

Phatic Traces: Sociality in Contemporary Japan

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ABSTRACT

Widely recognized as a social problem in Japan, kodokushi (solitary death) stereotypically happens when old people living alone, detached from kin and neighbors, die alone without being noticed immediately, leaving the body to decompose. Reorganizing Japanese discourses of kinship, locality, and other modalities of “connection” (en), practices and projects concerning solitary death articulate an emergent fantasy of sociality. I analyze this fantasy as an ideology of communication that draws upon idioms of “contact,” or phaticity: “touching-together” (fureai), “connecting” (tsunagari), and so on. Due recognition of such an ideology reveals different ways in which sociality is understood in Japan today. Reclaiming the concept of phaticity through a more explicit theoretical metalanguage, I offer an exploration of the cultural concept of en to suggest that the condition of solitude transpires in an interstice between two qualitatively different chronotopes of sociality. [Keywords: Phaticity, sociality, solitude, semiotics, Japan]

When Kinship Isn't Interesting

Nur ein Wort. Nur eine Bitte. Nur ein Bewegen der Luft. Nur ein Beweis daß Du noch lebst und wartest. Nein keine Bitte, nur ein Atmen, kein Atmen nur ein Bereitsein, kein Bereitsein nur ein Gedanke, kein Gedanke nur ruhiger Schlaf.

Just a word. Just a request. Just a movement of the air. Just a proof that you are alive and waiting. No, not even a request, just a breath, not a breath, just a readiness, not a readiness, just a thought, not a thought, just a calm sleep.

—Kafka 1992:333

I AM STILL ALIVE.

—On Kawara¹

In July 2010, a mummified body was found in a house in Adachi ward, a densely populated residential area in downtown Tokyo. The body was identified as that of a man who died 30 years ago but who, if alive, would have turned the age of 111, according to the resident registry of the ward. But the registry did not recognize his death until this discovery, nor did the family of the deceased report or even apparently realize the fact of death, even though—and this is the problem—the family had lived at the same residence where the body was found. The man had died alone in the midst of his family. This strange case prompted a mass media investigation into the way in which municipalities manage their population through resident registries. A series of discoveries followed that revealed similar cases of what the media quickly termed “unidentified senior citizens” in municipalities all over Japan. These senior people were identified only in the registry when they may have been long dead or were presently missing (as more likely in many cases of elderly homelessness) (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai Special Shuzaihan 2012:6).

Cases of death like this are now captioned in the media as *kodokushi*, or “solitary death.” *Kodokushi* is, perhaps, one of the most haunting images of troubled sociality that creeps up in the discourse on Japan’s “aging society.” The term stereotypically refers to when old people, especially old men, die alone without being noticed immediately, leaving the body to decompose. These people live alone in either urban or suburban

environments, and are divorced, retired, or generally detached from neighbors. It appears that many kodokushi cases involve those who migrated to Tokyo and other metropolises during the high economic growth period in search of work and took residence in suburban residential complexes, leaving their kin behind in the countryside and cutting off communication with them. The case of the Adachi man presents this sense of solitude with an ironic vividness, because he was actually living “with” his family but was nonetheless living “alone.”²

While solitary death as such is not a phenomenon peculiar to contemporary Japan (see Carol Morley’s 2011 film, *Dreams of a Life*), the ideas and practices provoked by mass-mediatised narratives of kodokushi reveal the specificity of contemporary Japanese experience through a particular economy of loss. The very expression “kodokushi” was widely invoked in the wake of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995 (Ōtani 2010). The term gained relevance again in the context of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of 2011 and its continuing ramifications, which entrap many people, especially the elderly, in unsettling infrastructural conditions. More generally, the “aging society” problem and the contemporary discourse of kodokushi need to be contextualized in relation to larger socioeconomic transformations in Japan from the 1970s through today, such as urban migration and massive suburbanization, the bursting of the bubble economy, and the increasing fluidization of labor, all contributing to the emergence of “social precarity” (Allison 2013; see also Slater 2010).

There is a conventional, almost clichéd lament about modern death in Japan. People lament the fact that they are dying on a hospital bed rather than on the domestic tatami mat, i.e., not being able to die under the gaze of their family members. The story is familiar: death was intimate before, now it is distant, medicalized, bureaucratic, and so forth (see Suzuki 2000). Now, the Adachi case and many others like it complicate this story. The man indeed died in a domestic space, it is just that neither his family nor any other persons around him was interested. So kodokushi has less to do with the modernist lament about the vanishing intimacy of death, but it draws into question the very *noticeability* of death: how, or really, whether, a death can trigger attention of others. Meanwhile, the problem of kodokushi is also separate from the equally serious issue of a shortage of places of ancestral veneration, where the problem is precisely that people still do care for their dead (see Rowe 2011). In the case of kodokushi, people don’t care.

Kodokushi points to a diffuse sense of crisis: the general indifference that people feel toward elders and, perhaps, the general indifference that elders feel toward society. Such general indifference manifests itself, as a specter, in the everyday reality of many old people. Consider *ore ore sagi*, “it’s me, it’s me’ fraud.”³ This relatively new type of criminal activity emerged in the early 2000s; Japanese police formally baptized it as *furikome sagi* (“Deposit money!” fraud) in 2004, and more recently in 2013 suggested a new name, *kāsan tasukete sagi* (“Help me, Mother!” fraud). Variations permitted, its modus operandi is more or less as follows: a young male impostor approaches an elderly person via telephone, posing as the target’s grandson or nephew (or son, as the 2013 name suggests) living in a distant place, saying, “Ore, ore” (“It’s me, it’s me”; ore is a first-person singular pronoun with the social connotation of masculine familiarity and youthful demeanor). He tells the target that he happens to be in a situation where he needs quick cash: a car accident or police arrest, perhaps. He then requests the target to deposit money to his bank account, appealing to the sense of generosity that kin are supposed to possess.

In this way, the impostor capitalizes on the perceived crisis of indifference toward the elderly. Like a computer hacker, he scans the kinship system for its security holes—moments of indifference—and fills them up with interest, manufacturing a need for contact, an *end*. Since the early 2000s, the media has been keen on reporting cases of this sort of hoax, invoking a relatively stable characterological frame: the money-crazed jobless youth in the city and the lonely senior living off of a pension—the two characters of poverty and non-reproduction that figure crucially in Japan’s post-bubble neoliberal predicament—connected through telecommunicative means. Seemingly easily preventable, this scheme has proven extremely effective (the police report that the total fraud figures for 2013 reached about \$248 million⁴); thus making it necessary for the police to form task forces and for local communities to engage in consciousness raising campaigns. ATMs across the nation now bear warning signs. Local buses in suburban areas, like Hachioji, Tokyo, issue pre-recorded announcements that suggest to passengers that passwords (*aikotoba*) be shared among family members—“just in case.” The very expression *furikome sagi/ore ore sagi* has become part of the present-day public discourse, establishing the act as a genre.

