

Designated Spaces for Designated Imaginaries: The Cruel Optimism of Citizen Participation in Post-disaster State-citizen Dialogues

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Abstract: Environmental disturbances, pandemics, or social crises often lead to the emergence of ‘heterotopian’ spaces (Foucault 1998; Boano 2011), that give rise to emergent debates on alternative imaginations of the future, even utopianism (Solnit 2010). At the same time, modern governance increasingly emphasises the active participation of citizens in processes where these alternative imaginations are turned into actionable plans (Bherer et al. 2016). In particular, the intensity of development needs in post-crisis contexts (Olshansky et al. 2012) can see the prolific spread of participatory spaces designated to facilitate dialogue between authorities and citizens. From creative workshops to citizen committees however, the results and experiences of citizen participation in these ‘designated spaces’ have remained consistently inconsistent (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018; Cleaver 2001). Drawing on ethnographic research carried out in 2015 and 2016 among individuals who took part in spaces of state-citizen dialogue after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, this paper contributes to critical debates on participatory governance by examining the non-critical acceptance of citizen participation as a universal social ‘good’. The paper focuses on the paradoxically high degrees of optimism and voicelessness reported by disaster victims in Tōhoku, arguing that this paradox reflects the wider patterning of dialogue and governance as a form of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011), where the optimism represents just another form of voicelessness. The paper concludes that to overcome the ‘cruelty’, more focus needs to be paid on improving the process through which the content of dialogues is determined and shaped together with the citizens in the participatory spaces, rather than used as venues for promising a better future.

Keywords: Participation, Hope, Imaginary, Cruel optimism, Post-disaster recovery, Japan

Anna Vainio is an Anthropologist working in the context of East Asian, with a specific focus on contemporary Japanese society. She gained her doctorate degree from the University of Sheffield in 2020, with her thesis exploring the post-disaster recovery in north-east Japan, and the disconnect in the framing and narration of post-disaster plans for the future between the authorities and victim communities. The work draws attention to the importance of affective elements in communal sense-making and articulation of experiences and life plans in socially disruptive contexts, contrasting their stories with the formal recovery policies and institutional frameworks where these elements are largely missing. Her overall research interests are related to the exploration of lived experiences in the context of sociological ruptures, bordering trauma and memory studies, while maintaining a commitment to ethnographic methods.

Introduction

Since the onset of the 'participatory turn' in the 1960s, actively engaging citizens in decision making has become a key principle of 'good governance' (Bherer et al. 2016). While perhaps most actively adopted by civil society organisations and NGOs in the fields of community and international development, participatory practices are equally prevalent at the level of local government, where the participatory practices were seen as a way of deepening the relationship and cooperation between the citizens and authorities at the level of everyday communal life (Ganuza et al. 2016; Polletta 2016; Leal 2007). Despite the popularity of participatory practices, their outcomes across multiple fields have remained consistently inconsistent (Cleaver 2001; Davidson et al. 2007; Moini 2011), with there being little consistent evidence of their impact on social change and democratisation of decision-making processes (Cleaver 2001; Gaventa 2004). In light of these critiques, we should resist the non-critical acceptance of citizen participation as a universal social 'good'. However, while there are undoubtedly many problems with participatory governance, its relevance as a point of inquiry persists, as the importance of citizens' inclusion in decision making as a core principle of democracy cannot be denied.

In this paper, I focus on participatory governance processes developed for the post-disaster recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disaster of 2011, discussing the operation of the spaces for state-citizen dialogue that proliferated as facilitators to a 'community-focused' recovery (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). The paper draws from a thirteen-month ethnographic fieldwork carried out in four disaster-affected towns in the Tōhoku region in 2015 and 2016, where I carried out 45 semi-structured interviews with local residents on their views and experiences of the recovery efforts. The interviews were carried out in the context of people's daily lives in the localities in order to be able to 'place' what people were saying into the concrete context of their surrounding reality. I also developed long-term continuous relationships with a number of residents in the communities that enabled me to gain a better sense of the stability and strength of people's views and arguments. The interview process was highly qualitative and flexible, focusing primarily on people's experiences of the disaster, their engagement with the recovery process, and dreams for the future, with all interviews carried out in a conversational manner.

Based on this material, I found that the majority of state-citizen dialogues were carried out in institutionalised spaces that took many forms, ranging from town-hall meetings, creative workshops and working groups and committees that required physical participation, to asynchronous methods such as surveys and consultations. 'Space' in this paper therefore encompasses both physical and non-physical sites of dialogue, referring rather to the extended institutionalised opportunities for dialogue

that emerge between citizens and authorities, with the paper exploring them in the context of post-disaster recovery where such opportunities often proliferate. Space is a key element in participatory practices, linked overwhelmingly to the notions of agency, purpose, and agenda of participation as a 'transformational act' to reform the foundation of the relationships within the space (Cleverly 2007). However, space is often overlooked as determining the *shape* and *meaning* of information that forms the foundations upon which mutual dialogues in these spaces are built, and outcomes and decisions that emerge from them. While focusing on the role 'space' played in the establishment of dialogue between the key partners in participatory governance, the authorities and the disaster-affected citizens in Tōhoku, this paper argues that 'space' also often becomes the determinant of the *content* of that dialogue.

