The triple disaster of 3.11 was a transpacific moment. With the earthquake came the tsunami, which threatened both Japan and Okinawa, as well as the other countries and islands of the Pacific rim. Natural disasters pay little attention to national borders. The nuclear accident at Fukushima, furthermore, underlined the transnational nature of this accident, with people in America and Okinawa worrying about the effect of nuclear radiation, which could so easily travel through air currents and seawater, to them. People in Tokyo, of course, also experienced this sense of danger, feeling themselves newly vulnerable to threats to their health.

Arriving in Tokyo shortly after the triple disaster of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear explosion of 11th March 2012 (hereafter, 3.11), many of the Okinawan scholars I met with told me the same thing: “Now Tokyo knows what it feels like.” A shared sense of danger or vulnerability: as Okinawans were vulnerable to damage—burglary, damage to property, assault, rape, murder—by the American military personnel who have been occupying their land since 1945,
so too were Tokyoites newly vulnerable to the radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. An analogous relationship was being proposed, through which Tokyo was suddenly humbled. Inhabitants of the metropolitan centre now had to worry about their bodily safety, their futurity, their communities, in a new way.

In this paper, I wish to examine this link that is being proposed, and compare it to another link proposed by Okinawan poet and critic, Takara Ben, who argues that the islands should free themselves from the colonial occupation of Japan and the American military which produces so much precarity, declare independence, and create an expansive, inclusive Pacific identity, reaching out to form bonds of friendship with Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and beyond. To that end, in this paper, I will examine Takara’s oceanic poetics of identity, and read his move away from the precarity of everyday life in Okinawa against the precarity of a post 3.11 (mainland) Japan. Using Takara’s ideas as a starting point, I will think about the possibility of a shared sense of precarity or vulnerability, as a condition both of the anthropocene and of the colonial and imperial legacies at work in Japan and Okinawa. Furthermore, as the anthropocene can be understood as positing a shared sense of humanity, I will ask how this works in tension with the specificity of the Okinawan identity being championed by Takara, and explore the value of comparisons, analogies, or equivalencies (after Jean-Luc Nancy) in a time of precarity. The precarity of daily life in Okinawa also attracts the attention of philosopher Takahashi Tetsuya, whose 2012 work, "Systems of Sacrifice: Fukushima, Okinawa" (Gisei no shistemu: Fukushima, Okinawa) compared the burden of the US military bases on Okinawa with the burden of nuclear power plants and the subsequent disaster in rural areas such as Fukushima.

Taking this analogy as a starting point, this paper will think about Okinawa and the triple disaster of 3.11. To do this, I will begin by drawing on the work of
Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophe*, and Takahashi Tetsuya’s 2012 work, “Systems of Sacrifice: Fukushima, Okinawa” (*Gisei no shistemu: Fukushima, Okinawa*). Both of these works explore the possibilities for comparison with the Fukushima situation: Nancy’s work to catastrophe more generally, and Takahashi’s to Okinawa specifically. I will then draw on some of the work of Okinawan poet and critic Takara Ben, offering a reading of his poem, “Cebu Ocean,” and drawing on his writings on the “Ryukyu Arc,” a space he proposes as the basis of an expansive, inclusive Pacific identity, reaching out to form bonds of friendship with Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and beyond. While Takara’s writings predate 3.11 by 15 or so years, they do index Okinawa’s long-continuing occupation by the US military, which has been going on since the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945 and has continued, past Okinawa’s “Reversion” from American to Japanese control in 1972.

I want to examine Takara’s oceanic poetics of identity, and read his move away from the precarity of everyday life in Okinawa against the precarity of a post 3.11 (mainland) Japan. The “oceanic” I employ here is what Sigmund Freud, after Romain Rolland, defines as “a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” (Freud, 11). How, I ask, does this unboundedness work in connection with the analogous relationship proposed by Takahashi, or with the equivalence proposed by Nancy? When Okinawans say “Now Tokyo knows what it feels like,” how far does this feeling go?

