect and dark tourism (Buda, d’Hauteserre, & Johnston, 2014; Pocock, 2015; Tucker, 2012), dark tourism places have not yet been systematically analysed through the lens of geographies of affect, which can uncover new knowledge on how post-disaster tourism circuits and heritage are constructed, managed and experienced.

Chapter 2 gave an overview of the relationship between the field of dark tourism and geographies of affect, critically analysing their interconnections and potential routes for research – theoretical and methodological. The affective layer of dark tourism highlights how post-disaster places articulate a connection with death and its representations, especially in media, and looks into the processes used by tourism workers and locals to construct and manage these places. This, consequently, has an effect on the ways tourists experience dark and post-disaster tourism places. I show how broader debates around dark tourism terminology and taxonomies, in most cases underlie considerations on felt, affective aspects of the dark tourism experience. I critically debate the concept of affect, the distinctions between affects and emotions, and the complex issue of representability of affect, concluding that while affect can never be fully represented, places of death and disaster can offer a fertile ground for affects to be felt intensely, and thus perceived. This offers a deeper layer of understanding for tourists’ experiences in death and disaster places as well as the political and ethical charge imbued in such encounters. In addition, I propose two routes for future research which are applied to empirical work in Chapter 5 and 6.

Chapter 3 delves into methods to get a glimpse of affect and emotions when interviews are conducted by email, rather than in person. While the chapter recognizes the subjective, volatile nature of representations of affects and emotions, by building on the theoretical approach of chapter 2, it suggests that a lot can be inferred from the linguistic features of email interviews, imagework (a tool in which participants are asked to imagine certain circumstances and describe how they would behave, act, or react), short stories, and anecdotes. These tools can indeed be used to ‘triangulate’ moments of affect in specific contexts, as they can show repeated patterns. As most visitors were struck by the absence of ruins and emptiness of the landscape, the chapter concludes that visitors have to reassess what they thought the landscape would look like, which they expressed through linguistic features of text such as particular configurations of adjectives; through anecdotes; and short stories.

Chapter 4 is an empirical chapter which presents how the TV show, Amachan, and its success contributed to revitalize and re-define tourism and heritage in the town of Kuji, in Iwate, which was heavily damaged by the 2011 tsunami. The case of Kuji is particularly relevant, as the town was selected by the Japanese government to become the set of a morning show with the idea that it would help the recovery and bring attention back to the town’s traditional intangible heritage: ama divers. Throughout the paper, it is shown how the fictional locations of Amachan, superimposed to the real towns of Kuji and the nearby village of Horinai, rewrite the 2011 disaster as an occasion to find unity and strength for the reconstruction efforts, and contribute to the real tourism effort of Kuji and its revitalization. In Kuji, heritage is re-invented both within the plot (as the characters struggle to attract tourism) and in its real world effects (as the show positively affected tourism). This chapter does not delve into affect, but offers an overview of the context and situation of both tourism and heritage in the region. It shows how media narratives, tour guides narratives, and
broader post-disaster narratives and performances in this case mostly related to ama divers, also incorporate elements related to the post-disaster, and to the show, creating a syncretic assemblage of heritage and tourism. The alternation between fictional and real produces new forms of heritage that are enhanced, revitalized and re-popularized by their diffusion into national con science. However, they can also be a means for the economic recovery of disaster-hit towns.

Chapter 5 discusses the case of Rikuzentakata, a town almost completely destroyed by the 2011 tsunami, which based its recovery efforts on the development of international post-disaster tourism. This chapter portrays an empirical case that shows what is at stake affectively in the construction and management of post-disaster places built around deliberate discourses on hope and resilience. My analysis highlights how the politics of affect built around the tsunami have been spatialized and grounded using material landmarks, but also narratives of hope and resilience based on comparisons with Hiroshima. The affective atmospheres engineered by local tourism workers, I conclude, were planned and performed as an attempt to facilitate cross-cultural communication and allow visitors to contemplate death and disaster on their own terms, while at the same time involving them in a broader processes of healing from trauma and recovery for Rikuzentakata and its residents. The affect of hope is spatialized in the town’s main landmark, the Miracle Pine, which became the receptacle of narratives that stress the trauma, but also the resilience of Japanese people. These narratives are perceived by tourists at an affective level, and negotiated and shaped by them in their own cultural frame, as affects can traverse cultural differences and have the potential to powerfully impact anyone, in the right circumstances. The affects such as pain, empathy and hope perceived by tourists, are considered positive and healing by the local population, which shows how tourism can be seen as a means not only of physical and economic recovery, but a powerful tool for recovery from trauma for the local population.