The paper shows that the majority of institutionalised participatory opportunities in Tōhoku were experienced as silencing by the citizens, devoid of mutual deliberation of content, with the citizens' voices being heard and recorded while not forming or impacting the foundation upon which the vision for the future was built. In this way, I argue that participatory spaces have become rendered what I call 'designated spaces' for the advancement of 'designated imaginaries' of the authorities. While these fixed imaginaries did provide hopeful momentum and an emotional resource for local populations, the paper concludes that because citizens could not impact the shape and content of the debates in the participatory spaces, this optimism turned 'cruel' (Berlant 2011), rendering hope and optimism just another form of voicelessness.

Designation of Spaces for Dialogue in Post-Disaster Heterotopia

The focus on post-disaster contexts to explore the spaces of state-citizen dialogues may seem specific for the reader, but as more sociological ruptures such as environmental hazards and pandemics are impacting populations across the world, our intimate experiences of 'the post-disaster' are increasing. Despite being anomalous and atypical sociological settings, disasters can 'lift veils' (Curato and Ong 2015) by revealing points of vulnerability in social systems. Most importantly, they expose the uneven distribution of everyday risks that often further marginalise those with the least say in decision-making processes in the first place (Pelling et al. 2004). On the other hand, post-disaster contexts open opportunities for sociological imagining, even utopianism (Solnit 2010), where through imagination the 'collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge' (Appadurai 2000, 6). Through these functions of revealing, diffusion, and challenging, the post-disaster contexts can thus offer apt environments for exploring existing norms and visions as well as relationships between different actors involved in human and social development.

Disasters create what Foucault (1998) calls a 'heterotopia', where the normal

relations, representations and designations of the space have been neutralised, and where traditional time has broken down (p. 178). Through their existence as 'spaces apart', heterotopias are contesting the order and form of the external, accepted and familiar 'normalcy' from which the disaster has emerged (Boano 2011), while simultaneously contesting the return to that 'normalcy' by enabling the imagination of a different future and alternative political visions. Disaster defies comprehension, with 'unimaginable' or 'unprecedented' being the words most commonly used by the residents to describe the events that took place along the North-Eastern Japanese coast on March 11, 2011. In a cataclysmic disaster like this, familiar life suddenly loses its rational order (Weick 1993), breaking the familiar shape of the space and chronology of time, disrupting the established patterns of sense-making. A heterotopia is therefore always a deviation from the surrounding familiar and accepted 'normalcy', containing a possibility for the past to be renegotiated and re-understood through the space and an opportunity to re-envision the future. (Collins and Opie 2010; Boano 2011). As 'spaces apart' they are, however, more a reflection of the space that surrounds them (the familiar space) than of themselves.

On the side of practice too, post-disaster development contexts are often described as 'blank slates' or 'windows of opportunity' to 'build back better' (Becker and Reusser 2016; Mochizuki & Chang 2017; Edginton 2017), a description that in itself refers to a state where the promotion of renewal and new possibilities are unencumbered by the physical and mental boundaries of the past society. The various participatory spaces, ranging from town-hall meetings, creative workshops and committees to surveys and asynchronous methods of consultation and opinion gathering, are quickly mobilised to open up and facilitate dialogues and cooperation in post-disaster settings between authorities and citizens (Dimmer 2016). Participatory spaces are often promoted as opportunities to discuss and develop post-disaster visions and ideals emerging from the 'blank slate' of the destruction into mutually agreeable and tangible plans for a 'better' future. These spaces encapsulate the spirit of sociological imagining, that is best seen as taking place through participatory governance, where the micro-level experiences on the ground can influence the macro-level policy making (Goulding et al. 2017). In principle, these spaces contain the impression of an exciting institutional environment, 'designated' for the deliberation of the alternatives and untested paths to the future, encouraged through local engagement and citizen-centred practices.

There is of course a great deal of evidence to support the positive impact citizen participation has on policy making, such as improving relations between public authorities and civil society actors (Fernández-Martínez et al. 2020), upscaling civic skills and competencies (Geissel 2009), and raising public accountability and civic responsibility (Michels and De Graaf 2010). Despite participatory practices and emphases of community engagement gaining popularity in development

processes and the positive impact it is having on some governance processes, general dissatisfaction toward post-disaster recovery outcomes has nonetheless persisted (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018). The simultaneous proliferation of participatory spaces and mounting popular dissatisfaction therefore presents a paradox. One of the key explanations for this paradox resides in the question about sociological imagination, with some authors arguing that despite participatory spaces promoting themselves as spaces for deliberation and mutual dialogues on alternative possibilities, these processes are not translated into practice (e.g. Smit 2004; Fischer 2006; Hamdi 2014). However, rather than accepting that imagination is entirely evacuated from participatory spaces, I argue that it is more a matter of *what* citizens are invited to imagine in these spaces.