In my previous field research, I worked with participants in a citizens’ movement living in different locales in Japan. Many of these people were

women in their 70s in the mid-2000s, living in Tokyo's suburbs or second-tier provincial cities. They all appreciated my project, and no single person declined to be interviewed at their home, noting, "How rare it is nowadays to see a young man visiting old persons at home to hear their stories." When I was ready for perhaps my eighth or ninth interview, however, several of those who had helped me before told me something I did not quite understand at first: "Perhaps you want to be careful when you open the door." Later I realized that this was a piece of advice as well as an expression of concern, carefully cloaked in indirection. That is, my friends worried that at "the door," the *neighbors* might see me and, based on witnessing this, they might formulate a theory along the characterological frame mentioned above—namely, that the interviewee is being approached by a suspicious man—precisely because "it is nowadays rare to see a young man visiting an old person at home." My friends' imagined scenario recognizes both value and danger at the moment of contact, a societal anxiety that is as underspecified as it is real. Contact is an allure. (Their imagination may have been assisted by the fact that, as a graduate student back then, my generally untidy appearance indeed made me look like a money-crazed, jobless youth.⁵)

The management of solitude and indifference is today at stake in everyday Japanese life. The image of an old person dying alone and without recognition in an interstice of urban cosmopolitan grandeur—a room suspended in space and time with material vestiges of everyday life but only in past perfective—is unlikely food for social thought for many people (see Povinelli [2011] for the "tense" of such "quasi-events"). While such a space-time of troubled sociality might become legible as a particular articulation of discourses of "suffering" projected from contemporary anthropology and other humanist sciences (Robbins 2013), I am here interested in the techniques and ideas through which people seek to engender sociality even in the absence of interests in it. Rather than seeing solitude and indifference as a new problem simply awaiting a solution, I argue that they are in fact productive of a fantasy of sociality, what I will describe below as the fantasy of the phatic. People need this fantasy. Kodokushi signals a limit case of kinship as a default model of sociality. It incites people's fantastic imagination about what chronotope of sociality might be possible when kinship fails, or better—in fact, precisely my point—when kinship isn't interesting. Such a cultural imagination should also instigate anthropological thought. We anthropologists may be interested in kinship

by profession, but let us not readily universalize our interest. What would anthropology look like if it could appreciate such an absence of interest as a cultural fact?

Phaticity

Kodokushi is still a vague concept as a category of death, lacking explicit definitions in legal, bureaucratic, and scholarly terms. Accordingly, because of the still shifting nature of what “counts” as kodokushi, various publicly reported statistical data are difficult to gauge against one another (see Nakazawa and Yūki 2012:11). The empirical reality of kodokushi, however, necessitates local, practical responses, such as prevention projects, field assessments, and everyday routines. These responses involve diverse social actors such as residents, activists, scholars, and officials. In lieu of explicit official codification, it is these responses that are sites of metadiscourse through which the category of kodokushi gets regimented, negotiated, and circulated today: these practical actions cue people to talk about death, sociality, and communication.

This article offers an analysis of such publicly available metadiscourses invoked in mass media messages, advertisements, project slogans and descriptions, and so forth. By proposing a different way of thinking about sociality, I would like to participate in the ongoing, critical ethnographic dialogue on aging, dying, and loss in Japan (e.g., Lock 1993, Long 2005, Ozawa-de Silva 2008, Plath 1980, Rowe 2011, Traphagan 2000).⁶ I argue that the contemporary discourse of troubled sociality articulates an implicit ideology of “phaticity,” the configuration (or what Jakobson [1960] referred to as “function” [*Einstellung*]) of communication that generates a salient focus on semiotic contact. Due recognition of such an ideology of phaticity will help us better parse out different ways in which sociality is understood and acted upon in contemporary Japan.⁷

Common sense holds that we “get in touch” with each other in order to get some business done. We believe we build a bridge so we can transport things, people, and information. The ore ore sagi perpetrators, are like us, commonsensical philosophers of communication. Like us, they presuppose purposive circulation—something moving toward an end, a point of consummation—and always seek to be interesting and worthy of attention. (As is often noted in various anti-ore ore sagi campaigns, the best way to deal with them is to ignore them, much like online trolls; see

Nozawa 2012b.) Now I suggest that for a change, we forget our desire to be interesting and try to scrutinize phatic connection as such. For all these portraits of troubled sociality in Japan today suggest that social-communicative contact, phaticity, is itself an object of deep desire as well as a source of anxiety—and, as we shall see, a point of semiotic-political intervention. It is an allure. For a change, take seriously Dorothy Parker's conversation, cited in Jakobson's explanation of phaticity, as a life and death question: "'Well!' the young man said. 'Well!' she said. 'Well, here we are,' he said. 'Here we are,' she said, 'Aren't we?' 'I should say we were,' he said, 'Eeyop! Here we are.' 'Well!' she said. 'Well!' he said, 'well'" (Jakobson 1960:355-356).

While long familiar in the anthropological literature—indeed, one of the few concepts whose anthropological ancestry is clear: Malinowski [1923] coined it—the notion of phaticity has always been curiously undertheorized (see endnote 6). It is treated as less worthy of or in need of theorization precisely because, I speculate, it is viewed as too easily understandable or else too mysterious, as if requiring or affording no further intellectual effort. The triviality of “phatic” talk is often iconically reproduced in its trivial treatment in scholarly analytic metalanguage which, incidentally, has far more robust theories of “metalinguistic” talk. Or else we convince ourselves of its importance by demonstrating, for example, that small talks have big consequences. Such demonstrations, while helpful in revealing the nature of those consequences, have surprisingly little to contribute to critical theorization of the concept of phaticity itself.

A friend of mine from previous fieldwork, an old woman in the Tokyo suburbs who lives on her limited pension and her husband's disability payments, once gave what appeared to me a surprising commentary on *ore ore sagi*; as I now see it, she was also articulating a theory of phaticity. Clearly troubled by these cases of fraud, she nonetheless said: “But I could definitely understand why these old people, people like us, get deceived. It's because they want to give. They just want to give, to anyone.” Counterintuitive, and as if condoning the crime, her theory nonetheless astutely bespeaks a certain subdued but urgent desire to engender sociality in today's Japan. However, she relates this desire not to reciprocity and dialogue, but to a pleasure and pain of giving/losing that only oozes out through moments of contact. “I would be duped, most certainly,” she added. Rather than productivity, the “phatic labor” (Elyachar 2010) articulated here points to loss as evidence of phaticity. Finding themselves in strange

suburban solitude, “these old people” desire the felt reality of a semiotic channel, even a hacked one and even only momentarily, whatever gets produced or moved through it. They desire an exquisitely fleeting intimation of alterity, a *somebody*. “*Nur ein Wort*,” Kafka said (1992:333). Just a word, just a plea, not even a plea, just a movement of air, just a breath, not even a breath, just proof that you are alive and waiting over there, not even that...

