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Deconstructing the Rural-Urban Divide in Post-growth Japan: Emerging Paradigm Shifts

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has enforced widespread changes that were already in the making well before 2019. Novel lifestyles and modes of working have been on the increase and rural areas that were previously seen as stagnant backwaters have been perceived as sites of experimentation. Hence, more young individuals have recently been interested in rural moves, and the line between short-term visit, tourism and lifestyle migration is more and more blurred. Hopes for a better work-life-balance coexist with self-exploitation, degrowth and competition all feature in rural communities. I will explore new forms of locality, tourism and entrepreneurship presented in my recent book *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society* (SUNY Press 2020) and rethink conventional paradigms with regard to mobility, work and leisure in late-capitalist neoliberal regimes. What future awaits rural areas and its communities?

Keywords

Rurality
Rural tourism
Rural-urban divide
Urban-rural hybridity

Preamble

Hi everyone. It's great to see so many friends and colleagues even if it would have been so much nicer to meet in person in Wakayama. I have fond memories of our last meeting at the Critical Tourism Asia Pacific Conference in Wakayama in February 2020 — which was in fact the last face-to-face conference I attended. Meeting old friends and making new connections, chatting away at gorgeous banquets, the exquisite conference bags have all left a lasting impression. Yet, I think that the time has also come to reflect on the downsides of conference tourism and other forms of mobility. After all, we are members of the "kinetic elite" causing the worsening climate crisis, as Mimi Sheller has called it (Sheller 2021). We tend to think of ourselves as "middle class." However, given that only 3% of humans around the globe fly in a year and 80-90% of humans are assumed not to have ever boarded a plane in their lives (Mau 2021: 47), we had better concede that we have pursued privileged lifestyles. It may also be worth keeping in mind that the wealthiest 10% of people are responsible for 76% of the energy consumption related to package vacations (<https://www.ecowatch.com/frequent-flyer-emissions-2651292287.html>, accessed 21 February 2022). As cited in the call for papers for this event, Lew et al (2021: 456) state, "Many people have come to realize, in recent years, that things need to change, not just for tourism, but for the planet overall." Rodanthi Tzanelli optimistically posits that in the post viral milieu "where and if human activity imposed by the lockdown has changed behaviors towards the environment durably and for the better, tourist imaginaries will become more post-human and environmentally friendly." (2021: 9) Before the pandemic, many of us spent considerable time on international long-distance flights, giving presentations, exchanging name cards, networking with colleagues. I confess that at times, I do look back with a certain nostalgia and some would go so far as to say that one of the few benefits of being an academic is the freedom to travel, but at the same time, it may be worth remembering that such mobility is highly stratified and extremely asymmetrically distributed.

Emerging Paradigm Shifts

In this talk, I would like to raise a few questions about sustainability at a personal and societal level and the need for more humility at all levels, centering on the concepts of mobility and emerging modes of work and life. Clearly, we have reached our limits, at work, personally, environmentally, socially. Arundhati Roy poignantly compares the pandemic with a portal through which we are going (Roy 2020). We are now faced with the choice of what to take with us and what to leave behind in our journey of post-pandemic transformations.

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smokey skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it." (Roy 2020)

Clearly, we have reached our limits.

Where are we headed to from here, what are our options?

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has enforced widespread changes that were already in the making well before 2019. Novel lifestyles and modes of working have been on the increase and rural areas that were previously seen as stagnant backwaters have been perceived as sites of experimentation. Hence, more young individuals have recently been interested in rural moves, and the line between short-term visit, tourism and lifestyle migration is more and more blurred. Hopes for a better work-life-balance coexist with self-exploitation, degrowth and competition. These all feature in rural communities. I will explore new forms of locality, tourism and entrepreneurship presented in my recent book *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society* (SUNY Press 2020) and rethink conventional paradigms with regard to mobility, work and leisure in late-capitalist neoliberal regimes. What future awaits rural areas and its communities? I'd like to start with three episodes that illustrate emerging paradigm shifts.



