

SPRINGS

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MAPPED FUTURES, VANISHING PLACES: ON INHERITANCE AT THE
WATER'S EDGE

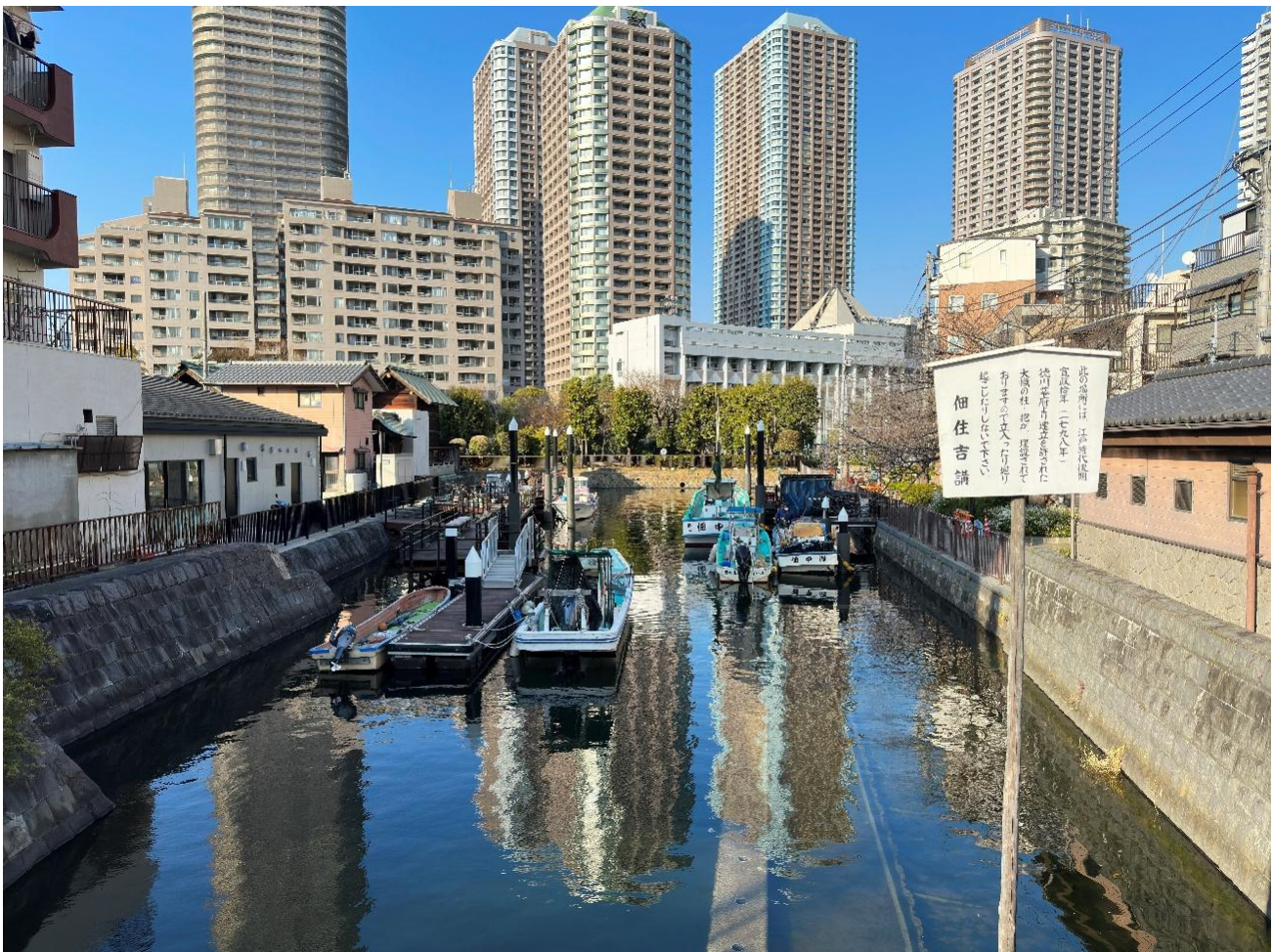
Kumiko Kiuchi

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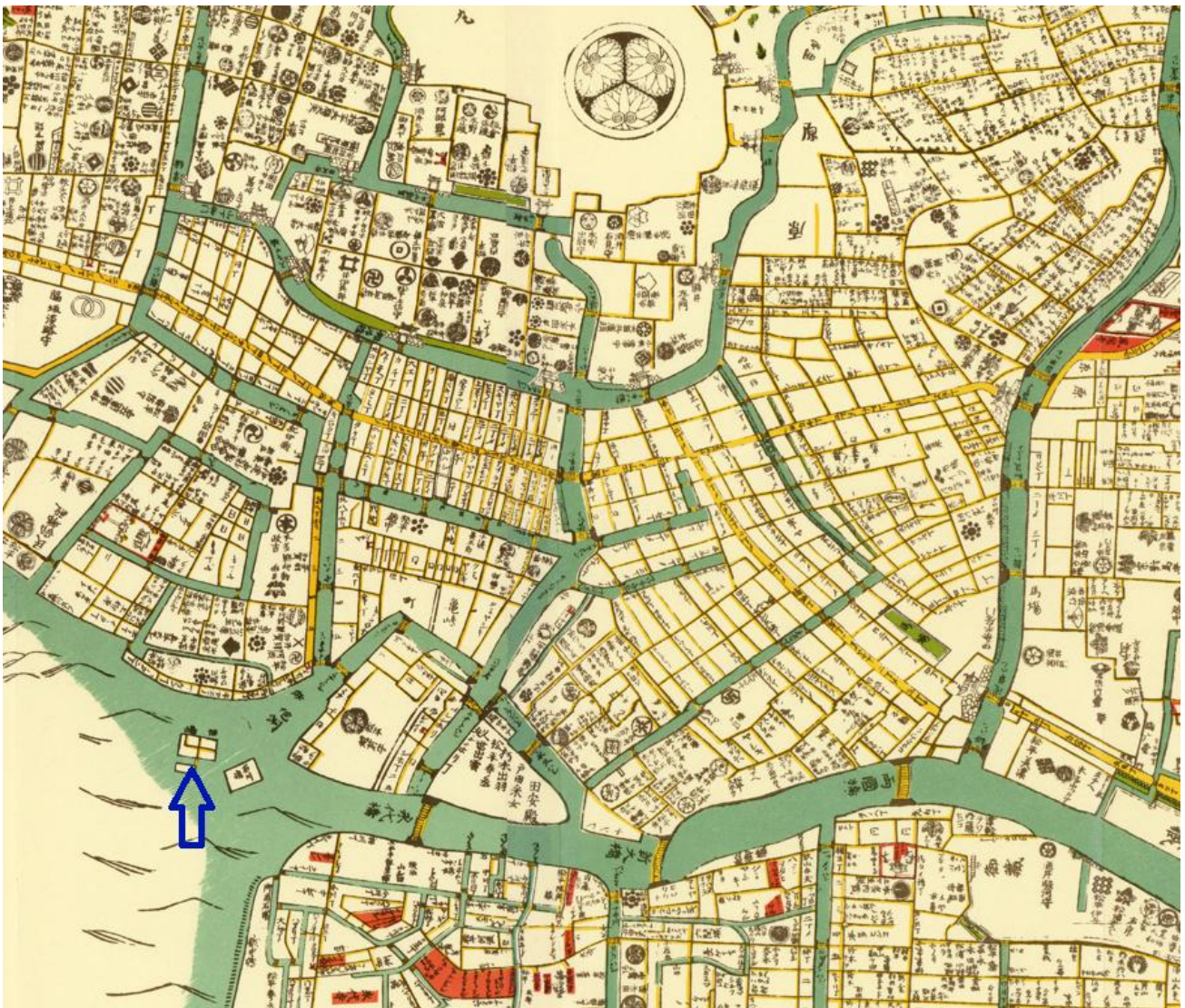
I began thinking about the inheritance of memory not in a classroom or a library, but at the edge of a half-closed moat on Tsukudajima, an artificial island in Tokyo. Some might imagine a concrete island with few signs of life, but, in fact, it is rich in colors, activities, and species. I walk by the moat every day. Before dawn, it remains plunged in a muted Maastricht blue, sharpening a shrine's silhouette under a slowly waking sky. In rush hour, a couple of boats sail out through a water gate almost as narrow as their width. During the day, people gather along its edge, fishing, waiting for a friend, talking, playing Pokémon Go, or dozing on a bench. In the evening light before dusk, the water mirrors a scarlet-mackerel sky as crows, starlings, cormorants, and egrets hasten away for the night, sensing the rain the next day.