In Japanese social life today, people want to be related to each other, pointed-to each other, but not at any cost; my friend would still rather not be duped. Rather, they desire a specific way of being related, even while this desire is clouded by a sense of resignation. For they are aware that the dream of authentic dying and living, life’s “worth,” might have all along been just that, a dream, “fading” at the unending end of Japan’s long postwar (Mathews 1996). While we often associate resignation with negative value, however, in Japan the concept *shikata ga nai* (and equivalents), “nothing can be done” exhibits a wide range of tactical value, describing situations from struggle to control. Over and above the oft-noted crisis of the family, then, people are constructing from within the space of resignation, a fantasy of relationality that lives and dies in phatic traces: just wanting to give.⁸

Muen

Kodokushi, “solitary death,” pointedly signals a profound collective worrying about the situation of what the Japanese call *muen*, “no relation.” The term *en*, embedded in this expression, may be glossed as “social relatedness”; Rowe (2011:45–46) suggests “bond,” and “connection” may work as well. I will return to discuss this idea below in detail, but let me first explore its absence, encapsulated by the notion of *muen* (*mu-* means “nothing”).

The contemporary context in which the term *muen* has become meaningful for many people emerged from a mass mediatized text, a TV documentary produced by Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan’s public broadcasting company, titled *Muen Shakai* (*Society of No-Relation*) (NHK Special 2010). Aired in early 2010, the documentary chronicles various cases of solitude and disconnection. This televisual text inspired enthusiastic uptakes by newspaper columns, books, blogs, TV programs, scholars, and community projects. It hit a chord, illuminating an anxious feeling of precarity that was already widely shared in various dimensions of Japanese society, across generational boundaries. Accordingly, the expression

muen shakai, “a society of no-relation,” became one of the “phrases of the year” in 2010, underscoring the deeper relevance of the problem of solitude and indifference to the contemporary world at large (see Allison 2013, Slater and Galbraith 2011). It is as though people are more interested in the issue of indifference than in each other.⁹

One crucial pretext for this worrying about *muen* is the Japanese cosmological understanding of the transmigration of spirits of the dead. A spirit of the dead calls for acts of propitiation, and a failure to provide sufficient ritual results in a malevolent spirit. Thus, *muen* deaths produce a negative state of affairs; people generally avoid becoming a *muen* death and avoid making their ancestors become *muen* through memorialization.

That such a sense of negativity could be ideologically mobilized for sociocultural practice is noted, for example, in Hardacre’s (1997) work on *mizuko kuyō*, ritual services for aborted fetuses. In one instance she discusses, “aborted fetuses” (*mizuko*) are “construe[d] [as] one subtype of those [dead] ‘without relations’ (*muen*)” (Hardacre 1997:194). Such construal creates a sense of urgency among those who experience abortion, as they fear that the spirit of *mizuko* might come back and haunt them.

On the other hand, *muen* can also invoke freedom. Rowe’s (2011) study of Japanese funerary practice focuses on the relatively new institution of *eitai kuyō* (“eternal memorialization”). This refers to vicarious death memorialization services provided by a third party: an *eitai kuyō* provider (often a temple) provides a grave and memorial services for individuals in the absence of and/or on behalf of their descendants, regardless of their “parishioner” (*danka*) status. But the crucial fact in this “post-*danka*” moment, as Rowe observes, is that people who use these services do not necessarily lack such descendants. Rather, many people seek these services not (simply) because they are afraid to become *muen* when they die but because they want to avoid “burdening” descendants (see Traphagan 2000:153). The specter of *muen* figures as a way of freeing people from institutional obligations. “The positive refiguring of dying without connections” is actualized through a new community of care and memorialization whose members, “create bonds that transcend those of blood and region,” according to one promotional pamphlet (cited in Rowe 2011:120).

In this vein, it should be recalled that historian Amino Yoshihiko long ago provided a refreshingly new perspective on the idea of *muen*. His now classic, path-breaking book, *Muen, Kugai, Raku* (1996), traces the genealogy of the “principle of *muen*” and argues for the link between the idiom of

muen and the idea of freedom in the medieval and older eras.¹⁰ The book opens with his own personal experience of playing *engacho* as a child, a popular children's game (think "cooties" in the North American context). This game of stigmatization and consecration involves someone becoming temporarily untouchable because of contact with impurities, and others around him or her calling out "engacho!" The untouchable may transfer the impurity to someone else by touching them. But there is a protective measure available for those around the untouchable. They may each form a little ring with their fingers and have someone else cut that ring, an act often accompanying a verbal announcement: *en kitta!* (The connection is cut!). As one might expect, this game has tremendous regional and historical variations: in some cases, the utterance *engacho* is considered sufficient as a protective spell; the announcement of disconnection may further be followed by *kagi kaketa!* "The door is locked!" (Again, consider "cootie shot" and "cootie lock.") In this way, one may create a certain barrier, a safe distance.

Amino's project aims to show how this seemingly exclusionary, stigmatizing "principle of disconnection" also helped produce interstitial social positions in which freedom would be nurtured against the background of hegemonic political power. He thus speaks of the "vitality" afforded by *en-giri* ("disconnection") and *mu-en* ("no-connection"): "the strength and brightness...the vitality of something that refuses connections" (Amino 1996:17). From this mini-analysis of the game, Amino goes on to unfold a deep history of *engiri* and *muen*. His first example is *engiridera* ("temples of disconnection") which, in the *longue durée* from the medieval to Edo periods, functioned as sanctuaries for divorce-seeking women, who generally did not have a way to actively seek divorce. Amino's overall argument is that, as state power became more consolidated in the Edo period, these "places of *muen*" got increasingly subsumed under state control.¹¹ It would require careful historical and sociological examination to contextualize the contemporary worrying about *muen* in terms of its deep history, disclosed by Amino, and such a task is beyond the scope of this article. My point here is simply to underscore the ambiguous nature of *muen*: negativity and positivity are co-present and negotiated through social practice. I suggest that we entertain, rather than resolve, this ambiguity, and inquire into possible visions of communication it might afford. In what follows, I hope to illuminate how the condition of solitude today gives particular shape to such a vision of communication, a semiotic ideology that

takes *phaticity* as a point of intervention. This ideology is emblemized by idioms such as *fureai*, (“touching together”), *tsunagari* (“connecting”), and more recently in the aftermath of the 2011 triple disaster, *kizuna* (“bonding”). It certainly is telling of the contemporary zeitgeist that the “phrases of the year” in 2010 included *muen shakai* and those in 2011 included *kizuna* (see Allison 2013:198).