In his 2012 work, "Systems of Sacrifice: Fukushima, Okinawa", Takahashi Tetsuya, himself a native of Fukushima Prefecture, expands on previous work on sacrifice and the nation-state of Japan. His understanding of a sacrificial system, he explains, is one in which a first party sacrifices a second party’s life, hope, safety, production, etc. in order to produce and maintain a benefit to the first party, which could not be produced and maintained without the sacrifice. This sacrifice, he
continues, is usually either hidden or aestheticised as a noble sacrifice to the community (the nation, society, the people, etc.) (185) In Okinawa, the mainland Japanese sacrifice the safety of Okinawans by allowing US military bases to continue to occupy Okinawan land in order to maintain their own perceived safety. In Fukushima, the safety of rural communities is sacrificed for the availability of cheap electricity for Tokyo. (We should remember that Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant belonged to the Tokyo Electric Power Company, rather than a company serving the Tohoku region.) While it certainly was advantageous to the economy of the Fukushima and the power of local politicians, Takahashi asks us to consider the differentiated risk for people living in the Metropole compared to the risk for those in Fukushima: benefit is gained, but the sacrifice is definitely made by the people of Fukushima. Those in Tokyo get to enjoy the less risky benefits. Nuclear panic certainly affected Tokyo due to nuclear radiation’s invisibility and to the particularly slow violence, to use Rob Nixon’s term, it is capable of inflicting, But in Tokyo houses don’t need to be abandoned, communities don’t need to be uprooted, animals don’t need to be left to fend for themselves, topsoil doesn’t need to be removed and buried in plastic, children don’t need to be told not to play outside.

Takahashi’s work emphasises the inequality and lack of agency inherent in sacrifice. Instead of being a certain community taking the burden upon itself for the good of the wider world, the sacrifice is imposed from outside, and shot through with unequal power relations that comprise the nation state. The sacrifice of the people of Fukushima is realised in the catastrophe of 3.11. Similarly in Okinawa, sacrifice is realised in the rape of local women by US servicemen, or the crashing of helicopters into local buildings. Takahashi argues that it is unfair for the people of the Metropole to impose, through this system of sacrifice, these risks
to the people of Fukushima or Okinawa, if they are not willing to undertake such risk themselves.

While they would most likely see themselves as aligning politically, we can find a distinct contrast in the conclusions reached over 3.11 and Fukushima by Takahashi and Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy’s *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, written shortly after 3.11, takes the triple disaster as a starting point for thinking about a commonality and a shared humanity. In Nancy’s understanding, the human effects of natural disasters are not separable from the social and political contexts in which they occur. The nuclear explosion at Fukushima is paradigmatic of this new equivalence: the explosion happened as a result of the effects of the natural disasters of the earthquake and tsunami, but also as a result of the nuclear power plant being built in that area, affected by the safety procedures in place at the time, evacuation procedures created shortly afterwards, media speculation, calls for unity and self-restraint, and so on. Nancy writes: “Catastrophies are not all of the same gravity, but they all connect with the totality of interdependences that make up general equivalence.” This equivalence is itself, in turn, “catastrophic”. (6)

In Nancy’s understanding, our shared vulnerability to damage in such an interconnected system is significant. In this age in which nuclear explosions seemingly affect everyone, we are rendered *equal* in the face of disaster and suffering, and our vulnerability gives us commonality: “In the balance of terror, the relationship between strong and weak, or between powerful and less powerful, does not exist.” Instead, we have “an equivalence that annuls tension be keeping it equal and constant.” (22) We’re all worried, all kept on the edge of our seats by this tension. “*Now Tokyo knows what it feels like.*”

But Nancy’s reading, taken at face value, seems worryingly abstract: what of the specifics of disasters? What about Takahashi’s conception of a differentiated
sacrifice? Someone living near Fukushima Daiichi is suffering on a very different scale to someone hundreds of kilometres away in Tokyo, whose suffering is yet different from someone living in California, or São Paulo, even though we might be affected by it in various ways. As philosophers Yuji Nishiyama and Yotetsu Tonaki note in an interview with Nancy, “the question of the victim, or the work of mourning after the catastrophe” is absent from his essay. (45) The system of equivalence abstracts human suffering to the point at which it can’t be recognised; even if Nancy insists that people have difference, and that what he is arguing for is a “communism of non-equivalence”, his difference is still abstracted to a point of near-meaninglessness. When he says that “All are equal in that no one is identical or commensurable with others” (60) we can conclude that for Nancy, difference has collapsed in on itself. There is no separateness here; Okinawa and Fukushima and Tokyo, while not commensurate, are nevertheless alike in their difference. The particularities of power and suffering are ignored.

