

# Ishimure Michiko and Global Ecocriticism

Karen Thornber

Introduction by Bruce Allen



**Ishimure Michiko**

Ishimure Michiko (1927-) is one of Japan's leading literary writers and social critics. Her extensive work, comprising over 50 volumes, spans a wide range of genres including novels, poetry, plays, essays, children's stories, and autobiographical writing. Ishimure is the recipient of numerous literary awards, internationally and in Japan, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award from the Philippines in 1973 and the Asahi Prize for literature in 2001. A seventeen-volume critical edition of her collected works in Japanese was published in 2013.

Ishimure has often been referred to as the "Rachel Carson of Japan," on the basis of her pioneering work that exposed the tragic incident of Minamata disease, caused by industrial mercury pollution in the 1950s and 60s. As in *Carson's Silent Spring*, a combination of hard-hitting factual reporting, along with exquisite literary narration, moved readers' hearts as well as minds and led to a worldwide awareness of the threat of environmental pollution and the birth of the environmental movement. Ishimure has followed up on Minamata events for more than 40 years in her writing, including in her Minamata trilogy of novels, written in a pioneering mixed genre style that brings together reportage and fictional writing, as well as in her 2004 Noh play *Shiranui*. Ishimure's life work has combined her commitments to social activism and writing; striving for recognition, response, and reconciliation with regard to social and environmental problems.

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The strong association of Ishimure's work with Minamata events and her identification as the "Rachel Carson of Japan" has, however, been somewhat of a mixed blessing, as it has played a part in an unfortunate pigeonholing of her writing as that of "merely" an environmental writer-activist. For some, there remains a lingering prejudice—in Japan, as well as

worldwide—that there is a contradiction between being an activist and a serious literary writer.

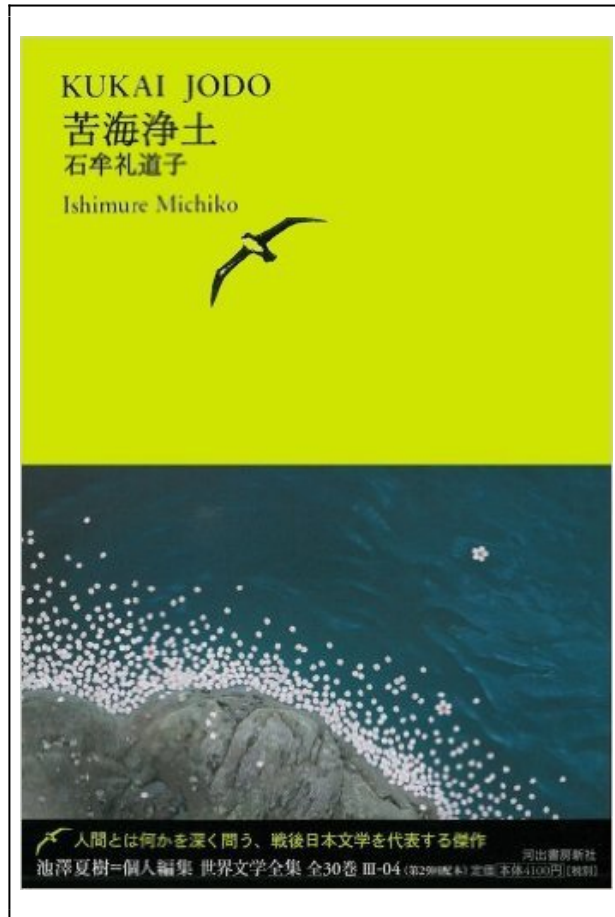
The predominant identification of Ishimure with her Minamata writings has also overshadowed the recognition of her extensive work in other themes and genres, such as those developed in her novel *Tenko* (Lake of Heaven, 1997, trans. 2008), which deals with ecological and social changes related to dam construction, and in her historical novel *Anima no tori* (Birds of Spirit, 1999, currently in translation), which deals with the Shimabara Uprising of 1638, in which some 37,000 Japanese peasants, mostly Christians, were massacred. The predominant attention paid to Ishimure's Minamata novels has also limited the recognition of her extensive work in poetry, non-fiction essays, and other genres.

In the international community, recognition of Ishimure's writing has been constrained by the rather small number of her works translated into English. To date, Ishimure's major translated works are three novels; *Kugai jodo: Waga Minamatabyo* (Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease, 1969, trans. 1990 [translated by Karen Thornber as "Sea of Suffering and the Pure Land"]), *Tsubaki no umi no ki* (Story of the Sea of Camellias, 1976, trans. 1983), *Tenko* (Lake of Heaven), and her contemporary Noh play *Shiranui* (2004, trans. 2016).

In recent years, the international reception and evaluation of Ishimure's work has been developing steadily. Her work has been the subject of numerous presentations at international literary conferences. The recent publication of a collection of critical essays, *Ishimure Michiko's Writing in Ecocritical Perspective: Between Sea and Sky* edited by Bruce Allen and Yuki Masami (Lexington Books, 2016), is another step toward a wider recognition of her work. The collection, containing essays by five Japanese and five