Fureai

According to Kotsuji and Kobayashi (2011), the term *kodokushi* (solitary death) first surfaced in mass media messages and began being consistently used in the present sense around 1970. An April 16, 1970 article in the *Asahi Shinbun*, a major newspaper, is entitled “Another *Kodokushi* Incident in Tokyo,” suggesting that similar incidents had already been reported. Another *Asahi* article, published on October 22, 1977, reports that a 70-year-old man was found dead on a Bullet Train arriving at the Tokyo station, completely unnoticed by other passengers (as cited in Kotsuji and Kobayashi 2011:125).

As the annual number of cases of *kodokushi* in Tokyo reached “one thousand” in 1983 (according to one news article; *Asahi Shinbun* 1984), various governmental bodies and other institutions started taking measures. One such explicit attempt to counteract *kodokushi*, as reported in a September 10, 1992 article in the Kyoto edition of the *Asahi*, involved what the Social Welfare Association of the Town of Ōe in Kyoto called *Fureai Yūbin*, or “touching together postal services”:

Once or twice a month, the Association will send senior citizens [in Ōe] letters stamped with the phrase “*Fureai Yūbin*.” Rather than leaving the letter in the mailbox, the delivery agent of the Ōe Post Office will hand-deliver [*tewatasu*] the letter to the elderly, saying [*koe o kakeru*; lit. “cast a voice”], “Hello, you’ve got mail.” If the addressee does not answer the door, the agent will visit again the following day. If the addressee still doesn’t answer, the agent will report to the Association or social welfare officers. The officers will then seek to confirm safety of the addressee. [Also,] if the addressee is ill he or she can relay that fact to the Association [using this system].

...The first batch of letters will be written by children at the town’s four kindergartens. (as cited in Kotsuji and Kobayashi 2011:125-126)

Here, a set of actants constitute a communicative architecture designed to induce a moment of contact. Children get connected to senior citizens through the circulation of messages (here, letters) made possible by the postal network. A crucial modification is introduced: the delivery agent not only carries the letter but also transmits sensorial metadata, that is, the hand and the voice. Also important is the feedback mechanism this additional work enables, and *not* from the elderly to the children. (Note: there is no semblance of dialogue between them here.) The hand and the voice are not those of the children or the delivery agent (who may be different persons on different days), but rather those of the system as a whole.

This kind of arrangement has been widely adopted by other municipalities.¹² Various community-level organizations and local post offices use a similar system today, often employing the same expression (*fureai yūbin*) and retaining a similar design: the relative youth as sender, the feedback mechanism, point-to-point communication, and the phatic voice of the system. Interestingly, however, publically available descriptions of these systems suggest a curious pattern of omission. The focus is not on the nature of the letter itself as a verbal sign: what kind of things were the children in Ōe supposed to say in the letter? It is highly unlikely that proponents of and participants in these projects do not care about the content and form of the letter. But over and above such concerns, the sincere and urgent response to events of kodokushi has crystalized phaticity as a target of semiotic intervention. However heartwarming the messages from the children might be and whatever cultural work their linguistic decorum might index, the point of the system lies in administering regular, repeatable events of delivery, where the system notifies the addressee of the letter's arrival and thereby *notices* the addressee, phatically signaling the (hitherto non-ir) regular functioning of the channel. At issue is whether the addressee is still alive and well enough to answer the door.

Like *fureai yūbin* systems, kodokushi prevention projects generally aim at creating a new scheduling of stranger-encounter, a "society of touching-together" (*fureai shakai*) as one organization puts it. Such scheduling is particularly important in suburban locales, for kodokushi is often seen as most likely to happen in massive suburban housing or *danchi* projects from the 1970s, like the one in the city of Matsudo in Chiba (east of Tokyo prefecture) and Tama New Town in west Tokyo (Nakazawa 2008).¹³ For example, in Tama New Town residents and activists have put forward various community revitalization projects, one of which involved the creation

of a free space on the first floor of one of the buildings. An “architecture of sociability” (Ellis 2008), this space functions at once as a café, a performance space, a reading room, and simply a place for residents and others to gather together.¹⁴

Crucially, however, while these concrete actions configure contact in terms of physical connection, idioms such as *fureai*, *tsunagari*, *kizuna*, etc., are very much *tropic* in nature. Beyond simply denoting material contact, these expressions also allow for rather unexpected imaginative applications.

In her ethnography of a care facility in Tokyo, Thang (2001) notes that “one meal program for elders, served by a group of students, is called the *fureai bento* (*fureai* box lunch). The newsletter of Kotoen [the facility she studied], published five times a year, is called *Fureai*” (2001:9). As in these expressions, the term *fureai* is widely distributed across society in sites of interaction with senior citizens. That is, it turns out, *fureai* is often part of a generic name for those objects and services specifically catered to the elderly: it indexes services and commodities “for old people.” For example, a number of local banks offer a type of *teiki yokin* accounts (time deposit savings accounts) they call *fureai teiki yokin*. The service name is rather obscure in its referentiality; it only hints at some vague experiential feeling of “touching together,” if at all. Rather, the service is so named because it targets senior citizens using the bank as a depository of their retirement pensions. In this sense, *fureai* joins the paradigm of expressions that are highly indexical of the culture of social welfare and senior care, such as *iki-iki* (“lively”) and *sawayaka* (“fresh”).

In this vein, Thang’s observation that “one hears the term *fureai* in public discourse more commonly now than thirty years ago” (2001:8) echoes Moeran’s discussion of Japanese advertising where he sees the idiom of contact extensively featured: “As the Japan Travel Bureau’s catchphrase goes: ‘Travel is Contact’” (1996:50); “An insurance company makes claim to your money by stressing that ‘it values heart contact’” (1996:53). Note how obscured the objects of contact are in this idiom, which instead foregrounds the promised moment of contact itself as imbued with a bundle of attainable “qualia” (see Lemon 2013).

This rather overdetermined preoccupation with contact recapitulates the ideology of relationality about “30 years” prior to Thang’s study, viz. circa 1970. In her study of the imaginary of travel in the 1970s nation-wide tourism advertising, the Discover Japan campaign, Ivy writes,

Since it is “myself” that is discovered in travel, the direct selling of approved scenic destinations suddenly seemed obsolete...Instead of using its posters to present famous scenes, scenery that the traveler could buy, Discover Japan stressed the interaction of the traveler with nature (shizen) and tradition; by touching (fureau) nature and tradition, Japanese would discover themselves as Japanese... Natural beauty in and of itself was not the issue; what was important was the encounter, the contact (fureai) between the quotidian and the nonordinary. (1995:42)

The issue surrounding the present-day space of troubled sociality, of indifference on the one hand and the deep desire for connection on the other, is, then, precisely that the quotidian is out of touch *even* with itself: people are living and dying alone in the midst of family. The problematic of travel Ivy identifies concerns the “national-cultural self-fashioning” that necessitates a relation to underdifferentiated alterity. On the other hand, today’s problem, at the unending end of the postwar, concerns the fashioning of alterity in everyday life, other-fashioning. How does one insert oneself into a community of others and engender sociality among them, newly and from within, one as phatically pointable-to as every other, “where every other is *equally* altogether other” (Derrida 1997:22).

