

Conclusion

YAMBARU FUNBARU!



Every day is a journey and the journey itself is home.
—Matsuo Bashō, *Oku no Hosomichi*, “Narrow Road to the Interior”

The *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* “Special Issue on the Environment” (Murphy 2011: 15), published around the time I concluded my fieldwork, declares that “Okinawa’s current orientation for economic development is doomed.” Okinawa’s two key economic flows—the U.S. military presence and tourism—are predicted to “slow if not screech to a halt entirely” (15) as global oil production peaks and then descends into a future of low energy consumption in which the costs of fueling aircraft and ships, both military and commercial, may prove an impossible budgetary burden that ultimately results in a much desired reduction in U.S. military bases on Okinawa.

The tourism industry, though still the most rapidly developing nongovernmental sector of Okinawa’s economy, may also be stunted by the rising cost of the energy needed to supply tourists with electricity, potable water, and fuel for the ubiquitous rental car. Murphy calls for the same kind of fundamental economic transition that Noboru Jahana anticipated and advocated during the late nineteenth century, in resistance to Japan’s political, linguistic, and environmental colonization of Okinawa. Through its enmeshment in the global sugar trade, Okinawa was vulnerabilized to “external energy and financial inputs” (Murphy 2011: 17). In the early twenty-first century, the “tourism imperative” has shifted the prefecture’s dependencies to external energy sources and the financial inputs of tourists.

University of the Ryukyus eco-critic and environmental literature expert Shin Yamashiro writes compellingly of the flux between the “particularity” of Okinawan environmental problems and the “universality” of the structures that produce nature-based tourism dependence on small islands (Yamashiro 2005: 51). The Yambaru kuina cannot be found anywhere else in the world,

but the threat of reduced habitat as a result of human expansion resonates with the predicament of the kiwi, a similar flightless bird endemic to New Zealand. Laura Ogden (2011: 119) argues that “when places become ecologically famous, belonging solely to the world of things and facts” (facts in the sense of particularized, collectable knowledge), “their social natures are polished smooth, removing discordances.” Through the “polishing” of Nature for ecotourism, Yambaru today has become what a “smooth object,” a region whose ontology has lost its history of “inherent material and ideological conflicts, incongruities, and biosocial entanglements” (Ogden 2011: 101) (cf. Latour 2004). My attention to slow vulnerability (cf. Nixon 2011; Parreñas 2012) in Okinawa is intended to roughen up and reinscribe some of the major historical and political events that have brought the ecological fame of biodiversity to the north.

Looking to the future, it is important to remember that Okinawan environmental consciousness first emerged “*in the reaction against* the military presence” (Yamashiro 2005: 55, my emphasis). Following decades of pressure and protests by local residents, the U.S. military has announced its latest plan to transfer 5,000 of the of the 27,000 troops currently stationed on Okinawa to Guam by 2020 (Fuentes 2015). Whether U.S. military forces ultimately depart Okinawa because of long-standing popular demand by Okinawans, fossil fuel-related financial constraints, or some combination thereof, this proposed military exodus will free up close to 20 percent of Okinawan land for new (and revived) sustainable economic practices. Intensive agriculture, permaculture, and other farming techniques could rebuild the prefecture’s economic backbone to support a strategic reduction of food imports (Murphy 2011: 20). While these kinds of military agreements have been long delayed owing to triangulated conflicts between the U.S., Japan, and Okinawa, the prospect of environmental decolonization promises to strengthen diversify economic opportunities in prefecture.

A tall white lighthouse towers over Nago Wharf, encircled by a massive, elegantly carved blue and turquoise dolphin statue that faces the sea. On the lighthouse is painted the Okinawan saying, “*Niraikanai*.” En route to join forest treks, coral transplanting dive trips, and dolphin therapy sessions, I drove past this sculpture hundreds of times without ever really noticing the message, which translates roughly to “the other side of the sea.” *Niraikanai* refers to the origin of all *Yuimun*—the good things that come near, that come *to* us (*yottekuru*), such as protein-rich food from the sea. Mr. Satō, the eccentric (if invasive) “messenger of the forest” who led me on multiple ecotours, told me that whereas *Niraikanai* generally has a positive nuance, bad things that come *at* us (*yattekuru*), such as illness, can also be *Niraikanai*.

For those who do not live on a small island, tourism may be regarded as something that impacts life negatively “somewhere else” (Gössling and Hall

2006: 13). When I first arrived in Okinawa in the summer of 2009, a casual stroll along the beach in Motobu revealed a stunning diversity of *Niraikanai* litter from the other side of the sea: glass soda bottles that washed ashore from Taiwan, milk cartons floated across from China, even an empty bag of potato chips that appeared to originate in the Philippines lay shrouded in Okinawan kelp. Okinawa, still imagined by many members of the military and business communities as the “Keystone of the Pacific,” shares a host of environmental dilemmas with Guam, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and American Samoa—many of which also support a large U.S. military presence and depend on international tourism.