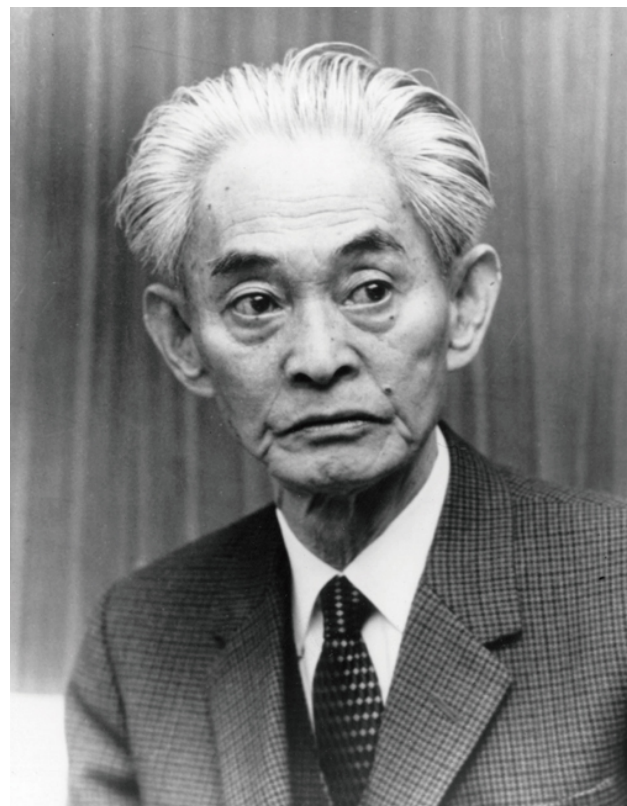
non-Japanese scholars, places Ishimure's work in the context of world literature and ecocritical analysis. It assesses the wide range of her work, including her activism and Minamata writings, while connecting this work to a wider consideration of the pioneering nature of her literary fiction, especially in regard to her innovative use of local dialects and her characteristic mythopoetic, non-linear narrative style. Moreover, the collection considers Ishimure's contributions as a major contemporary social thinker. It also includes the first English translation of Ishimure's contemporary Noh play *Shiranui*; a central work in her literary career, which presents a distillation of her mythopoetic imagination and her stylistic and thematic concerns.

The following article, "Ishimure Michiko and Global Ecocriticism," by Karen Thornber, is one of the chapters from this collection. Thornber's piece positions Ishimure's work within the larger context of world literature, while at the same time challenging us to consider broadening our conception of the meaning of "world literature."

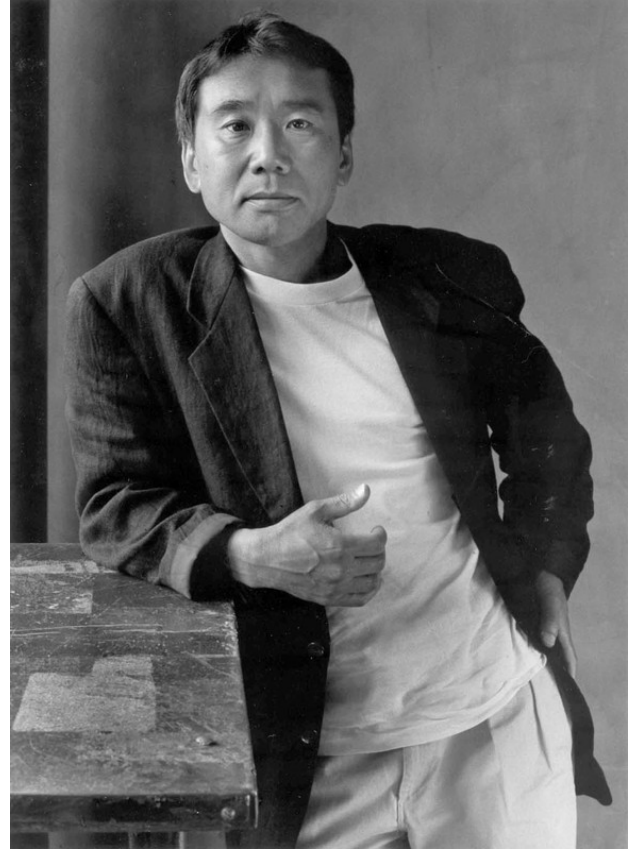


Kawade Shobō Shinsha's *Sekai bungaku zenshū* Complete Collection of World Literature, 2007–], edited by the Japanese writer Ikezawa Natsuki (1945–), currently stands at thirty volumes. The twenty-eighth volume, positioned between Joseph Conrad's (1857–1924) *Lord Jim* (1900) and a collection of mostly European short stories, contains Ishimure Michiko's trilogy on Minamata disease: *Kugai jōdo: Waga Minamatabyō* [Sea of Suffering and the Pure Land: Our Minamata Disease, 1969], *Kamigami no mura* [Villages of the Gods, 1971], and *Ten no uo* [Fish of Heaven, 1974]. With the exception of a short story by the Okinawan writer Medoruma Shun (1960–), Ishimure's trilogy is the only work of Japanese literature included in the *Complete Collection of World Literature*. Her Minamata trilogy is advertised to readers as “a masterpiece representing postwar Japanese literature” that “deeply questions what it

means to be human.” Few would challenge the latter claim, but the former might be more difficult to corroborate: even if one were to agree that the trilogy is a “masterpiece” (which despite the trilogy's great impact in Japan many literary critics would not, given its documentary nature and unconventional style), it is difficult to see it as “representing” postwar Japanese literature, if only because it differs in subject matter from much of this corpus.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Ishimure has not received nearly the global attention of any number of contemporary (post-1945) Japanese writers, particularly the Nobel prize winners Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972) and Ōe Kenzaburō (1935–) and the fan favorite Murakami Haruki (1949–).