[Starter 1:] In January 2022, the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications published statistics that show that for the first time in 14 years, more individuals have been leaving Tokyo than moving to the capital. Among Japanese who are relatively young and can engage in remote work, the pandemic has sparked a renewed interest in moving to rural areas. Takahashi et al have pointed out in their recent journal article about urban-to-rural migration in the *Journal of Rural Studies* that “the Covid-19 pandemic, along with its increased risk of infection in densely populated cities as well as rapid and widespread acceptance of teleworking across society, triggered a mindset change among urban workers.” (Takahashi et al 2021: 293). This mindset change was already evident from data released in October 2020 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications which indicated that for four months in a row, more people had left Tokyo than had moved to the capital. Departures from Tokyo had increased by 10.6 percent compared with the year before. In the meantime, remote work has increased from a mere 6% before the pandemic to more than 60%, although some sectors still seem reluctant to introduce teleworking in Japan and there are also regional differences. In general, remote work has become much more accepted than before the pandemic when it was mostly limited to the IT sector.

In 2021, more than 410,000 individuals left Tokyo to move to rural areas. Inquiries by individuals interested in relocating to rural areas have increased. Many individuals who were contemplating a rural move for some time have finally gotten around to implementing it. The pandemic seems to have pushed many to realize their long-held aspirations and living in a less densely populated area has become much more attractive. Also, many individuals mention having access to fresh food and water as much more important than before the pandemic.

[Starter 2] : In December 2021 I meet up with Taku who is just back from Estonia. I have contacted him on twitter for an interview when seeing that he happens to be in Sapporo. After working as a salaryman in IT marketing for eight years in Tokyo, he decided to quit his job and move overseas at age 30. Estonia seemed like a good place with its focus on IT. Managing to survive his first overseas stay during the pandemic, he came back to Japan in early 2021 and now lives in Nagasaki in a shared house, working as a freelancer. In the beginning he just felt like living in Nagasaki for one month, so it didn't feel like a big move. Now he has just prolonged his stay here. Taku pays a monthly rent to a service for nomad workers that allows him to use accommodation across Japan. With increasing numbers of individuals engaging in remote work, these services have been more and more popular. The line between work and leisure is blurred just like the line between what is home and what is being on the move. "Right now, I don't earn anything at all," he laughs. "But the advantage of working freelance is that I can pick what I do, I can design my own work and life. If I don't come up with ideas, nothing will go forward. Of course, I worry. I am super anxious. There is definitely uncertainty in this lifestyle, but I don't try to get rid of it, rather I try to live and coexist with it." (interview on 1 December 2021).

“Yosa ha nani mo kamo zenbu de jibun de kimete subete erabu koto ha dekiru, jibun no jinsei wo zenbu design suru koto. Kangaenai to susumanai shi. [Fuan mo aru yo ne] Ossharu toori...mechakucha fuan desu. Fuan ha zettai arun desu kedo kono fuan ha kesu to omowanakute sono fuan ha kienai na fuan to kyozon suru kanji desu ne.”

Taku aspires to a lifestyle that allows him to work just the amount he feels makes sense to him but also provides him with a livelihood. Many of my interlocutors over the years have

touched on their ideas of “just the right amount”. Yet so few seem to be able to put this into practice, with many struggling to make ends meet and/or engaging in self-exploitative work. In my book *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan*, I show that most lifestyle migrants are on the cusp — they have dreams and aspirations, yet these ambitions seem to be just around the corner, out of reach. And evidently, freedom coincides with uncertainty and precarity. Many of my interlocutors live from one day to the next; only few make long-term plans, people tend to go with the flow, people hedge their bets. Post-familial lifestyles, post-work aspirations, societal withdrawal while engaging with online communities — you name it. “Shakaijin” (person of society) — the term for a working member of a society — has conventionally carried connotations of someone who commutes to his/her office every day in a packed train. Now no longer, or at least, some privileged members of the working population have the right to work from home to some extent.

