

Narrating Life and Hope

Social Struggles in Japanese Post-modernity and the Impact of the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

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Abstract

In homogenous Japanese society, ‘the meaning of life’ used to be acquired by the completion of the self into an already articulated value. However, contemporary society emptied this value, and the attempt to regain meaning in life sometimes takes the ‘life-denying’ form of violence. This paper explores an alternative way of affirming lives in the practice of the anti-nuclear protesters after the Fukushima disaster. They regret that their indifference in everyday life caused huge damage to others and future generations. That evoked both a sense of incompleteness at the level of the individual self, and of responsibility for ‘life in assemblage’ in which they are connected with other people’s lives. The paper indicates that meaning in life can be acquired not by the completion of the independent self, but by throwing a singular life into a network of lives, interacting one another and changing oneself, others and society.

Introduction: Post-modernity and the Meaning of Life

The question ‘what is the meaning of life’ is a hackneyed one, yet it is constantly in our minds. We always hope to find our own place in society or in history, to find our role, which is not replaceable by others.

Post-modernity, a newly-emerged, diverse and complex society with “incredulity toward metanarratives”,¹ obscures the answer to this question. It blurs the connection between society and individual lives. Newman notes that post-modernity invites two reactions. Some are thrown into a radical drift from their social identity, while others desperately attempt to return to the ‘modern’ or to the ‘pre-modern’, clinging to stable identities and absolute authorities such as nation, ethnicity and religion.²

In this paper I examine the concept of the meaning of life in contemporary Japanese society and explore how we can affirm it. First of all, I argue that, in post-war Japanese society, the meaning of life was regarded as the completion of

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¹ Lyotard (1984), p. xxiv.

² Newman (2007).

the self into an already articulated norm. In particular, the triumphant economic success enabled people to enjoy consumption of pre-formed identities and narratives that made their lives meaningful. In the post-bubble era, this dominant lifestyle has become less and less plausible and achievable; yet this outdated narrative is still dominant. Those who have been left out of this prevailing norm experience the “hardship of life”,³ and they attempt to affirm their lives in a ‘life-denying’ way. The ‘senseless’ mass murder, over-conformity, suicide, and nihilistic ‘hope for war’ in contemporary Japanese society may signify the unidentifiable ‘outside’ of the reality.

Secondly, based on my interview research, I argue that the Fukushima nuclear disaster probably meant a radical crack in a petrified reality and brought the experience of “deterritorialisation”⁴ to some people. Finding that their passive acceptance of government-led discourses has worked as silent approval of the promotion of nuclear energy, these people have realised that they cannot disconnect their lives from society. The post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters are motivated by a strong sense of responsibility for social engagement. With reference to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “machinic” assemblage, I demonstrate that each protester regards him/herself as incomplete, but as having a capacity to affect others, creating new possibilities through interaction in the assemblage.⁵

Finally, the paper explores the new concept of the ‘meaning of life’ implied by these protesters. It is acquired neither by the completion of the self into some pre-supposed perfection, nor by the liberation of some authentic self. The paper concludes that ‘meaning of life’ might be acquired by throwing a singular body into a relational flow of life, connecting them with radical otherness, and changing its direction for the better through their own capacity.

The analysis is based on my fieldwork conducted between March and May 2012 and between November 2012 and January 2013. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the organisers and participants of the street protests in the Tokyo area. As well as being a researcher of the movement, I joined them as an anti-nuclear protester throughout this period. I regard my research as my responsibility to society, through which I hope to create some resonance with the on-going struggle to actualise a better form of living in my country, Japan.

³ Amamiya (2010). The actual Japanese word she used is ‘*Ikizurasa*’.

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

The Imagination of ‘Nuclear Disaster’ as a Radical Crack

It is said that the Fukushima disaster was an unimaginable accident, and this is both true and false. Nuclear disaster has been present in some people’s imagination, particular among certain young people, who look for the ‘outside’ of the petrified reality in order to engineer a radical crack in it.

Tomohiro Akagi claimed in an essay that, for a person like him, a part-time worker in his 30s and still unable to earn enough money to support himself, “war is the only solution” to cancel out his misery.⁶ War would spread equal suffering to everybody, and would provide him with a respectable role as a soldier; above all, this kind of total destruction would bring about social mobilisation and a paradigm shift.

This is not a unique claim. One of the common subcultural imaginations in the 1980s was that of ‘nuclear war’. The story about ‘society after the nuclear war’ reflected the desire to reconstruct the meaning of life with a historical mission.⁷ It is often pointed out that the Tokyo Metro Sarin Gas Attack by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 was the actualisation of this imagination.⁸ Many well-educated young people, who could not find the meaning of life in a materially affluent society, were attracted by this religious cult. Aum provided a historical mission to actualise the alternative, with its apocalyptic narrative of Armageddon and discipline for spiritual perfection.⁹ Aum filled the void of the lost meaning of life in contemporary Japanese society, although its actions resulted in a brutal crime.

One proposal to counter this deadly imagination was made soon after the Aum incident: Stop asking about the true meaning of our life. The sociologist Miyadai claimed that we should accept the emptiness and live “an endless everyday life”.¹⁰ He identified this lifestyle in teenage girls in the 1990s, especially those who casually engaged in ‘dating services’ for middle-aged men, including sexual intercourse. Miyadai was suggesting that they had discarded subjectivity, which seeks the meaning of life; thus, they could casually exchange

⁶ Akagi (2007). The original essay was printed in the Japanese journal *Ronza* in 2007. The direct translation of the original Japanese title is “I wanna slap Maruyama Masao: a 31-year-old freeter, whose hope is war”.

⁷ Miyadai (1998, c.1995), Ohsawa (2008), Uno (2011).

⁸ Miyadai (1998, c.1995), Iida (2002).

⁹ Castells (1997), Iida (2002), Uno (2011).