Imagination is a social fact and a process through which ordinary people are engaged in the organisation of collective social life (Appadurai 2000; Crapanzano 2004; Abram 2017), and as such cannot be easily negated. Imagination develops into an ‘imaginary’ when it attaches itself to values, norms, institutions, and laws that provide shape for imaginations within the social reality that is felt and experienced (Strauss 2006). However, imagining, and imaginaries, are also mechanisms through which ‘modern citizens are disciplined and controlled – by states, markets, and other powerful interests’ (Appadurai 2000, 6). Through the allocation of resources, establishment of administrative policies and legislative structures, for instance, authorities can direct the likelihood with which certain visions become more realisable than others (Oguma 2013; Barrios 2017), and in this way reduce the spectre of imaginative possibilities and fix development onto a specific trajectory. Despite ‘designated spaces’ fostering sociological imagining, these spaces are simultaneously limiting the scale and boundaries of what is possible to imagine. Such limitations are leading to the state-citizen dialogues taking place only within the predetermined remit of ‘designated imaginaries’ that the state deems desirable and realisable.

This narrowing down of imaginative possibilities is problematic, as the designated spaces do often genuinely promote inclusion, community engagement, and unhindered expression of ideas at the local level (White 1996; Poletta 2006), but also function as settings where the new ideas citizens are invited to express are attuned and altered to fit the existing institutional frameworks and agendas (Grindle 2012).

In this way, the spaces for dialogue themselves are moulding the shape and meaning of the information and ideas that are expressed in the spaces, rather than merely facilitating the process of expression and dialogue, with the ‘designated space’ becoming an integral part of the establishment and enforcement of the ‘designated imaginary’ itself. Institutional spaces that are designed to enforce existing agendas are of course not transformational, while this is often something that citizens expect as the outcome of their participation in decision making (Fernández-Martínez et al. 2020).

Expressing transformational ideas in spaces that themselves are not transformational results in the attunement or silencing of new ideas and imaginations, leading to a sense of voicelessness within the overall process of development.

The sustained ascendancy of human societies can be attributed to the ability humans have to adapt to and after traumatic events (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane 1996), often leading to post-disaster growth after adversities (Linley & Joseph 2005; Janoff-Bullman 2004), with optimism and hopefulness playing a key role in the recovery and psychological coping of Tōhoku, the site of the disaster discussed in this paper, for instance. In the absence of real opportunities to express their voices, local residents were often left with few options other than to hope that the 'designated imaginaries' would eventually deliver the promises that they contained. Paradoxically, therefore, I argue that it is the 'designated imaginary' that emerged as the source of optimism rather than endogenous forms of sociological imagining, thus rendering the hopefulness in communities a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011).

Sociological imagining and the proliferation of optimism

In Japan, the cataclysmic events of 2011 reverberated from the disaster-hit regions, with immediate consequences on the national economy and social and political debates. The post-disaster reality quickly gave rise to emergent discourses about the directions of travel that should now be taken. New debates about the future opened up across multiple sites in society. While the national leadership was calling for the re-discovering of national strengths, peaceful coexistence, and harmony for the twenty-first century, reminiscent of the golden years of Japan's economic success, the grassroots movements, local activists, and increasingly the disaster victims themselves, were calling for actions to challenge the conventional order and contesting the visions of the national neo-conservative regime (Morris-Suzuki 2017; Shaw 2017; Brown and Mackie 2015). While seemingly in contrast with one another, the imagined outcomes of the recovery process were nonetheless remarkably similar across the different visions that were debated. The collective sentiment both nationally and locally was for the recovery to function as a vehicle to create a more physically and socio-economically resilient communities and propel Japan onto a path of growth (Hirano 2013; Ubaura 2018; Murakami et. al. 2014), thus reflecting the well-established national imaginary of economic growth, strength and collective well-being that has dominated Japan's modern national history (Ivy 1995). I argue that it is the familiarity and attachment to this imaginary that formed the main source of optimism in post-disaster Japan.

The disaster primarily impacted a region of Japan that for decades had suffered from socio-economic and demographic decline, with the impact of the disaster rapidly exacerbating these trends (NIPSSR 2013) and in a concrete way revealed the catastrophic consequences of Japan's post-war social and economic policies and the

regional vulnerabilities they had created (Hopson 2012; Cho 2014). The Fukushima nuclear accident, for instance, was a direct result of deliberate economic policies that aimed to peripheralise the undesirable trade-offs of rapid economic growth into the rural regions (Aldrich 2008), with Tōhoku in particular being sacrificed for the development of technologically advanced and highly urbanised metropolitan Japan (Hopson 2012). Locally, the sense of urgency to turn the tide of decline was acutely felt, and the key priorities of improving resilience were equally highlighted in the local discourses and imaginaries that were emerging in the affected communities, among the citizens living in intimate contact with the altered spaces.