Which kind of *Niraikanai* do ecotourists pose for Okinawa? Celia Lowe writes that “*the ‘ecotourist’ is the specific figure for whom nature will be saved.* Despite claims to the universal value of biodiverse nature, this is a nature only some will be able to avail themselves of” (2006: 161, my emphasis). Whether future ecotourists come *to* Okinawa, as responsible travelers, or come *at* Okinawa, as polluting consumers, will depend upon how extensively the ideals of sustainable development are put into practice and policy, and whether and how local economic autonomy is regained for Okinawans (*Uchinaanchu*).

The catchy slogan “*Yambaru Funbaru!*” (Stand Firm Yambaru!) was printed on many of the postcards, t-shirts, posters, and brochures I collected during fieldwork. For all its doomsday predictions, Murphy’s article concludes with the promise that Okinawa “has the freedom and opportunity *within the resource necessities that present themselves* to pursue a path that will circle back to many of the values and practices that have long defined a vibrant, resilient, ancient island culture capable of not simply enduring the turmoil ahead but weathering it well” (2011: 20–21, my emphasis). Okinawans may not experience full freedom to reduce their fossil-fuel dependence and implement improved tourism standards as long as planes and rental cars determine the flow of tourist traffic on the island.

In this ethnography, I have assembled a pastiche of the innovative entrepreneurial and interpretive paths by which Okinawans are renegotiating the terms of their tourism imperative. The terms of the tourism industry are reclaimed through community chats that seek to revive lost language (*Uchinaaguchi*), and on nostalgic *Aruki* walks where residents search for lost places and practices (such as subsistence dolphin hunting and communal sweet potato farming). These journeys lead ecotourism guides and their visitors into the promise of newly demilitarized forests and U.S.- and Japanese-controlled farmlands. New pathways send volunteer scuba divers deep into the ocean, where they can take stakes in coral reef health, and redefine their sense of self through transformative encounters with non-human marine life. Each of these routes to economic and cultural revival present strategies for an exit

from the maze of environmental vulnerability and tourism dependence that shapes the conditions of possibility in Okinawa today.

Anthropological studies of tourism have propelled powerful discourses of the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990, 1992), privileging the visual realm of sensory perception. The politics of visibility, sight, and seeing in a touristic context are central to this book. I have emphasized the embodied aspect of seeing and walking, two activities fundamental to the tourist experience, to move away from the seductive but sometimes floating ideologies of the disembodied gaze (cf. Veijola and Jokinen 1994). A grounded ethnographic analysis of who is doing the participating and observing; through which technologies and interpretive media; and when, how, and for what purpose, is critical to studies of tourism concerned with human impacts on the natural environment.

Chapters 1 and 2 consider which histories are made visible—or not—for sightseeing tourists across Okinawa. In Chapter 3, I show how Okinawan placeologists, village walkers, and community chatters “notice” new and cherishable things by participating in community chats and attending to proprioception as an underutilized way of knowing the natural world. Chapter 4 scrambles anthropocentric notions of “observer” and “observed” by noticing whales who watch us (observation); dolphins who heal us (interaction); and coral polyps who transform our sense of boundedness through underwater gardening (intervention). In Chapter 5, forest therapy and other experiential nature encounters draw participants out of their comfort zones and away from overreliance on the visual apparatus as a means of apprehending the biophysical environment; at the same time, virtual simulations of Nature suggest that technological appendages can be generative and healing by providing innovative new platforms for multispecies “intra-actions.”

Many of the theoretical perspectives developed in this book center on the fundamental human problem of control: control of natural resources (sugar, water, lumber), control of knowledge and experience, climates, islands, people—and the (attempted) control of nonhuman life forms such as coral, birds, snakes, whales, dolphins, and adorable invasive mammals. This story is also about the absence of control, what Donna Haraway and Thyra Goodeve (2000: 105) call the “rejection of simplistic dualisms derived from Modernist assumptions that nature *can* be controlled,” my emphasis.

My political and ethical commitments as a fading Young Optimist were clouded by a pernicious hopelessness following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe that devastated northeastern Japan. I could not understand how people have the emotional capacity to continue caring about life despite the terrible ruptures, (un)natural disasters, and other human tragedies they cannot control. Instead, I asked how visiting tourists, tour guides, government bureaucrats, scuba divers, scientists, local residents,

environmental activists, and volunteer trappers come to cherish animals and ecologies not encountered in their everyday lives, and how they learn to resist slow vulnerabilities they cannot readily feel. I wanted to do this because I still believe that the key to education is experience.

Matsuo Bashō, renowned Japanese poet of the Edo Period (late seventeenth century), wrote about “home” as a daily journey undertaken by us all. Bashō’s poetic diary “Narrow Road to the Interior,” alternately translated as “Narrow Road to a Far Province,” details the journey of a pilgrim whose travels are simultaneously spiritual and geographic. While these aspects of the human journey may be timeless, it is the particularity of experience that makes our stories worth telling. Through collecting stories of history, healing, and the revaluation of local knowledge, I offer an interpretation of Okinawan journeys home, to this cherishable place.