[Starter 3:] At every Zoom meeting we have, we are seeing bits of people's lives without physically moving, as Tim Cresswell pointed out at a recent talk. We inadvertently end up seeing the pets of our research collaborators, babies crawl into the background of researchers being interviewed by media. Such effortless zooming in and out has become a part of our quotidian lives. However, it has highlighted the clear entanglement of the sedentary and mobile perspectives, which have often been reflected on in a binary manner. Such virtual encounters require us to rethink our existing assumptions about the meanings of space, home and sociality.

All three of these episodes clearly indicate that we acutely need to rethink conventional binaries like urban/rural, work/leisure and sedentary/mobile, something that I will come back later.

Japan is a heavily centralized country, with key companies, educational institutions and governmental bodies being situated in cities. 51.6% of residents live in Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya. Not surprisingly, rural areas were largely associated with farming and cheap manual labor. Anyone who aspired to a better life would leave. In 1950, 53 percent of Japan's population lived in urban regions. By 2014, 93 percent did. In comparison, 81 percent of the population lives in urban regions in the US. (The Atlantic, Alana Semuels, Can Anything Stop Rural Decline? August 23, 2017)

Yet, according to the Teikoku Data Bank survey conducted in 2021, as many as 351 companies moved their headquarters from Greater Tokyo (i.e. Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba, Saitama) to rural areas last year — more than ever before. The most common places of relocation are Osaka Prefecture and Hokkaido.

Another important trend is the term “**workcation**” in Japanese, i.e. the combination of work and vacation, that has been promoted by the central government to entice corporate employees to work in rural areas for limited periods of time. The Japan Tourism Agency allocated 5 billion JPY (more than 45 million USD) in its 2021 budget to implement workcation-related activities, hoping to boost the stagnating tourism industry. Many companies have introduced the workcation option for employees to spend time in the countryside while working and enjoying quality time with their families. Numerous hotels in Hokkaido and elsewhere have started adapting rooms to accommodate long-term workcationers rather than foreign tourists. This trend may constitute a larger paradigm shift in modes of work as well as greater awareness of the constraints of an urban culture that revolves around anthropocentric, consumerist lifestyles.

So, what future awaits rural areas and its communities



and what implications does this have for the future of tourism?

I will reflect on this from three angles, first "Rethinking forms of tourism", then "Rethinking locality and urban/rural" and lastly, "Rethinking sedentary and mobile lifestyles."

Rethinking forms of tourism

The big question that everyone has had in the back of their minds since the pandemic is what tourism will look like once the situation stabilizes. Whereas some countries have opened up borders to tourists on certain conditions, other countries, such as Japan, have pursued total seclusion. What emerges from developments across the globe, however, is that tourism will not be the same as before the pandemic even if the situation improves. The number of international travelers grew tenfold between 1970 and 2019 and reached 4.5 billion of passengers and according to the UNWTO, the number of international touristic trips amounted to 25 million in 1950 and reached 1.5 billion in 2019, 60 times as much. Against this background, the pandemic seems to have enforced the saturation trends of global tourism that were already in the making well before.

People have acquired new lifestyles with priorities shifting during the pandemic. More local tourism and trips closer to one's home have emerged as a preliminary trend. Staying in one spot closer to one's home for a longer period and enjoying the small things in life seem to be what people are aspiring to. Spending more money on ethically produced high-quality products and engaging with the local community has also emerged as a priority for many. The term "resonance tourism" has emerged recently to describe the increasing need in travelers to establish a relation with the place they travel to, its environment and its people in their quest to experience authenticity (<https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/artikel/tourismus/resonanz-tourismus-tipps-fuer-touristiker/>, accessed on 19 February 2022).

As an example of this emerging form of tourism that draws on personal transformation and experience, I would like to share Rena's story with you.

"I think that life should be fun, above everything. Otherwise, it's just too stressful. Having fun, helping others, and not suffering are the main things needed to achieve a balanced life, in my opinion. Personally, it makes me happy if I can see the faces of the people I work for rather than sitting in some office every day."