¹⁰ Miyadai (1998, c.1995).

their bodies for a sense of extra-ordinariness, or temporal pleasure.¹¹

Whether the strategy of non-subjectivity became the prescription for contemporary Japanese society was doubtful. Uno points out that these girls tried to pursue the very meaning of their lives by being needed by middle-aged men, and tried to regain reality through traumatic experience.¹² Far from the liberation from meaning, they may have attempted to engrave a strong narrative directly onto their bodies to regain the meaning of the self. Uno argues that, in the 1990s, the imagination of the exterior of meaningless life has become 'death'.¹³ This new imagination is well identified in the 1993 bestseller "*The Complete Manual of Suicide*".¹⁴ Its opening remark informs us that, since there is no more 'nuclear war' to destroy the world, suicide will be our last resort to end the everyday life.

When we feel that our lives are not fulfilled, we dream of the exterior of life's reality. Ohsawa argues that this imagination for the 'outside' or the 'anti-real' has shifted in post-war Japanese society. The period between 1945 and 1970 was "the era of ideal", when the transcendent other provided the universal guidelines of life.¹⁵ He argues that the source of these guidelines, which Lyotard would call a metanarrative, was primarily the United States. Although its legitimacy was substantially questioned in the 1960s by the Ambo (US-Japan Security Treaty) struggle, the anti-Vietnam war movement and a series of university conflicts, these protesters still identified Marxism as a counter-metanarrative to present the alternative form to reality.

The radicalisation of some student sects and the collapse of the student movements in the early 1970s signified that Marxism was not enough to provide them with a plausible narrative to pursue the alternative form of living. The liberation project is not as clear in contemporary society, because the source of suppressive power is no longer clearly identified as the form of tangible institution outside the subject.¹⁶ Instead, people have internalised it in the form of norms and disciplines, as Foucault describes through the concept of "biopower".¹⁷

¹¹ Iida (2002).

¹² Miyadai has now abandoned it to encourage a non-subject, and instead claims the necessity of inventing some kind of narrative to provide the meaning of life. See Uno (2011).

¹³ Uno (2011).

¹⁴ Tsurumi (1993).

¹⁵ Ohsawa (2008).

¹⁶ Iida (2002).

¹⁷ Foucault (1998).

Moreover, in the triumphant Japanese economy, people could enjoy the loss of fixed values as a state of ‘freedom’ because they could consume a differentiated sense of identities without a deep commitment to them.¹⁸ Ohsawa considers the 1970s to have marked the beginning of the new “era of the fictive”; people knowingly consumed images that did not claim any authenticity, pretending that they were real.¹⁹ The Aum incident revealed that the imagination of the ‘anti-real’ in the era of the fictive no longer worked as a political project. It was nothing more than fanatical terrorism.

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the economic bubble started to destabilise Japanese society. Not only did its cultural norms alienate some people who could find no meaningful life in it, but also more and more people were now losing their stable life prospects that Japanese economic success had previously appeared to guarantee. However, by this time, the concept of the anti-real did not even exist in a ‘fictive’ sense. According to Ohsawa, it is ‘impossible’ to identify.²⁰ In this “era of the impossible”, bodies may be the only solid basis on which to narrate life, and destructive action against them may be the last remaining imagination for the outside of the meaningless void.

The Absence of the Narrative of Life

Is there, in fact, a less destructive way of regaining a meaningful life in contemporary society? Several theoretical attempts have been made to find one. In the 1960s, the Situationist International claimed that the consumer society had rendered people powerless entities, capable only of choosing from the products, lifestyles and roles that hegemonic power had imposed upon them.²¹ The situationists encouraged the struggle for the alternative by releasing uncontained, intrinsic desires.²² The struggle of life in post-modernity is also identified by the autonomists. Hardt and Negri identify a new global hegemony as *Empire*, which regulates the world under the logic of a single neoliberal system. They posit the concept of ‘multitude’, a new political subject that fights against *Empire* based on a new social relationship that *Empire* has created.²³

These concepts are rather vague. Hardt and Negri seem to illustrate that

¹⁸ Iida (2002).

¹⁹ Ohsawa (2008).

²⁰ Ohsawa (2008).

²¹ Vaneigem (1983)

²² Debord (1983); Vaneigem (1983)

²³ Hardt and Negri (2004).

multitude can be ‘automatically’ born under the neoliberal system.²⁴ Newman claims that they do not explain “how this multitude comes together and why it revolts” while *Empire* generates more division than the commonness.²⁵

Indeed, asserting that his ‘hope is war,’ Akagi denies any possibility of collective action for social change. He believes that Japanese society will not accord him a legitimate voice because it still operates under the old norms of economic growth. It still regards it as being one’s own fault if one is a precarious part-time worker, although in fact many people have no other choice.²⁶ The multitude, the revolutionary subject in opposition to *Empire*, will never be formed as long as the majority of people accept this dominant norm. Thus, Akagi directs his anger at regular workers labouring under this norm instead of at *Empire*. Here, he indicates the hopeless miscommunication amongst the potential ‘multitudes’; how can this ‘multitude’ be formed when people are withdrawing inside their own territories in order to protect their own lives?

The situationists describe our struggle for life as releasing our ‘true experience’ from the representations imposed by the dominant system. However, are we hopeful of liberation? Is there an authentic desire, behind these representations, to be liberated? Melucci states that, in contemporary society, exploitation can be defined as “the deprivation of control over the construction of meaning”.²⁷ If so, the ‘outside’ of this power is the world without signification. It is this languagelessness of ‘who we can be’ or ‘where to go’ outside the reality that marginalises us and leads us to self-enclosure.

Self-enclosure and ‘Other Without Otherness’

Regardless of this impasse, a young sociologist, Furuichi, acknowledges that a significant number of young people in contemporary Japanese society find satisfaction in their lives with what they have now, instead of hoping for better conditions or an alternative to reality.²⁸ This self-contained lifestyle could invite boredom; however, Furuichi indicates that undertaking voluntary work with a simple narrative would allow them to acquire a meaning to life within the

²⁴ See Day (2005) and Newman (2007, 2011).

²⁵ Newman (2011), p.57.

²⁶ Akagi (2007, 2011).

²⁷ Melucci (1996), p.182

²⁸ According to Furuichi (2011), the statistics of 2010 show that 65.9% of male and 75.2% of female respondents in their 20s responded that their lives are satisfactory.

dominant norm.²⁹ He comments that this is a ‘clever way’ to live within a small community among close friends in that they can guarantee mutual acceptance.