Crucially, “contact” here is a trope for communication itself, or, rather, *komyunikēshon*. The implicit ideology of communication here—what might be called phatic-indexicalism—stipulates that relationality is, first and foremost, about making contact through indexical triggering (whatever else may also be accomplished). It is of note, in this respect, that *komyunikēshon* in Japan often figures as technical “skills,” as in *komyunikēshon sukiru*, a phrase that has gained wider relevance in the context of neoliberalism. It signals an ability to “read” (*yomu*) the flow—or, as the popular metaphor has it, “air” (*kūki*)—of interaction, a skill that popular comedians are sometimes seen as possessing. Skillful communicators facilitate the smooth circulation of the “air” of conversation within an interactional space, as by an air conditioner. In this specific sense of circulation, then, we observe the prioritizing of “material translation” over “meaningful translation,” to use Kockelman’s (2010) terms. The focus is less on the denotational “coding between signs and objects, qua interpretation” than on the phatic “channeling between signers and interpreters, qua circulation” (Kockelman 2010:409).¹⁵

Such prioritizing of phaticity is more directly seen in kodokushi prevention's focused attention to "greetings," or *aisatsu*. Nakazawa Takumi, who organizes a prevention project in Chiba, points to *aisatsu* as "the first step toward eradicating kodokushi." Through his own "engagement with kodokushi prevention," he has "discovered a simple fact, that mere *aisatsu* is crucial to human society" (Nakazawa 2008:40-41). But observe how he valorizes it:

What we struggled with is to figure out what it was that would be understood equally by old men, old women, and young people. And we arrived at *aisatsu* [as an answer to that question]. *Aisatsu*: anybody can participate, anybody can understand. (Nakazawa and Shukutoku Daigaku Kodokushi Kenkyūkai 2008:152; see also Wetzel 2004:102)

While *aisatsu* is a semiotic partial of the language that, along with honorific registers, often invites explicit essentialization of the national-cultural speaking subject, pointing to a culturalized Japanese speaker as its ideal participant (see Wetzel 2004), here Nakazawa emphasizes its technical affordance of communicative "equality," pointing to "anybody."

The speech genre of "greeting" has been one of the important objects of linguistic anthropological analysis because its ritualized form affords various performative negotiations (see Dunn 2006 and Wetzel 2004 for Japanese cases). In this vein, Duranti rightly observes that,

...the claim that greetings have no propositional content...is at least as old as Malinowski's (1923:315-316) introduction of the notion of "phatic communion," a concept that was originally meant to recast speech as a mode of action...The problem with the characterization of greetings as "phatic," and hence *merely* aimed at establishing or maintaining "contact" (Jakobson 1960), is that it makes it difficult to account for differences across and within communities in what people say during greetings. (2009:190, emphasis added)

This is a necessary and crucial reminder for scholars of the pitfall of instrumental reductionism (see Kockelman 2010). But for people living amidst the condition of troubled sociality in contemporary Japan, this reductionism may translate as an ideological resource for creating "isonomic" (free and equal) access to the affordance of phatic function (on *isonomia*, see

Karatani 2012). For, as expressed in Nakazawa's theory of *aisatsu*, it is precisely such "mereness" of semiotic contact that renders it tactically valuable: a small, easy, miniscule text of greetings, not tied to the macrosocial or even interactional dynamism of identity formation, not a spectacular ritual of cultural and historical importance, but something that "anybody" can practice regardless of "differences across and within communities"—"old men, old women, young people." Just a word, just a breath, just proof that you are alive and standing by—not even that.

En

While *kodokushi* prevention projects clearly involve techniques of monitoring with their emphasis on indexical infrastructures, they disavow surveillance. The woman who runs the coffeehouse in Tama New Town told me that she realized she really could not, or perhaps should not, coerce older residents into communication. She was trying to create a space-time of touching-together without forcibly grabbing people, as it were, to participate in it.¹⁶

Now, while such a struggle might suggest the classic problem of autonomy versus relationality, I argue that the issue here is more about two *qualitatively different* meanings underlying the concept of *en*, "connection," already mentioned a few times so far in this article.

Here is how Rowe glosses *en*:

The term for these bonds (*en*) in colloquial Japanese signifies connections, both concrete and mysterious. To have *en* (*en ga aru*) is to be linked by fate or destiny. To bind *en* (*en musubi*) is to marry (or, more recently, to find a partner). Regional *en* (*chien*) refers to the connections with those in one's village or hometown, while families are connected by blood bonds (*ketsuen*). (2011:45-46)

I suggest that the former two examples and the latter two provided here merit a more explicit analytic distinction because they exhibit different patterns of distribution.¹⁷

The expressions like the latter two types, *ketsu-en* ("blood-en") and *chi-en* ("land-en"), are perhaps most centrally important to Japanese social organization as they directly pertain to the mapping of people onto a relationship of group-based rights and obligation anchored to social institutions: kinship and locality. A relatively new term *sha-en* or *kessha-en*

(“association-en”) was proposed in the 1960s by anthropologist Yoneyama Toshinao (1966) to account for connections emerging outside the realm of kinship and locality, such as secret societies and occupational groups. These types of what Ueno (1987) called “en not of one’s choosing” (*erabenai en*)—especially the first two—encompass (though do not exhaust) what we typically call identity. As such, they follow the usual process of social identity formation, with rituals of institutional intervention and reproduction. In this scheme, then, both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies 2001) are included, in so far as these are all apprehended as “groups” of some kind mediated by institutional processes. For my argument’s sake, I will lump these types of connection together under the rubric of “group-based” or “institutional” connection. Perhaps, “institutionalizable” might be a more precise phrasing.¹⁸

It is usually this institutionalizable en that is explicitly theorized in the national worrying about muen. Recall Nakazawa, the Chiba activist we encountered in the previous section. Now, his gesture to the tactical utility of *aisatsu* (greeting)—“anybody can practice, anybody can understand”—is telling in its contrast to such theorization. This statement was made in an interview with Hasegawa Masatoshi, a historian of Buddhism and social welfare. In the interview text, the historian responds to Nakazawa’s invoking of *aisatsu* by pointing to what he calls “three voices” of sociality: the voice of ritual (e.g., sounds of a festival), the voice of play (e.g., children in a playground), and the voice of labor (e.g., work songs). He asserts that these voices were present when “village communities still existed before the high economic growth” and suggests that “communal revitalization projects focus on how to rejuvenate or create anew these three voices” in a local community facing the problem of *kodokushi* (Nakazawa and Kenkyūkai 2008:154-155).

