

Anne Allison. *Precarious Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 248pp. (ISBN: 9780822355625)

Relentless in its examination of “the collapse of mundane everydayness” (2) in Japan since the late twentieth-century, Anne Allison’s *Precarious Japan* offers a sobering portrait of the economic, political, and geological instabilities (the latter being especially palpable in the post-3/11 climate) that have shaped Japan’s historical present. Through a lens informed by affect and social theory, and augmented with touching ethnographic narratives, Allison’s study focuses on precarity—the sense of instability and uncertainty, particularly that felt by Japan’s under-educated and under-employed - - “the precariat” -- but equally applicable to the marginalized homeless and under-valued elderly.

In *Precarious Japan*, Allison contributes to the dynamic and growing field of affect studies, which originated in psychology but has since become a crucial component of other academic disciplines. As a field of study, affect is concerned with how people engage the world around them—how they are affected and how they affect others. It is an appropriate theoretical lens for Allison, as she is primarily concerned with how the Japanese are “getting by” today. With precision, she weaves together theoretical threads from Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant and others, while incorporating Japanese scholarship and non-theoretical social commentary. Affect discourse typically focuses on life’s difficulties, and the present book is no exception. The six main chapters are populated with harrowing accounts (provided by Allison herself from interviews or summarized from news reports, television programs and other media) of homelessness and anxiety, murder and forgotten bodies, social withdrawal and suicide. Allison investigates the causes of this

disquiet, focusing primarily on the dissolution of the home and other “intimate spaces,” as well as the bonds that hold people together.

Allison has written about the home before. In *Permitted and Prohibited Desires* (University of California Press, 2000), for instance, she evaluated the political implications of the *bentô* lunch and investigated the complex triad between home, school, and national subjecthood. She brought our attention to the *kyôiku mama*, or education mother, whose duty it is to ensure her child’s academic success at any cost. *Precarious Japan* both begins and ends at home and, by extension, the family, tracing the increasingly fuzzy line between homeless and family-less. The opening pages introduce us to a sensational story in which a man’s mummified body was found in the apartment he had called home for twenty years, setting a somber tone for the book that follows and foregrounding one of its major themes— isolation. Indeed, the man had been dead for a month before his body was found. From here, Allison goes on to discuss: *bikikomori*, those individuals who withdraw completely to live in isolation in their bedrooms; homelessness and the prevalence of savage attacks often carried out by homeless men; and finally the elderly, alone and neglected, as a metaphor for the unraveling of previously sacred family ties. Japan has become, she says, quoting the title of a Japanese television program, a “relationless society” (8).

Central to these somber narratives is the instability of community in a landscape defined by economic and social uncertainty—precarity. Early on, Allison explains that “[p]recarity is a word of the times” (6). The word itself gained momentum with the publication of Guy Standing’s *The Precariat* (2011), in which the author traces the possible emergence of a new class, “the ‘new denizens’ of the world” (53), in Allison’s words, who are disposable, cheap, and ultimately dangerous because they have nothing to lose and nowhere to go. In Japan, everybody is homeless, she seems to suggest, symbolically if not literally: loneliness, isolation, dissatisfaction, and anxiety about the present and the future

complicate the very notion of home and its affective comforts. Allison calls this situation “ordinary refugeism...the crisis of getting by” (43), a condition made worse, though not caused by, the triple disaster on March 11, 2012. Very little in this book is about what happened in Tōhoku, in fact. Allison had all but completed her manuscript before the disaster, but subsequently refashioned things by bracketing her study with observations on the “newest wave of precariousness” (18) engendered by earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis.

Following the trajectory of affect studies today, Allison focuses her attention on how people cope with life, how they survive, how they grieve. Although she does not evoke the term, she is talking about impasse, a trope Berlant uses in her works to describe the ways in which the building blocks of “normal life” have been foreclosed. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant describes the impasse as “temporary housing,” a fitting and unfortunate metaphor for the 3/11 crisis that left many Japanese homeless or living in shelters, within which many still live. So much of Allison’s book takes place in the trenches. But where there is misery, there is potential for healing; where there is death, there is opportunity for life; where there is grief, there is recovery. This is the underlying message of the book: the resilience of the Japanese in the face of so much precarity. She takes the reader into pockets of hope, such as the neighborhood patrol whose duty is to check on the elderly at night with flashlights tied to sticks so they can peek into second-floor windows, or the gathering of “sick” and “broken” youth who are in so much pain they wish only to share it, or the NPOs dedicated to helping the destitute. Allison is not overly optimistic; she admits that while some are eager to enact change by “shovel[ing]...mud” (202) or becoming mayors or clearing scrap, others are content to stay where they are, on the couch or in their bedrooms.

If this sounds familiar, it should; it is “just like everywhere today” (206), Allison says of the current state of affairs in which

people's lives are governed by the choices they make. To be sure, this book succeeds because it is familiar while also being about Japan; it is also timely. The anxieties she describes—disposable labor, a shaky economy, disposed youth, and the consequences of neoliberalism—resonate beyond the pages of Allison's thoughtful study. In this sense, the world is getting smaller, and sociopolitical currents can be felt on a global scale. As such, the book is beneficial for Japan scholars as well as those interested in ethnography, anthropology, affect, and global affairs. Furthermore, Allison's command of prose makes this an approachable, jargon-free study for the non-expert, who should come away with a clearer sense of the issues facing Japan today and how the Japanese are dealing with them. "Something abnormal has happened in Japan" (151), Japanese researchers have noted. It is a familiar refrain: things like this don't happen in Japan. A similar sentiment marked the late 1990s (the infamous "lost decade" that followed the bursting of the economic bubble), when a series of high-profile murders brought the kind of violence usually associated with afar closer to home: just like everywhere.

In the end, questions remain: what will become of the nuclear industry, of the still disposed who live in temporary shelters, of the greying population, of the present? Allison wisely foregoes predictions, however, preferring to let the passage of time resolve such lingering uncertainties.

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