This is a common analysis of Japanese contemporary culture: retreating into one’s own safe territory, ensuring mutual acceptance while supplying ready-made identities. Azuma suggests that the post-Aum era is the era of the “animal”, in that people consume a “database” that brings sensation directly to subjects without the mediation of a shared narrative and meaning.³⁰

This seems to be an extension of the cultural norm that has prevailed since the 1980s. On the other hand, the instability of post-bubble Japanese society has destabilised the solid basis for ‘enjoying’ the loss of (authentic) meaning. For example, in the post-bubble recession, most Japanese companies limit recruitment to new graduates, and this puts strong pressure on the job-hunting activities, or *shukatsu*, of Japanese university students. To them, failing *shukatsu* means that their entire self has been rejected, and it even drives them to suicide.³¹ Ouchi describes this extremely stressful tendency as ‘*zenshin-shukatsu*’ (a whole body job-hunting). Students accommodate their attributes and their entire way of life to the requirement of particular companies.³²

It seems that people’s entire lives are nowadays permeated by a certain small narrative whose meaning they do not believe. There is also a claim that contemporary Japanese children tend to “read the atmosphere” in a group and accommodate themselves to a certain “character” to support a pre-established harmony.³³ By limiting their territory and fixating their roles and discourses, they exchange mutual acceptance, which makes their existence meaningful. Thus they are extremely afraid of being hated.

Ohsawa analyses that, in the era of impossible, the only source of value resides in “the eyes of other people”.³⁴ This means that people simultaneously need, and are scared of, the evaluation of the other. People need “the other without otherness” – the other who provides them with the approval and meaning of the self, yet who should never hurt them.³⁵

²⁹ For example, Furuichi (2011) notes that a voluntary work in developing countries or disaster-hit area would provide an ‘extraordinary experience’ within the dominant norm, and highlights the meaning of life. He also adds the participation in social movements to this list of ‘extraordinary experience’.

³⁰ Azuma (2001).

³¹ Ouchi and Takenobu (2013).

³² Ouchi and Takenobu (2013).

³³ Doi (2008, 2009).

³⁴ Ohsawa (2008).

³⁵ Ohsawa (2008), p. 193.

This enclosed community without otherness is described by Baudrillard as “the hell of the Same”.³⁶ Contemporary culture and modern technology replace radical otherness with something harmless and predictable. Although this guarantees people’s chances of self-protection and self-reproduction, they can now barely distinguish their identities from one another.

This analysis is reminiscent of the Akihabara incident, a case of mass murder in 2008 that was triggered by an online incident. The perpetrator, a 25-year-old temporary worker called Tomohiro Kato, felt alienated from his job, family and friends. He devoted himself to an online community that provided him with recognition. However in this anonymous, non-physical communication space, someone else could easily pretend to be Kato. With his identity stolen, Kato thought that he “had been killed”.³⁷

In his autobiography Kato confesses that he was afraid to be alone, and was desperate for “connection to society”.³⁸ Nevertheless, his relationships remained shallow in ‘real’ society as he was afraid of being rejected by other people. The online community was the ideal supplier of ‘the other without otherness’ who does not hurt him and merely provides the meaning of his existence. He narrowed his territory, disconnecting himself from the radical others. He describes his victims as totally outside his imagination;³⁹ therefore, he used their lives to convey his anger to the anonymous harassers who stole his identity.

This incident tells us how the relation between the self, the other and society can be so hopelessly distorted. In between the ‘hell of the same’ and the vast outside-as-void, people’s hopes for meaningful lives often take the reverse form. There are self-enclosed subjects inside the dominant norm with the risk of over-conformity, while other people choose violence in search of an alternative narrative to affirm their own lives. Violent acts such as mass murder, suicide and ethnic exclusionism all reflect this contradictory life-denying affirmation of the meaning of life. How can we identify the meaning of life, describe the relationship between the self/others, and narrate our hopes in an era in which our value system has become so fluid?

³⁶ Baudrillard (1993), p.122.

³⁷ Kato (2012), p. 53.

³⁸ Kato (2012).

³⁹ Kato (2012), p.112.

The Fukushima Disaster as Deterritorialisation

The triple disasters of 11 March 2011 were, in one sense, the realisation of a subcultural imagination of a drastic social change. Although I cannot make a general statement that the disaster ended ‘the endless everyday life’, it can be said that the event at least created a huge rupture in a society that is believed to be stable. In particular, the nuclear disaster of the Fukushima Daiichi plants motivated tens of thousands of people nationwide to oppose nuclear plants, which have long been accepted as the norm. The nuclear disaster also questioned the ‘modern life project’ based exclusively upon instrumental rationality.

Several anti-nuclear demonstrations were held in Tokyo between spring and autumn 2011, mobilising up to 20,000 people. The movement experienced a further upsurge in summer 2012, when the Japanese government decided to restart the Ohi nuclear reactors in Western Japan, regardless of the potential risk of another disaster.⁴⁰ More than 100,000 people gathered at the weekly ‘*Kanteimae* protest’ (the protest in front of the Prime Minister’s office)⁴¹ in Tokyo, which was the largest number of protesters since the 1960s.

What initially motivated them was the anger toward the government and TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company), which kept failing to provide sufficient information about the scale of the damage. Furthermore, the radioactive contamination actually reached the Tokyo area, increasing people’s fears and anxiety.

However, people in Tokyo had another motivation for their concern over the Fukushima disaster, which happened more than 200km away. The Fukushima nuclear plants, built in the rural depopulated area of North East Japan, were generating the energy for the Tokyo area. This awakened another emotion: a sense of responsibility.

We had depended on these nuclear plants during the era of economic growth, and never questioned the risk until this disaster happened. That regret brought me here.⁴²

⁴⁰ Two of the Ohi nuclear reactors had been operating since the restart in July 2012. However, they were stopped again for inspection in September 2013. At the time of writing (November 2013), there are no nuclear plants operating in Japan.

⁴¹ The *Kanteimae* protest has been held every Friday since March 2012. It is organised by Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes, a network organisation of anti-nuclear groups and individuals in Tokyo.