Tower buildings with the moat and the sign indicating the location where the wooden segments are buried on Tsukudajima.
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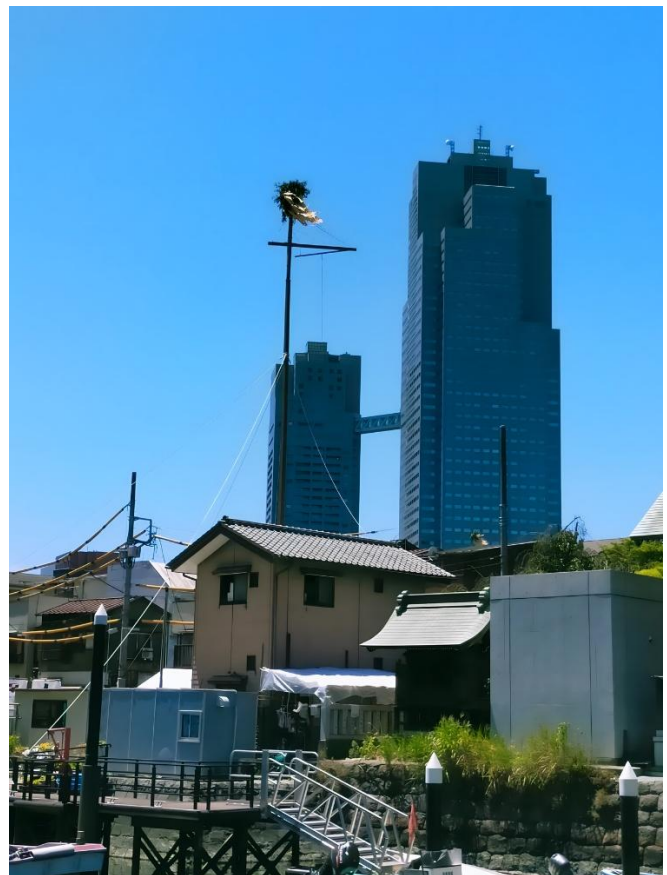
The moat is where both the fluid and the solid, life and death, intersect. Flotsam and the color of the water tell us the weather conditions of the previous days upstream by the river to which the moat is connected. The smells at the water's edge carry traces of the life and death of plankton and their relationship with urban water infrastructure. In the old times, human bodies were among that flotsam more often, and people downstream would have an altar for spirits with no identifiable kin and pray for them. Every summer during the week of Obon when it is believed the dead cross the water and return to this world, local families on the island burn incense by the moat to welcome their ancestors and entertain them with a local prayer dance. The dance is also meant to appease

the unfortunate spirits believed to drag the living into the water during their crossing. Even today, some boats remain moored to avoid such hazardous encounters during *Obon*.



Mouth of the Sumida River in the new revised facsimile edition of *Meiwa Edo Zu* (1771/2020) [enlarged]. The square island quartered by lines at the mouth of the Sumida River (marked by the author with a blue arrow) is Tsukudajima, the artificial island where the moat is. © Kochizu Shiryō Shuppan. All rights reserved. Data provided by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

On Tsukudajima, summer is also the season of the local Shinto festival, which dates back to the island's construction in the early seventeenth century. The first shogun of the Edo period, Iyasu Tokugawa, summoned 33 fishermen from Osaka to settle at the mouth of the Sumida River. Granted exclusive fishing rights, they reclaimed this sandbank and founded a branch shrine of their homeland. The festival was originally held on occasions of a bountiful catch of fish. Today, it takes place every three years. A month before the festival, the moat becomes a stage: The members of the shrine's confraternity wade into the water at low tide to dig the mud and retrieve heavy wooden segments. These are assembled into six 19-meter poles that carry long banners during the festival period. Listening to the unique "squeak" of these poles in the wind, some elders boast about their family's legacy as if they were still fishermen. These ritual practices do more than preserve tradition. They give the island a circular sense of time that cannot be easily translated into the linear time of planning and the projected future.



(Left) Woodblock print showing one of the six poles and banners of the festival. Hiroshige Utagawa, "Sumiyoshi Festival, Tsukudajima" (1857), from the series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo" (Tokyo National Museum). [ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan](#). [Public domain](#). (Right) A pole awaiting its banner before the festival. © 2026 Kiuchi Kumiko. All rights reserved.