**Kawabata Yasunari**  
**Ōe Kenzaburō**  
**Murakami Haruki**

To be sure, Ishimure's contributions were quickly recognized outside of Japan. In 1973, for instance, she received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, sometimes referred to as the Asian Nobel Prize, given annually since 1957 to persons "who address issues of human development in Asia with courage and creativity, and in doing so have made contributions which have transformed their societies for the better."<sup>2</sup> And many scholars of literature and the environment, regardless of nationality, are familiar with the name Ishimure Michiko. Papers on her work are regularly given at environmental literature conferences in the United States and East Asia. Some outside of Japan/Japanese studies, including Patrick D. Murphy in *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, have written on Ishimure.<sup>3</sup> But very few outside

Japan/Japanese studies have read much of her oeuvre. This is because Ishimure's writings—with the exception of *Tenka* (Lake of Heaven, 1997, trans. 2008), *Sea of Suffering* (trans. 1990), *Tsubaki no umi no ki* (Story of the Sea of Camellias, 1976, trans. 1983), and several short pieces—have not yet been translated: *Sea of Suffering* is available in Japanese, English, and German (*Paradies im Meer der Qualen: Unsere Minamata-Krankheit*, 1995),<sup>4</sup> and *Lake of Heaven* and *Story of the Sea of Camellias* are available in Japanese and English, but most of the other novels, poems, plays, and essays, which total more than fifty volumes, many of which are included in her seventeen-volume collected works (Complete Works of Ishimure Michiko; *Ishimure Michiko zenshū*, 2004), remain untranslated. So in some ways it seems incongruous to label her trilogy a work of “world literature,” when world literature recently has been understood as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin either in translation or in their original language . . . a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present in a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (Damrosch 4).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Ishimure's writing engages deeply with concerns that transcend those of their source culture, and much can be gained by reading it as world literature, that is to say examining how it reaches beyond its points of origin and how it relates to conditions worldwide. Indeed, one of the most effective means of increasing the global consciousness of literary studies is reading as world literature even those texts that might not be works of world literature in the conventional sense but that engage with important issues extending beyond single cultures.<sup>6</sup> And one of the greatest challenges for environmental critics in the coming years will be further broadening linguistic, geographical, and thereby conceptual scopes, not only to understand better how various societies have grappled with environmental challenges but also to gain increased

perspectives on the connections between local phenomena and those further afield.



**Rachel Carson**

Yet to date, although Ishimure has been called the “Japanese Rachel Carson,” the impact of her work—unlike that of the American ecologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964)—has been confined primarily to Japan.<sup>7</sup> *Sea of Suffering* generally is credited as one of the driving forces behind Japan's social activism surrounding Minamata and other pollution diseases. To be sure, the novel has been criticized for being “fiction” and for not always adhering perfectly to the “truth.” But it is through this novel that the voices of those suffering from Minamata disease have been most powerfully heard—as the Japanese literature scholar Keiko Kanai has discussed, many Minamata activists have “cited [*Sea of Suffering*] as seminal in motivating them to fight.” And some activists have stated explicitly

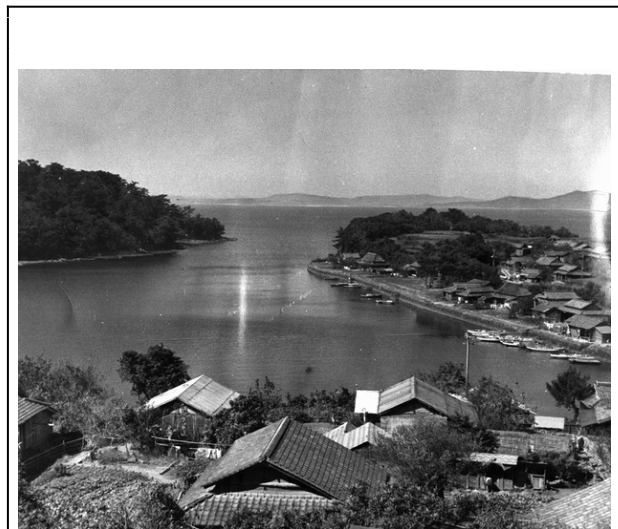
that “the characters in [*Sea of Suffering*] are more real to them than the actual victims” (Making up for Minamata). This latter statement might seem peculiar—characters more real than actual victims? But in turning actual victims into characters, writers often make painful human experiences more accessible and in so doing promote and sustain engagement, most directly at home but also across linguistic and national borders.<sup>8</sup>

Ishimure’s work has provided ecocritics worldwide with a better understanding of how Japanese have grappled with their nation’s environmental problems, a particularly important contribution given the dearth of Japanese environmental writing accessible to those who cannot read the language. But the relevance of Ishimure’s narratives far transcends Japan and its ecological challenges. Focusing on *Sea of Suffering* and *Lake of Heaven*, the following pages reveal how these novels illuminate two of the greatest challenges facing environmentalists, indeed societies worldwide: the readiness with which even the most obvious environmental damage is disavowed, particularly evident in *Sea of Suffering*; and the limits of ecological resilience, an underlying concern of *Lake of Heaven*. In so doing, this chapter brings to light some of Ishimure’s most significant contributions to global ecocriticism.<sup>9</sup>

### Disavowals and *Sea of Suffering*

Many literary works that address human-induced environmental disruption portray disavowing this damage—acquiescing to it by denying responsibility for ecodegradation and/or knowing about but dismissing (potential) ecodegradation—as a common response to and facilitator of compromised ecosystems. In some texts, disavowal plays a central role: certain narratives accentuate the extent to which governments, corporations, citizens’ groups, and individuals will go to refute that environmental degradation exists or, when

overwhelming evidence to the contrary makes such denial impossible, to reject responsibility for it, minimize its seriousness, and strive to expunge it from public consciousness. As in the Vietnamese writer Minh Chuyen’s (1948–) short story on Agent Orange “A Father and His Children” (2005) and the Indian-British writer Indra Sinha’s (1950–) novel on Bhopal *Animal’s People* (2007), Ishimure’s *Sea of Suffering* highlights this process. The novel shows the disconnects between obvious physical evidence (nonhuman spaces that are clearly polluted; people who are unquestionably disfigured) and the behaviors (disavowals, including both active denials and conscious indifference) of many in the Japanese government, the Chisso Corporation, and residents of Minamata and surrounding towns.