Chapter 6 focuses on the concept of the sublime in relation to both affect studies and dark tourism. By treating the sublime as an affect, it is possible to see glimpses, moments of it in the experiences of tourists, tourism workers and locals in post-disaster Japan. The chapter concludes that moments of sublime in post-disaster Tohoku can be instigated by different triggers: the vision of ruins and abandonment, the silence engulfing these places, and the knowledge of the invisible radiations threat, which evokes the idea of a ‘nuclear sublime’. While encompassing several places of post-disaster tourism, the chapter gives much attention to the exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The nuclear power plant was badly damaged during the 2011 disaster, and abandoned because of the high levels of radiations leaking from four of its six reactors. The sight of such a derelict landscape and the invisible threat of radiation contribute to an affect that can be defined as sublime, and the awe and terror caused by the disaster and consequent destruction contribute to deep affective moments for tourists. The interviews and participant observation conducted there all show that the nuclear catastrophe holds, as all that is sublime, a seed of ambivalence. Such moments, triggered by the ruins visible in the area, by the heritage landmark constructed for post-disaster tourism, and by the narratives of tour guides and locals, provoke dread and horror, but also give way to affective flashes of hope for a global future, a sense that such a massive disaster could be a memento so that what happened does not repeat itself in the future or in some other place. While horrible, the disaster can be employed to promote memory and a peaceful future by politicians, individuals and media.

The last chapter, Chapter 7, portrays a peculiar situation that expresses the power of media in constructing affective discourses on heritage and post-disaster tourism. There I considered the case of the debris from the 2011 tsunami carried by the sea. Some of this debris washed ashore on the coast of the United States and Canada, and certain items, invested of special meaning, have been brought back to Japan and memorialized. Through careful and calculated media narratives and official governmental joint news (from both Japan and the United States/Canada), the objects found have been put in the spotlight and were invested with affective value by enhancing the
compelling, emotive backstories of the objects themselves and the people connected to each debris item. The chapter proposes that process of heritage-making of some items lost at sea in the 2011 disaster in Eastern Japan has the potential to form spatialized configurations of affect. The chapter concludes that some debris items, after having been recovered on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, are brought back to Japan and memorialized into place as affective expression of hope or removed to ensure recovery from the emotional trauma of loss. This chapter concludes that there is potential to translate affect into embodied, place-grounded heritage constellations. Such affect-oriented narratives revolve around the concept of 'bringing the debris back home' to be spatialized and memorialized as symbols of the disaster, an allegoric journey of hope that mimics the journey of post-disaster recovery undertaken by Japan after 2011.

To summarize, the main purpose of this research was to form a coherent link between geographies of affect and dark tourism studies; study it in its theoretical, methodological and empirical applications; and produce a fertile ground to further methodological and empirical studies on both geographies of affect and dark tourism. This research approached configurations of affect in post-disaster Japan from different perspectives, and considering different actors (tourists, locals, tourism workers at local and national level), and concludes that, while affects are present in any situation, and always circulating in-between bodies (human and non-human), post-disaster settings and their tourism efforts can ‘spike’ the intensity of affect in a way in which it can become perceivable by tourists. To create post-disaster tourism sites that are affectively charged, media, tourism workers at all levels (local, national and international), Japanese institutions and local communities design and construct landmarks, performances, and narratives that intensify the potential for affect. In a way, this thesis also claims that an affective connection between, in our case, international tourists and the place hit by a disaster, represented by landmarks, narratives, performances, or the very same people who experienced the trauma, can greatly benefit both tourists, who go back home with a sense of catharsis, hope, and understanding, and the devastated local communities, who feel understood, emphasized with, and hopeful for the future.

8.3 DISCUSSION

In this part of the chapter, I address the two main themes that kept recurring throughout the whole research process. First, the possibilities and limits of the so-called non-representational methods and creative methods (also sometimes defined ‘inventive methods’), which have been debated in Chapter 2 and applied in all other chapters of this thesis. Secondly, my approach to positionality and ethics in this research, a topic that was not analysed in depth in the previous chapters, but that influenced my research process, my fieldwork, and the resulting thesis chapters.

