

## Introduction

I was alone in the office when a face appeared, stopped, then quickly disappeared again from the sliding glass doorway left open onto the quiet side street. A moment later, the face appeared again, its owner asking timidly, "This is Mother House, right?"

No doubt, the sight of a solitary person at the desk (a foreign one at that) was not what the man was expecting, but when I assured him in my friendliest Japanese that he was in the right place, he exhaled a sigh of relief and embarrassment. "Oh, that's lucky! Someone told me you might be able to help me. I'm looking for work, mainly, but I also need a new place to stay. I'm in a temporary dormitory, but I was told I have to move out in two weeks." His pained, apologetic smile was endearing, even if there were a few missing teeth.

I welcomed the man, who I will call Maeda, inside the office and poured two hot coffees for us as we waited for the director of Mother House to return. Maeda wore a dark blue corduroy jacket that hung loosely on his narrow shoulders as if draped on a wire hanger. His hair was shaggy and streaked with grey, and while he tended to avoid looking at me directly, I could see the gentle creases of age pulling down at the corners of his eyes, giving him a perpetually forlorn and melancholy expression. He told me he turned 68 that year.

As we drank our coffees, I told Maeda more about myself and my research, taking the chance to ask if he would be comfortable sharing some of his own story with me while we waited. Although the invitation was unexpected, Maeda wondered aloud if our meeting might be, "some sort of 'en,' or 'connection' between our destinies. He agreed to the interview, even after I repeated my disclaimer that my research would not be connected in any way to decisions related to his case. He nodded and took my business card, placing it on the table in front of him as a sign for us to begin.

The first thing that Maeda mentioned was that he had no family members who were willing to act as his guarantor on release from prison. What this meant was that rather than being granted release on parole to finish his sentence under supervision in the community, Maeda served the entirety of his sentence confined in prison. This was his fourth time leaving prison, and although his offense was a relatively minor case of theft, he was incarcerated for a little more than two years. This last sentence had been harder, he said, his expression locked in a grimace, "my health has been getting worse, and it's not easy to see a doctor [in prison]."

Maeda was given a place at an Independence Support Center (*jiritsu shien sentā*), a

kind of dormitory for recently released ex-offenders, but these centers expect residents to move out within six-months. In a few days, he would be back out on the streets. Even though he tried to mask the blank spots of his past incarceration when filling out job applications (divulging one's criminal history on employment applications is not mandatory in Japan), Maeda found it impossible to find anyone who would hire him. His age, his lack of employment, and absence of a guarantor all made it virtually impossible for Maeda to rent an apartment by himself. Very few landlords were willing to take the risk of a tenant who is older, alone, and living solely on public welfare assistance. But Maeda was also afraid of staying at another shelter, where older men like him were vulnerable targets for other recently released residents.

As I listened, the details filtered into the mental checklist I used each time I spoke to a formerly incarcerated older person: details about each individual's age, income, housing, health, and so on, that helped me situate them within the context of other cases that I came across. I would then be able to discern patterns or problems, systems and not just singularities. Perhaps, as anthropologists like David Graeber have argued, this sort of "simplification" has the potential to produce the kinds of intelligence and theoretical understanding that we need to challenge systems of injustice.<sup>1</sup> I would like to think so. At the same time, I was also keenly aware that I needed to treat my checklists critically, and carefully, to keep them from clouding my view of the person in front of me and the responsibility I took on as witness to his personal and complex story. This was not an easy line to walk-- Graeber also pointed out that identical techniques of simplification and standardization are the hallmarks of the subtle, stupid, and deadly boring forms of bureaucratic structural violence.<sup>2</sup>

Although he framed his concerns, at first, mainly in terms of practical needs, as the conversation went on, Maeda began to express his frustrations about the less tangible, difficult to articulate barriers to resettlement:

You know, when you've been in prison, you don't see things the same way. You see things that other people can't see. And things people see, you can't see. The things you see are just different. I'm sorry, it's just hard to explain. . . It's here, in me-- my feeling, my *kokoro*. I don't really know how to explain. . . I don't think I can face other people. And I can't tell anyone about where I was or what I did. So, it is like this wall or fence between me and the life of ordinary people.

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<sup>1</sup> David Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor. The 2006 Malinowski Memorial Lecture.," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (December 19, 2012): 105–28, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.2.007>.

<sup>2</sup> Graeber, 112.

Maeda's anxiety about things seen and unseen, things that need to be hidden from others, contained behind the wall of his heart (*kokoro*), were not the sorts of images or feelings that can be reduced to the checklist. As I accompanied him on this path, we moved on to talk about Maeda's perspective this time after release:

I guess I always think it will be [different] at first. I think this time my feeling (*kimochi*) is different. I have more of a will (*ishi*) to change. For older guys, it can be hard to find that goal (*mokuteki*), they can't get a job and don't have a family. I feel like that too. It is complicated. But you know, you can't see the future, you don't know what is going to come next.

He pointed a finger up at the ceiling. "Only god knows [the future]."

Here, Maeda pushed me to go further than the checklist allowed, to take up questions of feeling, of will, of aging, and change. Each of these were aspects of his everyday experience that shaped the conditions of possibility for his future – a future that did not unfold in the normative patterns of production and reproduction, labor and family, but had to transcend those patterns. "Only God knows the future" hung in the air, grey and ambiguous. Its fatalism seemed to contradict his assertion that one needed "will" and a "goal," yet there was also a faint ray of hope at its edges.

Soon, the director of Mother House returned, and as Maeda got up to follow him into another office, we quickly bowed to each other and I said thank you. This was the last time we spoke. About two weeks later, I found out that Maeda had been arrested and would be sent back to prison.

## Unsettling Futures

It is an unsettling thought, growing old in prison. But equally unsettling for formerly incarcerated older individuals like Maeda, was life on the outside. Like him, more than 70% of the approximately 6000 incarcerated people over the age of 65 (13.4% of Japan's total incarcerated population) have a history of prior incarceration, accounting for the highest rate of recidivism of any age cohort.<sup>3</sup> One in five older adults released from prison will return within two years-- twice that of ex-offenders 29 and under.<sup>4</sup> In the year that I spoke to Maeda (2018) more than one in five arrests (21.5%)

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice (Japan), "Corrections Statistics Survey [Kyōsei Tōkei Chōsa]," 2023, [https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?stat\\_infid=000040081386](https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?stat_infid=000040081386); Ministry of Justice (Japan), "Heisei 29-Nenban Hanzai Hakusho [2017 Crime White Paper]," 2018, [https://hakusyo1.moj.go.jp/jp/64/nfm/n64\\_2\\_4\\_8\\_2\\_2.html](https://hakusyo1.moj.go.jp/jp/64/nfm/n64_2_4_8_2_2.html).

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice (Japan), "Heisei 30-Nenban Hanzai Hakusho [2018 Edition Crime White Paper]," 2018, <https://hakusyo1.moj.go.jp/jp/65/nfm/gmokuji.html>, table 5-2-3-10.

were also older adults, a ten-fold increase in the last twenty years (2.1% In 1998).<sup>5</sup> While overall crime and imprisonment rates in Japan are falling, the demographic composition is changing dramatically, aging at a much faster pace than that of the general population. Beneath each of these numbers is a human story, like Maeda's, life that is unsettled yet surviving, trying to find a place in a broken world.

This book is my attempt to gather up some of the tangled threads of unsettledness that fray and fragment at the edges of the carceral condition. It looks at the complexities of lives like Maeda's, as well as our own complex responses to those lives, as reverberations of this "unsettledness," which permeates the carceral condition, both inside and outside sites of confinement. "Unsettledness" is a term which can mean both a state of being troubled or disturbed (Japanese: *fuantei, ochitsukanai*), as well as being unresolved and open to possibility (Japanese: *mikessai, mikaiketsu*) in a more neutral sense. Unsettledness, as I use it here, is not the opposite of 'resettlement,' but rather, the political and affective thread that ties the physical violence of incarceration to the structural violence of post-release welfare bureaucracy. In other words, *resettlement itself, as both an institutional process and a moral narrative, amplifies and reproduces unsettledness*. At times, this contradiction is so blatantly obvious that it leaves one dumbfounded by its absurdity. At other times, however, it is subtler, arising from actions meant to support or care for the individual, but which end up confining them in other ways. Even my own research became unsettled (and unsettling), mirroring other techniques of surveillance and simplification that echoed harmful carceral logics – "carcerality," writes Aisha Khan, "is capacious."<sup>6</sup>

To understand the ways unsettledness has become embedded in the everyday lives of older adults in particular, the book focuses on the case of Japan. Although Japan presents, in some ways, a unique set of social circumstances that have exacerbated the criminalization of older people, the underlying conditions of structural violence that have led to this situation are much more widespread, namely, a growing public anxiety about aging and an increasingly punitive penal system. The convergence of these two trends brings the punitive power of incarceration into the service of an anti-aging social welfare system, where those who do not remain contained within the narrow boundaries of acceptable aging are contained within the carceral circuit of the penal-welfare state. Old age may not be avoidable, but, in the logic of carcerality, it can be

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Justice (Japan), "Heisei 30-Nenban Hanzai Hakusho No Gaiyō [Outline of the 2018 Crime White Paper]," 2018, <https://www.moj.go.jp/content/001309862.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Aisha Khan, 'The Carceral State: An American Story', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51, no. 1 (2022): 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041420-013930>, 54.

locked up.