I now turn to examining the oceanic poetics of Takara Ben. I’ve so far offered two ways of thinking about “catastrophic relations” between Fukushima and Okinawa, and I’m going to try to view Takara’s poetics, although written before Fukushima, as being another way of thinking about these catastrophic relations: the whole messy business of damage, sacrifice, analogy, compassion and commensurability.

In both works of poetry and criticism, writer Takara Ben proposes a new way of thinking for Okinawa. In his collection, Ryūkyū-ko (Uruma) no hasshin: kunizakai no shima-jima kara (“Dispatches From the Ryukyu Arc (Uruma): From the Islands on the National Borders”), he draws the concept of the Ryukyu Arc from mainland Japanese novelist Shimao Toshio, reappropriating it from Shimao’s exoticising, Japan-centric use to make it into a political project for
Okinawan/Ryukyuan independence: an Okinawa free from the colonial occupation of Japan and the American military which produces so much precarity, declare independence, and create the expansive, inclusive Pacific identity I mentioned earlier.

This stance can be seen in a comment Takara offers about the work of philosopher Yoshimoto Taka’aki’s work, *Nantō-ron*, (“Theory of the Southern Islands”), in which he discusses Okinawa’s history and culture, comparing the so-called southern islands with metropolitan Tokyo. Takara, in his essay collection, "Dispatches from the Ryukyu Arc," expresses his distaste of the term “southern islands” contained in the title, saying that it contains “the gaze of the north,” and produces binaries of “metropolis/province”, “centre/periphery”, and “Japan/Okinawa” (*Ryūkyū-ko (Uruma) no Hasshin, 99*). Okinawans are not southern to themselves, and to label them as southern is to place them already in a relationship with the mainland, to have already decided where they are, and how they should be seen.

After expressing his distaste of the term "southern islands", Takara then goes on to list some other terms used for the area: “Okinawa”, “Okinawa Prefecture”, “Uruma Islands”, “Ryukyu”, “Ryukyu Arc”, “Ryukyunesia” and “Okinesia” (99). All of these names have different nuances: Ryukyu was the name of the islands and the kingdom which ruled them before their annexation by Japan in the Meiji period. After annexation, they were called “Okinawa” or “Okinawa prefecture”. Once occupied by the Americans, they were again called “Ryukyu” in an effort to distance the islands from Japan, although those who were pro-reversion used “Okinawa”. Uruma is an old, native word for the islands, and “Ryukyunesia”, coined by Takara, and “Okinesia”, coined by Miki Takeshi, are portmanteaus whose suffixes recall the island groups of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Miki wrote “A Cultural Theory of Okinesia” (*Okineshia bunka-ron*) after visiting
New Britain island in Papua New Guinea. Having experienced a feeling of familiarity between the life he observed there and his life growing up on Ishigaki island, in the south of the Ryukyu Arc, Miki theorised that Okinawa and the islands of the Ryukyu Arc were one more “-nesia” in the Pacific (Miki, 354).

Both Okinesia and Ryukyunesia engage with novelist Shimao Toshio’s ideas of Yaponesia, which he wrote about from the 1950s to the 1970s. His work attempts to orient the islands of Japan and the Ryukyu Arc away from the Asian continent and towards the Pacific, and also touched on ideas of local identity and culture in Japan. Shimao’s ideas, while unquestionably inspiring to Miki, Takara, and other writers, are also problematic: Davinder Bhowmik notes the heavy use of stereotypes and exotic descriptions in his work, which is ultimately based on “a libidinal illusion that robs the Ryukyus of a most certain existence.” (Bhowmik, 122) Furthermore, while incorporating the Ryukyu Arc in Yaponesia’s movement away from the continent, the idea of Yaponesia still privileges (mainland) Japan as the centre; Okinawa is still only a minor part on the edge of the archipelago.