8.3.1 METHODS: REPRESENTING WITH ‘NON-REPRESENTATIONAL’ METHODS

One of the main concerns when adopting any methodology to study affect is its slippery, not-completely representational nature (see McCormack, 2003; 2008). It is widely recognized in geographies of affects and emotions that thoughts, meanings, feelings, affects cannot be shared ‘in a manner faithful to our experience of them or equally that certain spectacular or horrific events and encounters escape their retelling’ (Laurier & Philo, 2006, p.353). The affects circulating in places, narratives, and performances in most cases stay part of the unnoticed background scenery rather than be an indispensable component of experience (Davidson & Smith, 2009, p.440; Laurier & Philo, 2006). Affect has been defined by many academics (see Davidson & Bondi, 2004; Massumi, 2002; Pile, 2010; Thrift, 2007), as a pre- or other-than conscious feeling, a set of unbridled, unrepresentable potentialities often directly opposed to conscious, perceivable emotions (see Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008). To ground affect in a frame that allows partial representation, in this thesis I consistently used Sianne Ngai’s approach, in which the difference between affect and emotion ‘is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or
kind (Ngai, 2005, p.27). She assumes that affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether, and that a switch from quality to intensity enables ‘an analysis of the transitions from one pole to the other: the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects’ (Ngai, 2005, p.27). As Ngai proposes, following Raymond Williams analysis on the so-called ‘structures of feeling’ (a concept often adopted by affect theorists to explain certain features of affect) not every situation and experience needs to be rationalized, defined, and classified before it exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action (Ngai, 2005, p.26). Indeed, ‘affective intensity clearly creates difficulties for more positivistic kinds of materialist analysis, even as it always remains highly analyzable in or as effect (Massumi, 2002, p. 260).

The methods used in this thesis both traditional qualitative methods, and, to overcome the issue of representability, it complements them with creative methods. I weaved together methods such as imagework, affective mapping, and a narrative approach that acknowledges the ways in which participants attempt to frame their experiences in a representable way. Then these methods were supplemented by ethnography and observant participation, so as to triangulate certain information, intuitions, and verify interpretations of moments of affect and the affective connections between bodies. Affect as intensity is a concept also utilized in the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), Ben Anderson (2006, 2014), and Derek McCormack (2008). They all emphasize the existence of diverse active intensities in affective endeavours, often marked by inter-subjective charge. This implies that it is possible for an affect to be felt intensely enough to be perceived, a sort of threshold of consciousness in which an affect is picked up before it is made sense of and elaborated into a specific emotion. For reasons I describe below, this threshold is called by Brian Massumi, one of the most influential scholars in affect studies, ‘the missing half-second’ (Massumi, 1995, p.89). He explained that during an experiment, some patients who had been implanted with cortical electrodes for medical purposes were administered mild electrical pulses. He concludes that: ‘If the cortical electrode was fired a half-second before the skin was stimulated, patients reported feeling the skin pulse first. The researcher speculated that sensation involves a “backward referral in time -in other words, that sensation is organized recursively before being linearized, before it is redirected outwardly to take its part in a conscious chain of actions and reactions. Brain and skin form a resonating vessel. Stimulation turns inward, is folded into the body, except that there is no inside for it to be in, because the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived.’ (Massumi, 1995, p.89)

It’s Massumi’s missing half-second that can constitute an affect, and the intensity of Sianne Ngai. While these approaches work well in theory and give a clearer idea of how to define affect, and how to distinguish it from emotion, they do not go as far as to offer a methodological solution to analyse affects. For this reason, this thesis utilizes a geographical approach to the methodological study of affect that comes from studies on atmospheres. As iterated in many of the chapters that compose this thesis, atmospheres are constitutive of how movement in space is experienced (Brown & Pickerill, 2009) and are ‘geopoietic’, in the sense that they generate and are generated by place through the interaction of bodies and affect (Adey, 2015). In the case of Rikuzentakata, in Chapter 5, for example, the atmosphere of the touristified landmarks of the disaster such as the Miracle Pine and Tapic45 are created in part by the narrations of tour guides and media. Such narrations give ways to specific affective atmospheres of pain and hope that in turn are perceived by tourists and audiences, and reproduced again and again, becoming central characteristics of the landmark and the town itself. The atmospheres that emerge unite affects with the emotions, and bodily responses felt by all those who experienced them (tourists) and created them (tour guides, locals, media). Once we recognize that these aspects are all experienced in an interconnected and overlapping way, we can analyse the affective charge of these atmospheres, the moments in
which the ‘half second’ allows us to grasp and apprehend an affect. In the interaction with (human and non-human) bodies, tourists can experience moments in which the intensity of affects spikes, and can, partially and subjectively, resonate, be perceived, acknowledged, and manipulated (Anderson, 2014).