Finding a path to liberation for criminalized older adults, then, requires confronting the debilitating effects of structural ageism, and imagining futures where men like Maeda could find and sustain meaningful connections to the world. The more we pull at the unsettled threads of the carceral condition, the wider we make the openings for ways of aging otherwise. The stories and voices of formerly incarcerated older adults not only expose the ways carceral circuits and structural violence affected their lives, but they also suggest directions toward decarcerated alternatives to anti-aging. Some groups, like Mother House are already working towards realizing these alternatives. This book will look at some of the efforts of these third-sector organizations and their efforts to create places of belonging (*ibasho*) and connection (*en*) that re-envision kinship and generations. If the vulnerability of old age sharpens our ability to sense the absurdity and cruelty made possible by the structural violence, then these new ‘families’ assembled in the wake of the carceral offer glimpses of ways to rethink communities to include and value a more expansive range of aging futures.

### Care and the Carceral in an Aging World

It is currently estimated that the world’s population will peak at around ten billion people by 2070 – within my lifetime if I am lucky to reach the age of 92 (and, I imagine, also within the lifetime of many of you reading this book) – before gradually falling to less than nine billion by the end of the century.<sup>7</sup> Globally, the proportion of older people is growing faster than that of younger age cohorts, and by 2050, the WHO estimates that 22% of the world’s population will be over the age of 60.<sup>8</sup>

Japan has been considering issues of population aging for arguably longer than any other country in the world. In 1970, Japan fit the United Nations classification of an “aging society,” when 7% of the population was over 65. Fifty years later, the proportion of the population over 65 had more than quadrupled to 29%. By 2040, it is estimated that this number will grow to more than 35%, more than half of whom will be over 75.<sup>9</sup> Average life expectancy at 60 for women stands at around 29 additional years, while Japanese men can expect to live another 24 years. What these numbers indicate is a degree of longevity and population aging that is completely unprecedented in the

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<sup>7</sup> David Adam, “How Far Will Global Population Rise? Researchers Can’t Agree,” *Nature* 597, no. 7877 (September 21, 2021): 462–65.

<sup>8</sup> “Ageing and Health: Key Facts,” World Health Organization, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, “*kōreisha no jinkō*” [Population of Older People] Last modified. September 15, 2021. <https://www.stat.go.jp/data/topics/topi1291.html>

history of human life on earth, but it is an uncharted territory that much of the world will soon be following, in Japan's footsteps.

Rapid social change is almost sure to be unsettling, particularly when it touches on fundamental existential fears around old age, illness and death. The sense of insecurity around the aging society has intensified in Japan over the last half of the twentieth century, as modernization and mobility appeared to destabilize traditional relationships of mutual care within the household and community. As the Japanese government pushed for a major overhaul of the long-term social care system at the end of the twentieth century, this public insecurity around aging was leveraged to support investments in the science of "anti-ageing," an ideological construct that brings together medical and cosmetic industries to promote a range of "active" or "successful aging" interventions presented as the solution to the problem of longevity and care.<sup>10</sup> The successful aging paradigm has been widely critiqued within social gerontology, but its basic tenet remains intact in social policy and public consciousness: it is up to individuals to prevent or delay aging for as long as possible.<sup>11</sup> Aging, in this model, is not chronological, but pathological: the loss of physiological functioning and independence due to illness, frailty and disability. But anti-ageing is not merely about promoting health, it is about constructing a particular kind of subject, one that is rational and calculating, who sees risks and seeks to minimize or prevent losses by becoming an informed consumer of goods and services in the anti-ageing marketplace and by adopting healthy lifestyle habits and values.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brett Neilson, "Anti-Ageing Cultures, Biopolitics and Globalisation," *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2006): 149–64; Brett Neilson, "Globalization and the Biopolitics of Aging," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 161–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0025>; Amina Mire, "'Skin Trade': Genealogy of Anti-Ageing 'Whiteness Therapy' in Colonial Medicine," *Medicine Studies* 4, no. 1–4 (2014): 119–29, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12376-014-0089-8>.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Lamb, ed., *Successful Aging?: Global Perspectives on a Contemporary Obsession* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Stephen Katz and Toni Calasanti, "Critical Perspectives on Successful Aging: Does It 'Appeal More than It Illuminates'?", *The Gerontologist* 55, no. 1 (2014): 26–33; Toni Calasanti, "Combating Ageism: How Successful Is Successful Aging?", *The Gerontologist* 56, no. 6 (December 2016): 1093–1101, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv076>; Marty Martinson and Clara Berridge, "Successful Aging and Its Discontents: A Systematic Review of the Social Gerontology Literature," *The Gerontologist*, May 9, 2014, gnu037, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu037>; Robert L. Rubinstein and Kate de Medeiros, "'Successful Aging,' Gerontological Theory and Neoliberalism: A Qualitative Critique," *The Gerontologist* 55, no. 1 (August 26, 2014): 34–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu080>.

<sup>12</sup> Kristen Bell, "Staging Prevention, Arresting Progress: Chronic Disease Prevention and the Lifestyle Frame," in *Preventing Dementia: Critical Perspectives on a New Paradigm of Preparing for Old Age*, ed. Annette Leibing and Silke Schicktanz (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020), 175–91; Mark Schweda and Larissa Pfaller, "Responsibilization of Aging? An Ethical Analysis of the Moral Economy of Prevention," in *Preventing Dementia: Critical Perspectives on a New Paradigm of Preparing for Old Age*, ed. Annette Leibing and Silke Schicktanz (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020), 192–213.

Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance system (LTCI), promoted as a hybrid between a universal socialized welfare model and a market-based system, embraces the paradigm of successful and "independent" (*jiritsu*) aging. While some advanced welfare states, most notably the Nordic countries, provide the security of government-supported professional care services for all frail and disabled older people who require them, Japan's system relies on unpaid family care alongside a government regulated third-sector service market.<sup>13</sup> Labor analysts have noted that while one of the primary initial aims of LTCI was the gradual 'de-familialization' of elder care, more recent trends indicate a 're-familialization,'<sup>14</sup> as paid care becomes harder to access and older people are encouraged to remain in the community. Despite the rhetoric of providing relief for family carers, no evidence has been found that LTCI has had a significant effect on the time family members spend on care-related activities. Instead, growing demand for extra-familial (paid) services has risen *alongside* increased family involvement in care, with family still needed to help manage the services and provide care to fill the gaps.<sup>15</sup> Home care has been adopted as the preferred mode of care service delivery, saving on costs of residential care homes. With fewer places in residential homes, the LTCI care needs assessment threshold to meet eligibility for more advanced care was raised, making it accessible only to those with very serious needs.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Japan's paid

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<sup>13</sup> While the success of the Nordic model has been celebrated internationally, there are also serious discussions about its sustainability. One response meant to ease the care receiver's dependence on professional care has been to rethink care as a process of "reablement," that empowers older individuals to continue living as independently as possible for as long as possible and minimizing direct support. The reablement paradigm has also become widespread in other northern European countries and aligns with local cultural models of the person. For a more extensive discussion, see Amy Clotworthy, *Empowering the Elderly?: How "Help to Self-Help" Health Interventions Shape Ageing and Eldercare in Denmark* (New York: Transcript Publishing, 2020). For more cross-national comparative accounts of LTCI, see, J. C. Campbell, N. Ikegami, and M. J. Gibson, "Lessons From Public Long-Term Care Insurance In Germany And Japan," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 87–95, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2009.0548>; Nanako Tamiya et al., "Population Ageing and Wellbeing: Lessons from Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance Policy," *The Lancet* 378, no. 9797 (September 2011): 1183–92, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(11\)61176-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)61176-8). Naonori Kodate and Virpi Timonen, "Bringing the Family in through the Back Door: The Stealthy Expansion of Family Care in Asian and European Long-Term Care Policy," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 32, no. 3 (September 2017): 291–301, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-017-9325-5>; Emiko Ochiai, "Unsustainable Societies: The Failure of Familialism in East Asia's Compressed Modernity," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 2 (2011): 219–45.