Minamata, 1960

Although most creative texts concerned with damage to environments acknowledge indifference toward and denials of this damage, *Sea of Suffering* is one of a subset that stresses the central role of these behaviors in causing and facilitating ecological degradation. More so than many narratives, it also specifies the reasons behind such disavowals, as well as their consequences. The novel devotes significant attention to alternatives, contrasting



denials of Minamata disease with the great compassion for the afflicted demonstrated not only by the families and close friends of Minamata patients but also by the Japanese medical community and sometimes even by members of groups known primarily for their disavowals. Incorporating other instances of industrial pollution both in Japan and abroad, Ishimure's text eloquently exposes denial of environmental degradation as a nearly global phenomenon, one endemic in human societies. On the other hand, the disavowals do not go unchallenged. Many individuals featured in *Sea of Suffering*, not to mention the narrator and the novel itself, actively reject their validity.

Early in the novel the narrator cites Sensuke, an elderly man who succumbed to Minamata disease, as having declared his a “disgraceful, unsightly illness” (水俣病のなんの、そげん見苦しか病気). The narrator claims that these terms describe not only the disease but also those “who caused this incident, concealed it, disregarded it, and tried to make people forget about it” (Ishimure 57). Most reprehensible, according to the narrator, is the Chisso Corporation. In 1959 scientists prepared a report indicating that Chisso's daily discharges of toxic, mercury-laden wastewater into Minamata Bay were the likely cause of Minamata disease. As the narrator describes, in July 1959 the Minamata Disease Comprehensive Research Group published an essay declaring that mercury in the fish and shellfish of Minamata Bay was the most likely cause of the disease; this report also points out that Chisso discharged poisonous wastewater into the bay. Chisso immediately denied any connection between its wastewater and the disease. The response of the corporation is understandable only insofar as Chisso was not the only polluter of waters around Minamata. *Sea of Suffering* transcribes an article published in the January 1, 1957 issue of the *Journal of the Kumamoto Medical Society* that indicates a number of possible pollutants: “The Minamata factory of a fertilizer company, the

Minamata municipal slaughterhouse near Tsukinoura, the underwater springs in the Yudō area, and in the Modō area the former naval ammunition storehouse and antiaircraft encampment” (37).

Yet rather than cooperate in subsequent investigations, for many years Chisso did everything it could to deny its role in propagating this disease, including pumping wastewater under cover of night and prohibiting scientists from taking samples from the bay for examination. The narrator describes some Chisso employees as sympathetic to the plight of Minamata patients, even alerting residents of Minamata to Chisso's plans to divert their wastewater channel to another location; similarly, researchers from the Chisso company hospital contribute to efforts to understand the disease better. And at its August 1967 meeting the Chisso First Union issued a declaration condemning its own failure to fight Minamata disease and affirming its commitment to do so in the future. But for the most part, *Sea of Suffering* paints Chisso as an absolute villain; one that denies any connection between factory wastewater and Minamata disease yet prohibits scientists from studying the wastewater; one that does everything it can to avoid paying indemnities and instead continues to discharge poisonous effluent, thus expanding the number of people who may demand compensation; and one that delays dispatching employees to visit hospitalized Minamata patients until 1965, more than a decade after the outbreak of the illness. The narrator comments: “Looked at from today's perspective, the noble and strong personality and the superior investigative research of Dr. Hosokawa [one of the premier researchers of Minamata disease] into the outbreak and spread of Minamata disease provides a fantastic contrast with all the attitudes [and behaviors] exhibited by the Chisso Corporation” (69). Throughout *Sea of Suffering* the narrator alternates references to Chisso's heartlessness with those to the dedication of

medical researchers. It often is difficult for Minamata doctors to understand their patients, since Minamata disease makes speech a challenge, but the novel portrays physicians as doing whatever they can to assist those suffering from this disease. The narrator calls attention to the bonds that form between doctors and their patients and the trust the latter have in their physicians, except when they believe they are being used solely to further a doctor's career.

Acknowledging Minamata disease belatedly in 1968 and only with great reluctance, the Japanese central government is described as largely responsible for facilitating Chisso's disavowals. This contrasts with local political bodies, which although relatively ineffective, show considerable concern with the spread of Minamata disease and establish various investigative groups. Yet throughout *Sea of Suffering* the narrator highlights the tragedy of this situation: the greater and more widespread the suffering of those affected physically or economically (fishers with no market for their contaminated catch, or even with nothing to catch), the greater and more persistent the efforts of those not affected, both Chisso and bystanders in the local population, to disregard their suffering. Commenting on the presumably deliberate misperceptions of the local Public Health Department concerning Minamata disease, the narrator notes that "the strange illness continued to work its way steadily along the coast of the Shiranui Sea, moving from one village to another. The true nature of the strange illness was not officially declared, but the incidents and their ramifications slowly continued to tear apart people's lives and hearts" (179). The narrator cites remarks by Tanaka Minoru, head of the local Public Health Department, downplaying the seriousness of Minamata disease. Tanaka claims that his office is working diligently to discover the cause of this disease, but he also stresses to members of the Minamata City Assembly that it is not always fatal. He neglects to mention that for

those with severe cases, life might not always be preferable to death.

*Sea of Suffering* underscores how national politicians and other government employees downplay if not disavow Minamata disease. To be sure, the central government is depicted as initially being concerned about the illness. The narrator notes that in 1957 the Ministry of Education established the Minamata Disease Comprehensive Research Group, a unit composed primarily not of Chisso officials but instead of presumably impartial doctors from Kumamoto University Medical School. The group's report identified organic mercury as the most likely cause of the disease and pointed to Chisso's practice of pouring untreated wastewater into Minamata Bay. Despite these findings, the Japanese government for many years did not prohibit Chisso from continuing to discharge outflow, nor did it enact measures to clean polluted waters or to help those stricken with Minamata disease. These disavowals of the significance of this illness marked the beginning of decades of frustrating struggles by Minamata patients and their families, with both the central government and Chisso.