In her early 30s, Rena is originally from the Greater Tokyo area and moved to a small town six years ago. After working for the municipal government for three years she has opened her own guesthouse in an idyllic spot in the mountains. Rena studied international development at university and spent some time abroad. She worked in Bangladesh for two years and could not envision returning to Tokyo after that. Rural life seemed more in sync with her experience overseas where everything was going at a slower pace and people stopped for a chat. Rena's cosmopolitan experience is clearly reflected in her guesthouse: Visitors can enjoy cooking lessons on how to make various curries with freshly harvested local vegetables and the relaxed and easy atmosphere also seems different from conventional accommodation in Japan. Rather than offering the traditional *omotenashi* hospitality with the customer being served, the concept at Rena's place is participation, communication and experience. Guests are asked to take part in cooking and preparing the meals. Guests are also asked to bring their own towels and toiletries. Rena also offers guests the chance to do some work in the fields if they are interested. The wooden verandah in front of the guesthouse is adorned with little trinkets from outside of Japan and tropical plants that suggest

a South Asian environment. "My way to go about things may be low risk, low return," she laughs, sitting on her comfortable porch with a picture-postcard view of the mountains, valley, river and forest stretching out below as birds sing in the background.

Rena is highly satisfied with her present move, despite the pandemic having reduced the number of guests. In the meantime, domestic tourism has recovered, and she has been quite busy. By the spring of 2021, Rena's guesthouse was buzzing with visitors from across Japan. During Golden Week, a five-day holiday in May, her guesthouse had visitors from Tokyo and Osaka, including a British family with two children and a young British couple. I actually stayed at the guesthouse during my follow-up fieldwork and gradually turned from a guest to a quasi-staff member who explained how things worked to newcomers and served them fresh herb tea. It was fantastic to be woken up by the birds chirping away in the morning and enjoy the incredible panoramic view — in a way, it was the perfect rural idyll at first sight. At second sight, you would start to see the impeccable garden hedges of the neighbors and start to feel the pressure to take care of your own hedge as well. I did in fact try my hand at hedge cutting after which I could never enjoy the panoramic view beyond it ever again as my gaze would automatically shift to the faulty hedge.

In addition to the guesthouse, Rena works in a variety of other jobs including farming, writing, cleaning and looking after children in school. Quite in contrast to the slow life in the countryside, however, Rena's calendar is filled with appointments — mostly work-related — and there is hardly a day for leisure only. This is something many newcomers share: they are busy, some even busier than in their urban lives. They are satisfied with their present lives, but they also worry about the future. Doing odd jobs to ensure a minimum income rather than having just one job is common in rural areas. "Social capital is all we have so we need to be really careful about our relations with everybody." I admire Rena's patience with an elderly female neighbor who drops in all of a sudden, brings freshly harvested vegetables and chats for an entire hour — the pace of time is indeed slower in the countryside when it comes to gossiping.

As for rural areas in Japan, I would like to suggest the emergence of what I call "**anxious tourism**". I use this term to describe a group of individuals between 20 and 40 years of age who travel to rural areas in their quest for something better, something new, a change of routine. Such anxious tourism is closely related to the resonance tourism I mentioned earlier. It also draws on a term I have described in my book *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan*, "moratorium migration" (Klien 2020, Chapter 6). We tend to take it for granted that mobility is movement imbued with meaning (Cresswell 2001, 2006) and that movement is a means for individuals seeking to render their lives more meaningful — this is why "lifestyle migration," i.e. individuals who migrate to rural areas for primarily non-economic reasons (Benson and O'Reilly 2009), is such a compelling notion. However, Angela McRobbie has previously described forms of "mobility, which does not quite know where it is going." (McRobbie 2016: 90). Drawing on McRobbie, I argue that "moratorium migration" fuses "the previously contradictory elements of 'lifestyle' and 'precariat' into a fuzzy gray zone where work, lifestyle, leisure, self-realization, and precariousness all blend into one" (Klien 2020: xxvi). Many of these tourists work in contract jobs, some with precarious conditions, and live by themselves. Many live relatively anonymously in urban conglomerations and have scarce connections to their families or any communities. They make trips to rural areas looking out for new places to move to, yet only few get around to it. They