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<sup>15</sup> Shingou Ikeda, "The Necessity of Reduced Working Hours under the Re-Familization of Elderly Care," *Japan Labor Issues* 5, no. 30 (2021): 16–33; Ochiai, "Unsustainable Societies"; Kodate and Timonen, "Bringing the Family in through the Back Door."

<sup>16</sup> As of 2022, the number of people waiting for a space in residential nursing homes (*tokubetsu yōgo rōjin hōmu*) has decreased to about 270,000 nationally. This is roughly half of the 532,000 waiting for beds in 2013, just before the revision of eligibility threshold according to the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare (MHLW) "Tokubetsu yōgorōjin hōmu no nyūsho mōshikomi-sha no jōkyō (reiwa 4-nendo)" [Status of Applicants to Enter Special Nursing Homes] (2022), Accessed January 27, 2023, [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/0000157884\\_00004.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/0000157884_00004.html). Private

care sector faces a deepening labor shortage crisis, with an estimated worker shortfall of 690,000 by 2040.<sup>17</sup> Some volunteers and neighborhood welfare groups may provide supplemental informal support, especially for older people living alone or without family living nearby, but this is widely variable depending on local or municipal circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

If the current LTCI system in Japan presents challenges for frail and disabled older people who remain dependent on unpaid family care, the situation is even more difficult for older people without good relationships with their families. Whereas in the past, extended family relationships might have provided a network of support for older people facing difficulties in later life, today, more and more older people are living on their own. In 1986 55.9% of older people resided in multigenerational households, while only 31.3% lived alone or with a spouse only. Thirty years later, in 2016, the proportions had reversed: only 31.7% lived in multigenerational households, while 58.3% lived alone (27.2%) or with a spouse only (31.1%).<sup>19</sup> Poverty is a growing problem among these elder-only households, and is one of the main factors contributing to Japan's high overall poverty rate (15.4% according to the most recent OECD estimates). More than one in four adults in their 70s continue to work (more than any other country in the world) in order avoid poverty, despite the high risks of occupational injury. A 2018 report by the Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association noted that while the overall number of occupational injuries have steadily declined over the two decades preceding the survey (1989-2017), the number of incidents involving workers aged 60 and older had doubled (from 12% to 23%), including the highest rates of work-related deaths of any age cohort.<sup>20</sup> Those who cannot or do not work subsist on a small pension allowance or must resort to Protection of Livelihood Assistance (*seikatsu hogo*), a social welfare provision that provides a minimum living allowance for individuals living in abject poverty. About 45.5% of those receiving *seikatsu hogo*, are over the age of 65.

Poverty in old age, particularly when it overlaps with “care poverty” or the

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nursing homes, not covered through LTCI had grown dramatically in the first part of the century, but in recent years have been in decline. This is mainly due not to the decrease in demand, but because of the lack of experienced care staff.

<sup>17</sup> “Dai 8-Ki Kaigo Hoken Jigyō Keikaku Ni Motodzuku Kaigo Shokuin No Hitsuyō-Sū Ni Tsuite [Report on the Required Number of Nursing Care Staff Based on the 8th Long-Term Care Insurance Business Plan]” Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, July 9, 2021, [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/0000207323\\_00005.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/0000207323_00005.html).

<sup>18</sup> Lynne Nakano, *Community Volunteers in Japan: Everyday Stories of Social Change*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, ‘Graphical Review of Japanese Household’, 2018, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association, “Kōreisha Rōdōsha No Katsuyaku Sokushin No Tame No Anzen Eisei Taisaku [Safety and Health Measures to Promote Active Participation of Elderly Workers],” March 2018, [https://www.jisha.or.jp/research/report/201703\\_01.html](https://www.jisha.or.jp/research/report/201703_01.html).

“poverty of social networks,” may explain why older people are committing crimes, more than half of which are relatively minor incidents of theft (*settō*) and shoplifting (*manbiki*), but we should also be cautious about reducing crime to merely an economic issue.<sup>21</sup> The narratives of formerly incarcerated older adults like Maeda point to much more unsettling existential concerns, about seeing and being seen, about grief and uncertainty about the future, and about the pain of aging alone. In a sense, Maeda had been lucky. Tens of thousands of isolated older people in Japan die each year without being discovered for weeks or even months, having fallen through the widening gaps of the unsettled care system’s social safety net.<sup>22</sup>

One term often used to describe both the isolation of individuals that leads to these lonely deaths, or, in other cases, to chronic recidivism, is *muen*, translated by Anne Allison as “dis-belonging.”<sup>23</sup> Muen is the shadow side of a social and cultural system where relations are based on *en*, or an “ineffable connection” to others, whether by blood (*ketsuen*), work (*shaen*), or, as Maeda alluded to when we first met, a serendipitous encounter where the underlying significance may only manifest later. *En* is so important in Japan that it extends past death, honored and cultivated through practices of memorialization.<sup>24</sup> This makes being *muen* at the end of life even more painful, as there is a strong consciousness that one’s spirit will be left abandoned and unsettled in the other world, haunting the living.

### Arresting Aging

The anti-ageing ideology has not significantly reduced aging, let alone the public anxiety around growing older. In Japan, the average person who has reached the age of 60 will still spend around six years living with chronic conditions, frailty or disability

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<sup>21</sup> Matsumiya Ashita, “Kōrei-Sha No ‘kankei-Sei No Hinkon’ to ‘kodoku-Shi’ koritsu Shi’ [The Poverty of Social Networks on the Elderly and Dying Alone],” *Nihon Toshi Shakai Gakkai Nenpō [Annual Report of the Japanese Association of Urban Sociology]* 2012, no. 30 (2013): 15–28, <https://doi.org/10.5637/jpasurban.2012.15>; Teppo Kröger, *Care Poverty: When Older People’s Needs Remain Unmet*, 1st ed. 2022 edition (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Jason Danelly, “The Limits of Dwelling and the Unwitnessed Death,” *Cultural Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (May 22, 2019): 213–39, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca34.2.03>; Nils Dahl, “Governing through Kodokushi. Japan’s Lonely Deaths and Their Impact on Community Self-Government,” *Contemporary Japan* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 83–102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18692729.2019.1680512>; Anne Allison, “Not-Wanting to Die Badly: Facing the Precarity of Dying Alone in Japan,” in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, ed. Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak (London, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Plc, 2018), 181–202; Anne Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 85.

<sup>24</sup> Jason Danelly, *Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturity in Contemporary Japan* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Casper Bruun Jensen, Miho Ishii, and Philip Swift, “Attuning to the Webs of En: Ontography, Japanese Spirit Worlds, and the ‘Tact’ of Minakata Kumagusu,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 2 (September 1, 2016): 149–72, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.2.012>.

that increase their dependence on care.<sup>25</sup> Anti-aging has, however, supported the political project of the neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state, and the consequent exclusion and further stigmatization of older people who age ‘unsuccessfully.’ Anti-aging and carcerality both hinge on a logic of individual culpability and moral responsibility, clearing the state of accountability for inequalities and vulnerabilities of disadvantaged people.<sup>26</sup> By taking responsibility for the prevention of aging, by continuing to work, exercise, or participate in social activities, for example, some older individuals may feel a sense of agency and empowerment, even as they willingly submit to the control over their everyday lives.<sup>27</sup> Those whose lives fall outside of this restrictive normative model of anti-aging, on the other hand, not only suffer additional social stigma and blame, but are also further disadvantaged by the tightening of restrictions on welfare and social care that it justifies. A common theme running across the stories of formerly incarcerated older people described in this book is the experience of everyday forms of exclusion and alienation that make leaving prison more unsettling than entering prison.<sup>28</sup>

Part of David Graeber’s argument about the inner workings of everyday structural violence is that it allows those in power to remain ignorant about those they have power over, and it renders the powerless “stupid” as they expend their efforts trying to understand, interpret and anticipate the perspectives of those in power.<sup>29</sup> Suzuki and Otani, evaluating the treatment of incarcerated older adults in Japan have adopted Elaine Crawley’s term “institutional thoughtlessness” to describe the ways the ideology and design of penal institutions perpetuates practices of ignorance about the particular vulnerabilities of older people.<sup>30</sup> These practices render older adults more susceptible to

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/gho-ghe-hale-healthy-life-expectancy-at-age-60>

<sup>26</sup> Khan, ‘The Carceral State’, 54.