⁴² Interviewee 1, male in 60s, participant in the ‘Tokyo big march’, held by MCAN (11 March 2012)

This sense of regret at not actively saying NO is shared by many protesters. Among the older generation, some show regret for their oblivion, saying that they had been anti-nuclear protesters after the Chernobyl accident but had failed to maintain the movement.⁴³

In particular, the protesters feel that their passive acceptance of the government/mass-media discourse allowed the nuclear plants to be built all over this earthquake-prone country. One regular participant of the Kanteimae protest says:

I have listened to what my parents said, my teachers said and lived a decent life, but what was that for? Now you have to think with your own brain. People might still think that the government will protect us, but actually they don't.⁴⁴

These people taking part in the protests say that they have now started collecting information by themselves, sharing it through social media and daily communication. They have also expanded their knowledge and actions through mobilisation. Various protesters have commented that they are now interested in other problems relating to the nuclear energy issue, such as a neoliberal economy, low-wage labour and an unjust social system, in that the urban area tends to sacrifice the rural area. Also, the huge mobilisation in the summer of 2012 gave the protesters confidence, and they realised that collective action could have an impact on society. In 2013, many anti-nuclear protesters joined in direct action against racism. In this way, they expanded their imagination for other people and acquired the practice of raising their voices, instead of merely accommodating themselves to the established norm.

It should be noted that, in the post-bubble era, there had already been some attempts at breaking norms, even before the Fukushima disaster. The writer/activist, Karin Amamiya, identifies the term 'precariat' as a new subject of engaging in the struggle for life.⁴⁵ Having herself endured a turbulent

⁴³ Interviewee 2, male in 50s, participant in the 'One million people's large occupation', held by MCAN (11 Nov 2012); Interviewee 3, female in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (23 Nov 2012).

⁴⁴ Interviewee 4, female in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (23 Nov 2012).

⁴⁵ Amamiya (2010). The term 'precariat' is a neologism combining the adjective 'precarious' and the noun 'proletariat', which usually describes temporary workers or part-time workers, whose labour

adolescence, she has been actively engaged in this precariat movement since the late 2000s. She claims that the movement includes all those who experience the hardships of life, from people with mental illness and low-income part-time workers to regular workers who are forced to overwork; and the movement aims at fighting against “a thought that decides whose lives are worth living and whose are not”.⁴⁶ In addition, a local community movement ‘*Shiroto no Ran*’ has been organising small carnivalesque demonstrations in Tokyo, proposing a different value of life from that of the consumer society.

Both Amamiya and *Shiroto no Ran* were among the initial organisers of the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement. Hajime Matsumoto, the spokesperson of *Shiroto no Ran*, says that he wanted to break down the atmosphere of self-restraint after the disaster.⁴⁷ At that time, people could not express their concerns about the nuclear accident, as Japanese society was dominated by an atmosphere of condolence and a strong narrative of national solidarity.

The existing system is not affirming our lives – the sense of dissatisfaction, which used to be held only by a minority of outsiders, is now shared by the majority of people, who used to support that system. In this sense, the Fukushima disaster is the experience of “deterritorialisation”.⁴⁸ A regular staff member of the Kanteimae protest describes how her perception of life changed after the disaster.

I wanted to be a normal person. Living a decent life had been a guideline of my life. [...] I have tried to be a fully-fledged person. I believed that would make my life more fulfilling. But now I realise that there was also another way, which is to reverse it (the concept of ‘fully-fledged’). From now on I will be reversing these unnecessary titles.⁴⁹

The Fukushima disaster brought a radical rupture to the belief of many Japanese people that the social system was immutable whatever commitment they did or did not make. The regret over their previous non-commitment was channelled by the ‘pioneers’ into a desire for the alternative form of living. We must not disregard the crucial encounter at the mobilisation here between the

form is flexible and insecure.

⁴⁶ Interview with Karin Amamiya (22 Mar 2012).

⁴⁷ Interview with Hajime Matsumoto (6 Apr 2012).

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, (1988).

⁴⁹ Interviewee 5, female in 50s, staff of the Kanteimae protest (17 Dec 2012).

people of the dominant norm and the outsiders who have been trying to project an alternative form of living, which resulted in the outburst of the anti-nuclear movement. This interviewee mentions *Shiroto no Ran* as one of her eye-openers. A meaningful life, for her, used to be the construction of herself according to the dominant norm of society, or of being regarded as ‘fully-fledged’ from society. However, she has found another kind of value through her experience of the disaster and encounters in the social movements.

Responsibility to be Open

The problem of contemporary Japanese society is the absence of a plausible narrative to guide people in how to live their lives. Hence, how will the post-Fukushima protesters proceed in their movement towards a better way of life?

One distinctive aspect of the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement is that it does not assume a totalising ideology. What connects protesters is a particular insistence on ‘No Nukes’, while they have different opinions on the entire picture of the society-to-come. The protesters often say that the political stance of Left or Right does not matter, because “it is the matter of life”.⁵⁰ The movement *does* include various people who identify themselves as Left, Right, and politically unaffiliated. Therefore, this movement is different from that of the 1960s, in which autonomous individuals were trying to realise the ‘ideal’ form of society based upon a linear process with which they all agreed.

Most of the time, the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters do not describe any ‘hope’ as the impetus for action. The protesters gathered in the street because they were desperate but “did not know what else to do”.⁵¹ In a sense, they are less hopeful than Akagi, with his nihilistic ‘hope of war’. One organiser of the Kanteimae protest, who classifies himself in the low income group, comments:

Akagi is not hopeless enough [...] I don’t believe that we can actually achieve what we want. But I am doing this protest, because I cannot rely on somebody else to do it. I am doing this because I have no hope.⁵²

⁵⁰ For example, one protester states that the movement is intended “to protect children, protect lives” and it that can be more like “primitive politics; not ideology”. Interviewee 6, male in 10s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (21 Dec 2012).

⁵¹ Interviewee 7, female in 30s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (30 Nov 2012).

⁵² Interviewee 8, male in 30s, staff of the Kanteimae protest (28 Dec 2012).

The discourse of the protesters has more affinity with a sense of despair than with hope. Regardless of our identity, we are already part of social reproduction, and we cannot, or should not, disconnect our private lives from it. Since no one can stand outside society, silence does not mean being a neutral observer; silence is the approval of reality. This despair turns into a sense of responsibility for social engagement, and this sense of responsibility has replaced the motivation led by a universal ideology; we must actively engage in society, even though we do not know the correct way to do so.