dream of a slow life in idyllic rural settings that will provide an escape route from their continuing struggles. Yet, once they arrive in the countryside, they seem at a loss to pinpoint what exactly draws them to these areas beyond common descriptions that sound like soundbites from lifestyle magazines. I use “anxious” because they are restless, always on the lookout for new things, yet many of them do not seem to find what they are looking for. They aspire to what they imagine as tightly-knit rural communities, yet dread social pressures and are not confident that they could muster up the courage for small talk. Most of them are digitally literate and are always looking for the next Instagram motive. Many mention social media as the entry point to a community, i.e. the post of a friend or acquaintance about the community as the first step that aroused their interest in the community. Yet, when they encounter a local face to face, conversation often halts. They find themselves drawn between the acute need to change and the dread of change. On the surface, they seem to play along with the societal pressure to get married and find a stable job; yet many do not seem to be interested in long-term commitment either at the personal or the professional level. They seem to be living for the moment, from one day to the next, on the cusp. For such “anxious tourists”, experiences are key. Rather than wanting to accumulate souvenirs during their short stay in the countryside, they are interested in brief encounters with local residents and lifestyles. Joining hosts for literal fieldwork, i.e. cultivating vegetable fields for 2 hours seems just the right thing for them: It allows them to get their hands dirty, but under the supervision of someone who knows this stuff, so it’s a carefully curated activity with limited risk. Self-initiative is not their strength either, so relying on their hosts is a safe route for them.

Rethinking locality and urban/rural hybridity

Previous scholarship on rural Japan and rurality in general drew on a binary understanding of the countryside as the polarized counterpart of the cities. Rural areas typically embodied Japan’s lost traditional heritage, with nostalgia-laden catchphrases such as “furusato” or “satoyama”. A large part of the scholarship about rural Japan focused on traditional performing arts, craftsmanship or agricultural activities (Martinez 2004, Schnell 2005, Thompson and Traphagan 2006, Rausch 2010). Human geography has recently seen the emergence of a more comprehensive and multi-faceted view of the countryside as hybrid, i.e. as defined “by networks in which heterogeneous entities are aligned in a variety of ways” (Murdoch 2003: 274). There is also a brand new volume forthcoming by Menelaos Gkartzios, Nick Gallent and Mark Scott *Rural Places and Planning: Stories from the Global Countryside* (Policy Press). Such ‘rural relationality’ approaches reject space and place as fixed entities and position space as “a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations” (Massey 2004:5) that is forever dynamic and contingent (Woods 2011: 40). Quite in contrast to rural areas in the past that were distinct and bounded, places are nowadays “moulded by relationships that are ‘stretched out’ across space, from the local through to global scales”. We find common stereotypes coalescing with new takes on what the countryside stands for: Cosmopolitan elements are combined with well-known associations that facilitate conventional projections of what the rural should stand for. Whereas ten years ago, lifestyle settlers portrayed themselves working in the fields to cultivate their own vegetables, now newcomers more commonly share images of themselves working away on their laptops in the middle of a bridge, by a picturesque river or on the veranda of a gorgeous traditional house. In other words, rather than a leisure adventure, life in the countryside has

evolved more into a background for work, if in novel ways.