<sup>27</sup> John W Traphagan, “On Being a Good Rōjin: Senility, Power, and Self-Actualization in Japan,” in *Thinking about Dementia: Culture, Loss, and the Anthropology of Senility*, ed. Annette Leibing and Lawrence Cohen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 269–87; Katrina Louise Moore, “A Spirit of Adventure in Retirement: Japanese Baby Boomers and the Ethos of Interdependence,” *Anthropology & Aging* 38, no. 2 (November 28, 2017): 10–28, <https://doi.org/10.5195/AA.2017.159>.

<sup>28</sup> Carol Lawson, “Subverting the Prison: The Incarceration of Stigmatised Older Japanese,” *International Journal of Law in Context* 17, no. 3 (September 2021): 336–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552321000422>.

<sup>29</sup> Graeber, ‘Dead Zones of the Imagination’, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Masahiro Suzuki and Akinori Otani, “Ageing, Institutional Thoughtlessness, and Normalisation in Japan’s Prisons,” *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 0, no. 0 (March 13, 2023): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2023.2188236>; Elaine Crawley, “Institutional Thoughtlessness in Prisons and Its Impacts on the Day-to-Day Prison Lives of Elderly Men,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21, no. 4 (November 2005): 350–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986205282018>; Elaine Crawley and Richard Sparks, “Is There Life after Imprisonment?: How Elderly Men Talk about Imprisonment and Release,” *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 6, no. 1 (February 2006): 63–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895806060667>.

coercive violence, both within and after release from prison, since, like Maeda, the penalty for re-offending is likely to carry a harsher punishment. The case of Japan's 'thoughtless' criminalization of older adults demonstrates the dangerous intertwining of structural and coercive violence, as well as the unsettledness that disempowers those caught within the churn of its circuitry. In the next chapter I will look more closely at the carceral, and the ways it perpetuates ignorance through techniques of separation and dis-belonging. While anti-aging has been the neoliberal response to public anxieties and uncertainties around longevity and the aging population, similar public concerns about crime have resulted in increasingly punitive carceral landscapes of containment.

The stories of formerly incarcerated older adults in this book must be understood within the context of anti-aging and punitivity, neither of which originated in or are unique to Japan. Therefore, many of the lessons we learn from these stories will be relevant in other cultural contexts where older people are similarly confined in unsettledness. The ethnographic perspective I take can help us critically dismantle popular representations of Japan as country free from both ageism and crime, it can also show how community-based efforts to support formerly incarcerated older adults utilize and expand local cultural frameworks in ways that offer glimpses of the possibilities for care and transformation.

## Chapter 8

# Wounded kinships

Carceral circuits work by separating individuals not just from public life, but also from any sense of a redeemable past and from any form of livable future, reducing them to the status of deviants, and containing them within cycles of structural violence. For older adults, social isolation was the single most significant factor predicting incarceration, and once they were in the carceral circuit, their isolation deepened. If the first insight I took from the experiences of formerly incarcerated older adults was that carceral circuits operated across the prison-welfare continuum, the second was that carceral isolation was constructed, controlled and reproduced in parallel and mutually exclusive to constructions of the family. This is not to say that the solution to Japan's aging prison population is a return to "traditional family" values, but rather that the labor of carceral exclusion produces the social imaginary of a traditional family itself.

The closer I looked at the rise in social isolation and incarceration of older people, the more I kept running into the family, or rather, its absence. Whether I was listening to stories of older adults' lives prior to incarceration or after, the absent presences of the family haunted both personal narratives and the bureaucratic architecture of carceral circuits. To rephrase Saidiya Hartman's claim that "slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship," in Japan, kinship seemed to be the ghost in the machine of the carceral.<sup>31</sup>

The ghost of kinship haunted the dark and silent corridors of San'ya's cheap one-room doya accommodations. One afternoon, the staff member I was shadowing led me through the empty lobby of one of the doya houses on our way to visit an older client, when my eye was caught by a pink plastic toy cash register sitting on a table next to black ashtray and a roll of toilet paper. The bright colors were sickly sweet against the backdrop of mismatched browns the floor, walls and furniture, but even more jarring was the way the toy brought childhood, and by association, the family into a space where both were extremely rare. I asked my guide if he knew of any families in the building, but he told me that he had never seen one. I tried asking the older man we visited, but he did not know of any families either. The abandoned toy, like its absent family, remained a haunting presence. After we left, I asked the staff member how he thought the absence of family impacted formerly incarcerated older people. His reply underlined the complex ways that family and isolation were intertwined across the

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<sup>31</sup> Saidiya Hartman quoted in Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (London: Daunt Books, 2023), 62.

carceral circuit:

The reason that the number of older prisoners has risen is because they're all alone (*hitori bochi*). For example, you might have an older person, okay? Living in a nice household with grown up children and maybe grandchildren or something, and they're looking out for the older family members. Now, let's say that grandpa steals some rice wine (*sake*). In that case, they get caught by the policeman but then some of the family would go to the shop owner and the son or daughter go and apologize and talk to them and offer some kind of compensation (*benshō*). But the granddad has already been arrested. Now the policeman has to decide if they are going to take it further or not, and they might see that person has a family and a house to go back to and everything so there's no need to go to a judge after all and they can be released (*fukiso*). So they won't go to jail. Because he had a family supporting him. The reason that older prisoners are increasing is that they go out and steal the wine, but *they don't have a family*. So then, who is going to apologize or give compensation? Who is going to support that person? There's no one to do that. So, there is nothing they can do but arrest them, charge them, and if they go to court, they'll be found guilty, right? So now that person is going to prison. What is the difference? The person who has family, even if they break the law, won't go to prison. The person who doesn't have family is going to go to prison. The reason there are so many older prisoners now is because they are all alone. Even when they come out, they're still alone, so they do it again, and back again. So then that keeps going on and on. The reason is because older people alone have increased and there is not enough support for them. It's not because there is a huge increase in crime or Japanese people are a bunch of criminals!

While not every family is willing to ask the police and courts to commute a sentence, the staff member's narrative implies that the carceral system is just as much about disciplining families as it is about punishing the isolated. The two functions worked hand in hand, each reinforcing the other. This was a story that other NGO staff knew as well, especially if they were called by the police, as Igarashi was when Ji was arrested, to stand in the role of the family member, taking on responsibility for the care and resettlement of the accused. With the numbers of solitary-dwelling older people in the community climbing rapidly across Japan, the staff member's story demands serious consideration. It implies not only that the family remains deeply embedded within the Japanese penal-welfare system, but that it is the absent presence, the ghost of family, that propels the older carceral subject along the circuitous path from prison to community and back again.

As intergenerational kinship ties have grown thinner and more uncertain, more people spend later life alone. From 1998 to 2018, the number of older Japanese people (65+) living alone tripled to more than six million households (21% of older women and

13% of older men), with predictions of continued increases to close to nine million by 2014 (about one in four older women and one in five older men).<sup>32</sup> Living alone has become increasingly easier over the years, as many of us realized during Covid-19 lockdown periods, with groceries and everyday items brought to the door by delivery services. The Japanese Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system that began in 2000 also promoted home-based care, or "aging in place," as a means of reducing both the need for unpaid family care or residential institutional care. In the LTCI system, benefits were prioritized for older people living alone, meaning that living apart from family members (whether they were involved in caring or not) was actually being incentivized by the government. Similarly, Public Assistance for Livelihood Protection allowances are calculated on the basis of household units (the assumption being that co-residence implies shared resources and mutual care), rather than on the basis of each separate individual's circumstance. Living with family members who were earning an income could bring down the total amount of benefit allowance received by the older person. As neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state has led to a 'post-welfare' society familialism has returned to an empty home.<sup>33</sup>

Not everyone who lives alone feels lonely or disconnected from others, but for a large proportion of those living alone (especially men), solitude can be profound; weeks may pass without speaking to anyone. The Japanese Cabinet Office Survey of older people's housing and living conditions reported that in 2018, over 70% of solitary dwelling older men felt they had no one they could depend on (with the proportion increasing for those who were unmarried and/or in poor health).<sup>34</sup> Loneliness has become a growing concern in Japan, not only for older people, but across ages and generations as uncertainties and anxieties seep in through the cracks of a life course that has become despairing and fragmented.<sup>35</sup>

The mutually reinforcing links between age, family problems, isolation, incarceration, welfare poverty and homelessness that trap individuals in carceral circuits was glaringly obvious to the staff members of NGOs assisting unhoused people. When I asked about the referrals received from Community Resettlement Centers, a staff member at one of the NGOs told me she estimated that for around 90% of the cases

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<sup>32</sup> Cabinet Office (Japan), 'Reiwa 3 nenban kōrei shakai hakusho' [2021 Annual Aging Society White Paper], Figure 1-1-9, 2021

<sup>33</sup> Tetsu Harayama, "Posuto Fukushi Kokka Ni Okeru Haijo to Hōsetsu No Kōsatsu [For Considering Exclusion and Inclusion in Post-Welfare Nation]," in *Kōreisha Hanzai No Sōgōteki Kenkyū [Comprehensive Research on Elderly Crime]*, ed. Yoko Hosoi and Bunri Tatsuno (Tokyo: Kazama Shobo, 2021), 15–32; Miyazawa, "Welfare Regime in Japan and Recent Social Security Reform"; Allison, *Precarious Japan*; Danelly, "The Limits of Dwelling and the Unwitnessed Death."