8.3.2 ETHICS AND POSITIONALITY
Places of disaster negotiate painful pasts, complex political and ethical situation, and are a receptacle for all sorts of negative feelings and trauma on the part of the local communities, in most cases amplified by sensationalised narratives of national and international media. Tohoku, in particular, is a rural region, which even before the disaster saw declining population and very limited tourism. In this context, it was crucial not only to be aware of the cultural norms, but also of the power relations in place, and my positionality as a foreigner and as researcher who speaks Japanese and conducts research in a disaster area. This was an important concern, as working with disaster towns implies an effort in writing ‘with’ rather than writing ‘about’ certain populations in order to redress concerns about marginalization, essentialisms, and differences in representation (Sultana, 2007). Reflecting about my positionality involves ‘reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Sultana, 2007, p. 376). It concerned ontological assumptions (the nature of social reality), epistemological assumptions (the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (Sikes 2004). At a practical level, this meant recognizing that every time I visited one of the disaster towns, I was always well-received and shown around because I was a foreigner and a researcher in tourism, and they were interested in their stories being narrated to a foreign audience. This meant, on one hand, that I could hear the stories they prepared for foreigners, and sometimes, access information on how these narratives were created and targeted at foreigners. On the other hand, especially in Northern Japan, there was reluctance from the local population in engaging with me, as they were not used to foreigners and felt wary. Both me and my local participants were always acutely aware of my status as a foreigner, and obtaining more than superficial information on tourism data in the area proved difficult. I had to take a step back and analyse my positionality, my bias, and my interlocutors’ expectations. Moreover, I had to accept that a research on affects and emotions in a social context so radically different from my own, implied the acknowledgement of my own subjectivity as a means to interpret the data collected. With time, I managed to be included more in the workings of these towns, and embraced my ‘Otherness’ as the only possible route to conduct research with locals. This proved useful towards the end of my fieldwork, as it added the dimension of cross-culturality that gives substance and originality to Chapter 5. In addition to this, I started building more personal relations with some of my participants and key informants, in an attempt to even out the power dynamic at play (Dowling, 2016).

Regarding at the beginning of my fieldwork I deliberately chose not to engage with survivors. While I did obtain ethical approval from the University of Groningen, I thought it not necessary to engage with survivor, as mine was a research focused mainly on tourists and tourism workers. Moreover, I thought the survivors’ contribution, while potentially useful, would come with a whole different approach to ethics than the one I had prepared to engage with tourists, tourism workers, and locals who were not directly involved in the disaster. However, this proved impossible while on fieldwork. First of all, it was difficult – and useless- to try to define a sort of ‘hierarchy of trauma’ between the people that experienced the tsunami and survived, and those who were away from the coast that day, but lost relatives and friends. Once I was in Tohoku, the borders blurred. Then, in August 2016, I stayed at an Airbnb in Ofunato, and commuted back and forth to Rikuzentakata to attend the gohyaku rakan workshop (see Chapter 5). The very first evening, the owner of the Airbnb, Ozeki-san, who is also in charge of a local NGO, brought two survivors who wanted to be interviewed with him. They said that the survivors in Ofunato were not receiving the same treatment as the ones in Rikuzentakata, because they did not...
lose as many people and buildings. They were, in their own words, second-class survivors, and they felt invisible and forgotten. They had heard of a foreign researcher who came all the way to Ofunato, and they wanted to tell me their story.

Given their situation, they insisted on using their real names, and asked to be video-recorded. The questions to them were kept broad and open, to give them the possibility to choose what to say and what to keep to themselves. They were asked who they were, to talk about their life, and why they had asked to be interviewed. The next day, another survivor came and asked to be interviewed. She appears in the very first sentence of the introduction to my thesis. All three survivors interviewed did not need many questions: they kept talking freely about the situation before the tsunami, the aftermath, and the future they hope will come. In my opinion, it seemed that the interview was a cathartic experience for them, one in which they could use to help make sense of what had happened to them.