As is true of Chisso officials, national politicians and bureaucrats are depicted as disavowing Minamata disease for a variety of reasons: financial dependence of the town, region, and nation on industries like Chisso; inability to appreciate the suffering of Minamata disease patients and the significance of the damage inflicted on local ecosystems; and simple heartlessness, including the belief that because Minamata disease affected such a small, rural, and impoverished segment of the Japanese population it did not merit attention. Chisso, as the "second-largest chemical complex in the world," was vital not only to the finances of towns on the Shiranui Sea but also to the national economy (Cumings 168).<sup>10</sup> Japan's central government is particularly prone to disavowal. In his report on the Minamata



Disease Policy Committee's visit to Tokyo in 1957, City Assemblyperson Hirota Sunao recalls that officials in the Welfare Ministry not only had never heard of Minamata but upon learning that the disease affected mostly indigent fishers, claimed it too trivial a matter to pursue. Those who listened to their petition did so only to be polite and were eager to see them depart (79). The meeting in Minamata between Diet representatives and the Municipal Assembly two years later (November 2, 1959) was no more productive. The narrator describes this encounter as resembling a "cross-examination" (76). Diet members take advantage of the recently elected mayor's inexperience with politics and his relative unfamiliarity with Minamata disease and its effects on the town. The narrator laments: "Both the regional administration and the Diet were supposed to be looking out for the people, but it was inevitable that the meeting between the two sets of officials, with their different agendas, would become a confrontation between the authority of the diet and the powerless impoverished" (77).



The narrator speaks on several occasions of the national government's long history of disavowing industrial pollution, of its failure to confront much less prevent such occurrences. She reminds readers of the Ashio copper mine incident (1880s) and how the rights of local farmers near Ashio have yet to be recognized nearly a century later, indemnities have yet to

be paid, and a commission has yet to be established to study Japan's first modern pollution event. And she accuses the Japanese government more generally as having a "policy of abandoning its people" (*kono kuni no kimin seisaku*) (234). In 1968, fifteen years after the first instances of Minamata disease and four years after the first cases of mercury poisoning in Niigata (Niigata Minamata disease)—the Japanese government at last declares Chisso entirely responsible for Minamata disease. But the narrator is quick to note that this admission by no means resolves the struggles of those afflicted with the disease.

The most troubling disavowals of Minamata disease come from residents of the Minamata area who fear that acknowledging both the severity of water pollution and Chisso's culpability in instigating it will further destabilize the region's already precarious economy. Although a number of local government bodies take the disease seriously, many individuals chastise Minamata patients and other activists for threatening the welfare of their town. The narrator includes an article from the October 19, 1968 Kumamoto edition of the *Mainichi shinbun* (Mainichi Newspaper) describing the Development of Minamata City Citizens' Conference. The conference prospectus chastens those residents who have been intent on having Chisso admit its wrongdoing and modify its behavior; conference participants support those afflicted by Minamata disease but insist on continued cooperation with Chisso.



**Ishimure in sit-in protest at Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 25 May 1970**

Significantly, disavowals by Chisso, the central government, and residents of the Minamata area forestall not only the prevention of further outbreaks of the disease, compensation to Minamata patients and their families, and remediation of environments but also further protests by Minamata activists. The narrator emphasizes what a difference it makes to be taken seriously by the authorities, not only in the form of increased outside intervention (more government regulation of and sanctions against polluters) but also in empowering the afflicted. One distressing example is a meeting with Minamata fishers when Diet members visit the town (November 2, 1959). The fishers are delighted at the opportunity to share their experiences with the Japanese authorities, who treat them with respect and listen solemnly as they detail the crises facing their community. They are so emboldened by the compassion shown by Diet members that later that day several thousand of them hold a protest rally at the Chisso factory; the rally quickly turns violent, injuring several factory workers and dozens of fishers and police. The narrator declares it unlikely that the principal cause of these riots, as often is argued, was the inability of union leaders to control their subordinates. Instead, she claims that “The real essence of the problem lay elsewhere. The situation probably resulted from the fact that measures

to fight Minamata disease have until today been almost entirely neglected . . . We can say that responsibility for the inauspicious incidents of November 2 lies with the lethargy of the authorities” (97-98). Had authorities at almost every level not had a history of disavowing the seriousness of Minamata disease, the meeting with Diet officials likely would not have made as deep an impression on the fishers and would not have inspired a riot. Yet the question is not whether the fishers will storm the Chisso factory, but when. Had their problems been taken seriously by the authorities from the outset, those physically and economically affected by Minamata disease might, as the narrator suggests, never have felt the need to resort to violence. But there is also a strong possibility that they might have marched on the factory sooner. Earlier activism could have resulted in increased repression, but it also might have motivated the authorities to respond more quickly to the pollution of the waters around Minamata, saving no small number of lives.

*Sea of Suffering* exposes not only the terrible suffering experienced by those stricken with Minamata disease but also the many political, social, and economic forces that, in denying this suffering, allow it to proliferate. Ishimure’s novel trenchantly reveals that even the most obviously debilitating conditions—as photojournalism such as W. Eugene Smith and Aileen M. Smith’s *Minamata: Words and Photos* (1975) revealed, Minamata disease is anything but a silent killer—are repudiated in the name of social stability and commercial profit.<sup>11</sup> People are depicted not only as doing nothing when faced with ecodegradation but also as actively fighting against measures to remediate existing damage and prevent future harm to environments. Even those with the strongest emotional bonds to the nonhuman are concerned with environmental health almost entirely because of its connection with human well-being. In her afterword, the narrator of *Sea of Suffering* declares hers a “fragment of a

book” (258). The novel is hardly a fragment. But one important question it raises yet leaves unanswered is whether, with disparities between conditions and behaviors so extreme, with even the most obviously debilitating and painful disease so readily disavowed, there is any real hope of diminishing, much less preempting, environmental crises.