This particular conversational exchange is a good example of how metadiscourses of solitude sometimes work to conflate the envisioning of phaticity with the longing for “identity.” The explicit theorizing of solitude presupposes as an object of recuperation the en that is sufficiently characterizable in terms of institutional groupness and hence identity or, as often suggested, national identity: a nation-once-so-perfectly-harmonious. What needs to be reestablished, this theory suggests, is the whole institutional system of rights and obligation, fastening people (back) to family, locality, corporate body, civic group, or the nation. Accordingly,

the presupposition also works to regiment what people are supposed to desire in their relationality.

Such regimentation is greatly motivated by the way in which the expressions such as *ketsuen* and *chien* are interpreted. Note that they share a similar nominal compound form, X-en. This form cues Japanese speakers to reanalyze the expression to infer the range of its reference determined by the modifier. Saying *ketsu-en*, for example, people know immediately what kind of relationality two entities are forming and what kind of entities are good candidates for that relationality—the necessary condition: human. Put more simply, the meaning of *ketsu-en* appears to people to be “built-in” into the expression, with its referents seen as readily available for communication.¹⁹

This “language ideological” framework (Silverstein 1979) makes institutionalizable *en* appear as if an ethnonational standard of sociality, a reality that is identifiable by a sign independently of events of signaling. This might be expected, especially for *blood-en*: as Franklin and McKinnon put it, “kinship helps constitute what it describes” (2001:2, as cited in Goldfarb 2012). In the Japanese case, the framework gives a powerful ideological underpinning to “blood ideology” (*ketsuen shugi*; lit. blood-en-ism). But by the same token it constitutes precisely a point of contention and anxiety. Goldfarb illustrates this in her study of adoptive and foster care in contemporary Japan. Adoptive and foster families find themselves ideologically calibrated with respect to the model of *blood-en*, as if required to resemble it closer and closer asymptotically. Her ethnographic examples include adoptive and foster parents pointing to the physical “resemblance” they develop to their children, an indexical icon that they claim results from long-term co-habitation and acts of care, construed as publicly available evidence of the “normalcy” of their relationship (Goldfarb 2012). (This is analogous to the conical structure of value in modern national language standardization where the standard forms occupy an asymptotic top-and-center of the cone, rendering acts of sameness and difference particularly consequential for the distribution of resources; see Carr 2010, Inoue 2006.)

There is another meaning of *en*, however, which is, for lack of a better word, somewhat rather magical in its nature and more diffuse in its application. Its “magical” nature resonates with the ideology of phaticity disclosed in the previous section. In this second meaning, *en* refers to a seemingly serendipitous encounter and the resultant connection that is

however retrospectively characterized as “fated”: en as a play of chance and fate; I will borrow “ineffable connection” from Goldfarb (2012) as a provisional gloss. The gloss is appropriate as an ethnographic first approximation, I think, for it implies an aesthetic of intuition and wonder disorienting logical calculation from within. The ineffable en feeds an imaginative, inquisitive mind with ambiguous determination; it arrests the mind moving between realis and irrealis, *this-ness* and *otherwise*.²⁰

In actual language use, the ineffable en may be identified in expressions like en ga aru (“there is connection,” as suggested in Rowe’s explanation above), where en is not directly modified by anything. The term en in these constructions may refer to a multiplicity of social relations by *not* naming types of entities that can form a relation, unlike the forms in which institutional en are expressed. It presents a relation but leaves the entities that may occupy it underdetermined. This usage is more likely to be construed as a “shifter” (Jakobson 1971) and can yield heterogeneous interpretations in its high dependence on contextual factors. More precisely, it is particularly useful for communicating underdetermination.

Here are two simple facts of distribution: 1) interestingly, people usually do not say en ga aru to refer to their or other people’s normative blood-kinship; that is, blood-en is ideologically maximally presupposed. And, 2) People can “have en” (claim connectivity) with animals, objects, places, and events. Indeed, en in this sense is applicable to a literally infinite number of entities apprehended in a coupling. Other than normative blood-kinship, any kind of meaningful relations can invite this kind of reading that, over and above anthropocentric linkages, construes relationality among people, animals, objects, places, and the like as a sort of hidden or camouflaged thread connecting them together. Therefore, notwithstanding the way in which I have described them, the institutional and ineffable en are not two sides of the same coin: the former is necessarily human-centered, while the latter is not. This does not prevent overlaps in extension, however. For example, marriage is both a social-institutional (human) fact in one construal, ideologized along hetero-normative regimentation, and a *mere* fact of two stranger-entities colliding to merge as one entity in another construal, intuited as a process of mysterious causality.

To give more examples of ineffable en: I have heard participants in a volunteer group working in the disaster area in Fukushima and Miyagi characterizing their encounter with local people and with each other with

the phrase, “there is en.” It is not that they understood volunteer work as such as being conducive to such a connection. Rather they were gesturing to a sense of wonder for the connection that had emerged through their collaborative work, *this* connection that would *otherwise* remain unnoticed. The participants in a grassroots citizens’ movement I worked with in my previous research expressed to me, many times, this same sense of wonder in finding themselves connected, couched in the idiom of *friendship*, not knowing what brought them together while sustaining this non-knowledge (Nozawa 2012a). I am sure that ethnographers working with Japanese-speaking people have heard them explain the ethnographic encounter in a similar manner.

One of the perhaps most frequently heard collocations involving inef-fable en is the rather fabulously vacuous, but totally ordinary expression *nanika no en*, “en of something” or “some sort of en” (see, e.g., Yoneyama 1999:117). This fashion of speaking frames relationality as something generated by means of some unidentified entity or phenomenon: *related, somehow*. It signals a feeling of relatedness-as-such while the nature, cause, history, or future of this relationality is apprehended in surprise or in ignorance. An adoptive couple in Goldfarb’s study (2012) speaks of its adopted child: “There must have been some connection...It was as if there is no child but this child.” This play of realis and irrealis compels people to seize upon the *momentary surfacing* of hidden connections with people, things, places, and so on. It makes them look for a hint.

The *nanika no en* idiom is particularly interesting because it suggests that connections can be utterly fleeting, so unproductive and inconsequential that characterizations like “fate” and “destiny” may sound a bit too over-glorifying. Golden-gai is an area in Shinjuku, Tokyo that houses numerous tiny bars lined up in narrow alleys with extreme density and is known for its rather clandestine urban nightlife. As I visited a bar there one night, one customer (whom I had never met) and the bartender (whom I knew from a previous visit) were talking about a curious moment of encounter that they described to me as “some sort of en.” There was another customer earlier in the evening, not a regular of the bar, who at one point took a sticker out of his bag and put it on the wall (as in many bars, people sometimes make this sort of signing on the premise, through inscriptions, stickers, carvings, etc). The sticker bore an emblem of a professional football team in Kyushu, in southern Japan. Upon recognizing this image, my interlocutor (the first customer) initiated a conversation with the man,

telling him that she was a fan of the team, too. The man then revealed that he was not a fan, but actually a player on the team. Then, the conversation ended. It went nowhere, or perhaps somewhere else. She was not from Kyushu, nor did she have any regional connections; she just knew about the team. He on the other hand did not apparently intend to pursue any further move with the display of his biography.