<sup>34</sup> Cabinet Office (Japan), "Kodoku/Koritsu Ni Kansuru Kakushu Chōsa Ni Tsuite [About the Various Survey on Loneliness/Isolation]," 2018, tpls. 2-1-11–2.

<sup>35</sup> Allison, *Precarious Japan*; Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, *The Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2021).

they see, there is a history of “complicated family problems.” She then laid out the pattern of cascading disadvantages and increasing marginalization at each step:

[Usually] The family was poor, or they were raised by a single parent, there was abuse. Feels like most of them have had it hard. From there, they can't crawl out from under that. For example, they won't go to school, they don't enter society because they're carrying this wound in their kokoro (heart), and it just keeps going, you know? Then when they're old, it really eats them up and they're lots living on the streets and stuff like that. For people who were raised in that kind of environment, recovery is really hard.

In this narrative, the “complicated” family returns in old age as a wound that will not heal, perpetually exposed to the world and the 'cold winds of shaba.' The wound "eats them up," hollowing out the world from the inside, isolating them from the capacity to be with others. Age and a history of incarceration made it even more difficult to "crawl out from under" the weight of disadvantage, cutting them off from both the social field of production (i.e., education and work) as well as the field of reproduction (maintaining a stable family of one's own); they became 'ordinary refugees' of Japan's post-welfare society.<sup>36</sup>

This chapter examines the ways non-kin actors such as NGO staff, perform family in ways that go beyond the practical role of mediating between carceral institutions and the ex-offender in times of crisis. Becoming like-family, meant cultivating mutuality of care and dependence, the relational analog of making a house a 'home.'<sup>37</sup> Becoming family gave ex-offenders the chance to rewrite their story about what it meant to carry this wound, to create spaces of belonging and mutual care.

Compared to the 'warm heart cool hands' approach of the Community Resettlement Center, becoming a family entailed a deeper sense of responsibility and risk. Another concern was that in acting as a substitute for the family, volunteers and staff of NPOs could be seen as complicit in the very familialist logic that produced the exclusion of older people. It was difficult to challenge a penal-welfare structure based on the idea of family while acting like a family. Instead, organizations like Mother House were attempting to reimagine and embody forth a new incarnation of the family, one that was purged of the carceral logic of hierarchical authority and the enclosure of rights and property within lineages. Instead, they embrace family as an inclusive, multigenerational body situated in local places of belonging, and founded on

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<sup>36</sup> Anne Allison, “Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 345–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2012.0027>.

<sup>37</sup> Ozawa-de Silva, *The Anatomy of Loneliness*; Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is-And Is Not* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

alternative forms of relationality (*en*) and common identity generated through lived experience *tōjisha* and practices of care.

Carceral kinship observed in places like the US and Brazil, or among indigenous and first nations communities around the world, where experiences of incarceration are shared across generations, have also been viewed as both an inheritance of violence and a foundation for resistance.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Mother House members had no blood-ties to one another, nor were generational histories of incarceration part of their individual or shared narratives. They did, however, embrace many of the emotional and strategic elements observed in other forms of carceral kinship, such as the combination of both reformist and radical strategies, the use of the symbolic power of the mother, and a "love-politics" rooted in care and mutual vulnerability.<sup>39</sup> In addition, elements of Japanese kinship, such as bonds of *en* and ties to the spirits of the dead mingle with other religious and spiritual practices, situating these carceral kinships in a local cultural space. By reframing Mother House as a place to reimagine the family and generate fugitive worlds of care rather than merely an organization focused on the narrow aim of preventing recidivism, I consider the possibility of escape from ageist carceral circuits.

### Ghosts of Kinship

About one month after he had left the detention facility, Mother House moved Ji to a new rented house in a small residential neighborhood surrounded by quiet farms. At a moderate pace, it would take me about twenty minutes to walk from the vicinity of the train station, where most of the shops were located, to Ji's house. Ji couldn't walk that far on his own, and the bus to the station came only once an hour. I usually picked up a bag of food from the supermarket on my way over, selecting a mix of some of his favorite comfort foods like instant noodles along with some fresh fruit and vegetable side dishes that he did not make as often.

As I let myself in through the front door, I could hear the television in the next room, the volume turned up louder than usual. On one side of the entrance were Ji's

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post Keynesian California Landscape," *Transforming Anthropology* 8, no. 1–2 (1999): 12–38, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tran.1999.8.1-2.12>; Khan, "The Carceral State"; Hollis Moore, "Extralegal Agency and the Search for Safety in Northeast Brazil: Moving beyond Carceral Logics," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 33–51, <https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2020.380104>; Alana Abramson and Muhammad Asadullah, "Decolonizing Restorative Justice," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Decolonizing Justice*, ed. Chris Cunneen et al., 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2023), 367–79; Angela Garcia, "The Blue Years: An Ethnography of a Prison Archive," *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (November 15, 2016): 571–94, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.4.06>.

<sup>39</sup> Keahnan Washington, "Love-Politics and the Carceral Encounter," *Anthropology News* 60, no. 1 (2019): e65–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.1074>.

blue clogs, and in the opposite corner, a collection of umbrellas and Ji's cane. Ji was the only one home, as he was most days since being resettled again. Although Kei had moved in with Ji, but he found part-time work, and between that and his volunteering at Mother House, he was busy most days, sometimes spending nights at Mother House to save on commuting. If he was going to be away, he would ask one of the other tōjisha to stop and check in on Ji.

The kitchen was clean and uncluttered, but that was most likely because it was rarely used. When I opened the refrigerator to put away the things I brought, the only food inside was a bottle of mayonnaise and a large plastic tub of kimchi.

Ji spent his days in the front room of the house, since his leg pain made climbing stairs dangerous. It was the only room in the house designed in a traditional Japanese style, with sliding paper doors and a floor of interlocking tatami mats. The walls were the color of wet sand and rough to the touch, while the support beams were smooth, straight and an unpainted blonde wood-grain. The contrast between the two gave an illusion of depth in the small space.

A large sliding door provided a floor to ceiling window out onto the small garden, which was little more than dirt and rock, hidden behind a cinder block wall. Next to this window was another glass door, the outer shutters drawn closed, so the glass reflected the room. Ji's bed, equipped with remote controlled posture adjustment and grab handles was provided by the social welfare service, and occupied most of the room. The bubblegum pink sheets and blankets softened the intrusive feeling of this oversized contraption in a space otherwise dominated by warm, natural materials and textures.

Ji's room did not bear the impressions and stains of years of habitation. It was a temporary shelter, a site of dis-settlement. No need to clean or to pretend it was a home no need to make attachments or drink from a real glass no point in filing papers away, no one was coming over anyway. I wanted to ask if thought that this might be his last home, but I wanted to be careful about being too direct on the subject of dying. "It's hard to think about what's going to happen as you get older, isn't it?" I started, "You never know how many years you have left." I let him think about this for a moment, hoping he understood where I was going.

"Two years!" he suddenly announced abruptly, like a door shut slamming shut.

"Two years?" I repeated, a little stunned. "You're saying that you figure you have only two years left (to live)?"

"Two years," he said again, this time in a softer voice.

"Well, who knows?" I said, starting to recover, "Maybe we can meet again in two years and see?"

A long pause followed. He didn't offer any additional explanation. I didn't press him. We let the silence pool up again. Two years seemed arbitrary at the time, like he had given himself a sentence to serve, like he was still "doing time," even on the outside. Was it hopeful or pessimistic? What kind of time was 'two years'?

Ji sat on the edge of the bed, facing the window at the front. Usually he would face the reflecting side, sitting for long moments staring at himself. Before either turning to his left to watch television, or to his right, where a low table was covered with papers, envelopes, medication packages, a calendar, a half-full tub of pickled plums, a pair of scissors, a comb. The objects, like his life story, reflected a fragmentation rather than an assemblage. They were all pieces of life that had lost their sense of order or relationship to each other, shuffled around in an arbitrary pile.