According to Critchley, traumatic experience calls on us to look towards ethics. When the core of one's subjectivity is exposed to the uncontrollable outside, and when a sense of the self is split by the incomprehensible other, the subject finds the responsibility to be open to this otherness, and tries to respond to it. This infinite responsibility to face the radical otherness forms the ethics of commitment in interconnected society.⁵³

By exercising this responsibility of being ever open to the incomprehensible other, one might confront radical disagreement. The Kanteimae protest received some criticism from the people in Fukushima on the grounds that the movement led by 'urban' people does not understand how the Fukushima people feel. Yet it seems that the protesters are determined to speak out based on their own identity, experience and ethics. One of the organisers, Yasumichi Noma, responded to the criticism, saying:

If we all try to avoid hurting someone, we will inevitably shut our mouths. Then we will have a totally quiet society where nobody hurts but everybody is completely suppressed. Rather, we need to accept some pain to establish a ground for earnest discussion.⁵⁴

This individualism is all too often misunderstood as selfishness and irresponsibility. Several intellectuals have indicated that these protesters are thoughtless and reactive, ignoring the local economy in Fukushima and simply asserting the outsider's view,⁵⁵ or being carried away by a mere populism.⁵⁶

⁵³ Critchley (2007), pp. 61-62.

⁵⁴ NHK-ETV, Fukushima wo Zutto Miteiru TV, 『福島をずっと見ている TV』 (Broadcasted on 6 Dec, 2012).

⁵⁵ A sociologist, Kainuma (2012), takes this position, criticising that the protesters are over-simplifying the problem. Also, a political scientist, Suzuki (2012), notes that it is undemocratic for people in Tokyo to try to stop the Ohi nuclear reactors, which generate electricity for western Japan.

However, the individualistic voice of the protesters does not mean that they do not care about the others. Noma's comment indicates that they are willing to interact with the others, although this does not necessarily mean reaching a consensus. Their claim should not be judged in the typical opposition of individualism versus altruism. Perhaps the more important point is whether an individual claim is willing to interact or remain self-sufficient.

The social engagement of the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters seems to have its basis in their personal experience and emotion. Yet the ethics of commitment are woven by encountering the (unwanted) event and the incomprehensible other, and by trying to respond to it.

The Imperfectible Self

However, the 'openness' to the others does not necessarily result in constructive interaction. The relationship between the self and the other could end up with one assimilating/subjugating itself to the other or dominating/silencing the other. On the other hand, too much respect for the difference between the self and the other leaves atomised subjects with a relativist non-interventionist policy.

The ethics of interaction are particularly important for movements such as the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement, because it is the very interaction that motivates the movement. What prevents their individualistic, but interactive, claim from losing its openness and becoming one-sided enforcement of a personal view towards the other? In summer 2012, there was indeed a criticism that the anti-nuclear claim had become the majority, dominating and suppressing the minor voices.⁵⁷

However, it seems that the Fukushima disaster brought another crucial factor that made the protesters remain open to the others: a sense of ambiguity of the self. What they used to believe was no longer trustworthy, and they found that their everyday lives harboured such a catastrophe. It significantly destabilised many of the protesters' identities. One protester explains that, before the disaster, she was living her life based on what she believed to be right. However, the

⁵⁶ A philosopher, Azuma, describes on his Twitter account (21 Jul 2013) that the Kanteimae protest is 'populism' along the same lines as exclusionism and racism [<https://twitter.com/hazuma>]. Kainuma (2012, p.114) compares exclusionist demonstrations with the anti-nuclear demonstrations, asking "is a society that has social movements really that good?"

⁵⁷ For example, Sankei Shimbun newspaper published a column (19 Jul 2012) criticising one speaker at the anti-nuclear rally, who implied that the anti-nuclear claim had become the 'nation's voice'.

disaster made her realise that “it was not enough” because she had “never involved other people in it”.⁵⁸

Perfecting oneself, or being an autonomous subject is not enough to build a better society unless it creates a resonance with outside entities. This feeling leads to an egress from the self-sufficient subject, and to the quest for the other to get a response. This sense of ambiguous self is, together with the sense of responsibility, displaying a new relationship between the self, the other and society. This responsive subject is not a transparent ‘non-subject’ who is totally dependent on the other’s decision or internalises the value of the others. They have their emotion and ethics as the basis of their action, yet it is always generated through interaction with the others.

This deconstructed subjectivity is illustrated by Deleuze and Guattari through the concept of “machinic” assemblage.⁵⁹ They describe the world as being composed of a series of machines that are “plugged into one another”.⁶⁰ The subject as machine does not have an essential, pre-fixed identity. His/her identity is not self-sufficient and it is always open to being coupled with other machines. Such a machinic assemblage is neither a mere accumulation of independent parts (mechanism) nor the seamless whole in which each part fuses into harmonious unity (organism).⁶¹ De Landa argues that the whole emerges contingently as a result of interaction between parts exercising their capacity.⁶² Individual actors can make their intentional choice, yet any consequence of the synthesis of large social assemblage would be unintentional.⁶³

The post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement can be seen as this assemblage. Each ‘part’ brings his/her capacity to the space of the protest. For many, it is a mere physical body in the swarm of protesters. In particular, the Kanteimae protest is designed to be the easiest action for participants, which is just to stand and chant, or even simply to ‘be there’. Nevertheless, some make speeches and others bring their instruments. There is a cyclists’ protest around the area and a ‘guerrilla cafe’ has emerged to provide refreshments for the protesters. This is perhaps not really similar to the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ in which a dialogue and deliberation between the participants is supposed to reach a

⁵⁸ Interviewee 5, female in 50s, staff of the Kanteimae protest (17 Dec 2012).

⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

⁶⁰ Marks (1998), p. 49.

⁶¹ May (2005), De Landa (2006).

⁶² De Landa (2006), pp. 10-11.

⁶³ De Landa (2006), p. 24.

‘rational consensus’.⁶⁴ The assemblage of these Kanteimae protesters does not produce a consensus. Nevertheless, the assemblage is not a mere aggregate of individuals. It is a place where each ‘part’ can bring his/her own capacity and create new possibilities.