The individual stories of personal changes and transformation I heard in Tōhoku reflected not only the typical processes of post-traumatic growth (Linley and Joseph 2005; Janoff-Bullman 2004), but the sense of ‘awakening’ and recognition of new possibilities that was prolific in post-disaster Japan (Shaw 2017; Samuels 2013; Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2017). A number of citizens reported the disaster as a stimulus for personal changes such as moving back to the disaster-affected town from metropolitan Japan, changing forms of employment, or becoming more involved in communal affairs through volunteering, for instance. While motivated by a diversity of factors, residents noted that through these localised and personal actions they were also advancing the overall goals of the recovery in their own small ways. Ms. Mori, a young woman who had recently moved to the Town of Minamisanriku, for instance, dreamed of starting a family soon. While a personal goal by its very nature, Ms. Mori nonetheless explained that *‘raising kids in the countryside is easier, and that way I can also support the development of this town.’* Equally, Mr. Yoshida, who was living in Sendai while waiting for the time he could return to his native Onagawa, emphasised *‘even though I live here [in Sendai], I maintain my residence in Onagawa because I want to pay my taxes there. It’s my small way to help the recovery effort.’* Whether it was having children or starting a business and creating jobs, in the stories of citizens these personal actions became integrated into the broader communal aspirations of economic prosperity, population growth, and general socio-economic resilience.

The broad vision of resilience was therefore a widely compelling one, drawing on the long-term anxieties over rural decline and stagnation of the national economy, while simultaneously promising their reinvigoration. In the months after the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, the Japanese government commissioned a report called ‘Hope Beyond The Disaster’ that was authored by a handpicked group of cross-disciplinary academic and political experts to outline the vision and key principles for Tōhoku’s recovery (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). The report holds a seminal place in the projection of Tōhoku’s future, forming the foundations for the formal principles, visions, and language for the recovery process, both nationally and locally (Ubaura 2018; Murakami et al. 2014). Through

the report, the government established a vision for the recovery, with specific goals of aggressively promoting development of new industries and employment opportunities in order to support a stable population base and rebuild safer habitats that not only protect people from future environmental hazards but also enable the flourishing of the region's cultural and social assets (Reconstruction Design Council 2011). Despite the desires for change and broad calls and commitments to ideas like sustainability and de-growth that emerged as responses to break the cycle of structural vulnerabilities and inequalities (Dimmer 2016), the collective goals reflected both nationally and in local narratives were remarkably conventional and static.

The endogenous actions and desires among the citizens strongly mirrored the desires and goals included into that promise. Mr. Takeda, a native of Onagawa with whom I formed a long-term collaborative relationship during my time in Tōhoku, for instance, explained to me in an excited tone how the disaster could be a '*real chance*' for his community to recover and rebuild in a more resilient and prosperous manner. When I asked Mr. Takeda what kind of a town he wanted Onagawa to be in five years' time, he painted a picture of a vibrant growing community bustling with tourists and visitors, new businesses, and job opportunities that would attract more people to move in, and where everyone would feel safe and comfortable. This optimism was detectable in the energy and vibrancy of the towns I visited more broadly, with local residents starting businesses, reinvigorating local festivals and changing their personal life courses as a result of the disaster experience, motivated by the collective desire to create a better and more resilient community.

However, against the socio-economic realities of ageing, overall depopulation, and economic stagnation, the imaginary that was promoted by the state and drawn on by the local citizenry was proclaiming promises of resilience and prosperity that could not realistically be delivered. Onagawa for instance had lost 40% of its population in the tsunami, either directly in the disaster or to the outmigration that ensued (Takano 2016). With Japan's economy lying stagnant for decades and the overall population now in a state of absolute decline and rapid ageing (Statistical Yearbook of Japan 2019, Ishikawa 2017), the chances of the Onagawa, or any of these peripheral rural towns recovering some, or even any, of their lost populations seems extremely slim. This paradox was not lost on the local populations, with points of anxiety and uncertainty increasingly rising to the surface of the narratives the more time I spent in these communities and with these individuals. '*How long can we manage our lives high up on the mountainside when our bodies grow old?*', Mr. Takeda wondered, worrying over the practicality of daily life for him and his ageing neighbours in the new residential areas that were now mandated to be relocated on higher ground, separated from the shops and services that were now pooled together below in the bay area to better facilitate the fostering of tourism, all in the name of physical and socio-economic resilience.

The optimism in Tōhoku, therefore, did not amount to blind naivety, as the local populations were painfully aware of the realities within which their communities were trying to reinvent themselves. However, it was the moments in which the locals articulated the concrete presentations of their anxieties when the familiar social imaginary began to break down, revealing the points of contestation from which dissatisfaction toward the recovery revealed itself. Much of the dissatisfaction that people articulated, culminated in the feeling that the authorities lacked understanding of the localised communal conditions in which the recovery was taking place, with local citizens noting on the government or city officials only rarely ‘descending’ into the communities. These details, I argue, pointed toward a break-down in dialogue and communication between the authorities and citizens on delivering a recovery that would ‘respect the needs of local residents [and to] duly reflects their various opinions’, as outlined by the government as a key principle at the beginning of the recovery process (Reconstruction Design Council 2011, 18). These problems of dialogue were curious as post-disaster Tōhoku had witnessed a mushrooming of participatory spaces and processes, with a strong emphasis on the recovery being carried out in close engagement with the victim communities, thus following the international ‘best practice’ on community-based development (Bherer et al. 2016).

Designation of imaginaries through the designated spaces

It has been argued that participatory processes as a method of ‘good governance’ merely seek consent and commentary from citizens, rather than provide them with the tools and resources to control their own circumstances (Bherer et al. 2016). This typical orientation and emphasis toward consensus was also strongly present in the participatory spaces for state-citizen dialogues in post-disaster Tōhoku, often marginalising local voices in the process (Cho 2014; Dimmer 2016), and thus leading to feelings of voicelessness and dissatisfaction. I argue that while the imaginary of more resilient and prosperous communities did resonate with local residents, it was the national goals and objectives for the recovery that were emphasised in this imaginary over the priorities of the region and the local towns themselves.