In front of Ji was a wooden chair that he used as a table for his meals, often simply white rice mixed with kimchi, plums, or some other garnish, or a bowl of instant ramen. The packaging from his meals collected in a clear plastic bag underneath the chair. Ji drank cold tea out of an old aluminum can that used to contain pineapple chunks, according to the label, the rough edges where the lid was cut off were still visible around the rim. A box of Lark cigarettes and a lighter were set next to the can.

Ji did not elaborate on why he thought he only had two years left, switching on the television. The quiet of the room was broken sharply by the young and happy actors on the commercials, selling vacations or luxury homes. They were commercials I'd seen many times before, but the bright, enthusiastic images were even stranger than usual when viewed next to Ji. He changed the channel to the Sumo tournament, and since we had both been following it closely this year, we talked about who was likely to move up in rank and who might be demoted. The slow, steady, ritualistic pace of the tournament fit the atmosphere of the room much better than the manic sensory flood of the commercials. As each wrestler swaggered and squatted, the tension would build up until it would suddenly erupt in a colossal smashing of skin against skin. In seconds, the bout would be over, and the slow pacing of the next pair would resume. Watching sumo with Ji was almost hypnotic.

Apart from his commentaries on sumo, however, I continued to struggle understanding his speech. When I asked him to repeat something, he would say it over and over while I repeated what I thought I had heard. Sometimes we would figure it out. Other times I would let him go on, thinking that I would figure it out after he had said a few more words. He could get frustrated if I pushed too far. His tongue seemed thick in his mouth like a ball of cotton wool. His lips never quite constricted enough, the

words tumbled out, soft and choppy and wet. After a few sentences, we would just sit in silence and rest. Ji would sometimes put on his glasses and find a piece of paper that had been in the pile on the table next to his bed. It would be a letter from the ward office, or something from his doctor or pharmacist. Ji would hold the paper in his hands, reading it slowly, then put it back on the table. It was part of his routine, his ritual, the way sumo wrestlers would stretch or throw salt in the ring before settling into position.

Just beyond the table of papers, propped against the wall, was a large color photograph in a simple black frame of a woman who seemed close to Ji's age. Next to the portrait, was a brown glass vase with sakaki branches covered in deep green leaves, and bundle of incense sticks next to a burner. It was a funeral portrait of his mother, and one of the few personal possessions he kept.

Jason: I see you have a photo of your mother there.

Ji: I look like her don't I?

Jason: Will you be buried with her? After you die, have you thought about what will happen to your remains?

Ji: Nothing.

Jason: You won't be put anywhere?

Ji: *Muen-botoke* [a disconnected ghost]

Jason: If you become a *muen-botoke*, that will be so lonely!

Ji: It's fine.

Jason: Really?

Ji: I don't need any fuss.

Jason: Now, do you feel *muen* already?

Ji: I've lost contact with my siblings, my daughter. So I'm *muen-botoke*. I don't have a child to take care of me.

Jason: (checking to make sure I understood) A child?

Jī: A child. A child- I don't have a household. No one to carry on. So I'm *muen-botoke*.

Jī's insistence that he and his mother would become disconnected ghosts on the one hand, seemed to foreclose on any hope of resettling in the world, while on the other, bound his fate even closer to that of his mother's, the two of them connected in their disconnection. Indeed, if Jī was the last of his household lineage left to care for the spirit of his mother, building new forms of kin-like connections with Kei or others at Mother House might feel like abandoning her, his last connection to his life before prison.

For others, the prospect of becoming *muen-botoke* did not pose such fraught decisions. For isolated older people leaving prison, creating bonds of connection (*en*) with others that will continue after death provides both comfort regarding the end of life and the sense of being valued while still living. One of the most moving scenes in the documentary about Fukuda (the man arrested for the Shimonoseki arson described in Chapter 6) was one in which staff were explaining to Fukuda that they had secured a place for his remains in an ossuary (*nōkotsudo*), and would continue to look after them. When Fukuda realized what this meant, he began wiping the stream of tears from his face, overcome with emotion. "I'm not disconnected (*muen*) anymore!" he smiled triumphantly.

Even in places like San'ya, where everyday sociality is marked by precarity, invisibility and uncertainty, NGOs, clergy and community members have pooled their efforts to establish ways for the deceased to be reintegrated into the fabric of social memory by establishing new gravesites and rituals.<sup>40</sup> For Jī, being *muen* left him without the security of post-death ceremonies, a ghost in waiting, with little to direct or project back into the present moment. But there was the image, the photograph of his mother. Constant and watchful, a face like his own, mirroring his own fate, the image of his mother was the last thin line of connection to the world and to the just bearable life.<sup>41</sup>

## Mother

"Man, look at you all!"

Arisa, Igarashi's wife, was passing through the cafe where I happened to be

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<sup>40</sup> Jieun Kim, "Necrosociality: Isolated Death and Unclaimed Cremains in Japan: Necrosociality," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22, no. 4 (September 2016): 843–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12491>; Matthew D. Marr, "The Ohaka (Grave) Project: Post-Secular Social Service Delivery and Resistant Necropolitics in San'ya, Tokyo," *Ethnography* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 88–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138119845393>.

<sup>41</sup> Hage, "Bearable Life."

working on a laptop alongside three other men. "This looks like the front of a Yakuza office with all of you in here like this!" she half-joked, setting her bags of groceries on the table.

"Especially you Tatsu!" she went on, pointing at the assistant manager, who was seated with his feet on his desk, fanning himself. He was an intimidating figure, gruff-voiced, shaved head with a face usually twisted into a scowl. Arisa pointed at the folding fan. It was white, with the Chinese character meaning "Love" written on it in black calligraphy.

"Look at your fan, that's just the sort of thing a Yakuza boss would wave around, don't you think? They're crazy about calligraphy like 'love,' or 'loyalty' stuff like that."

Tatsu frowned, but Arisa kept on going. She laughed and struck a tough pose as if she was in a Japanese gangster movie. Tatsu finally relented. "Give me a break, will you?" he pleaded, cracking a smile. Relieved, the rest of us all had a laugh at this petite mother of three, her hair tied back in a long ponytail doing a goofy impression of a yakuza tough guy.

While Arisa was not an employee of Mother House, her presence always had a way of keeping the mood a little lighter, and she played an important role as the only one at Mother House who would openly poke fun at Igarashi, relieving some of the stress some members felt when they were tired of deferring to his rules. Often times, she would drop off a child or two in the office, giving a few of the men a chance to work on their babysitting skills. The presence of children in Mother House, at birthday parties for members, or occasional outings, created an atmosphere of family life where ex-offenders could practice caring for others, rather than just receiving care. As a woman and someone without an official status in Mother House, Arisa knew that she could joke at the serious diligence of the men, softening their hard exteriors with a couple of well-placed jabs.

Everyone being supported by Mother House, like Ji and Kei, and all of the Mother House regular staff, were men. While this reflects the demographic make-up of the penal system in Japan (less than 10% of incarcerated individuals are female in Japan, nearly a third of whom are over 65), the male dominated space seemed to be obviously at odds with the organization's maternal moniker. From an outside perspective, the idea that the formerly incarcerated men and NGO staff at Mother House were somehow becoming a family might seem to be a stretch.

And yet, under the masthead of each of the Mother House newsletters was the message, "You were born to be loved and to love others. You are needed and important. Mother House is your family." This was sent out every month to around 800

incarcerated individuals and supporters. Making this happen was one of the most labor-intensive jobs for the volunteers, who usually came in for several days over the week before newsletters were mailed. I spent days with volunteers printing, collating, folding and packing envelopes with these newsletters. On these days, the gender dynamics at Mother House changed dramatically, since the majority of volunteers that helped with the newsletter were women from the Catholic church, including a couple of nuns. The nuns were motherly figures at Mother House, in the sense that they were mostly older than the men, and they projected a sense of stern yet graceful acceptance that several of the men found comforting. Many of the women who volunteered were also corresponding with incarcerated men, a project that Igarashi had (somewhat misleadingly) named "Love Letters." While Igarashi meant for the name to express the sentiment "Perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18), it was not unusual for the incarcerated pen pals or prison staff to mistake it for a Christian match-making service.