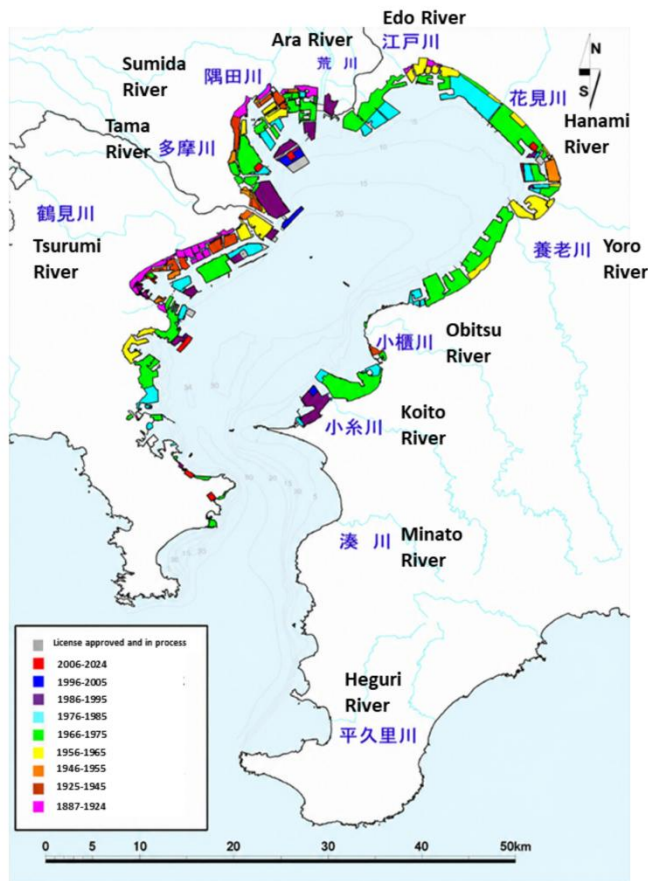
I first came to know this landscape through walking with a friend from Tsukishima, a modern artificial island constructed in 1892, adjacent to Tsukudajima. Her family house was a prewar building with a unique billboard-style façade, but a redevelopment plan replaced the narrow alleyways dotted with small low-rise houses with a 32-story tower building. Through walking, her memories appeared not necessarily as a coherent history, but as fragments: a shop that had disappeared, a room where she had played with friends, and the Kachidoki Bridge, which once opened three times a day and showered pedestrians with dust and litter. What mattered was not only what she remembered, but how memory surfaced in the act of walking—by retracing old routes and everyday scenes, in conversation, and in response to small details in the landscape.



Map indicating the location of Tsukudajima, Tsukishima, Kachidoki, and Kachidoki Bridge. Made with the Vector application and a map provided by [Geospatial Information Authority of Japan](#). © Kumiko Kiuchi. All rights reserved.

Moving through the same paths, I found myself walking at different paces, sometimes in haste, other times more slowly, more attentively, becoming aware of the multiple, uneven temporal scales that shape this place. Interconnections between rhythms and scales have become more apparent to me. If the daily rhythms of activities around the moat constitute a human scale, the time of the three-year ritual is cyclical, binding this community together across changing times and generations. Tides are cyclical, but when high tide coincides with earthquakes or severe weather, water levels can rise and lead to floods, which have reshaped Edo and Tokyo several times throughout history. Redevelopment also has different rhythms in different phases. During construction, the pace is brisk and driven by deadlines. Once a tower block is complete, it is expected to have a lifespan that exceeds one hundred years, outliving a human generation. This also assumes that the artificial ground the building stands on lasts even longer, and, for that, the land requires constant maintenance of embankments, drainage, and dredging. Most of these artificial pieces of land were part of a vast tidal flat in the inner Tokyo Bay only about 150 years ago, and when it teemed with sea creatures. These multiple layers of time are a disquieting reality. The moat is the frontline of different times and competing claims on the future.¹

In Tokyo, urban waterfronts are areas where high-rise buildings are concentrated, not only for the good views of the sky and the sea, but also because of the land's history. Most modern artificial islands were constructed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sold or leased large plots of land to factories and warehouses to secure assets for the construction of a modern capital. As a result, the land-rights issues are less complex, and the economic benefits are easier to justify. In redevelopment, the future is treated as a profitable set of calculable assets rather than something uncertain in time. It is an example of what Simone Abram describes as the "spatialization of time" in urban-planning practice.² To minimize risk and achieve planned profits, the redevelopment project is conducted within a short and tightly planned timeframe.