The government placed a specific emphasis on the ‘community-focused’ nature of the recovery process, with the aforementioned ‘Hope Beyond The Disaster’ report concretising this objective by promoting the establishment of ‘forums where residents will be able to discuss the future of their own communities’ (Reconstruction Design Council 2011, 21). This approach is not unique to the Japanese context, closely echoing the prevailing emphasis on localism and community-based approaches within international disaster recovery and risk mitigation communities (e.g. the Hyogo Framework for Action). The practical establishment of these ‘forums’ in the Japanese context was left to the discretion of the municipalities, thus ensuring proximity of

the recovery process with the recovering citizens, but their primary purpose was nonetheless to facilitate dialogue between the authorities and citizens.

Overwhelmingly these 'forums' took the shape of participatory planning meetings, citizen committees and workshops, that in many municipalities were organised within months of the disaster, often in cooperation with existing civil society organisations (Tsuji et al. 2007; Cho 2014; Dimmer 2016). In my fieldwork sites, local residents reported the use of surveys, action groups, and committees to establish dialogues for more diverse opinion gathering, alongside the more typical 'designation' of physical spaces for public meetings. These various methods developed a diversity of institutional spaces where dialogues between citizens and authorities were taking place, resulting in detailed and concrete development plans for local disaster recovery as well as other measures through which the recovery would reflect the views of the affected communities.

While municipalities in Japan hold the legal responsibility to carry out emergency response disaster recovery, due to the scale of the disaster the capacities of the local municipalities were reduced, thus leading to additional assistance being required from the central government (Oguma 2013). Equally, the disaster had a huge impact on the national economy, political discourse, and regional dynamics, despite the immediate impact being limited to a relatively contained area. The simultaneous emphasis on the regional and national impact was noticeable in the central government's approach to the disaster response. The 'Hope Beyond The Disaster' report, for instance, states that 'Japan's economy cannot be restored unless the disaster areas are rebuilt. The disaster areas cannot be truly rebuilt unless Japan's economy is restored [...] we shall simultaneously pursue reconstruction of the afflicted areas and revitalisation of the nation' (p. 2), thus firmly intertwining the fate of the region and Japan together.

Through this interconnectedness the central state was able to justify its own strong role in the recovery that effectively undercut its simultaneous emphasis on citizen engagement and the 'community-focused' principle of the recovery. The government's position is illustrated by its strong role in the structural organisation of the recovery, which permanently altered the established dynamic between the municipalities and the central government by turning the hierarchy of local control over disaster recovery on its head (Murakami et al. 2014; Dimmer 2016; Oguma 2013). By dictating the availability of resources and the legal and administrative structures the state was already effectively guiding the direction of development and shaping the meaning of goals and objectives to its desired direction without citizen input (Sato 2012). Despite being promoted as forums where citizens can discuss the future of their communities, the imaginative framework imposed upon these spaces of dialogue by the fiscal and legislative control measures was often so narrow that it left very little room for genuine deliberation on the meanings embedded into the imaginary of a

more resilient future, and how they reflected the meanings emerging from the context of the recovery and citizens' lived experience.

The solutions to improve safety against natural hazards provide an illustrative example of the dissonance between the different meanings embedded into this objective by the authorities and by the affected populations. The government offered the disaster-affected coastal towns only two centrally sanctioned and fiscally backed options to increase their physical resilience: either move communities to higher ground away from coastal regions, or erect tsunami walls to protect coastal habitats (Murakami et al. 2014). Both of the options were, however, seen as problematic by the local populations, because they broke the physical intimacy and visual connection with the sea. Despite having experienced the immense power and danger of the sea, it was also central to the communities' way of life and something that the locals wanted to recover. *'The sea got angry with us, but it has always given us more than it takes'*, said Mr. Takeda, continuing to explain how a degree of risk is always present when living with forces of nature, but that these communities would not exist without the sea. Likewise, Mr. Ono, a local fisherman in Ishinomaki, worried about the dangers of the government-imposed tsunami walls that were breaking the residents' visual connection with the sea in many places. *'Not seeing the sea is dangerous'*, he stated, alluding to the experience that people in these coastal towns have gained from living in close proximity with the sea and have the ability to recognise oncoming dangers (e.g. storms and tsunamis) just by looking at the sea. On the side of socio-economic resilience too, due to the disruption the walls are anticipated to cause on the coastal ecosystems they will likely impact the abundance of catches (Dionisio and Pawson 2016; Littlejohn 2018), while local entrepreneurs and residents worried about the walls destroying the natural beauty of the Pacific shoreline as a resource for their budding tourism industry (Littlejohn 2018).