“So what?” you might ask. I almost did. But what entertained my interlocutors, in their reporting this moment to me, was precisely the exchange’s sense of joyous, funny futility. It was nothing, though it could have turned into something. The sticker image just left the participants with a vague, but strong enough impression of a connection, strong enough for my interlocutor to recount it in her own serendipitous encounter with me that night. I asked her and the bartender to elaborate further on their description “some sort of en.” These seemingly random connections, they said, strike the mind as “perhaps not being totally random.” These mere connections—a bridge that connects but carries nothing—are sometimes worth paying attention to because they make life “fun.” That was their theory of the event and the place.

Perhaps this kind of theorization transpires in other cosmopolitan cities as well, where similar types of fleeting encounter are habitually experienced. And it might even be motivated directly by urban architectures of stranger-sociability (cf. Simmel [1949:255] on “pure sociability” as a “play form of association”). But it is nonetheless noteworthy that the particular theory presented to me that night emphasizes a feeling that was most casually, and yet effectively, narrated through the figure of *nanika no en*: the futility of identifying and reaching an “end,” the fun of capturing a connection as it emerges and forgetting it as it disappears, the pleasure of succumbing to real nothings.

The different patterns of distribution for the institutionalizable and ineffable *en point us* toward two different “chronotopes” (Bakhtin 1981) of sociality. The institutionalizable *en*—relations of rights and obligations—delineates people on a standardized social-institutional map along boundaries of social grouping. People need to become legible on this map to take part in calculations of responsibility and entitlement. They need to show their capability of such calculation in order to be normative, institutionalizable subjects. It is this kind of group dynamism that scholars of Japan have identified as structured along the deictic topology of “inside” and “outside,” *uchi* and *soto* (Bachnik and Quinn 1994).

On the other hand, the topology of ineffable en suggests a network of hidden threads and traces, throwing people, things, animals, places, events, and the like on a possible (and perhaps fated) collision course, like rolling dice. Rather than orienting people to borders and regions as in the uchi/soto topology, it anchors them to *points* of collision, moments of purified indexicality. This second chronotope, the chronotope of pointy life, creates a maze. Like the almost labyrinthine geography of downtown Tokyo, where people make unnecessary detours and get caught in serendipitous encounters, this maze is filled with secret pathways and unexpected openings—streets magically bifurcating, gates suddenly appearing, like in Kafka’s stories. The space is filled with pointers, hidden hints of eventfulness. While potentially a gateway to fraudulent relations, these points can also bring people a smile, a pleasant surprise. The absence of calculation creates a convincing alibi for narrating these points as potentially connectable. This chronotope emphasizes en as a game of stumbling upon something, the pleasure and pain of finding meaningful connections, without necessarily invoking a system of rights and obligations. The institutional en invokes calculative reason, a business of sociopolitical institutionality; the ineffable en induces speculative pleasure, a wager on the maze of social life.

Conclusion

I began this article with the case of a man who died alone in the midst of his family in downtown Tokyo. We now see that he was perhaps doubly lost between two chronotopes of sociality and two kinds of loss/value. People die a kodokushi death because their institutional connections are directly damaged by a series of macrosocial events of failure, destruction, and loss. It would not do justice to them at all, however, to think that their otherwise healthy sociality just happened to be exposed to crisis during the unending end of Japan’s long post-war. The post-war institutional edifice that gave a great many people the dream and the itinerary of a successful life is not only crumbling now but, in truth, it is revealed to have been built on a faulty premise. The triple disaster in 2011 signals not just this crumbling edifice but a shaky ground, cueing people to realize that their lives and deaths are unevenly distributed along numerous fault lines in everyday life. It is precisely at this historical conjuncture, it seems to me, that the call for a return to national–cultural togetherness, to a healthy nation as a healthy family—a

call deeply ingrained in modernist pageantries like the modern Olympic Games—reveals its most insidious nature in pathologizing marginalized lives and deaths and standardizing desires. Kodokushi is a prolepsis of what precarity will bring forth, as much as it is a crack on the hypocrisy of postwar institutions that currently reproduce the precarious condition.

On the other hand, people also get lost in the maze of relationality, the game of encounter and collision, and lose a pleasure and a motivation to live, to play the game *again*. Their precarious lives and unnoticed deaths are also implicated in another, equally profound kind of loss that haunts everyday life in Japan today: the loss of the mystery of sociality. The game of sociality is supposed to animate a mysterious, ineffable force and offer us a hint that has neither a question nor an answer—a bridge that carries nothing, no provenance and no destination but just a still image of bridging. As the bar example above suggests, there is comedy in relationality, a comedic collision of signs that is as fated as it is absurd and unexpected—like the collisions and near-collisions in Jacques Tati's *Playtime*.

In addressing these two kinds of loss, kodokushi prevention projects are very much aware of how difficult it is to keep the mystery of ineffable connections alive while working hard to recalibrate people's everyday lives to institutional processes. What I have emphasized in this article is that these projects and similar attempts to counteract urban solitude bespeak a certain power associated with this mystery, the allure of contact. While their programmatic vision seeks to reestablish institutional arrangements, this vision also relies on the rather fantastic idiom of *fureai* (touching-together).

If disconnection affords freedom, and resignation works as a tactic of life, even only momentarily, then the phatic mereness, a fantasy of pointy life, might invite people to experiment with new forms of co-presence with others, a new practical politics of togetherness. As Abe Kobo's 1973 novel *Hako Otoko (The Box Man)* suggests, what appears to be a cul-de-sac that encloses and disconnects people from the world may instead be a hidden entrance to a new world secretly available to them. The moment of effacement may create an imaginative worlding and summon anew "the vitality of something that refuses connections" (Amino 1996:17). A fuller co-presence may be just a dream, a hoax. People will still die alone. But a reckoning of alterity might allow them to live and die believing their life and death will be notable to somebody, a *you*, any one of you, on the other side of the channel. I know you are not here, I just want a hint, a sign that you are alive and waiting for me—not even that. ■

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Endnotes:

¹This phrase is taken from Kawara's conceptual "mail art" work, created in the 1970s, in which the artist sent a series of telegrams from different locations to specific addressees, all bearing the same message: "I am still alive." See http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=96314 for one of these letters, dated 1973, preserved in the Museum of Modern Art's collection.

²It is often noted (see, e.g., Nakazawa 2008) that men are more susceptible to kodokushi than women. This perception, if not fact, deserves more careful treatment than I could offer here. See Danely (2010) for the gendered image of abandonment in Japanese narrative tradition and its contemporary relevance.