In this sense, the Kanteimae protest is notable. This weekly protest began with only 300 people seeking to pressurise the government by expressing the people’s anti-nuclear will. However, after the huge mobilisation in the summer of 2012, the meaning of this action was diversified. Many interviewees describe the Kanteimae protest as a space for exchanging encouragement and motivating one another to further action. Moreover, one organiser of the Kanteimae protest recalls how he resolved to continue the movement when he saw how many protesters had gathered, even in the pouring rain.⁶⁵

It seems that these protesters know that, as individuals, they are not perfect and can sometimes become lazy and forgetful; therefore, they mobilise their physical bodies into the eyes of the other, making a connection with them so that they can continue to practise their ethics in assemblage. They already know from experience that it creates a resonance in society. Although the number of participants in the Kanteimae protest has now decreased, one interviewee positively describes the Kanteimae protest as a live coal to be maintained, so that they can recover the flame when necessary.⁶⁶ She seems to believe in the huge potential of this small flame.

Chesters and Welsh describe the alter-globalisation movement as the “temporary stabilisation and heightening of collective intensities”,⁶⁷ or what Deleuze and Guattari call “plateaux”. Each movement becomes a space of various encounters, networking, collective deliberation and capacity building processes, and its resonance directs participants to many different plateaux, forming a new rhizomatic network.⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “rhizome” is contrasted with the hierarchal form of the arboreal, heading towards its convergence.⁶⁹

The Kanteimae protest can be understood as a space for forming this rhizomatic network by the spreading of actions, or spreading a sense of

⁶⁴ Newman (2007).

⁶⁵ Interviewee 9, male in 30s, staff of the Kanteimae protest (11 Jan 2013).

⁶⁶ Interviewee 4, female in 60s, participant at the Kanteimae protest (23 Nov 2012).

⁶⁷ Chesters and Welsh (2006), p. 90.

⁶⁸ Chesters and Welsh (2006).

⁶⁹ Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

responsibility that leads to actions, rather than being a space for constructing one right answer. Each ‘part’ brings a new meaning to the assemblage, while the practice in the assemblage changes the ‘parts’ as well. Here, the search for a better form of living is not a linear project based on a coherent programme. In such a rhizomatic project, the participants anchor themselves with the very network they create.⁷⁰ In the network, each ‘incomplete’ self engages the rebel “against [their] own complicity” by repeating “millions of experiments”.⁷¹

A Life in Flow

Several people taking part in the protests comment that the Fukushima disaster has changed their idea of how they want to live their lives. They insist that we need to reconsider the post-war social scheme, saying “prioritising economic growth cannot protect our lives”⁷² and “we should not be wealthier by depending on something uncontrollable”.⁷³ The slogans ‘Protect lives’ (*Inochi wo mamore*) and ‘Protect children’ (*Kodomo wo mamore*) are common at the anti-nuclear demonstrations, as are ‘No to nuclear plants’ (*Genpatsu iranai*) and ‘No to restarting (the nuclear reactors)’ (*Saikado hantai*).

The discourse of ‘life over money (economy)’ might sound moralistic. That is why people such as Tomohiro Akagi criticise this anti-nuclear movement, saying that “they (the protesters) will be fine (even if the economy shrinks as a result of abolishing nuclear plants), because it is only the poor people who suffer from the damage of an economic shrinkage”.⁷⁴ His claim indicates that the anti-nuclear protesters know, after all, that their own lives are sufficiently protected from their own moralistic claim of deterritorialisation to save others. Akagi even argues that the discourse of ‘for the sake of children’ is the preserve of wealthy people who can afford to establish a family with children.⁷⁵

However, the protesters’ aim of ‘protecting lives’ seems to go beyond the concept of the individual lives of myself and the other. The Fukushima disaster has not merely opened the protesters’ imaginations to consider the other people who live outside their community. It has also expanded the imagination for the non-existing other: the future generation. This imagination for the historical

⁷⁰ Escobar (2008), p.268

⁷¹ Holloway (2010), p.256-7

⁷² Interviewee 10, male in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (21 Dec 2012).

⁷³ Interviewee 11, male in 50s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (11 Jan 2013).

⁷⁴ Akagi, on Twitter, (22 Jun 2012). [https://twitter.com/T_akagi].

⁷⁵ Akagi, on Twitter, (10 Jul 2012).

other allows the deepening of the concept of life.

One protester comments that the disaster has taught her that we need to value life as *inochi* (life-force) rather than as *kurashi* (the way of individual living). She distinguishes these two as follows:

Inochi is something that is connected to the future, while *kurashi* is the way of life in a limited time. It can be said that it is a difference between ethics and common sense. Common sense varies in time, while ethics are woven by the accumulation of data we acquire through the interaction with others.⁷⁶

Her comment indicates that the slogan ‘protect lives’ (*inochi*) means more than asking for protection of individual lives. By *inochi* she means a flow that accumulates from the past, involves her life and continues to the future. The Fukushima disaster shocked her because radioactive contamination, which remains for decades, has distorted this life as flow in a way she never wanted. Another protester comments:

We could recover from the war, but (the highly contaminated area in) Fukushima will remain uninhabitable for a long time. It has happened during my lifetime. I want an excuse for our children and grandchildren, saying that I have done something (to fix it). I used to believe that I would complete my own peaceful life, but I shouldn’t, in such a huge mess.⁷⁷

Morioka points out that, for Japanese people, the term *inochi* possesses contradictory characteristics of finiteness and infiniteness. On one hand, life belongs to the individual and encompasses birth and death. In this context, life is regarded as an independent ‘particle’ with a clear border and limitation. Yet, at the same time, life can be seen as a network or a stream of these individual lives, which expands thorough the universe, and continues through history.⁷⁸

In contemporary Japanese society, people seem to have been struggling to perfect the individual self into a certain form. However the traumatic disaster highlighted another aspect of life, as assemblage. The Fukushima disaster

⁷⁶ Interviewee 12, female in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (16 Nov 2012).

⁷⁷ Interviewee 13, female in 50s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (14 Dec 2012).