The map shows the construction of artificial islands and coastal reclamation from the late nineteenth century to 2024, color-coded by construction periods. Map labels and legend text translated by the author into English. About 20 percent of Tokyo Bay is now reclaimed. As of 2026, the gray area has been extended further south to accommodate treated waste from the Tokyo metropolitan area. This patch of land, called New Surface Disposal Site, is expected to serve that function for the next 50 years. There is no prospect of constructing another artificial island in the inner Tokyo Bay. Published in: Kanto Regional Development Bureau, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, "Process of Land Reclamation," in *Tokyo Bay Water Environment Restoration Plan (Third Phase)*, revised March 2025, 10, <https://www.ktr.mlit.go.jp/ktr-content/content/000909347.pdf>. © Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Yokohama Port and Airport Technology Investigation Office. All rights reserved.

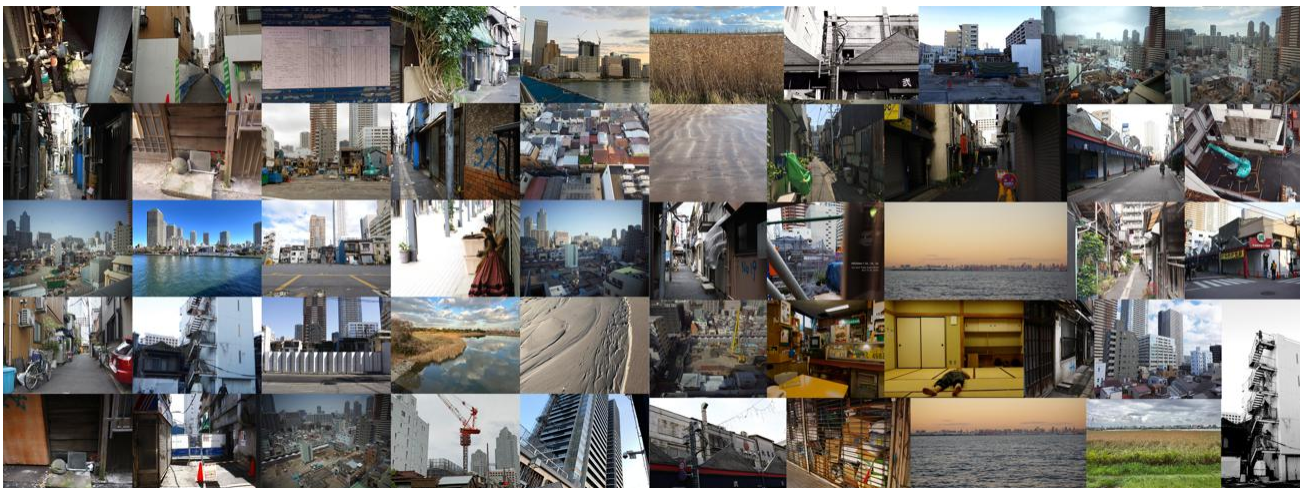
As Tsukishima became subject to three redevelopment plans in the late 2010s and the early 2020s, I noticed how this way of structuring time also affected the residents' sense of place. Suddenly, their familiar living space became a target of criticism. The streets were too narrow for rescue vehicles; residents were aging; old, vacant houses were increasing in number; the houses were vulnerable to fire. The area was becoming a burden on the next generation, and redevelopment was presented as necessary on the grounds of safety and efficient land use in central Tokyo, and sound investment in the future. At the planning meetings I attended, time took on a particular form. The developers' draft, dense with technical language, laid out a schedule that seemed to move forward on its own. It was described as adjustable, but its tone carried a sense of inevitability, which put residents under pressure. Despite their uncertainty and lack of time to consider different options, they soon faced several deadlines, including a deadline to decide whether they would commit to the redevelopment project or accept compensation and leave. Some agreed without fully grasping what the commitment entailed. Their automatic enrollment in the project's urban-redevelopment association, the body officially responsible for carrying out the redevelopment, made them financial stakeholders. Their future was tied to fluctuations in construction and material costs, meaning that rising costs could reduce the value of what they expected to receive. Later, in the completed building, monthly management and maintenance fees would also rise—sometimes tripling over 15 years. For many, staying would prove temporary: Over the years, several long-term residents would sell their property and leave. What troubled me was

not only the material loss of houses and alleys, but the way redevelopment converted an uncertain future into an apparently inevitable sequence of administrative steps.

