Instead of asking “can the subaltern speak?,” this talk examines how the barriers to seeing and hearing the subaltern are produced and normalized. Thereafter, I offer some methods in our academic practices within area studies to unsettle these barriers. In 12 March 2021, Nippon TV’s live morning program, Sukkiri, made a discriminatory remark when introducing a documentary on oral historian and upopo performer Kayano Rie. The announcer referenced the Ainu as a dog. I trace this reference to the historical occupation of Ainu lands through the discourse of kaitaku (development) in Hokkaido and the linear hierarchy of human-animal relations underlying settler colonialism and capitalism in Japan. This is followed by some examples of activist and academic work that unsets the normalized production of a settler “Japan” past and present. These include responses and actions from various members of the Ainu community and their allies after the discriminatory remark was aired.

Referencing my work with Ainu community collaborators, I argue that the Ainu people have always been “speaking,” amongst their community members and to the Wajin (ethnic Japanese) settlers. However, the failure to listen and Indigenous erasure was/is necessary for privileging the production of the Japanese settler nationhood.

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