As scholars have demonstrated, the U.S. Brevo hydrogen bomb test in 1954 not only redoubled the fearful specter of nuclear disaster—embodied in the filmic cautionary tale Godzilla—but also galvanized a citizen-led movement for food safety and independent scientific investigation in Japan. Similarly, initiatives challenging the normalization of “safe” civilian uses of the atom have a long history in Germany, where the success of progressive movement to prevent the building of a nuclear power plant in the city of Würt in 1970s was a key achievement.

The Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters have underscored the futility of “clean up” protocols in the face of contaminated crops, livestock, waterways, and airlifts throughout Europe, and beyond.

The striking convergences—as well as the divergent aspects—of Japan and Germany’s postwar nuclear histories form the basis of our collaborative research project, Nuclear Futures in the Post-Fukushima Age. With its multi-tiered approach, including a graduate seminar course, doctoral fellowship, (edited) volume, and digital humanities project, Nuclear Futures contributes to and draws on the University of Maryland’s key thematic focus on sustainability and climate adaptation, expanding on the core strengths of environmental science and policy by developing an innovative methodology grounded in the environments of humanities. Drawing on interdisciplinary conceptions of environmental studies, ecocriticism, cultural history, and geography, among others, the environmental humanities aims to shed light on the relationships between humans and the environment, and to contribute to our understanding of the stakes of environmental justice today. At a moment when public discourse is dominated by the objective politics of science, and when elected officials dispute the facts of climate change, the humanities must play a renewed role in demonstrating the lessons of history, creating connections between the past and present, illustrating the importance of critical thinking, and fostering imaginative solutions to the problems of our time. In this vein, our work facilitates productive dialogue on and new understandings of environmental activism, scientific commitments, and artistic engagements with atomic issues in the present moment. Leveraging the unique atomic histories of Germany and Japan, we emphasize the lessons and legacies of past nuclear events for combating environmental degradation and conceptualizing notions of sustainability and environmental and human futures.

Given that environmental humanities is a relatively new and dynamic field of study that has developed largely within the Anglo-American context, there is considerable room for pushing the geographical, temporal, cultural, and linguistic scope of previous scholarship. Nuclear Futures employs a comparative methodology, focusing on Germany and Japan’s postwar and contemporary periods, to analyze a wide range of cultural production, including fiction, film, video, manga, music, animation, and oral histories, as well as civil environmental movements and advocacy. What emerges are insights into how ordinary citizens and shared lived experiences of nuclear disasters, sustain networks of caring and connection for bodies and communities in distress, question received norms of peaceful uses of nuclear power, and pose alternative narratives and pathways out of the thorough rationalization presented by political actors and nuclear industry proponents. Fruitful pairings, such as Yoko Ono’s disjointed and disorienting City of Corpse (1968), which plays on scripts from shojo (girl) and shota (boy) literature and newspaper stories from the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing—and Chrisse Wolf’s interweaving of lyrical reflection and reportage in her response to Chernobyl, Accident: A Day’s News (1987), reveal the inextricable link between form and content and the challenges of constructing lived understandings of unassailable catastrophes. The significant role played by narrative in making unimaginable disasters visible and in addressing trauma for those affected forms the crux of Alexander Kluge’s short stories on nuclear catastrophe in the post-Holocaust era, while Natsuki Hasegawa’s Atomic Box (2014) maps out new ethical terrain for apprehending the disturbing connections between nuclear weapons and nuclear power while questioning notions of “security” through the generic conventions of the political thriller. Likewise, generative juxtaposition can be found in Nobel-Prize-winner Svetlana Alexievich’s oral histories in Voices of Chernobyl (1997) and the popular fictional account of an intentional community in post-disaster Chernobyl in Baba Dunya’s Last Love (2015), by Russian-born, German-language writer Alina Bronsky, both of which probe conceptions of futurity after the collapse of mass utopia.

The intertwined cultural history of Germany and Japan is evident not only in shared attention to the philosophical and representational dilemmas of the nuclear age, but also in a range of confronting communicative texts that transcend the limitations of the national-cultural paradigm as they attend to the geopolitical transformations and environmental challenges of the present. Doris Dörrie’s Fukushima, Mon Amour (2016), a German film shot on location in the exclusion zone of Fukushima, traces the encounter between Marie, a young German woman seeking to cheer up elderly victims...