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Allison, A. Precarious Japan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

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Sociologist Ezra Vogel's major work, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (1979), stands as a common benchmark for measuring the socioeconomic decline in Japan over the last 35 years. Vogel was not writing to applaud Japan but rather to encourage American corporations to consider Japan's production and economic methodologies—and then to adapt those methods into the American system. Assessing the national ethos of Japan becomes inextricably connected with corporate capitalism and the varying conditions of the employed and unemployed, ultimately revealing a corporate capitalist environment that has increasingly alienated its employees. In light of the economic downturn, the dissolving of the family unit, and the increase of job insecurity, it is not surprising that “precarious” is how Anne Allison has described Japan's late stage capitalism in *Precarious Japan* (2013). Through a well-documented and multi-faceted critical approach meant to engage the reader in an analysis of capitalism as a system, Allison surveys the current state of social precarity in Japan and the dangers that may lie ahead for the aging society in the post-3/11 Fukushima environment.

Serving as the Robert O. Keohane Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, Allison is one of the leading Western scholars on Japanese social theory, having conducted decades of research encompassing Japanese society. The focus of the text under review is the long-term effects that capitalist society sows within the individual. Readers are presented with a clear image of a foreboding hopelessness felt in a post-capitalist Japan. Allison's research lends itself to a modern day inquiry concerning the duress in the alienation of the Japanese work force as well as class conflicts and exploitation. Extensive fieldwork constitutes a majority of Allison's material, and her publication incorporates interviews integrated with her personal experience as a volunteer in the Fukushima tsunami cleanup efforts.

As Allison is quick to note, Japan is a society that seldom diverges from its well-entrenched social structure. However, since the burst of the 1990s economic bubble, it has done just that: there has been an increasingly systematic shift in Japanese corporate strategy away from retaining employees, who were themselves expected to sacrifice all elements of personal life for that of the company. The demographics have altered and the upward trend of part-time and temporary workers has increased to 33% of the workforce (p. 5). As of 2015, it was reported that as few as 10% of employees held lifetime employment.¹ The delicate nature of employment in Japan is one of the primary factors, Allison argues, that has negatively influenced the status quo in Japanese society. Supporting this claim is an overwhelming awareness on the part of many Japanese of being displaced, of being disconnected, and of precariousness in everyday life.

The devastating natural disaster of the March 11, 2011 Fukushima earthquake and subsequent tsunami occurred while Allison was conducting research for *Precarious Japan*. The book is therefore tinged with the influence of the aftermath of this disaster and the now bleaker outlook troubling Japan's future. Because of the loss of home and livelihood, many of the tsunami victims were required to move to different regions of Japan to begin anew. The structure and organization of *Precarious Japan* are both helped and hindered by Allison's inclusion of a description of the disaster: Allison wrote large portions of the text before 3/11, and, only the final chapter deals with the cleanup efforts after the disaster and the deepened uncertainty of the country. As such, there is an inevitable fissure within the work.

Divided into seven chapters, *Precarious Japan* moves through various levels of Japanese society—from the assumed norms and expectations esteemed by a post capitalist society, to the underworld of the *hikikomori* (self-induced shut-ins, homeless inside their own

home), and attempted suicide survivors. Throughout the reading, Allison consistently provides a keen analysis of the “politics of sociality,” endeavoring to lay bare a “scarcity in the means of subsistence and a sparseness in human capital and connection” (p. 58), which primarily effects the 33% of the population who exist on the edge of or below the poverty line. The chapters provide the historical background behind the progression of Japan’s once successful capitalist force (which peaked during the 1980s and 1990s) to the country’s shift into the post-bubble collapse, including the drastic increase of suicide rates brought on (partially) by the economic downturn.

Allison’s argument is aided through the employment of three dominant resources: media reports, personal interviews, and the observation of creative artistic performances. The last of which endows the research with arguably its most valuable insights into the sociocultural currents of 21st century Japan. Something is brewing in Japan, Allison posits. The country’s soul is at work, but it is still hibernating. There may eventually ignite within Japan, she says, “a call for a social revolution” (p. 131)—an uprising of the Japanese soul—beginning in an underworld of artists. Allison interviews individuals who are representative of the “alienated [laborer],” those who represent “the alienation of man as species-being,”² and those who are seeking social belonging through artistic avenues.

Perhaps the most resonating of Allison’s observations revolves around the future generation of Japan, as, she says, the youth are gravitating toward “de-sociality” (p. 85). On a grander scale, this phenomenon is similar to that of the voluntary seclusion undertaken by the *hikikomori*, who constitute a presumed one million former members of Japanese society. In the larger picture, such the passivity of the Japanese youth is reflected in a generation of young people who are not actively participating in the social system surrounding them. There is a disconnect; a sense of complacency, asserts Allison, that rejects the need for future-thinking. Japan, it seems, will have no Arab Spring, partly because the aspirations of the youth for their future are nonexistent, deemed inconsequential, or, as some research has suggested, not instilled by their parents (p. 92). This last possibility is perhaps symptomatic of the lack of communication within the family circle. Inactive participation suggests that the youth are becoming “de-social” (p. 139). The rekindling of an apparently diminished “lust for life” among Japanese youth,³ Allison suggests, could be a critical element in the assuaging of the current precarity of the country.

What becomes clear through Allison’s analysis of Japanese youth is that the capitalist drive for success and status (including security) once sought and enjoyed by previous generations—now absent—has left the current generation of Japan without hope, with fewer youth willing to sacrifice their lives for a life-consuming position in a corporation that is no longer likely to retain them for life in return. Immediate commodity fetishism has arisen, replacing a forward-looking perspective with a drive for the “now” of the material world; Japan’s young people, as Allison describes them are a “perpetually presentist, precariously employed, forever ‘youthful’ youth” (p. 91). Where this will lead the country is unclear; what does emerge, however, is that modern social life and the transforming economic vitality of (insecure) labor value in Japan have been shown to be disjointed, provoking Allison to consider an existent need in Japan to “move away from a standard of work and productivity measured by capitalist value” (p. 69). As job-based class differences increase, alongside a diminishing interest in pursuing overseas opportunities, the youth have become “refugees” in their own country.