The intricate linkage of urban and rural areas has been enforced through recent trends such as workcation initiatives, lifestyles with two places of residence (*nikyoten seikatsu*) or nomad working where individuals would spend periods of times in different places depending on their preferences. No longer do we need to opt for “either urban or rural lifestyle”, but increasingly, people can enjoy both as they deem appropriate for their personal circumstances. Taku whom I mentioned in the beginning of this talk did not feel like moving back to Tokyo after his return from Estonia, also because he did not have a permanent job in Tokyo anymore. As a freelancer, it seems to make sense to sign up for one of the many programs allowing people to live in a range of accommodations across Japan for a set price. Individuals do not have to worry about furniture or internet access as this is also included in the accommodation. Last but not least, moving to a less densely populated area during a pandemic seems a rational choice that many others have opted for. Some employees with jobs based in Tokyo choose to work three weeks in a rural area and one week in Tokyo. Others only return to Tokyo when they have work appointments that cannot be done online. The increase of virtual meetings and other online communication has enforced the hybridization of rural areas as not only newcomers but also local residents engage with stakeholders outside these areas. This has relativized the physical location of many sites and lessened the need for convenient locations close to train stations.

Rethinking sedentary and mobile lifestyles

Before the pandemic, there was a clear-cut division between sedentary lifestyles as classically led by individuals who have lived all their lives in one and the same place, often with many generations before them — and mobile individuals. Tax regulations, rules on how to put out the garbage in Japan and many other legal rules inherently constitute sedentary lifestyles as the norm as they imply that individuals generally spend their time in one and the same place. This is why people like the regional revitalization cooperation volunteers (*chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai*) who tend to work only 1-3 years in one place are often seen with suspicion by local residents. Responsible members of society stayed in one and the same place. Yet, now with the unfolding pandemic, and remote work, mobility has once again gained ground. After a period of standstill and almost total immobility, more individuals have embarked on nomad working. Internationally compared, Japan is still lagging behind in this respect, but changes are likely. Interest in subjective well-being and personal satisfaction has been on the rise in young employees. With declining population numbers, companies need to compete for employees, meaning that they will need to offer more attractive work conditions to attract new employees. Some companies have already upped their offers, e. g. Pasona Group has moved their headquarters to a small island off Kobe to avoid overreliance on urban areas and offered employees the chance to move to the island with their families if they wish to do so. Fujitsu has cut down its office space by 50% as a response to telework.

But change is not only limited to physical mobility, it also affects individual employment choices. As mentioned before, individuals seem increasingly less interested in lifelong employment. Many university graduates prefer to spend some time overseas or in a rural area on an internship or as a rural revitalization cooperation volunteer, something that was not socially accepted previously.

Change is also salient at the institutional level: More



recently, the Kishida government has presented the “Digital den'en toshi kokka kousou” (Digital Garden City Nation Initiative) - a vision for Japan that aims at closer links between urban and rural areas by focusing on digitalization and well-being and promoting short-term dispatches of urbanites to rural areas such as the workcation programs mentioned before.

Last but not least, I would like to refer to the **notion of “im/mobilities”** by Mimi Sheller to try to tie all these loose threads together.

“intertwined coproduction of mobility for some and immobility for others, as well as the ways in which disempowered groups also experience forced displacements, evictions, deportations, and expulsions.” (Sheller, *Island Futures* 2020: 18)

“The use of ‘(im)mobilities’ is meant to signal that mobility and immobility are always connected, relational, and co-dependent, such that we should always think of them together, not as binary opposites but as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices, and relational meanings.” (Sheller, *Mobility Justice* 2018: 1)

In other words, the element of power in mobility, or “the cartographies of power” as Sheller describes it, drawing on Avtar Brah’s *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Taku’s decision to move abroad and then move to a rural area may be seen as a lifestyle choice. It may also be seen as an escape route from the shackles of neoliberal work or an escape route from the pressures of mainstream norms.

I would like to discuss one more story today to think about the entanglement of sedentary and mobile lifestyles, the story of Yuka, a lifestyle migrant who is passionate about edible schoolyards and achieving social change.