For the locals, it was the intimate and unrestricted connection with the sea that provided the foundation for resilient lifestyles and livelihoods, where the physical risks of tsunamis and storms were offset by the resilience gained from the knowledge and understanding of how to live with the risks, and the abundance, of the sea. Even though local populations reported strong support for improved physical safety, given their traumatic experiences with the tsunami in 2011, neither of the two options that the state made available to their communities seemed to facilitate the realisation of local impressions and meanings of resilience. By imposing fixed solutions to the problem, the government was effectively erasing the possibilities to negotiate alternative meanings of resilience that emerged from the local context, thus eliminating the possibilities to imagine alternative solutions that would match the local conceptualisations of safety and resilience beyond community relocations and tsunami walls. The purpose of the 'designated spaces' for dialogue was therefore to

offer a 'designated imaginary', complete with ready-made and financed solutions, not to stimulate conversation on what the problems were that needed solving in the first place.

This function of designated spaces as merely seeking approval from the citizens was reflected in the local commentary with regards to the people's experiences of participating in them in Tōhoku. When I asked local residents about their experiences and desires to take part in the dialogues that were regularly organised in their towns, I was regularly met with either neutral or negative expressions, noting the lack of interest or the overall pointlessness of participation. Mr. Ishikawa, a local resident of Minamisanriku that had experienced wide-scale damage from the tsunami, was one of the few people I met in Tōhoku who was still a regular participant in the participatory spaces. He reported his own observation about the dwindling numbers of participants and how hardly anyone attended anymore. He explained that *'many feel there's no point in going, everything has already been decided. You can only comment on the existing plans, not propose anything new'*, indicating the lack of opportunities for sociological imagination within participatory spaces.

Over the years it seems that local populations had become increasingly frustrated with the authoritarian space of the recovery, with the designated spaces in the municipal localities often viewed with bitterness and indifference. Mr. Ishida, a local resident of Onagawa, exclaimed that *'there are too many meetings, they [the authorities] should just get on with it [the recovery]'*. He elaborated on his comment by explaining that the authorities in his town had asked for their views and invited citizens to participate in the deliberations, but noted that *'sure, we said our opinions, but whether they were reflected upon or not [by the authorities], I do not know [...] they say they hear our opinions for building a new town, but maybe it's just what they say.'* Mr. Ishida's comments reflected the overall atmosphere where local residents had become increasingly disillusioned with the designated spaces for dialogue, the very forums where residents were supposed to 'discuss the future of their own communities' according to the government. In this way the act of participating in dialogues itself becomes meaningless (Picton 2018), as the sense of futility local residents in Tōhoku felt toward participation stemmed not from the act of taking part itself, but rather their inabilities and restricted opportunities to control the meanings and directions set to reach the goals of the recovery.

While the main points of friction resided between the central government and the municipal actors as legislative and fiscal mandate, these frictions became increasingly polarised in the relationship between citizens and authorities in general, manifesting in a sense of voicelessness and powerlessness at the local level. The built-in inflexibilities within funding, legislation, and administration of the recovery were further replicated and strengthened down the line in the relationship between the municipal authorities

and the local citizens, whose endogenous ideas and visions regarding reconstruction of the tangible local reality the municipality was unable to fully support. No matter how innovative, creative, or empowering the participatory work would be within the designated spaces for dialogue in close proximity to the communities themselves, the municipal decision making and resource allocation was nonetheless shackled and severely restricted by the institutional framework of the recovery that was externally dictated (Oguma 2013; Dimmer 2016). When the tsunami walls were being erected despite vocal opposition, local residents directed their anger and bitterness toward the municipal actors, who were nonetheless often equally powerless to offer alternatives.

By holding the legal and fiscal power to control resources, the authorities were narrowing the scope of debates within the participatory spaces. However, they were simultaneously promising to deliver a fixed imaginary of a more resilient future, with the designated participatory spaces becoming an integral part of the designation of that imaginary. Arguably, the emotional response of optimism in Tōhoku seemed to be propelled precisely by the firm and strong fixing of that future by the authorities, drawing on the innate desires for future prosperity that the resilience narrative reflected, with this imaginary being enforced and administered to the citizenry through the participatory spaces. While providing a source of optimism, the spaces for participation were limiting, merely offering people a chance to engage with the designated imaginary, but not to reorient or redesign it.

Despite appearing as fixed and unmovable, serving the agenda of the state, and upholding the status quo, the designated spaces for designated imaginaries nevertheless played a central role in delivering a 'promise' of a better future that resonated with citizens' own innate desires for resilience, growth, and prosperity and provided them with points of attachment. The acceptance of participatory spaces as simultaneously fostering optimism and voicelessness offers an opportunity to explore participatory spaces and processes beyond being simply transformative *or* enforcing the status quo. In post-disaster Tōhoku, people's optimism did not inherently emerge from their abilities to participate in the dialogues, but rather from the hope that the promised 'designated imaginary' would eventually deliver a desired future. In a way, the fixed and designated imaginaries exhibited a degree of 'care' from the authorities, thus critically showing that top-down directed visions do have some societal value.