8.4 CONCLUSIONS

Natural disasters are part of life in Japan, and part of the forces that have always shaped its landscape. But the earthquake that struck Tohoku in 2011 was the fourth strongest seisim in history, so powerful that it moved Japan four meters closer to America (Lloyd Parry, 2017). It sounds redundant to say that this disaster has changed the face of the region forever. And yet, the traces of this catastrophic event will be seen – and felt- for a long time. In this situation, tourism might seem a short-sighted, even inappropriate endeavor. But fascination with catastrophe has always been a feature of humankind, and of the natural desire ‘to confront the remainder, or to be confronted with that which is in excess of signification’ (Doane, 2006, p.213). When tourists come to post-disaster places, they can be motivated by curiosity, by the need to be educated, or to have a cathartic experience that shapes and gives a different meaning to their life and their personal tragedies.

This thesis analysed moments of affect in post-disaster tourism in the region of Japan hit by the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown. Some of the towns in Tohoku have developed tourism in an effort to recover and revitalize the place. Often at odds with the government-mandated plans, which involve raising the ground in the towns and building new, higher seawalls, some communities looked at tourism as a way to have their voice heard. At the moment, tourism in the Sanriku coast involves mostly tourists who visited Japan more than once, college groups on educational tours, and more generally, groups involved one way or the other with other activities in the area (recent visitors were a Danish choir, and a rugby team participating in a match in Fukushima city). Regarding tourism in Tohoku, Stefan, an informant and founder of the website Japan Guide, says: ‘The only towns featured in japan-guide.com that existed before 2011 and were directly affected by the tsunami were Sendai and Matsushima’ (Stefan, 16 August 2016). Before the disaster, Matsushima was the only relatively famous tourism spot in Tohoku, with around 3.7 million tourists per year29. However, they only hired an English-speaking employee around 2014.

Indeed, almost the totality of the population does not speak English, including tourism workers. To overcome this obstacle, some of towns hired American employees to help raise their profile abroad, and started adding directions, information, and tourism material for foreigners (mostly English material, but also Chinese and Thai). Around 2015 and 2016, the towns of Rikuzentakata, Matsushima and Minamisanriku tried to plan a tri-city tour, with the intention of creating a circuit where tourists could stay for more than a few hours, use the local facilities, and buy local products. However, cooperation amongst the towns, and the necessity to give priority to more immediate recovery, stalled the project. The development of post-disaster tourism in Tohoku at the moment is slow, and to attract both domestic and international tourists, it is crucial to develop and promote narratives that integrate the traditional and historical elements with stories and heritage landmark from the disaster. This

way, like in Kuji, post-disaster tourism can have not only an impact for the recovery, but serve as an engine for long-term revitalization of rural Japan. Collective memory and heritage of the disaster can thus become the piece of a puzzle that adds to the atmosphere of the place and that it is continuously performed (Rigney, 2008).

Narratives of post-disaster tourism rely on affects connected to the disaster, such as hope, pain, catharsis. I propose that such post-disaster tourism efforts are based on a set of narrations and practices that are built on and build complex networks of affects. The government, tourism workers, and locals contribute in reframing the disaster for tourism purposes, creating stories that overlap and sometimes contrast the expectations of tourists. At a broader level, the tourism workers in the area are constructing affective atmosphere and attuning visitors to them, not by creating physical heritage, but by taking tourists by the hand and painting a picture for them that offers a parable about impermanence and the stoic peaceful resistance and resilience of the Japanese population. For post-disaster tourism, it is not always necessary to create separate tourism circuits, or to have show-stopping narratives that attract international media attention. For some towns, it can be a more subtle affective charge that is brought up by tourism workers to enhance the ‘background hum’ of atmospheric attunements, of the little worlds entangled in the noise of everyday life (Gandy, 2017).

These places cater to imaginaries, and they do so using affects to engineer specific context and attractions, and embrace dark tourism or elements of dark tourism to varying degrees, and with the purpose to preserve memory, create heritage, and keep the towns visible in the eyes of global media so they are not forgotten. This is particularly crucial, especially now after seven years, with the government moving fund and workforce to Tokyo to prepare for the Olympics, and with the general media and audience having found other disastrous events to focus on. In these contexts, dark tourism is not morbid and purely motivated by curiosity, but could become a tool for a more long-term recovery, one that preserves historical and cultural legacy.

REFERENCES