After he offers the list of terms used, Takara goes on to state that he prefers the terms “Ryukyu Arc”, “Uruma Islands”, “Ryukyu”, and “Ryukyunesia”, but acknowledges that none of these terms have “universality” (tōitsuisei) or a “sense of stability” (anteikan) (99). This sense of the unstable is another aesthetic that can be seen repeated in his work, and it is this instability which makes Takara’s ideas of space and place so attractive and so potentially powerful. He names and renames the space he inhabits, using different terms with different nuances, and causing its borders to shrink or grow depending on the name he uses, at times reaching into the past, at times reaching toward mainland Japan or toward other Pacific islands. This tactic of naming a space different things and having its borders shrink or grow, smudging them into insubstantiality, contrasts sharply against the
idea of the nation, which, by its very definition, is a solid area: fixed and delineated.

The idea of the nation is further destabilised by Takara when he recalls the history of the Ryukyu Arc, whose islands “were, at the whim of the power of the Japanese nation, brought into Japan, and then subsequently expelled.” (84) For Japan, Takara continues, the islands might be borderlands or in-between spaces, but the people themselves are, in fact, “stateless” (mukokuseki-sha) (85). Bounced around from the control of one occupier to another, at times having their islands split up and then put back together, the people of the Ryukyu Arc might well be inclined to see the nation as a highly arbitrary space, one of non-belonging, rather than of belonging.

Conceiving of Okinawa as a transnational Pacific space is the powerful liquid core of Takara’s thought. Indeed, the border-crossing Pacific Ocean is at the heart of Takara’s poetics and his conception of the Ryukyu Arc, as echoed in his poem, “Cebu Sea”. The poem was written in the Philippines, where he went in his 40s as a foreign exchange student on a government scholarship. The narrator of the poem, travelling to Cebu, has his first sight of the ocean since coming to the Philippines, which inspires a feeling of love, with the narrator declaring:

I'm madly in love with
the ocean;
that old smell of the roaring of the waves,
the shining sun
breaking open my head.
O!
my first sight in the Philippines of
the ocean
Fantasies of going back home to
the bosom of my mother
no,
to my wife's petals,
the centre of her flower

Here, the longing for the ocean crosses over into sexual feelings and the longing
for home in a vertiginous trajectory. He first meditates on his “thirst at the / soft
breasts and / firm split-peach bottoms” of local women, his gaze objectifying them
as he separates their bodies into composite elements. The narrator then moves his
attentions to the sea, which causes his home-going fantasies, its water slaking his
thirst and satisfying his desire at the same time as it moves him to further desires.
The sight of the ocean at first invokes his mother's bosom, but desire for the
maternal moves, oedipally quickly, to his wife's genitals (hanabira kashin, literally
translated “petals flower-centre”; the two words are not connected by the genitive
particle no or separated by commas in the original). Then his gaze moves over the
ocean, and he thinks about returning to Okinawa, the familiar space of his family:

Fantasies of going back home
One step at a time,
slowly
Entering between
The folds of the water,
Becoming a boneless jellyfish
and drifting.
This is the island of Cebu.
Blue, yellow, green, indigo, all the blues of the ocean.
On the horizon are
So many uruma coral islands
Palm groves
Sinking, floating up between the waves
If I float
In the water like this
The blood-waves
Will wash
The beaches of the islands
Called Okinawa, Japan.
The ocean currents cross
every border...