While the future of Japan as resilient and prosperously growing nation is an ever elusive one, especially in the context of Tōhoku's exacerbated socio-economic and demographic decline, the promise of a better future pushed forward through the 'designated spaces' for 'designated imaginaries' was therefore a comforting one, providing hopeful momentum to keep moving and rebuild lives that had been unimaginably changed in an instant. This optimism was nonetheless 'cruel' in nature, as the designated imaginaries relied on familiar and conventional solutions

to problems that could not be responded to with familiar methods. Despite general agreement on the overall abstract goals of increased resilience and prosperity, local dissatisfaction and voicelessness resulted from the restricted opportunities citizens had to outline the nature and shape of their needs and problems as the foundation of their dialogues with the state.

The cruel optimism of ‘designated spaces’

The emphasis on participation, citizen engagement and empowerment reflected by Tōhoku’s ‘community-focused’ disaster recovery and reflected in the dynamics of the ‘designated spaces’ for state-citizen dialogue arguably mirror the wider patterning of the failures of contemporary governance practices, increased frustrations toward participatory processes (Fernández-Martínez et al. 2020), and mounting dissatisfaction (Davidson et al. 2007; Curato 2018) that can be seen as reflecting the distancing of citizens’ lived experience from the outcomes of political processes. Yet, modern governance continues to emphasise the virtues of active citizen participation in processes through which alternative imaginations are supposedly turned into actionable plans (Bherer et al. 2016). In particular, the intensity of development needs in post-crisis contexts (Olshansky et al. 2012) can see the prolific spread of participatory spaces designated to facilitate dialogue between authorities and citizens, as was the case in Tōhoku. Despite declining numbers of participants and mounting dissatisfaction, authorities nevertheless continued to promote and push forward the participatory agenda.

While sociological imagination was prolific in post-disaster Japan, with alternative imaginations being produced both nationally and locally, through legislative, fiscal, and administrative control measures the state nonetheless established clear boundaries for imaginaries that can be debated within the designated spaces for state-citizen dialogue, thus fixing the content of discussions in place. The ‘designated spaces’ for state-citizen dialogues become representations of pockets of enforced ‘normalcy’ within the post-disaster heterotopian ‘spaces apart’ and can thus become part of the overall trend where ‘participatory forms of governance can be folded into the logic of hierarchy and coercion’ (Penny 2017, 1352). However, this notion is not only related to authorities’ desires for tangible control and maintenance of the status quo but, I argue, was also motivated by the existential understanding of the democratic principles embedded into ordering of the relationship between the citizens and the authorities, reflecting what Lauren Berlant (2010) calls ‘cruel optimism’.

Berlant argues that as humans we have the innate capacity for optimism, manifesting itself as a desire to induce conventionality in patterns of change, or find forms of predictability within the change that we desire. This capacity to generate optimism, however, turns ‘cruel’ when it draws us toward attachments that are actively hindering

the achievement of our aspirations. In Tōhoku's disaster context, the citizens' belief in the better future through the recovery, represented by the tangible goals of increased safety and socio-economic prosperity, remained compelling despite the long history of rural decline, depopulation, and decline of industries, along with decades of evidence of revitalisation initiatives that had failed to rectify these problems (Love 2013; Knight 1997). In the disaster context, people's attachment to the idea that the tide of decline could be turned, was combined with the idea of the disaster functioning as a 'window of opportunity' for the newly emerging discourses and alternative visions to be realised. Berlant argues that optimism is a force that moves people to engage with the broader world and society in order to get closer to satisfying *something* that citizens and communities cannot generate on their own (Berlant 2010, 1–2, emphasis original), but this force of optimism can be further reinforced by the self-promotion of authorities to be in a position to generate the change that is collectively desired.

Therefore, despite reducing and in some cases entirely taking away the opportunities for deliberation by citizens, the authorities in Japan were simultaneously making a 'promise' to deliver a more resilient and prosperous future for their citizens, reflecting the 'something' in Berlant's notion above, while also speaking to the high expectations in Japan placed upon the central state for care and action in case of crises (Dionisio and Pawson 2013). State planning and interventions are seen as mechanisms that compensate for the inability of citizens to solve large-scale structural and embedded challenges that ironically are often produced by the state itself (Abram 2017, 79). Through the institutional, legislative and fiscal structures imposed by the state, the path to the future became fixed in place, or 'frozen' to use Crapanzano's (2004) denomination, with the 'designated spaces' for state-citizen dialogue becoming an integral part of the state's 'designated imaginary', or promise, itself. By fixing the future of communities onto a specific trajectory, the promised future could only be attainable through the specific context and set of circumstances that were embedded within the promise itself (Abram 2017; Wallman 1992). The fulfilment of the promise can only be observed from the future, with citizens being simply asked to (or expected to) place their trust in the oncoming of that promised future, thus justifying an atmosphere of opaqueness in the formal recovery process between the now and the promised future.

The opaqueness of the process placed citizens into a liminal condition where they could not return to the past while lacking the power and resources to generate the future that they desired. All they could do was *'hope that everything will turn out ok'*, as Mr. Takeda noted when I asked how he felt about the progress of recovery and the future of his community. This hopefulness has propelled a great deal of action in Japan but can often only be measured as the pulse of optimism, without an instrument or scale, in the absence of real opportunities to deliberate efforts to imagine a different kind of society (Kelly 2012). To understand the abundance of hope in Tōhoku,

Stephen Robertson (2016) offers a powerful conceptualisation of hope as a method to sustain daily efforts by providing ‘momentum’ without necessarily providing tangible capacities or agencies to reach the future that is desired. Hope as ‘momentum’ is therefore inherently ‘cruel’ in character, as it still follows the patterns of established attachments to fantasies of resilience and socio-economic growth and prosperity and is not a force of transformation itself.