Much literature that addresses human damage of ecosystems portrays conflicts between human behaviors and environmental conditions. Among the most striking are creative works such as Ishimure’s *Sea of Suffering* that depict people who accept and at times encourage ecodegradation, even when it harms them and their loved ones. As is true of *Sea of Suffering*, many literary texts expose how people behave when confronted with damaged environments, particularly their tendency to procrastinate, to grapple with problems only when they become too large to ignore, to assume that the nonhuman exists for human benefit, and to approve remediation only if it does not in any way adversely affect human lives. Literature points to the near inevitability of such reactions. These sobering narratives invite us not only to ponder the complex motivations behind such behaviors and their frequently ambiguous implications but also to think more deeply about the long-term consequences of interacting with environments in this way.<sup>12</sup>

### Disappearances and *Lake of Heaven*

A common trope in many literatures is to contrast the relative resilience (endurance and revivability) of nature, whether individual species or the nonhuman more generally, with the ephemerality of people and their cultural artifacts. Numerous texts that establish this dichotomy allude to or even highlight nonhuman endurance in the face of human transformation of environments.<sup>13</sup> Narratives often call attention to those parts of the nonhuman that withstand or recuperate from

damage imposed by people, and those that exhibit resilience in the face of blizzards, typhoons, and shifting tectonic plates. Yet any number of these writings, despite their seeming optimism about the prospects of the nonhuman, in fact leave ambiguous nature’s resilience. Ishimure’s *Lake of Heaven* [*Tenko*] (1997) is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Written three decades after *Sea of Suffering* and in a nation and world of increasingly threatened ecosystems, *Lake of Heaven* describes the visit of Masahiko, a young Tokyo composer, to what remains of his grandfather Masahito’s hometown of Amazoko (lit. bottom of heaven), a village in Kyushu that thirty years earlier was buried under a lake created by a dam. Amazoko is fictional, but it is modeled after an actual Kyushu village—Mizukami, submerged by the Ichifusa Dam; this dam was built in 1960, to control flooding and generate power along the Kuma River in Kumamoto Prefecture. The Ichifusa and other dam projects in the area have been controversial; protests surrounding the Kawabegawa Dam (located on an upstream section of the Kuma River) have postponed its completion for several decades. On the other hand, the Arase Dam, also located on the Kuma River, is currently in the process of being removed, in part because of opposition to this dam from local residents, opposition that was inspired by Ishimure’s writings (Allen 2010).<sup>14</sup>

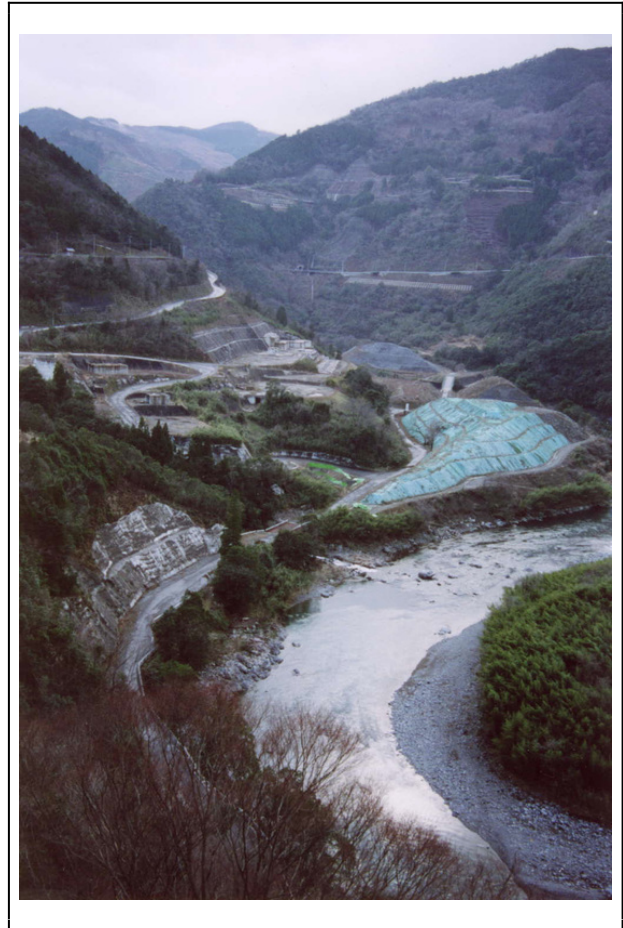




*Lake of Heaven* has rightly been described by the American poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder (1930 –) and others as mythopoetical, incorporating as it does tales, dreams, myths, Noh drama, poetry, and song as well as more straightforward narration (*Lake xi*). The novel speaks explicitly of the power of words, of *kotodama* (lit. word spirit), as “born of the union [*gattai*] of things such as morning light and the plants of the hills and fields”; the novel calls residents of Amazoko “people in a kind of ancient epic poem” (*Amazoko no hitotachi wa sonna kodai jojishi no naka no hitotachi da*) (*Tenko* 278). Ishimure’s text celebrates rural peoples, the natural world in which they are enmeshed, and the power of language used to evoke both.<sup>15</sup> The novel’s vivid, magnetic images captivate even its most casual readers, underscoring all that has and will continue to be lost as nations reshape ecosystems ever more dramatically. But even while questioning their future, *Lake of Heaven* also highlights the incredible resilience of both people and the natural world.