“All of my friends work for banks and flight companies — they post that they have worked for 5 years on their Instagram accounts. Well as for myself, I have never counted how long I have worked. When I was 23, I attended graduate school in the UK for one year to do my master’s degree in international development, so I guess I have worked four or five years after that.” I run into Yuka at Common, a newly opened public institution that accommodates a library, playground and meeting rooms. It is made of local wood and attracts many children and parents, mostly newcomers, as Common is located next to a set of sustainable housing facilities for new settlers to a small town with some 5,000 residents in Western Japan. With her beautiful long hair and above-average height Yuka looks like a model although she hardly wears any makeup and has a natural tan. When I meet her first, she is wearing a Barbour jacket and a summer dress with a flower pattern. She is fluent in English and we switch effortlessly between Japanese and English in our conversations. She is only 28 but has spent time in Kosovo, Laos, Macedonia, Myanmar and Pakistan in addition to study in the UK and US as well as having lived in five different places within Japan as a child. Being passionate about concepts like permaculture and living more in tune with and close to the environment, she is organizing trail runs for children with a like-minded peer who is also a newcomer. In addition, she is planning to open a nature school for children this April with several peers, which combines learning and activities for experiencing the environment. At Common, she also organized a workshop for children to make mudpies and decorate them with various flowers found outdoors. Unsurprisingly, Yuka is extremely popular with many small kids. Several times during our conversations, 3-year-old

Aiki-kun pops in to share with us enthusiastically that he discovered a “dangomushi” or roly-poly bug (pill bug), which we both acknowledge with great admiration and laughter.

“I enjoy this work so much I sometimes think whether this really counts as work. Usually, you have to change into the work mode right. The work I do is different. I don’t have pangs of guilt about this gap but I have thought about this. [...] For me work and life is directly related. And frankly, just thinking about having to pay 70.000 JPY [600 USD] for rent every month, I don’t think I could get myself into this mindset plus I could not pay it in the first place (laughs). Here my partner and I live in a house surrounded by nature, and just getting up in the morning and looking outside is stunning. It’s like living in Heidi’s world. I have a fig tree just in front of the house, I can just pick stuff and eat it.” (interview on 28 April 2021)

Asked about whether her activities aim at getting out of the capitalist economy, Yuka nods. “I am interested. I wonder what are other options. In Japan, you get a wide variety of options lined up neatly, but I think there are other options beyond those. I think it takes time to get outside of the system but I believe it’s worth trying to experiment with different values and cultures with a community of like-minded peers. I am presently trying to spy around to find like-minded peers.” (interview on 28 April 2021)

This being said, Yuka also admits to liking high-end sweets, cheeses and foods mostly available in Tokyo just as attending art museums is also a leisure activity she misses in the countryside. She and her partner mostly shop at a store in the little town that offers organic products and joining them for dinner reminded me of a high-end restaurant even if the atmosphere was relaxed and casual.

Lifestyle migrants seem firmly invested in their new places of residence. Yet, many mention that when they stay in the same place for some time, they feel like moving on. Yuka confesses that she feels overwhelmed by the sense of being surveilled by local residents at times. Just taking an occasional walk outside of the town and getting into the next hamlet turns out to be a huge relief for her. “Becoming a nobody is impossible in a small town like this,” she points out. There is a feeling of restlessness and constant pressure that seems in contrast with the sense of satisfaction many settlers mention at first sight. Yet, thinking about it, it all comes together when we consider precariousness to be a human condition, and as being a condition that is inherent to humans and non-human beings (Lorey, *State of Insecurity*: 12). Judith Butler defined precariousness as a “socio-ontological dimension of lives and bodies” (Butler 2009). Drawing on Butler’s work, Isabell Lorey argues that precariousness “designates something that is existentially shared, an endangerment of bodies that is ineluctable and hence not to be secured, not only because they are mortal, but specifically because they are social (State of Insecurity: 12). Lorey also makes the important point that “precarization is not an exception, it is rather the rule.” (State of Insecurity: 1) In a similar vein, Anna Tsing importantly argues that “precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious — even when for the moment, our pockets are lined.” (Tsing 2015: 2)

Lorey describes precarization as “living with the unforeseeable, with contingency.” Lifestyle migrants tend to interpret contingency as a benefit rather than a threat as many of them have discarded so-called stable jobs. And here the aspect of precariousness as productive comes in: people just take it as something that naturally occurs and try to turn it into something positive. “In a governmental perspective, precarization can be considered



not only in its repressive, striating forms, but also in its ambivalently productive moments, as these emerge by way of techniques of self-government." (Lorey 2015: 14). In other words, self-realization and self-exploitation often coalesce in individual practices and narratives, as I show in my monograph *Urban Migrants*.