Here the scenery provokes a feeling of familiarity, as indicated by Takara’s use of the Okinawan word “uruma,” which in the original is glossed afterwards in Chinese characters as “coral island”. Uruma is also, as indicated in the title of his essay collection, one of Takara’s preferred terms for Okinawa. The islands he can see in the ocean become the islands of his home; the two merge on the horizon into one. He dreams of becoming a jellyfish; a boneless creature without hard borders and solid structure, moving around through the waves, and these ideas repeat themselves in description of the ocean, transcending national borders and moving where it pleases, a transnational agent. The sea washes over the beaches of Cebu just as it washes over the beaches of Okinawa and Japan, words which Takara writes in katakana, the Japanese script generally used for words of foreign origin, instead of the Chinese characters in which they would normally be rendered. In doing so, he makes all the spaces equally foreign – Okinawa, Japan, and Cebu are all islands in the ocean, connected by the waves.
At the same time, as this, however, they are all equally familiar, being intimately linked with his family and with the idea of home. The term Takara uses to describe the movement of the ocean, “blood-waves,” (chishio) is a Japanese word which generally refers to the blood of a person’s body, gushing from a wound or being pumped through their circulatory system like the waves of an ocean. Here, however, the usual employment of the metaphor is reversed; the ocean is the blood which connects him with home and his loved ones. He then continues, employing the term furusato, meaning one's native place, or home village—and which is normally associated with the land, and the countryside—to refer to the ocean:

The ocean currents cross every border,
the shoals of jumping fish
My daughter, without your father,
have you become a jellyfish floating
in your home [furusato], the ocean?

The language of the poem itself also encodes the theme of crossing over. The thoughts of the familial/familiar (also the homely/heimlich) are invoked by “that old smell of the roaring of the waves” (natsukashii shiosai no kaori). Here the nostalgic smell is not of the waves themselves but rather their roaring; the synaesthetic description in which sound can be smelt echoes the crossings over elsewhere in the poem. The poem's syntax, similarly, crosses over, causing there to be many overlapping clauses which modify both the preceding and the following lines. In the lines “I'm madly in love with / the ocean; / that old smell of the roaring of the waves, / the shining sun / breaking open my head” I have
translated the two parts as being separated by a semicolon; they could also be translated in a less poetic tone to read “my falling in love with the ocean is the old smell of the roaring of the waves and the shining sun breaking open my head.” Likewise, in the lines I have translated as “The ocean currents cross/ every border,/ The shoals of jumping fish”, the verb “cross” (koete-iku) can also be read as modifying the next line, “shoals of jumping fish”. Translated in strict order, the text reads as follows:

Kairyū ga [The ocean currents]
arayuru kokkyo wo [Every border]
koete-iku [Crossing]
tobi-zakana no mure [Shoals of jumping fish]

The shoals of fish cross, as do the ocean currents. Just like the smell of the sound of the waves, the overlapping description here repeats the central motif of the poem: that of the Pacific, which crosses borders, overlapping and becoming a transnational space, a space which allows the narrator and his family, as well as the islands of Cebu, Japan, and Okinawa, to become deterritorialised, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s idiom; they are moved away from their previous contexts and relations to be more free.

This, as I mentioned, is an example of the oceanic, “a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” as Freud says (11). This limitless, unbounded sensation, recalling the jellyfish in “Cebu Sea” or the ocean in which it floats, is the key to Takara’s poetics. The ocean itself becomes a metonym for the Ryukyu Arc and for Okinawa; it is an unbounded space that opens itself to all, flowing over borders and washing the beaches of territories indiscriminately. Looking at his poetics, as well as reading them in the context of his larger political
project, we can see the possibilities of moving beyond the nation, to a transnationalism that tries to break free of the colonial and imperial relationships that structure territory and people’s lives.

I want to propose that Takara’s oceanic poetics offer us a way of thinking about difference and potentially catastrophic relations. The coral islands in Takara’s understanding are all equally foreign, as I said: Cebu and Okinawa and Japan are all held in the ocean, and what enters the water from the beach of Cebu might wash up on the shores of Okinawa or Japan. But even in this travelling through the unbounded ocean, with all its border-crossing ocean currents and the vertiginous desire it inspires in the narrator, there is still a sense of difference and distance. Takara’s narrator fantasises about going back home to his family, even as he realises the commonalities in the seascape he views. Here the places are held together in the ocean, but they’re not equated with each other. Maybe, then, the unbounded nature of the oceanic should be qualified as an aware oceanic, a sensation of eternity and unboundedness that nevertheless begins from the beach you’re standing on as you look out at the ocean. This sensation is also not a cold one: the human feelings apparently so lacking in Nancy’s work pervade Takara’s attachment to the islands and to the ocean; they’re linked to his family, to sex and love.