Ishimure’s narrator describes the villagers as quickly embracing Masahiko, who is deeply impressed both by their rich spiritual lives and by the healthy and abundant natural world—including trees, rivers, and mountains—that physically and audibly permeates their communities. *Lake of Heaven* vividly exposes the great traumas to both people and nature that the dam has inflicted. But the novel also explores the ability of ecosystems to withstand human manipulation. People have irrevocably transformed Amazoko’s landscapes, and many of the immediate changes are described as having been quite painful. Yet the narrator gives little indication that this landscape remained ravaged for long; in fact, it is repeatedly described as a space of great harmony and beauty, one that inspires Masahiko’s musical compositions. Even the novel’s title suggests triumph over extensive human manipulation of ecosystems: the lake (*tenko*) behind the dam is

one of heaven, not of hell. While condemning significant human shaping of environments, such as damming rivers, *Lake of Heaven* seemingly—likely without meaning to do so—highlights the relatively rapid recovery of the nonhuman in Japan’s rural areas.



In contrast, cities have not fared so well; Ishimure’s novel sharply condemns the air and noise pollution that plague Japan’s urban spaces, depicting metropolitan ecosystems as far worse off than those of rural areas. The question lies in just how much human interference landscapes can endure. *Lake of Heaven* addresses two extremes of transformed ecosystems: those that after an initial period of adjustment regain their health and flourish (spaces, including the lake, that are barricaded by concrete, as well as the areas surrounding these spaces) and those that because of the density of their human population are

seemingly beyond repair (spaces, such as cities, that are covered in concrete). Because the dam and new lake constantly exemplify human transformation of environments, the narrator and characters of *Lake of Heaven* harbor no fantasies that rural Japan has been left untouched. More confusing is how much longer rural Japan, or at least that part of it closest to the nation's expanding metropolitan areas, will be able to withstand such large-scale human projects.

Ishimure's novel emphasizes the high human cost of inundating Amazoko. Not only did most villagers lose their homes, but gambling and financial mismanagement followed on the heels of dam construction with money designated for relocation falling into the wrong hands and impoverishing many. More significant, the deep attachment and sense of loss many former residents, including Masahiko's grandfather, feel toward the "village at the bottom of the lake" do not erode with time; for some the memories are an obsession and constant source of grief. Visiting this lake, Masahiko is surprised to find that he too is moved: "All the places about which his grandfather had told him—the Hall of Kannon, the monkey-seat rock, Oki no Miya—where were they submerged? Trees, scattered here and there, were the only things visible at the bottom of the water; the only thing he understood was that there was the site of the village. His heart was attacked by a crushing sensation. He hadn't expected to feel this way" (27).

Much of the nonhuman also has recovered from the traumas inflicted on this landscape. *Lake of Heaven* highlights the devastation caused by the dam: the narrative includes numerous graphic descriptions of the merciless submerging of everything from grand and beloved trees to small and helpless insects:

All the flowering clover, the Chinese milk vetch, and the innumerable sweet flowerings of

violets that grew along the ravines and ridges of the field—everything was flooded together. For a moment, even when in the water, the scene looked as though it were one of living vegetation. What most surprised everyone was the variety of insects, creatures that usually were overlooked, floating everywhere on the surface of the water. Ants large and small, molting light-green dreamy small butterflies, with their wings, thinner than paper, torn apart were floating. Mole crickets were swimming, lizards too were swimming. Even tiny baby birds that appeared as though they'd just hatched were floating in their nests . . . Together with the insects, which seemed as though they were burning in hell, the villagers felt as though they too were being exterminated before they even knew what was happening (307-8, 310).

Ishimure's narrator vividly describes the painful physical mutilation of insects' bodies. The seemingly thoughtless flooding of their ecosystems is contrasted with the villagers' more respectful plowing of the land. As Oshizu reminisces:

When they started letting in water, around the time that Sōsuke's field of Chinese milk vetch was submerged, inordinate numbers of green caterpillars and mole crickets bubbled up from beneath the grass. Everyone gasped when they saw this. The insects were floating, covering the surface of the water, choking us up. I've never forgotten that scene. Oh, just think, when we built these

fields, we held proper memorial services for the insects.

There is a stone monument on the hill in the cemetery with the words “memorial for the soul of the ten thousand beings.” By “ten thousand beings” they didn’t mean just people. The stone monument on the hill dedicated to the ten thousand beings was meant not just for the insects and the birds; it was also for the souls of things we can’t see, things that protect the village. Our ancestors built it for this reason (114).<sup>16</sup>

Oshizu reveals not only her own conflicting attitudes, condoning the killing of flora and fauna for agriculture while condemning their killing for the sake of a dam that likewise aims to make human lives more comfortable. She also exposes contradictions between the attitudes and behaviors of her predecessors, namely the conflict between their killing and honoring a vast array of nonhuman beings. This rural landscape has a long history of a human habitation and manipulation—not only have local peoples long been farming here, but well before the dam was built, forest fires and a French lumber mill polluted the region and triggered landslides. But the dam caused unprecedented damage.

Even so, thirty years after the dam was built the ecosystems Masahiko encounters show few if any signs of degradation. Looking at the lake for the first time, Masahiko notes that, far from being a polluted cesspool, “the submerged village has been made into a gathering place for fish” (24). The water is clear and peaceful, so much so that some residents seem to believe that “this manmade lake, constructed taking full advantage of modern technology, was like a transparent cocoon that contained within it the chrysalis and silkworms that the sleeping ancient village had become” (78). And surrounding the lake the soil is rich and fragrant, the foliage luxurious, the air filled with birdsong, and the mountains magical.

Masahiko and the narrator can barely contain their excitement. The region is occasionally afflicted by droughts, but these are infrequent, do not seem to be human-induced, and do not cause lasting damage.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, much greater than the difference between the pre- and post-construction landscapes is the gap between rural and urban areas, a dynamic often overlooked in critical discussions of *Lake of Heaven*, which understandably focus on the disruption to rural lives, both human and nonhuman. The narrator and Masahiko frequently contrast rural and urban sites, almost always to the detriment of the latter. Masahiko is particularly captivated by the sounds heard in the mountains and in what remains of Amazoko. Listening to the winds along the shore of the lake,

All the cacophony [騒音] of that frenzied city [狂暴な都市; i.e., Tokyo] vanished [消えていた] from around him. The grating noises of cars [車の擦過音], the sound of brakes [ブレーキの音], the noises of shutters opening and closing [シャッターの開閉音] that had eaten down to the marrow of his bones. Street noises [街の音]—things constantly being torn up and smashed down—had all vanished [消えていた]. What kind of world was that? Could it be that I’ve been carried off by the energy of the cacophony [騒音] of that giant city [巨大都市; i.e., Tokyo] and made a soft landing here? (29).