When pushed to the outskirts of society through an inflicting social dis-ease, members in a growing segment of Japanese society become “Othered.” Allison envisions this group of “outsiders” as one possible source of change, suggesting that from inside these groups emanates a growing awareness of the need for diversification among Japanese communities. Indeed, loneliness in Japan seems chronic (p. 168), and in many of Allison’s interviews,

loneliness surfaces as one of the blights of society. A sense of belonging and recognition is exactly what post-capitalist Japan has lost with the advent of precarity, and the voices of those on the outskirts of society may give rise to the creation of spaces of belonging and acceptance. Drawing on the queer theory work of José Esteban Muñoz, Allison agrees that “exclusion from normative belonging” (p. 175) plausibly functions as a starting place for creating spaces of belonging. Anthropological spaces, containing “places of identity, of relations and of history”⁴ are arguably needed in post-capitalist Japan, and Allison focuses on Muñoz’s queer argument, suggesting that a sense of shared precariousness can give voice to actual change. The existence of physical spaces in which individuals can feel accepted in their identities allows for the development of connection and facilitates a sense of belonging for a new segment of the community.

As noted, Allison’s overarching argument points to the youth of Japan and the need for a revived outlook of hope for the future. While throughout the book there is reference to the obvious, encroaching threat of a society burdened by an aging generation, Allison’s focus returns to the prospect of the youth and their engagement (first with other people and then with the future of Japan). A forward-looking Japan (like that of Post-WWII) may eventually be reborn—as opposed to being revived—as a result of a shift away from previous generations’ drive for success and status. The precarity of current day Japan, *Precarious Japan* suggests, hinges on the future developments of the society: developments that should not be driven by government policies but by Japanese citizens. As some of Allison’s elderly interviewees perceive, young people need to turn to political activism, becoming protagonists in generating the transformation of the old, strict societal structures and encouraging a “loose relationality” among family, authority, and politics (p. 200). In developing sociopolitical interests—especially within communities—youth have the potential to bring forth the much needed hope for the future; as Allison observes, “Hope shouldn’t be top-down—or pronounced in the name of a collective Japan that exerts pressures and exclusions all its own” (p. 199). The seeking of a sense of “belonging” (p. 198), a buzzword arising in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, signifies the advent of a new collective mentality in Japan; sadly, however, the Fukushima disaster also put a blight on the country’s future after the destruction to the nuclear power plant.

In a noticeable shift, the final chapter of *Precarious Japan* focuses on the relief and rebuilding efforts taking place in Fukushima Prefecture. This chapter incorporates Allison’s own volunteering trips to Fukushima and the conversations she shared with other volunteers in order to provide a first-person, outsider’s perspective to the support efforts. Entitled “In the Mud,” a reference to the massive amount of sludge left after the tsunami waters receded, the chapter is perhaps the most removed from prior chapters, demarking the post-3/11 Japanese mentality. A major shift in the Japanese mindset due directly to the aftermath of the disaster is an increased distrust for the government (p. 204). Many Japanese consider the government to have seriously failed in protecting the public, compounding issues of mistrust with lies. Linked with the social dis-ease present before the disaster, this distrust of the government has served as an impetus to bring some youth out of their reveries, inspiring them not only to participate in the cleanup efforts but also to actively take part in anti-nuclear protests held throughout the nation. What Allison observes is that there is a new commonality arising in the aftermath of the disaster: “a sociality formed in pain” (p. 192). Witnessing, as Allison does, the initiatives undertaken by people from all over Japan to support their fellow citizens affected by the radiation provides a more positive outlook and closure for *Precarious Japan*. While not glossing over the reality of the crisis, Allison observes through the volunteers that “hope is a collective action,” an action that is a “working partnership recovering, relieving, reconstructing the stricken area, moving it—and Japan—forward, cultivating hope” (p. 202).

Overall, *Precarious Japan* offers readers a glimpse into the current state of the Japanese socioeconomic climate. Post-capitalist Japanese citizens are struggling to see a clear direction into the future, with many of the youth trapped in a very materialist present. A strong attribute to Allison's work is the skillful application of Edward Said's cautioning of the Western mind to avoid perspectives "circumscribed by a series of attitudes and judgments"⁵ when grappling with the complexities of Asian studies. *Precarious Japan* is in every manner an examination of human alienation in a post-capitalist society; a precarious condition is present in Japan, as Allison's last words express, "just [as there is] everywhere today" (p. 206). The unforeseeable and devastating events of the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami pervade Allison's various analyses on Japanese society, and the work feels disjointed due to the unsettling nature of the event. Additionally, many of the chapters read individually, rather than cohesively (with references in each chapter to identical events, as if they had received no prior mention in earlier chapters). These critiques aside, *Precarious Japan* is a valuable study of the precariat element in a shifting society. The implications found through Allison's study reveal that the effects brought about by the downturn of post-capitalist Japan are only to be rectified through the uplifted voice of the youth and a push for a new, hope-filled future centered on a new form of community—and not on a re-treading of the path of previous generations.

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¹ McNeill 2015.

² Lefebvre 2008, p. 62.

³ The need to recreate social organisation implies "a care deficit and a deficit in sociality in Japan today" (p. 127); as another scholar has noted, "the family's human resources...have gone bankrupt" (Lebra, p. 167).

⁴ Augé 2008, p. 43.

⁵ Said 1994, p. 67.