Hence, in this time of ongoing uncertainty — a continuing experiment as it were - what I am essentially concerned with in this talk is the question of how we can establish more inclusive and diverse systems, mobilities and relationships that are good for us, good for society and good for the planet and beyond. I would like to advocate for an emphasis on 'post-growth', i.e. the perception that on a planet of finite resources, economies and populations cannot grow infinitely. This is also why rather than referring to "demographic decline", I consider it more appropriate to talk about "demographic change." Having less people is not necessarily negative, and this applies even more so during a pandemic. I vividly remember a conversation I had with a female local in her late 60s during follow-up fieldwork last year. Asked whether she had ever contemplated moving to an urban area, she replied, "No way. Living in a tiny box with no friends, going to and from work every day? Not for me. Here, I have my community of people, my pace of life and I can always go to the city for a day if I like." (interview on 4 May 2021) Sometimes, it may put things into perspective if we change the way we look at things.

So, as regards future avenues for us to pursue, rather than trying to come up with a fast and easy answer, I would like to open up the conversation and emphasize the importance of abandoning conventional binaries once and for all. Local/global, open/closed, urban/rural, industrialized/developing, mainstream/marginal, work/leisure, growth/stagnation are binaries that seem less and less insightful to think with.

In lieu of a conclusion

After this trip through emerging forms and meanings of tourism, locality and lifestyles, I would now like to offer a digestif to round up this imaginary "meal". Before the pandemic, when we talked about "fieldwork", we were thinking going places, getting in there, engaging with people, drinking with people, getting our hands dirty. Memories of trying to find one's way back in the mountains in an area where GPS does not work come to mind. Smells, sweat, fighting with insects. After completing my last follow-up fieldwork in Tokushima Prefecture in western Japan last year, I felt elated about being able to sleep peacefully without having to worry about being bitten by centipedes. Face-to-face fieldwork has long represented the gold standard while digital ethnography continues to be perceived as second rate, a complementary option at best. Now, the reality is more multi-faceted. For some people, conducting fieldwork may be the same as before. Others like myself may be resorting to a combination of methods. Since the start of the pandemic, for better or worse, I have been forced to resort to digital ethnography given that Japan has closed its borders and the Ministry of Education has not permitted any overseas business trips for researchers working at national universities in Japan. Ironically, the topic of my research project since 2020 is transnational mobility of Japanese. I would never have imagined that fieldwork could mean getting up at 5am once a week to listen in on a Clubhouse group in my warm futon and chatting away with my Japanese interlocutors in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Switching from face-to-face fieldwork to Clubhouse was challenging at first as it forced me to focus on voices and blend out the visual perspective. But with

time, I have gotten used to the acoustic realm, the subtle timbres of voices and characters shining through. We can get so many valuable insights from just hanging out, listening to how people interact with one another, even if only acoustically. I have also conducted dozens of online interviews and my experience has been much better than anticipated. This may have to do with the fact that many of my interlocutors work in IT and are used to working and communication online from well before the pandemic. Discussing highly sensitive and intimate issues turned out to be easier online than face-to-face as many of my collaborators felt that talking online is a platform they are more comfortable in. Especially individuals who describe themselves as introverts, like to work indoors and/or belong to marginalized groups seem to actually prefer online interviews. While digital encounters evidently come with many limitations, they also offer numerous benefits.

The various episodes and reflections of this talk clearly illustrate the need to radically rethink our practices as researchers as well as human beings, with the ultimate aim to find "just the right amount" as individuals, as groups, as societies, also with consideration for the environment and the post-human. In sum, drawing on Arundhati Roy, I hope we can go through the portal, leave anachronistic binaries behind and work with the emerging paradigms.

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