⁷⁸ Morioka (2012).

revealed the incompleteness of self as an individual who had been unknowingly harbouring a possible disaster; also the event brought a sense of responsibility to face the otherness. The slogan ‘protect lives’ could be understood as protecting this life as an assemblage, rather than protecting each independent life. By chanting this, they may be declaring that they are part of the flow of life, accepting their responsibility to direct it in a better way. They are doing it for themselves rather for the sake of others, because it is their meaning of life.

Reconsidering the Meaning of Life

Just as the concept ‘life’ has two aspects, De Landa acknowledges that the term ‘meaning’ also has ‘two meanings’; one is linguistic ‘signification’, and the other is pragmatic ‘significance’.⁷⁹ For instance, a sentence such as ‘What do you mean?’ asks for signification, clarification and disambiguation. However, when someone says his/her life has no ‘meaning’, he/she indicates that his/her life is not significant/important to anybody. De Landa mentions that the term ‘significance’ relates to the “capacity to make a difference”.⁸⁰

Here, the linguistic form of meaning (signification) and non-linguistic form of meaning (significance) appear to have contrasting natures, since the former is about identity, fixation and territorialisation while the latter implies difference, change and deterritorialisation. These two are often confused; and those who pursue ‘the meaning of life’ would be the greatest victims of the confusion, as we have already examined how contemporary Japanese young people fall into over-conformity in order to gain identification (signification) to make their life significant. Although signification does sometimes make one’s life significant, it leads to self-enclosure when people believe that gaining signification is the only way to make their lives ‘meaningful’.

On the other hand, the meaning of life for most post-Fukushima protesters has less to do with signification. The protesters often describe themselves as “plus-one” of the protesters,⁸¹ “a drop” in a river⁸² and “a tree” on a mountain.⁸³ Although they regard themselves as a mere number without signification, they

⁷⁹ De Landa (2011).

⁸⁰ De Landa (2011).

⁸¹ Interviewee 6, male in 10s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (21 Dec 2012); Interviewee 7, female in 30s (30 Nov 2012). Precise Japanese is ‘*Atamakazu wo tasu*’.

⁸² Interviewee 5, female in 50s (17 Dec 2012).

⁸³ They mention a Japanese saying: ‘even a dead tree may brighten a mountain’ (*Kareki mo yama no nigiwai*). Interviewee 14, male in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (30 Nov 2012); Interviewee 15, female in 60s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (21 Dec 2012).

know that their existence is significant in assemblage, making a difference to themselves, to others and to society. Deleuze explains:

The life of such individuality fades away in favour of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life...⁸⁴

This concept of life in assemblage is clarified in a new materialist philosophy that emphasises the process of ‘self-organisation’. It describes a spontaneous formation of the physical, chemical, biological or social structure out of the interaction between parts and the surrounding conditions. The self-organised structure is constantly formed and re-formed without any central control and fixed picture as the whole.⁸⁵

New materialism is distinguished from a certain traditional vitalist philosophy, although both reject the reductionist understanding of life that simplifies life as the mechanistic accumulation of the parts. The traditional vitalist philosophy tends to assume life as an organic whole with the end/intention that gives each part its harmonious order. In contrast to this, Colebrook refers to the Deleuzian concept that describes life as ‘neither organic nor mechanistic’.⁸⁶ Life is not explained as having a transcendent meaning as the whole, nor is it an accumulation of independent parts whose attribution is calculable under instrumental rationality. It does not have an identifiable meaning in advance, but still has significance. Inspired by Deleuze, De Landa illustrates life as an assemblage in which individuals are testing their capacities in the limited environment, or checking one another’s “affordance”.⁸⁷ Here, the distinction between subject and object disappears and all entities become dependent variables affecting one another. In this sense, it is more accurate to say that life is both “self-organised and other-organised”.⁸⁸

New materialism posits a new vision of life, which is different from the

⁸⁴ Deleuze (2001), p. 29.

⁸⁵ Escobar (2008).

⁸⁶ Colebrook (2010), p.173.

⁸⁷ De Landa (2002), p.63. The concept of ‘affordance’ was introduced by James J. Gibson. According to De Landa, ‘affordance’ is a capacity of things, although it is different from ‘intrinsic property’ of things. ‘Affordance’ of things is relational to those who are affected; for example, ‘affordance’ of water surface is perceived differently between small insects (which can walk on it) and heavier animals (which break through the surface tension).

⁸⁸ Escobar (2008), p. 260.

perfection towards the already-articulated norm. De Landa refers to the Darwinist “norm of reaction” to explain this non-essential description of life. In the essentialist notion, each life form is measured by a resemblance or “degrees of perfection” in comparison with the fixed archetype. Meanwhile, the “norm of reaction” considers life in the dynamics of the interaction between several variables affecting one another, such as genotypes and outside environment.⁸⁹

The latest developments in genetics prove that a life is more ‘rhizomatic’ than the Darwinist theory of evolution through heredity and ecological selection pressures. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, with reference to viral infection, lateral gene transfer between the already differentiated entities is commonly seen in the evolution of life forms.⁹⁰ The struggle of life is neither about completing oneself into some ideal form, nor about releasing an authentic subjectivity. It is identified in the non-linear dynamics in assemblage, and its meaning depends on how the interactions between individuals and surrounding entities occur.

How to Affirm Life?

It is misguided, however, to conclude that the Fukushima disaster changed people’s perceptions from life-as-particle to life-as-assemblage. Although it is reported that almost 70-80% of the Japanese people now desire a nuclear-free society sometime in the future, the results of two general elections in December 2012 and July 2013 both favoured the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a pro-nuclear conservative party that has been dominating Japanese politics for most of the post-war period.⁹¹ After the election in December, many of my interviewees expressed their shock at discovering that they were surrounded by a sea of indifference and oblivion, two years after the accident.

This result revealed a divided worldview on how we can affirm life in post-Fukushima society. After the general election of December 2012, the political scientist Atsushi Sugita commented that it was “presentism” that made people

⁸⁹ De Landa (2002), pp. 48-49.

⁹⁰ Raoult (2010).