The name 'Mother House,' is a direct reference to the charitable work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, but the recurring figure of the mother in the work of ex-offender rehabilitation draws in other associations of the mother's archetypal nurturance, devotion, and unconditional love. For formerly incarcerated men in particular, finding a sense of connection to this love, which they may not have experienced in their own family, was part of finding self-acceptance and forgiveness. The figure of the mother is understood by many as fundamental to Japanese cultural conceptions of personhood and ethical orientation to the world. In the Buddhist-based psychotherapeutic practice of Naikan, for example, Ozawa-de Silva notes that intense reflection on one's mother is central to the practice of embodying a powerful sense of guilt and indebtedness that moves the client towards healing.<sup>42</sup> While Naikan's philosophy originated in Pure Land Buddhism and is practiced as kind of spiritual counseling in a variety of contexts today, its technique was first used in the early twentieth-century in Japanese prisons, where it was framed as a secular form of self-reflection.<sup>43</sup> Even prison chaplains who do not use this specific technique do utilize the image of the mother in the practice of spiritual counseling. Lyons, for example, describes a powerful interaction that he observed between a female Buddhist Chaplain (Fukai) and an "elderly man who had been

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<sup>42</sup> Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, *Psychotherapy and Religion in Japan: The Japanese Introspection Practice of Naikan* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 130-131. This argument about the importance of the mother is most strongly expressed in Kosawa Heisaku's theory of the 'Ajase Complex,' see, Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, "Demystifying Japanese Therapy: An Analysis of Naikan and the Ajase Complex through Buddhist Thought," *Ethos* 35, no. 4 (2007): 411-46, <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2007.35.4.411>, as well as in the socialization of *amae*, see Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Self: The Individual Versus Society* (Tokyo; New York; New York: Kodansha USA, 2001); Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1976); and 'skinship,' see, Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*. In all of these cases, the mother-child relationship, which is both inter-corporeal and inter-subjective, becomes the prototype for a kind of intimate social relationship with others characterized by the presumption of having one's desires indulged and of understanding and indulging others' desires.

<sup>43</sup> Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, *Psychotherapy and Religion in Japan: The Japanese Introspection Practice of Naikan* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 7-8; Lyons, *Karma and Punishment*, 212.

arrested repeatedly for minor offenses”:

She tried first to speak to the man in the language of Buddhism. “Next time, before you do something bad, try to remember the face of the Buddha.” His eyes remained on the floor. He said, “I don’t know the face of the Buddha.” Fukai nodded once and shifted focus to the family. “Where is your mother? Do you still have contact with her? Why don’t you visit her when you get out? I am sure she thinks about you.” The man remained impassive. “I don’t know.”

Fukai pressed. “You have to remember your mother. The next time, before you do something that will send you back here, please try to remember the face of your mother.” The man said, “I can’t remember.” Undaunted, Fukai said, “You have to try. Please do your best.”<sup>44</sup>

In this interaction, the image of the mother, substituted for the Buddha, is suggested as a presence that can be conjured as a conscience in moments where self-will falters. She is the place of belonging and care that one can always return to, a face that accepts without judgement, and without the need for explanation. While psychologists and anthropologists have debated the uniqueness of the significance of mothers in Japanese culture (both empirically and theoretically), it is undeniable that like other places in the world, mothers hold tremendous cultural symbolic meaning, especially for those whose trust has been wounded, and who long for security and care.

When Igarashi decided that Mother House should not only have an office, but also a home-like ‘*ibasho*,’ it converted part of the open garage-like space it rented next to the old office into its ‘café.’<sup>45</sup> Igarashi named the Mother House *ibasho*, the ‘Maria Café’, doubling the ‘mother’ image of Mother Teresa with the even more monumental icon of saintly motherhood. The space itself was much less grandiose. A few mismatched chairs were brought in, and several stuffed animals, including a large Winnie the Pooh, were placed in the front to make it look more inviting. On the grand opening day, a camera crew from one of the news channels was there, and special tables were set up to give it more of a sidewalk café feel (alas, this did not last beyond that day).

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<sup>44</sup> Lyons, *Karma and Punishment*, 229-230.

<sup>45</sup> Allison, *Precarious Japan* 174-175 describes *ibasho* not only as a “place or space when living feels right”, but as “Human Time,” of “mutual caregiving and open acceptance” full of queer potentiality for social reorganization. While Mother House *ibasho* was meant to be inclusive, accepting, and diverse, and while it did bring together multiple temporalities (religious, carceral, therapeutic), it was also strongly tied to more normative notions of family and motherhood; Similarly, Ozawa-de Silva, *The Anatomy of Loneliness*, 216-17, does not think of *ibasho* only in spatial terms, but more importantly, as relational, and flexible to other virtual and imaginative spaces; Saito, *Rupo Rojin Jukeisha [Report Elderly Prisoners]* 199-200, describes a conversation with Law Professor, Yasuda Megum, where she describes a dream of creating a “coffee shop” where ex-offenders and those with an interest in them can come together and build relationships.

As one of the only ‘customers’ at the event, the cameras hovered close by as I played my role. The Mother House men acted as if we had just met, and politely took my money, poured and served my coffee. The reporters asked what I thought about a café staffed by former prisoners. “When you say it like that, it sounds scary, doesn’t it!” I replied in mock surprise, “But everyone is very friendly and the coffee is good. I like it here!”

When the camera turned away, I laughed a little, feeling slightly embarrassed by my awkward act, but Igarashi was very pleased. After all, while *ibasho* might romanticized as places where one can ‘be oneself’, it might just as well be the case that an *ibasho* is a place to perform different selves for the sake of others you wish to share the space with. After the broadcast, the extra tables were packed away and the café rarely saw customers, despite the open doors. Like other Mother House ventures, Igarashi often moved ahead with his vision without engaging in typical drawn out negotiations with neighborhood community leaders that might have fostered more trust and exchange. While bringing the public into the space was a challenge, the café still functioned as a place of community for Mother House members, especially during the monthly *tōjisha* meetings. In this sense, even this underdeveloped effort deserves credit for going beyond the care planning role of the Community Resettlement Support Centers, and did strive to cultivate empathetic encounters (*deai*) and identity amongst the ex-offenders and others, or what Igarashi referred to as ‘relationality’ (*kankeisei*).

When I asked Igarashi about the role of family for formerly incarcerated older people, he replied,

When we talk about older people’s crimes, first of all, their families have fallen apart. The father has been abusive or something. Children are perceptive, right? They’re really sensitive. And of course, the wives also respond. What happens with old people then is they reoffend. So then they go to the Community Resettlement Support Center. This is a special thing in Japan for older people and disabled people, but it is run by each of the prefectures in its own way like a contracted corporation, so it’s all over the place. So there are some places that do things well and others that don’t. If the Community Resettlement Center is handling the case, then first of all there has to be a written agreement. For me, instead of that, these are human beings, so you have to meet them, and attend to the relationality (*kankeisei*) and then to the extent that you don’t have any connection to them, to get them to tell you all about themselves, I don’t think they’re going to tell you everything. That won’t work. That’s relationally. Pay attention to that.

The growing number of older offenders is due in part to the inability of the family to support and include older members. Could Mother House expand its rehabilitative

framework to provide a home for older ex-offenders? I thought about Ji, alone in his room, his only relative, a disconnected ghost like himself. Yet the presence of mothering and kinship remained vital and sustaining. I wondered if an *ibasho* like the Maria Café and the fugitive family formed around it could be the kind of place where he would find a new sense of relationality. What surprised me, however, was that for Ji, kinship emerged not in the dedicated space of the café or during soul-bearing peer support meetings, but rather in the accompaniment through ordinary spaces of the same administrative institutions that I had argued perpetuate carceral churn.

### **Forgotten Items**

Each week, Kei and I took a train across the Sumida River from Mother House into the city for an evening bible study. On our way back to Mother House to pick up the car, I asked Kei what he thought of the lesson, a section from the book of Mark (10:46), where Jesus healed the blind man Bartimaeus. Kei gave me a confident look, surprised that I was still thinking about It. He got it easily from the start: “If you want to be healed, you have to shout. If you’re sick, you’ll be healed, if you’re a sinner, you’ll be forgiven.”

When we got off the train, Kei got a phone call from another Mother House member who lived near Kei and Ji. As we walked, Kei’s side of the conversation started sounding alarming. “He walked? Is he okay? Uh-huh. Are you kidding? Okay, we’re on our way.” He put the phone away and shook his head. “It’s Ji. Sounds like he tried to go to the hospital today.”

Jason: He walked all that way?

Kei: It took him four hours because he had to stop a lot to rest because of his leg.

Jason: Is he okay?

Kei: Yeah, sounds like he got there and thought he could see a doctor, but he didn’t have an appointment or the right paperwork. You know Ji, he got angry and thought they were just kicking him out. It sounds like it almost got serious.

