

On October 31st, we interviewed poet and playwright Yuri Kageyama at UC Berkeley's Women's Faculty Club over lunch. She gave us an update on the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Ishmael Reed: So tell me what is happening around the site of the soccer field in Fukushima.

Yuri Kageyama: Yeah, they chose the soccer field right by the plant. They spent a lot of time cleaning up the radiation, so that would be the showcase for the 2020 Olympics. The J Village, right by the Fukushima Dai-ichi Plant, will be the site where they will be setting up camp for the Japanese soccer teams.

Ishmael Reed: So what is the hazard to them?

Yuri Kageyama: Because they cleaned it up so well, it would be hard to make a case that they're getting radiated significantly anywhere in that area. The area that they ordained as unsafe near the plant is shrinking because the idea is to bring as many people back as possible to live. And if your residence used to be in a place that was deemed unsafe, you would be eligible for aid. So once they make it safe and you're supposed to go back and live there, then you no longer get that aid. So more and more people have to fend for themselves, and that's difficult for some of them because they are old. The younger people have gone on and left, but people had businesses and farms in Fukushima. They were put up in emergency housing.

Ishmael Reed: Was that subsidized by the government?

Yuri Kageyama: Yeah, they were, but if they say it's safe, you're no longer eligible.

Ishmael Reed: So what are they saying? Are they saying it's safe?

Yuri Kageyama: Yes, so you can go back and live there.

Ishmael Reed: But it's not safe.

Yuri Kageyama: Well, it's hard to tell if it is safe or it isn't. Obviously, no one can guarantee that even low level radiation is perfectly safe. Also, if you don't feel safe, you won't want to go back and live there.

Ishmael Reed: It seems like the World Trade Center where the governor of New Jersey said it was safe to go down there. Remember after 9-11? So the governments always do that, you know, for commercial reasons.

Yuri Kageyama: You don't get aid. You have to fend for yourself, and the thing is that, if the accident hadn't happened, they would have had normal lives.

Ishmael Reed: So what are they doing with the plant? The last I heard is that radioactivity was leaking, and it was affecting sea life on the West Coast here.

Yuri Kageyama: They did try to trap the radioactive water so that the radioactive water leaking into the ocean has decreased considerably. But they have to keep putting the water back around into the reactors' system to keep the melted-down nuclear material chilled. So the water -

Ishmael Reed: They're putting it in tanks?

Yuri Kageyama: Yeah. The tanks are growing. I don't remember offhand the exact amount of water stored at the plant, but it is still more than a million tons, and the tanks are growing at the rate of several swimming pools per day.

Carla Blank: What are the tanks like _ cement or something?

Yuri Kageyama: It's metal, and they're really big. They did devise a system where they get most of the radioactive material out. The radioactive materials that get taken out are being put in separate tanks. The amount of water is already massive, and so they want to dump that into the ocean, but nobody has taken the political responsibility yet to do so. The water keeps piling up.

Ishmael Reed: If they put it back in the ocean, how does that affect the fishing industry?

Yuri Kageyama: Some people will not want to eat the fish. Scientists say that tritium is one radioactive material that remains in that water, even if other radioactive material gets successfully removed. They say it won't immediately harm people's health, but people are worried. With the Olympics coming up, the government is very intent on sending the message that Fukushima is some catastrophic blip that they had, and everything's under control.

Ishmael Reed: Aren't they protesting or anything?

Yuri Kageyama: Many people, including those involved in the Olympics, feel they want to contribute what they can to the recovery of Fukushima. And Fukushima gets a lot

of sympathy votes for obvious reasons. You know about the typhoon recently? We have the drought in California, but global warming is causing more rainfall in Japan, and the dams are not equipped to deal with the rainfall. They were built after postwar reconstruction. They're not ready for the excessive rainfall caused by global warming, and then masses of water flooded into areas that weren't expecting it at all, the residential areas, the farm areas and all. Fukushima had the biggest numbers of deaths from the rainfall in Japan.

Ishmael Reed: Why is that?

Yuri Kageyama: They weren't prepared at all. Global warming and nuclear energy _all that is related, right? It's all related. But although the government says it will help the typhoon victims, the core issues of global warming and energy are not being addressed at all. I think that the awareness is much higher here. I think that people are being told not to waste water.

Carla Reed: That's just in California.

Yuri Kageyama: Really? Nowhere in Japan is there any highly critical consciousness. Even in the media. I think it's really good that the awareness is high here.

Carla Reed: They're actually fighting with the federal government over how motor vehicles should be built so that they will have lower emissions than the national emission standard that Trump has now set back up.

Ishmael Reed: He's now eliminating all of Obama's programs.

Carla Reed: I notice that some of the Japanese car makers are now using lower emission standards.

Ishmael Reed: The ones here are, too.

Carla Reed: Yeah, but there's a split as to which auto companies do and which don't meet the lower standards.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, but Trump's doing this out of spite to Obama.

Yuri Kageyama: I think it's better than before in Japan. Consumers can choose to get electricity from the company that bought Sprint. The CEO is behind sustainable energy. But he is one of the few people who've spoken out in Japan.

Ishmael Reed: So your prime minister seems to be very passive towards Trump. He humiliates him when he comes to Washington.

Yuri Kageyama: Abe loves him. He's one of the few global leaders who really loves Trump. They like to go golfing together.

Yuri Kageyama's book of poetry, Peeling, was first published by Ishmael Reed, while she was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, and again in 2011, with her collection of short fiction and poetry, The New and Selected Yuri: Writing From Peeling Till Now. The film of her multidisciplinary performance work, "News From Fukushima: Meditation on an Under-Reported Catastrophe by a Poet," directed by Yoshiaki Tago, recently became an Official Selection at the ARTS X SDGS Festival in New York and the Oniros Film Festival in Italy. It documents 2017 live performances in San Francisco, directed by Carla Blank. The film won the Grand Festival Award at the Berkeley Video & Film Festival last year. It is also a Select Showcase Official Selection at the Guam International Film Festival and Finalist at the New Vision International Film Festival in Amsterdam. Another recent film, a collaboration with stop motion artist Hayatto, "The Very Special Day," presents Kageyama's story about a child growing up amid discrimination, which was first published in KONCH in 2013.

<http://yurikageyama.com/>