If the ocean is something which inspires these feelings, it’s also something through which we can register a differentiated damage: the radioactive water which flows out from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific is distributed, unevenly, through the water: “The ocean currents cross / every border,” as Takara says. The Pacific is not all equally radioactive, and the damage and precarity faced by the residents of Fukushima is not the same as that of the people in Tokyo. But through the oceanic feeling proposed by Takara, maybe they can feel a little of it, to cross the border and imagine themselves being together.
with others. “Now Tokyo knows what it feels like” is not an absolute statement, but maybe it’s a hopeful one, a point from which to progress and imagine: a new type of (oceanic) catastrophic relation.

All these work think in relation, using concepts of analogy, difference, and affiliation to make connections between groups and areas, to try and foster political sentiment. We can understand the shared sense of humanity that is proposed by the anthropocene as another of these movements. This movement is a central one in the humanities; it is not something that we can jettison or ignore. Rather we need a sense of comparison and a desire to forge links that is based on attention to specificity as well as commonality. Paying attention to the power relations between what is compared, focusing on the human beings at the heart of the comparisons, and being well aware of the limits of comparison, is three important points to bear in mind when this work begins.
Bibliography


Appendix I: Cebu Ocean

Translation of セブーの海 (高良勉著) by Daryl Maude

How many days has it been? the centre of her flower
Days seeing only One step at a time,
  drab buildings and slowly
  mountain ranges which block the entering between
  horizon.
My thirst at the the folds of the water,
  soft breasts and Becoming a boneless jellyfish
  firm split-peach bottoms and drifting.
  slowly taking hold of my throat.
And even so, This is the island of Cebu.
I’m madly in love with Blue, yellow, green, indigo, an ocean
  the ocean; of many blues
  that old smell of the roaring of the On the horizon are
  waves, so many uruma coral islands
  the shining sun Palm groves
  breaking open my head. sinking, floating up between the
  waves If I float
  my first sight in the Philippines of in the water like this,
  the ocean the flowing blood of this ocean
  Fantasies of going back home to will wash
  the bosom of my mother the beaches of the islands
  no, called “Okinawa”, “Japan”.
to my wife's petals, The ocean currents cross
every border,
The shoals of jumping fish
My daughter, without your father,
have you become a jellyfish
floating
in your home, the ocean?
Huge cumulonimbus clouds are rising
and maybe a violent squall is getting closer
Well then,
time to go.
And now
for how many more days
will I be able to bear it silently?
In the middle of the crowds of the metropolis
where I can't see the ocean
Appendix II: Original: 「セブーの海」、高良勉 著

何日ぶりだろう 骨のないクラゲになって
くすんだビルディングと ただよう
水平線をさえぎる山脈 ここはセブーの海
ばかり視つめて日々 青、黄色、緑、藍、群青の海
やわらかい乳房と 水平線には
堅い桃われ尻へ渴きが いくつのウルマ島（珊瑚島）
じわじわと のどをしめつける ヤシの林が
こんなにも 海 波間に沈んでは浮ぶ
に恋い焦がれるとは このまま水の中
なつかしい潮騒の香り 溶けていけば
脳天をかち割る ギラつく太陽 この海の血潮は
おお フィリピンでの オキナワ ジャパンと呼ばれる
初めての 海 島々の砂浜を
母のふところに 洗ってくれるだろう
いや 女房の 花びら花芯に 海流があらゆる国境を
還るほどまぼろし（幻想） 越えていく 飛び魚の群れ
一歩ずつ ゆっくり 父のいない娘も
水のひだひだに 今ごろ一匹のクラゲになって
分け入り 故郷の海で
漂っているのか                  耐えられるのだろう
巨大な積乱雲が湧き上り         海の見えない
激しいスコールが近づけば            メトロポリスの
さあ 帰り仕度だ                   雑踏の中
また あと 何日 黙って