Those rare few who actively sought information from similar redevelopment cases across Japan came to recognize the injustice they were forced to face. Despite the peer pressure in the neighborhood, these residents, believing their right to reside was being disregarded, sued the municipality, demanding that the plan be halted. They pursued the case for eight years, even though they knew defeat was likely, because no resident had ever won this type of lawsuit in Japan. In 2022, a redevelopment proposal came ashore on Tsukudajima, calling for the replacement of the low-rise houses around the moat with tower blocks. I was surprised by the residents' shared sense of

resignation. They said they would not be able to do anything about it when “it” came, which revealed how thoroughly the future had already been accepted as inevitable. I informed some residents of what I knew about the redevelopment. A week later, I heard that the residents had opposed and managed to halt the project in the first meeting. Their concern was not only the financial risk but also narrowing the moat as was proposed in the plan. They resisted the prospect of a future without the festival and the boats, at least for now.

My daily walk along the moat now feels different—more bodily and unsettled. With a premonition that the narrow alleyways in Tsukudajima may one day be replaced by high-rises, my walk has become a quiet patrol, almost territorial in feeling, a discreet declaration that this place surrounding the moat is still alive.



Collage of photos from walks with friends and research colleagues from 2016–25 in Tsukudajima, Tsukishima, and other tidal flats. Before and during the demolition of the houses, I invited people to Tsukishima to walk through alleyways together. I am grateful to all who visited the site. For this collage, I thank Daniela, Daniel, Kasia, Keiichi, Kimiko, Makoto, Matthew, Mitsuru, Sanae, and Tsubasa. © 2026 Kumiko Kiuchi. All rights reserved.

While this episode suggests that ritual practices can still safeguard collective and individual memories, the abstract temporal force of redevelopment often redirects lived experience away from the concrete past toward an anticipated future, placing situated knowledge at risk of erosion. What disappears in such transformations is not only the visible fabric of a place, but also the memory carried in repeated paths, habits of attention, and long attachment to it. Environmental memory, then, is not limited to flood, contamination, or species loss. It also inheres in inhabited and transformed environments: artificial ground, waterside life, neighborhood ties, and practical forms of knowledge that vanish when a place is remade.

Yet the problem extends beyond place. A neighborhood can be mapped, photographed, archived, and narrated, and still something essential may fail to pass on. What is lost is not simply information, but a way of inhabiting a world. The same difficulty emerges wherever inheritance depends upon experiences that cannot be directly transferred: a landscape remembered through walking, a ritual sustained through bodily participation, or a historical event known only through the testimony of others. In each case, records may survive, but inheritance remains uncertain. It depends upon whether later generations develop a relation to something they did not themselves live.

Seen from this perspective, the challenge facing a disappearing urban landscape is not entirely different from the challenge of transmitting historical memory. Both involve the question of how traces endure once the people who carried them are gone, and whether those who come later can remain attentive to experiences that are no longer immediately accessible. The question becomes particularly pressing when the continuity of living memory itself begins to break down.



Himeyuri Cenotaph (*Himeyuri-no-Tou*), Itoman City, Okinawa. Himeyuri ("morning star lily") refers to the female students who served as nursing aides at a local military hospital. The memorial is dedicated to 227 people (136 female students and 91 others) who lost their lives during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The cave in front of the cenotaph was used as a shelter, where 80 people were killed in the bombardment. © 2016 Kumiko Kiuchi. All rights reserved.

In 2025, Japan marked the 80th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, and public attention turned once again to how its remembrance is carried forward, with particular emphasis on Okinawa Prefecture alongside the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the seamless memorial events from 6 to 15 August may appear to be a coordinated national effort, Hiroshima and Nagasaki launched their respective memorials independently in the immediate aftermath of the war and continue to host them today. The same applies to Okinawa. Okinawa's Memorial Day receives less media coverage because it falls on 23 June, when the Japanese military ended their deployment there and departed. The Okinawans who experienced the war have carried their own suffering and protected the lineage of inheritance of memory even during the US occupation by incorporating it into their everyday lives and their peace education. There is a history of those in a fragile position seeking, with great perseverance, a platform to make their voices heard, when collective efforts to conserve memory were still lacking.

