

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



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Wielding Toxic Discourse: Insanity in the Nuclear Narratives of Chernobyl and Fukushima

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Environmental scholar Lawrence Buell defined toxic discourse as a mode of writing that expresses “anxiety arising from a perceived threat of environmental hazard” (2003, 30-31). Fictional works from the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear accidents feature characters who appear to be mentally unstable because of this anxiety. Rather than their insanity discrediting them in the eyes of the nuclear industry, this presentation draws inspiration from Buell to consider how insanity can be used by victims of nuclear disasters to claim authority through toxic discourse by crafting narratives of resistance. One of the most controversial images stemming from nuclear disasters is of people who remain in highly irradiated areas unfit for human habitation. In novels by Kimura Yūsuke (*Sacred Cesium Ground* and *Isa’s Deluge*) and Alina Bronsky (*Baba Dunja’s Last Love*), the so-called insanity of these characters allows them to comment critically on the postdisaster situation, specifically the evaluation of risk and the bankruptcy of credibility. They provide insightful voices of resistance to the narratives of containment and safety perpetuated by the government and nuclear industry. The presentation ends with a consideration of actual residents in contaminated zones in Kamanaka Hitomi’s documentary *Little Voices from Fukushima*.

Rachel DiNitto is a Professor of modern and contemporary Japanese literature at the University of Oregon. In addition to her recent book, *Fukushima Fiction: The Literary Landscape of Japan’s Triple Disaster* (2019), she has published articles on the literature, film, and manga of this disaster and postwar Japan.

About:

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is a forum open to scholars working on Japan in any field of the humanities. It is organized by Barbara Geilhorn and Torsten Weber. All are welcome to attend, but prior registration online at www.dijtokyo.org or by email (geilhorn@dijtokyo.org) is greatly appreciated.

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