³All translations from Japanese sources in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁴For the report, see <http://www.npa.go.jp/safetylife/seianki31/higaijoukyou.html>.

⁵As implied in this episode, "home" (already a highly symbolic and embodied social space) is itself a crucial sociotechnical mediator of solitude in its internal and external divisions and enclosures, its surfaces and backdoors, its location and accessibility. I thank anonymous reviewers for raising this point.

⁶See also contributions to Suzuki (2013), to the issues 33(2) and 33(3) of *Anthropology and Aging Quarterly*, and in particular Suzuki (2012). For cross-cultural explorations, see Lynch and Danely (2013).

⁷See contributions to the special issue of *Japanese Studies* on the theme of "touch," to which Stevens (2011) serves as an introduction. But phaticity is a vitally important theme beyond Japan as well. Recent reconsiderations bespeak its increasing relevance to the contemporary world (Elyachar 2010, Kockelman 2010, Lemon 2013, Slotta 2015). The communicative–technological infrastructure in late-industrial societies saturates everyday life with signs of connection and disconnection (Turkle 2011). To the extent that wirelessness haunts communication (Peters 1999), this romance of invisible connection with the distant, an elsewhere, today finds its practical articulation in the fingertip and the touchscreen, a here (see also Boyer 2013). Concurrently with such sociotechnical mediation of distance and proximity, diverse genres of affective labor have emerged that increasingly rely on the calculability of "phatic labor" (Elyachar 2010; cf. Hochschild 1983; see also Galbraith 2011, Plourde 2014, and Takeyama 2010 for Japanese cases). As anonymous reviewers suggested, the Japanese case presented here should be contextualized in this larger sociotechnical condition; I am deeply grateful for their suggestion. Unfortunately, I do not have space to elaborate any further on this important issue, to which therefore I must return on another occasion.

⁸For the notion of resignation in Japan, see Long (1999) and Plath (1966).

⁹For more on the documentary, see Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai Special Shuzaihan (2012). See also Nakazawa and Shukutoku Daigaku Kodokushi Kenkyūkai (2008) and Nakazawa and Yūki (2012) for further details. By "phrases of the year," I mean winners of the "New and Popular Phrases" awards administered by Jiyūkoku-minsha, a publisher famous for its *Gendai Yōgo no Kiso Chishiki* series (an encyclopedia of "Basic Knowledge" about "Contemporary Terms"). Each year, the award committee selects expressions that best encapsulate moods of the year and, when applicable, gives awards to individuals and institutions deemed responsible for coining or popularizing them.

¹⁰See Amino (2007) for an English translation of Chapter 11 of *Muen, Kugai, Raki* (1996).

¹¹Compare Gershon and Alexy (2011).

¹²I should note that I am not entirely sure whether the system in Ōe in 1992 was the "first" implementation of the idea of fureai yūbin. So my wording here may be misleading.

¹³Nakazawa (2008:17–19) is careful to note, however, that kodokushi is not restricted to the danchi environment and he challenges such a stereotype with some relevant statistical evidence.

¹⁴For the Tama New Town case, see Nakazawa and Kenkyūkai (2008); see also <http://www.fukushitei.org/vision/index.html>. On the slogan “fureai shakai,” see <http://www.sawayakazaidan.or.jp/gaiyou/index.html>. See also Allison (2013), especially Chapter 6.

¹⁵*Indexicalism* of various sorts—i.e., indexicality as an ideology (interpretant semiosis)—may be approached more systematically under the Peircean rubric of “dicensation” (see Ball 2014). I thank William Feeney and David Slater for comments on comedy and the “air” metaphor; see also Allison (2013:70). The phatic-indexicalist mode, especially in its *tragicomic failure*, is a theme often explicitly articulated in Japanese subcultures. *Watashi ga Motenai no wa Dou Kangaetemo Omaera ga Warui!* (*No Matter How I Look at It, It's You Guys' Fault that I'm Not Popular!*), a 2013 Japanese TV anime series based on Tanigawa Nico's manga, features Mokocchi, a high school freshman who secretly harbors an ambition of becoming a popular girl in school while her deep communicative ineptness, a stereotype of “geek” (*otaku*) personality, makes her fail in every attempt to be one. A tragicomedy of failure, the story is punctuated by her vicious rants against hegemonic aesthetics (looking pretty) and sociality (having a date). The closing credit song of the anime, sung in Mokocchi's voice, begins with the following line: “Conversations keep faltering—why, why? Oh fuck it” (*Kaiwa ga tsuzukanai na, nazeda d shite da? Ahoka*).

¹⁶This question of propriety and privacy, closely related to the concept of *mimamori* (“observe,” “care”; *mi-* = “see,” *mamoru-* = “protect”), has animated discussion among activists and scholars, especially important in the post-2005 legal context of the Protection of Personal Information Act (*kojin jōhō hogo hō*) (see, e.g., Yūki 2012:22).

¹⁷Allison (2013:200) refers to Genda Yūji, a Japanese economist known for his *kibōgaku* (“hope studies”), and to his differentiation between *tsuyoi kizuna* “strong relationality” and *yuruyakana kizuna* “loose relationality” (to follow Allison's glosses), which in effect classifies forms of connection (*kizuna*) as a difference of *degree* (see Amano 2005 for a similar process of iconization of *en*, in her idioms, “hard” [*katai*] vs. “soft” [*yawarakai*]). Such a view already presupposes a single ideology of relationality that rests upon what I am here calling “institutionalizable” connection.

¹⁸For more on the forms and functions of groupness, see Sapir (1949[1932]). See also Amano (2005) and Ikegami (2005).

¹⁹I thank Asif Agha for suggesting this.

²⁰While this contemporary meaning is closely related to Buddhist cosmology, in this article I do not directly address the Buddhist literature, mainly because I feel that doing so would take me beyond my intellectual capacity. However, I acknowledge that the mysterious quality highlighted here definitely necessitates reconsideration of the religiosity of sociality, perhaps in a more fundamental way. I thank anonymous reviewers for raising this point.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Phatic Traces: Sociality in Contemporary Japan

[Keywords: Phaticity, sociality, solitude, semiotics, Japan]

交話的痕跡：現代日本の社会関係

[キーワード、交話性、社会関係、孤独、記号論、日本]

应酬的痕迹：社会交际在当代日本

[关键词：寒暄成分，社会交际，孤独，符号学，日本]

Traços Fáticos: Sociabilidade no Japão Contemporâneo

[Palavras-Chave: Do que é fático, sociabilidade, solidão, semiótica, Japão]

Фатические следы: социальность в современной Японии

[Ключевые слова: фатичность, социальность, одиночество, семиотика, Япония]

آثار لغة التواصل المحكية: السلوك الإجتماعي في اليابان المعاصرة

كلمات البحث: لغة التواصل الاجتماعي المحكية، السلوك الاجتماعي، العزلة، السيميائية