Jason: What happened?

Kei: Somehow they found out where the house was and they took him home.  
Shall we go?

We took the highway. Kei kept the windows open so the cold night air blew in, but he was still starting to yawn. When we reached the house, Ji was lying in bed, watching television with the lights out.

Kei shouted over to him. "Ji! We're back! Are you awake?"

Ji: "I was asleep!"

Kei: What happened today? I heard you walked.

Ji : Eight AM.

Kei: "You left at 8am? And when did you get back? (Ji holds up three fingers) 3pm? Seven hours? Ji, you can't be doing things like this. If you get caught, you're on suspended sentence right now!"

Kei sighed, his voice cooling down into steady tone of concern. "You'd get in real trouble if you did something. I won't even be able to visit you in detention probably."

When Kei told me about Ji walking to the hospital, I had mostly been worried about the pain he must have endured and the danger of him falling or getting hurt on the way. It didn't cross my mind that the perfectly ordinary chore like a frail older man visiting a hospital (with an appointment or not) could end up in an arrest and prison time. But Kei was right. This was a close call, and if he had really had a fight with someone at the hospital while on a suspended sentence, it would be hard to keep him out of prison.

Early the next morning, I came downstairs to see that Ji was already up and dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed. He had on his baseball cap with the words "Believe in Yourself" emblazoned on the front in English. It had been a while since I had seen Ji outside of his lounging clothes, so it was nice to see him dressed in a shirt, a cardigan, and khaki trousers. Kei came down, spotting Ji's new look like I did. "Ready for your big day?" Kei was wearing a black baseball cap, black t-shirt, gray sweatpants, looking much more like an ex-gangster than he might have intended. As we left, he threw on a hooded sweatshirt, covering up his tattoos.

Ji seemed to be in good spirits despite the chaos of the day before and that fact that we were about to take him to a neurologist to screen him for dementia. We fished his identification and insurance paperwork out of the pile of papers by his bed, but we still had to stop at the ward office to file additional papers before we were to the clinic. When we finally arrived at the clinic, Kei borrowed a wheelchair for Ji and we pushed him into the busy waiting room.

The clinic walls, furniture and linoleum floors were all in different shades of light gray and cream with few decorations. A small plastic basket with the label “forgotten items” was placed on a shelf by the reception window, as if to remind us of why we were there. Kei and I looked around and immediately noticed a calendar on one of the walls. It was distributed by the National Police Agency (*keisatsu-chō*) and showed a photograph of two uniformed officers smiling as they watched a small child riding his bicycle. Kei pretended to be the voices of the officers, saying things like “Hey kid, you’re under arrest for driving without a license!”

We waited a few more minutes in silence before Jī turned to me, smiling and saying clearly “I’m totally senile (*boke*)!” Although he didn’t seem worried, I felt like I ought to be comforting him, so I told him that the doctors will let us know, so we’ll have to wait and see what they say. He shrugged. “It didn’t use to be this way. I used to be able to see really well, but I can’t see anymore, can’t walk.”

Soon Jī was called into one of the examination rooms, where two women in pink smocks and stiff nurse caps pushed his wheelchair in front of the physician, a young man in a clean white jacket. Before addressing Jī, the doctor turned to Kei and asked if he was the oldest son of the patient. Kei was surprised for moment, then shook his head “No-no-no-no-no.” I also had to take a momentary pause after the doctor’s question, as if I was snapping back into a world where it was not normal for a gangster and an anthropologist to take a man to the neurologist. Weren’t *we* his family?

Kei tried to explain that they lived together, but were not related, and that Jī was being looked after by a group called Mother House. The physician was not quite sure what to make of the situation, but he continued to address Kei as the screening began, asking him various questions about Jī’s behavior. Jī sat quietly, waiting his turn, while Kei stood at his side. The physician still had not even greeted Jī, and as the questions continued, I could feel myself getting more agitated. Finally when the doctor asked Kei if Jī sometimes wets himself I heard myself saying out loud, “why don’t you ask *him*!” Everyone ignored me.

Finally the physician did turn to Jī, and using a much louder voice, ran through a version of the Mini-Mental State Exam (MMSE), asking him questions about the date, what he ate (“the same thing every day?” Kei whispered to me as we watched), who was the Prime Minister of Japan and who was the President of the USA (Jī answered both correctly), and so on. The physician measured Jī’s grip, and then asked him to draw a clock and draw a cube. Kei and I looked over his shoulder, and we both agree that he did well on these tasks, and better than both of us had expected. Afterward, as Kei pushed Jī into the corridor to await additional tests, I told them that I didn’t like the way the doctor never even spoke to Jī, even to explain why he was asking all these strange things. Kei thought that if the doctor did all that, the test results wouldn’t come

out right, so we would just have to do what they said and wait for results. The anonymity, the waiting, the paperwork, the confinement, the guarded authority – even spaces of healing hold these traces of the carceral.

After several more tests, Ji became quiet. Finally the young doctor called us in for a preliminary diagnosis. We gathered around a printout of the MRI scan, as the doctor quickly explained to Kei that there were no unusual signs of brain deterioration or dementia, and the dark spots they found were probably the result of his stroke. Then, in his loud voice, he told us that Ji's results from the other tests gave him a score just below "passing," however, there were still concerns that Ji might develop more dementia symptoms soon. Ji remained quiet until we had left the clinic, when I asked what he thought about the results. "I'm totally senile!" he repeated, smiling, "Doesn't matter."

The diagnosis seemed to confirm what Kei has suspected, and he tried to reassure me that the doctor was good as we drove to the next appointment at the orthopedic rehabilitation center. Kei was trying to keep Ji's spirits up, playing like his chauffeur, even when he was pushing Ji in the wheelchair. The waiting room at this clinic was almost empty, and as Kei took the clipboard from the reception desk putting on a pair of small reading glasses to fill out the intake forms, it felt like all eyes were on us, trying to place our relationships. Kei started filling out the boxes, while Ji and I helped.

Kei: (Reading the form) How long have you had the pain?

Ji: Um, five years.

Kei: (to me) Five years is how many days?

Jason: Uh, 1832?

Kei: Okay. (fills in a box and keeps reading) uh, Ji are you allergic to anything?

Ji: No!

Kei: Are you pregnant?

Ji: Don't be stupid! (Ji starts to laugh a little, and we hear a few of the other women in the waiting room start to giggle as well).

Kei: (loudly, so everyone can hear) Oh right, you're not pregnant at the *moment*, you must have already given birth! I get it.

Jī: You idiot! Stop fooling around.

The examination went smoothly, although the news, again, wasn't good. Jī would have to do a regular and painful regime of physical therapy if he wanted to keep his knee from deteriorating further. After the appointment, the three of us stopped at a small noodle shop and ordered piping hot bowls of curry noodles. Kei and Jī sat side by side, and perhaps it was the matching caps or the back and forth of their conversation, or the fact that they ordered the same meal, but they could have easily passed for father and son, as everyone from the ward office to the clinic staff had been assuming all morning long.

The clinic, and its unexpected affordances for both concern and humor, brought Kei and Jī together into a space of "carcerality's kinships," where they became more attuned and open to each other, even as (or maybe because) the circumstance was also one of vulnerability and uncertainty.<sup>46</sup> Although Jī was not interested in joining the other Mother House ex-offenders at places where Igarashi hoped they would find restorative kinship, or 'relationality', such as support meetings, mass, or Bible study, the clinic, with its own carceral atmosphere, surprisingly, brought us all into a more kin-like configuration. Rather than being complicit with the structural violence of the family and the clinic as carceral institutions, together, as 'family,' Kei and Jī were able to destabilize the power of these places and deepen their own relationship of care.

Jī was not the only one that seemed to enjoy the company. By taking care of Jī, Kei was also 'encountering' himself, as Igarashi explained – a fundamental step towards recovering from decades of life in and out of prison. In this way, kin-work, while entailing its own ambiguous sense of responsibility, was a move away from the carceral past as well as a way of navigating the carceral logics of institutional bureaucracies that only a day earlier had almost resulted in Jī's reimprisonment. While Omuro and Nakai in the previous chapter, rested their hopes on being reunited with (and forgiven by) family, the kin-like connections of Mother House sought to transcend the narrow boundaries of affiliation and descent that insinuate it within the carceral continuum and to transform the family into an entity of mutual of care.

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<sup>46</sup> Klaus Hamberger, "Kinship as Logic of Space," *Current Anthropology* 59, no. 5 (October 2018): 525–48, <https://doi.org/10.1086/699736>; Khan, "The Carceral State," 58.

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