However, we are now at a turning point in history. Direct witnesses are in their late 80s or older, and the transition must be made from live interaction to transmission in their absence.³ The question needs to shift from how testimony is expressed to how it is received and carried forward. Yet this does not mean that those who listen to the witnesses can inherit their experience as such. As Marianne Hirsch argues in the context of Holocaust memory, the listeners' relation to the past is necessarily mediated, shaped not just by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and desire. The ethics of inheritance lies not solely in claiming proximity to the past, but in remaining attentive to what cannot be fully possessed or understood.⁴

One response to this challenge has been to create situations in which younger generations do more than passively receive testimony. A project in Hiroshima, for instance, has emphasized careful

listening through sustained encounters with digitally colored photographs to prompt survivors' recollections. The locals also run a workshop for survivors' family members to retell their experiences and hold sessions with city residents to paint scenes from survivors' memories. What matters in such practices is not only preserving information but also cultivating intergenerational connections through which memory is inherited as a form of responsibility.

Yet even such practices do not resolve the challenge of transferring lived experience across generations. Chikako Yamashiro's video work *Your Voice Came Out of My Throat* (2009) gives such difficulty a striking form. First, Yamashiro's face appears on the screen: She is listening to a male voice recounting his childhood on Tinian Island and how his entire family committed collective suicide to follow the nationalist motto, "never live to experience shame as a prisoner." Yamashiro's mouth gradually starts moving in pace with the man's voice, and after a while, tears stream down her cheeks. While her mouth stops moving for a while, the man's face is slowly overlaid on hers: The woman lends him her throat and demonstrates the difficulty of inheritance through her physical presence. The artist reflects on the production, recalling the first recording of the footage: "I understood his words, but I couldn't visualize the content as concrete images."⁵ She transcribed his words and read them aloud repeatedly, and on the tenth reading, a single tear fell. The work does not claim that another's suffering can be possessed through empathy, nor that concrete, sensual knowledge can be gained. On the contrary, Yamashiro emphasizes the fleeting and unstable character of an "unintellectual grasp" that moved her. She states her determination to keep trying and to hang on to hope, "to cultivate a sense of coexistence and shared life with the victims who experienced war."⁶



From Chikako Yamashiro's video work *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat* (2009). Courtesy of Yumiko Chiba Associates. Data provided by the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum. © Chikako Yamashiro. All rights reserved.

What Yamashiro's work helps bring into focus is that inheritance does not become easier once it moves beyond the horizon of lived human continuity. On the contrary, its possibility becomes even more fragile. We may imagine a world a century from now, when the tower blocks that stand today may no longer signify the same luxury or economic prosperity. Those who live among them may no longer share the values through which these towers were built. They will inherit not our intentions, but the consequences of plans made under different symbolic conditions.

Onkalo, Finland's final repository for nuclear waste, constructed within geologically stable bedrock formed 1.8 billion years ago, pushes the same problem beyond that horizon, into a future where language, institutions, and even the meaning of warning may no longer survive. Michael Madsen's documentary *Into Eternity* (2010) sheds light on this paradox. The facility is designed to store nuclear waste for one hundred thousand years, until the material becomes harmless, and to remain completely untouched during that time. The greatest uncertainty in this scenario is humanity itself: No other species is likely to break open the site. Debates surrounding Onkalo in the film reveal the limits of human attempts to convey its danger to future generations far removed from our own. In the film, humanities scholars collaborate with scientists and propose warning markers, archival systems, legal obligations, and symbolic forms of communication that may maximize the possibility of continuity between the present and the future, knowing that no such continuity can be guaranteed. Even if signs survive, future generations may not understand them; even if they do, they may not obey. Deep time exposes the fragility of inheritance by showing that language itself is historically contingent, and that the future inheritor remains radically unknowable.⁷



From Michael Madsen's film *Into Eternity* (2010). © Magic Hour Films. All rights reserved.

Compared to the deep time of Onkalo, the issues facing Tokyo's artificial land may appear more limited in time scale. Artificial ground is often assumed to endure indefinitely, yet its long-term durability remains uncertain because it has not been tested over truly extended periods. What is certain, however, is that its stability depends on continuous maintenance. In discussions of urban redevelopment, one rarely hears sustained reflection on this maintenance-dependent condition, or on the future it presupposes: one in which human institutions continue to monitor, repair, and stabilize the ground. That silence seems telling. To speak openly of this dependence on ongoing care would unsettle the certainty and predictability on which planning time depends. And where such questions are not publicly taken up, the work of inheritance becomes far more difficult.

