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Places at Their Limits: The Problem of Sustainability in Rural Japan

My book project, *Places at their Limits: The Problem of Sustainability in Rural Japan*, is an ethnographic examination of rural depopulation in Japan. Its title derives from the term *genkai shûraku* or “hamlets at their limits,” a Japanese designation for mountain villages depopulated and aged to the threshold of extinction. These proliferating but declining villages reflect the extremes of urbanization, population aging, falling fertility, and economic slowdown in twenty-first-century Japan. My ethnography is based on fieldwork spanning ten years in a region of northeastern Japan, from which decades of young natives have migrated to the nation’s cities. In their wake, they have left an elderly population living amid empty houses, vacant lands, and untended ancestral spirits. Within this hollowing landscape, I examine efforts of remaining residents to sustain and care for their homes in the context of a decentralization reform agenda that demands greater self-sufficiency and autonomy of rural regions and their inhabitants.

My project assesses the growing political relevance of the sustainability concept against the backdrop of rural decline in twenty-first-century Japan. Adopted into rural development policy, sustainability prioritizes revitalization approaches that value local agency, regional diversity, and environmental awareness as sources of future viability. Such values have inspired a lively slate of agro-tourism, heritage food industries, and other grassroots initiatives in my field sites. I characterize these initiatives as forums through which their organizers, often elderly women, foster new agency and vitality. Yet, I argue that the optimism and longing for future renewal animating these diverse projects also echoes the new ethic of responsibility and self-sufficiency promoted by decentralization and other neoliberal reforms. In highlighting tensions between decline and renewal in an era of devolving state responsibility, I also suggest the limits of sustainability as an orientation that promises to generate future viability.