⁹¹ The Fukushima disaster happened under the government of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which achieved a historical regime change in 2009, ending the long LDP-led political era. Although the DPJ government had not been actively promoting anti-nuclear policy after the Fukushima disaster, the pressure of the anti-nuclear movement forced them to announce a ‘new energy strategy’, which aimed at achieving a nuclear-free society by 2040. In this political situation, the return to the LDP government was a clear setback for the anti-nuclear protesters.

vote for the LDP, as it was prioritising the economic boost.⁹² The pursuit of the stability of individual life seemed to have overwhelmed life as assemblage, which might be threatened by another nuclear disaster.

Life as individual particle and life as fluid assemblage are both aspects of life. However, their desires are contradictory, as Morioka distinguishes them as the “desire of the body” and the “desire of life”.⁹³ The former relates to life as particle, which sought for self-protection and self-reproduction within a closed environment. Meanwhile, “desire of life” indicates the passion for opening up one’s individual life to the radical encounter and creating it anew; therefore, it relates to the act of deterritorialisation.

Considering the results of the general elections, I often wondered whether these protesters had been left out of the majority of Japanese people, who were determined to return to the situation before the disaster and engage in protecting their individual lives as if nothing had happened. The act of deterritorialisation is indeed difficult.

Nevertheless, many people in the protests still said that they would continue. The organiser of the Kanteimae protest comments, “I gave up giving up. We can never go back before 3.11”.⁹⁴ Another participant says, “at least I keep raising my voice. Otherwise it will be forgotten”; the elections made him realise the necessity of appealing to those “who are too busy with their own lives”.⁹⁵

Those people in the dominant norm were probably the same people the protesters themselves had once been. Thus, the protesters know that individuals sometimes tend to close their territory, becoming lazy and forgetful. Although they emphasise life as an open flow, this does not mean that they are trying to completely deconstruct their closed form of life. They concede a desire for the closed individual body because it is also part of life.

This tolerance towards incompleteness may be the reason why they are able to continue their painstaking practice of infinite responsibility to face the radical other. The post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters seem to be finding a balance between the openness and self-closure of life. It is probably not a complete

⁹² The comment was made at the talk event ‘Shinseiken ni dou taijisuruka’ (『新政権にどう対峙するか』) on 22 December 2012, held in Tokyo.

⁹³ Morioka (2003)

⁹⁴ Interviewee 9, male in 30s, staff of the Kanteimae protest (11 Jan 2013).

⁹⁵ Interviewee 16, male in 20s, participant in the Kanteimae protest (11 Jan 2013). Following the election, the organisers of the Kanteimae protest also started publishing free pamphlets to appeal to the people outside the protesters’ circle.

elimination of a border but a knowledge of when and how to open and cross the border and with whom.⁹⁶ It is probably a question of how to be an “organism unbound”.⁹⁷

Morioka argues that the “desire of the body” can be channelled into the “desire of life”.⁹⁸ The body or territoriality is not something to be denied, as Escobar indicates that a change occurs out of a familiar place and grounding practices.⁹⁹ We need a border, but the border should be thought of as a “discursive membrane” that has a double function “both isolate cells and connect them to others”.¹⁰⁰

I see this “discursive membrane” in the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement. The Kanteimae protest is a stable territory that the participants and the organisers carefully maintain, but in that familiar territory people create a new possibility. Thus, the hope might lie inside their individual bodies and experience – how they have changed since the disaster, how they have opened themselves up, been affecting one another, and found pleasure from their responsibility for engagement.

One protester comments:

It is such a terrible time, and it might sound imprudent to say, but I feel excitement too, because I can make connection with various people locally and create new actions.¹⁰¹

She was one of the organisers of the anti-nuclear demonstration held on the same day of my interview. I also joined it. It was supposed to be a joyous parade in springtime with musical bands, colourful costumes and a karaoke machine; on the way, however, we were suddenly hit by a hailstorm. Then, in my desperate attempt to look for shelter, I saw that many protesters were actually cheering and celebrating everything that fell upon them. When I recall this now, I find that it probably sums up how they affirm life.

I believe that people make a social commitment as they want their limited

⁹⁶ Day (2005), pp. 185-186. Day describes this new ethical subject using the insight of Gloria Anzaldua.

⁹⁷ Pearson (1997), p. 189.

⁹⁸ Morioka (2003).

⁹⁹ Escobar (2008).

¹⁰⁰ Peltonen (2006), cited in Escobar (2008, p.260).

¹⁰¹ Interviewee 17, female in 30s, staff of the ‘No Nukes parade’ held by ‘Shiroto no Ran’ and the local anti-nuclear group ‘Datsu Genpatsu Sugunami’ (6 May 2012).

lives to be meaningful; here, however, a ‘meaningful life’ may not be so much about self-protection or self-perfection. A life of singularity becomes meaningful when one immerses one’s limited body in the flow of life, encountering other entities, and making a difference to the self, to them and to society through one’s own capacity. ‘Lifeness’ or dignity of life may mean the celebration of this threshold.

Conclusion

I do not claim that the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement is providing a ‘remedy’ for contemporary Japanese society, where people seem to be stuck between the fear of ‘meaningless’ outside and suffocation of the inside, and the attempt to affirm their own lives sometimes takes a destructive form against the self and others. Nevertheless, I can state that the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters are indicating different values of life that are beyond signification and identification.

I regard my research on social movements as an exploration of my own life. I was born in 1980 and am thus two years older than Kato, and five years younger than Akagi and Amamiya. The ‘hardship of life’ that they explain has also been part of my life. Therefore, I wanted to explore how we can raise our voices and affirm our lives in an era when individuals seem to be atomised and the meaning of one’s existence appears unclear.

What I learned from the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear protesters is the following: like it or not, we are interconnected with others, sometimes with unwelcome otherness, and we have a responsibility to keep responding to them and co-create a better society. Our struggle in life is probably not heading toward completion. Instead, we always recognise the incompleteness of the individual self and remain ourselves open to others. In a rhizomatic connection, we will keep trying out better arrangements of life as assemblage with our own capacity. The meaning in life will be woven through the endless experiment of encounters, responses and changes.

This new concept of life and ethics might be further developed in the movement. I hope that my research will be part of the movement and I am willing to continue my fieldwork, probably because this is the meaning of my life. First and foremost, I enjoy seeing myself changing through the encounter with the protesters.

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