If language cannot secure inheritance, the question becomes whether responsibility can still be cultivated through bodily practice. I came to reconsider this question through the work of dancer Namiko Kawamura, whose practice has long treated walking not as an ordinary act, but as a medium of attention. Since the 1970s, Kawamura has developed performances centered on slow

walking in outdoor spaces in the nude, often with the hope that those watching might “feel nature and notice something” through their bodies as a “medium” or a “sentient body.” In her work, walking becomes a way of sensing relations that remain difficult to capture in explanatory language alone.⁸



From Toshiko Takashi's film *Walk Slowly: Kawamura Namiko Dances at 84* (2023). Courtesy of Here&There. © Toshiko Takashi. All rights reserved.

This way of sensing relations is especially palpable in Kawamura's live performances. In *Walk Slowly*, presented in December 2025 and dedicated to the eightieth commemoration of the end of the war, the extraordinarily fragile slowness of her walk and the soundless placement of each foot seemed to suspend linear time, opening a space in which past, present, and future fold into one another. Her walk did not present history as a narrative. Instead, it altered the temporal conditions of perception. Kawamura asked the audience not only to watch her slow walk but also, eventually, to walk with her, to step slowly with attention to our inner feelings. As I joined this mode of walking, I began to feel I was moving not only as a person in the present but also as someone who would one day be absent from this world. Would future residents, none of them kin to me, accept my spectral visit, knowing I had belonged to a time when humans were still worsening the conditions on Earth? This thought was not the result of abstraction. It emerged through the slow act of walking. In that moment, walking became a mode of inhabiting time otherwise.

What mattered in that experience was not the recovery of a lost past in any full sense. Nor did walking provide access to the clear imagination of a future. Rather, it brought into awareness the fragile position of the living in relation to those who are gone and those who are yet to come. Walking made it possible to sense responsibility toward a future I will not live to see, by drawing me into the discontinuities of time rather than reflecting on time from a distance.



Banzu tidal flat, the only remaining coastal tidal flat in the inner Tokyo Bay. © 2025 Kiuchi Kumiko. All rights reserved.

The water's edge welcomes one of the four moments of slack tide. Small waves cease, and the surface stills. The reflection of the sky appears without distortion, and the passage of a waterbird draws an unshaken arc across it. Before that trace fully disappears, a small whirl forms, and the tide begins to turn again. A blink of these nonhuman times brings into view an invisible image of tidal flats buried underneath our feet, and rhythms of waterbirds, plants, and moss on the stone embankment come to the fore. This is not merely a passing moment of beauty, but something I want to retain as an orientation for living: to remain humble, for the future cannot be fully mastered, and stay close to places where different times meet, if only for a moment.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ The "idea" of walking that unfolds in this essay has a number of reference points ranging from Tim Ingold's 2011 book *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot* (Routledge) to Matthew Gandy's 2024 essay "Attentive Observation: Walking, Listening, Staying Put" (*Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 114, no. 7: 1386-1404, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2024.2353841>). Tim Edensor's edited volume on rhythm, *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies* (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584430>, also offers valuable insights into the subject of walking. As for the concept of the environmental humanities, among several introductions to the subject, Christof Mauch's interview concisely summarizes it and outlines its future direction: see Diana Villanueva-Romero, "Humanities in Transition in the European Context: Interview with Christof Mauch," in *Imaginative Ecologies*, ed. Diana Villanueva-Romero, Lorraine Kerslake, and Carmen Flys-Junquera (Brill, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004501270_004.

² Simone Abram, "The Time It Takes: Temporalities of Planning," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, no. S1 (2014): 129-47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12097>.

³ Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2010).

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.7312/hirs15652>.

⁵ Quoted in Keiko Okamura, "Land, Mind, Body-Scape in the Works of Chikako Yamashiro," in *Chikako Yamashiro, Reframing the Land/Mind/Body-scape*, ed. Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, bilingual ed. (Mizuoshia, 2021), 93.

⁶ Ibid. Yamashiro's subsequent works in the 2010s and 2020s explored the relationships among people, memory, landscape, and environment.

⁷ *Into Eternity*, directed by Michael Madsen (Magic Hour Films, 2010).

⁸ The quotations of Kawamura's words are from her interview recorded in the following documentary film: *Walk Slowly: Kawamura Namiko Dances at 84*, directed by Toshiko Takashi (2023).



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