In this way ‘hope’ becomes just another form of voicelessness that was otherwise also apparent in Tōhoku, representing ‘cruel optimism’ embedded into the fundamental dynamics of governance between the state and citizens. Hope has multiple functions, it can be a resource, a stimulus for action, or a disposition internal to and fostered by the individuals and communities or driven by the context and situations from which it emerges (Kavedzija 2016) and has often been associated with post-disaster dialogues around the world, along with other sociological coping mechanisms ranging from social capital to utopianism (Aldrich 201; Valaskivi et al. 2019). Aside from situational and fostered hope, evidently hope can also be externally administered through familiar hopeful narratives and visions for the future, irrespective of their potential for realisation. Both the state’s promise and the people’s attachment to that promise of a more resilient and socio-economically prosperous society were after all based on a false premise, due to the stagnant state of the economy and absolute population loss in the context of Japan. The illusion of the ‘promise’ nonetheless remained a compelling one, despite the mounting evidence that the state cannot deliver on its promise that will constantly elude citizens. As hope can be associated with the loss of specificity that diffuses the clarity of directions one can take toward the future (Kavedzija 2016), the proliferation of optimism can help to fill the gaps in the opaqueness of the recovery process.

Conclusions

In this paper I have outlined that disasters generate heterotopian spaces that help to uncover vulnerabilities and inequalities in existing ‘normalcy’, while also giving rise to alternative imaginaries to transform society. Disasters are contexts where resurrection of life and the development of that life to a better direction are urgently emphasised, with the role of citizens in deciding their own life courses seen as equally important. New spaces for state-citizen dialogues to negotiate and determine the course of development rapidly emerge in disaster contexts but are often reduced to venues where citizens’ voices remain marginalised in favour of the visions of the authorities, therefore resembling pockets of enforced ‘normalcy’ within the heterotopian landscape. However, despite disrupting the emergence of alternatives, through the empirical material presented in this paper, I have shown how these pockets of normalcy were still providing the most hope for disaster victims.

This proliferation of hope was nonetheless ‘cruel’ by nature, as the goals of resilience and prosperity presented in the state’s designated imaginary are unlikely to be realised, with people’s attachments to the predictabilities and familiarity built into that vision standing in the way of deliberation on genuine alternatives. Despite hope in this way representing another form of voicelessness, it is not meaningless, nor something that should be critiqued outright in the process. While this lack of control of collective and structural means makes ‘hope’ insufficient as a resource for transformative participatory governance and development of genuine alternatives, the positive impact of hope as an emotional resource, or ‘momentum’, cannot be overlooked. Equally, hope provides an analytical window through which to explore the spectre of voicelessness, enabling us to move away from discussing participatory spaces as either good or bad, against or for citizens, democratic or non-democratic, but also to see their functions as much more complex and complementary than literature on development practice of participatory governance would indicate.

Consideration of the role of these spaces in communities, societies, and state-citizen relations as existential, comforting and reflective of our ideas of democracy, even when these spaces fail to provide us with the outcomes that we desire, needs to be included in the discourses about participatory governance and the spaces through which it is carried out. It is therefore perhaps unfair to say that participatory practices and spaces for state-citizen dialogue amount to ‘tyranny’ as Cooke and Kothari (2004) have noted; however, it would not be correct to say that they are transformational either. What we need to do is recognise that developing social imaginaries and visions for the future is a process, not a goal, where the objectives of the dialogue need to fluctuate as the recovery advances. If the goal of the recovery is to create physically and socio-economically more resilient communities, then the premise of these dialogues between the state and citizens always needs to return to and start from the question of what resilience looks like for each community now and in the future. Elements of sociological imagination, deliberation, consent giving, opinion taking, and sharing of information all have a crucial role to play in these spaces and dialogues at different times of the recovery process. What the empirical, material, and residents’ testimonies indicate, however, is that citizens want to be able to see their individual and communal experiences reflected in the broader plans and visions for their communities, which is the foundation that state-citizen dialogues should be built on.

What was evident in Tōhoku was the disconnect between the shape of the localised problems, and the solutions offered to them as part of the state’s vision. While both the citizens and authorities agreed that a physically and socio-economically more resilient future was necessary for both the localities and Japan as a whole, the way citizens experienced both risks and resilience in the localised context, often did not match the structural and financial solutions offered by the state. Despite offering

hope, these fixed imaginaries which proliferated through the participatory spaces were therefore ultimately silencing, stemming from the inabilities of and the lack of opportunities offered to people in these spaces to explain the shape of their local issues to the authorities. The institutional spaces for state-citizen dialogue were not designed for these types of dialogues to take place. To overcome the ‘cruelty’ in participatory governance, the focus on participatory spaces as facilitators of dialogue needs to shift from simply offering a greater number and more innovative opportunities for citizens to debate fixed content, to improving the process through which the content of dialogues is determined and shaped in these spaces together with the citizens, rather than used as venues to simply promise a better future.

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