Noteworthy is not only the jarring racket of Tokyo—the narrator repeating the character for “noise” (音) six times in four lines—its omnipresence and omnipotence, its ability to infiltrate the skin and, as is true of the chemicals Ishimure describes in *Sea of Suffering*, eat down to the marrow of the bones



(*hone no zui made kuiitteita*). Also striking is the healing power of the landscape: the narrator describes not so much the presence of these sounds within Masahiko's body as their absence. They once had penetrated the very core of his body, but they have since disappeared, the narrator concluding the first two sentences translated above with the verb "vanished" (消えていた). Later in the novel the narrator again remarks on how the sounds of trains and trucks would interrupt conversations in the city between Masahiko and his grandfather, and on the sharp disparity between the forest of thriving Andromeda trees not far from the buried village and Masahiko's own tiny potted Andromeda, covered in soot, that wilted not long after his grandfather's death. Tokyo is so cacophonous, Masahiko reflects, that the cries of roosters are audible only in zoos. Not long after arriving in the village he comes to think of the "breaking, rapidly swelling Tokyo as a giant cancer cell" (78).

The ground on which Tokyo is built and the air above the city are not the only spaces implicated. Nearly all of Japan appears at risk. The narrator comments that the Japanese islands have become "a conveyor belt carrying concrete scabs, all covered with swarms of shuddering vehicles" (260). Complaining that people do their best to disregard the machines removing the very earth that once nurtured them, the narrator asks, "Doesn't it seem as though a giant, invisible hand is stretching out and grasping the epidermis, or rather even the dermis beneath it, of the densely populated area of this archipelago, and peeling it away?" (75). The ecosystems around the former Amazoko have thus far been relatively spared. In fact, in the first chapter—unlike in the *Sea of Suffering* where the narrator declares that a "deep, fissure-like pathway . . . ran the length of the Japanese archipelago" (218)—Masahiko declares that except for the dam this region has "no straight line of human construction" (79). But the dramatic image of hands grasping the

epidermis of the Japanese islands ready to peel it away indicates that environmental devastation is hardly confined to a few select spaces. New roads are gradually infiltrating areas around Amazoko, and although they so far have successfully blended into the mountainsides, and their vibrations have stayed in tune with those of the earth's skin, at least in Masahiko's interpretation, there soon will come a time when these roads are no longer so inconspicuous. Interestingly, Masahiko initially had been disturbed that the land was gashed to build the new road, but now he believes these changes nicely complement those the terrain inflicts on itself in the form of volcanoes, shifting land masses, and the like (276). Needless to say, it is such changes in attitude—from being troubled by the human reshaping of the mountainside to believing such transformations complement millions of years of nonhuman upheaval—that allow for increased human manipulation of environments. The elaborate discussion of the geological history of the region suggests that Masahiko and the narrator feel somewhat uneasy about justifying human activity in this manner. Although *Lake of Heaven* in many places highlights the parallels between the pre- and post-construction landscapes and underlines the differences between Japan's cities and its mountain regions, the novel also makes clear that the latter are in jeopardy. These landscapes have for the most part withstood and overcome the changes people inflict, but Ishimure's novel suggests that environments will not be able to do so forever, at least not in a form that can readily sustain human existence.



Karen Tei Yamashita

Much literature that addresses massive human destruction of environments draws attention to the ultimate survival of the nonhuman, albeit in changed configurations. Taking this idea to an extreme is the narrator of the Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita's (1951 -) novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), who declares:

[A team of entomologists] had mistakenly discovered [a] metal cemetery [in the Amazon] while chasing after only one of several thousand rare forms of butterfly. The machines found all dated back to the late fifties and early sixties—F-86 Sabres, F-4 Phantoms, Huey Cobras, Lear Jets and Piper Cubs, Cadillacs, Volkswagens, Dodges and an assorted mixture of gas-guzzlers,

as well as military jeeps and Red Cross ambulances. After so many years in the forest, the vehicles were slowly crumbling, piece by piece, bit by bit, into a fine rusty dust . . . What was most interesting about the discovery of the rain forest parking lot was the way in which nature had moved to accommodate and make use of it. The entomologists were shocked to discover that their rare butterfly only nested in the vinyl seats of Fords and Chevrolets and that their exquisite reddish coloring was actually due to a steady diet of hydrated ferric oxide, or rusty water. There was also discovered a new species of mice . . . Finally, there was a new form of air plant . . . There were, along with these new forms of life, a myriad of traditional varieties of flora and fauna that had somehow found a home, a food source or way of life in this exclusive junkyard. It was an ecological experiment unparalleled in the known world of nature (99-101).



Ibuse Masuji

For its part, the Japanese atomic-bomb writer Ibuse Masuji's (1898-1993) novel *Kuroi ame* (Black Rain, 1966), regarded by some as Japan's foremost work of atomic bomb literature, comments on the untimely deaths of Kokutaiji's ancient camphor trees: "They were said to be more than one thousand years old, but today had been brought to an end" (97). On the other hand, like much Japanese literature of the atomic bomb, this narrative also remarks on the speed with which the flora and fauna of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reappear; *Black Rain* defies assertions made directly after the bombings that it would be decades before anyone or anything could live in these cities. Surveying the ruins of Hiroshima, the novel's

protagonist remarks, "This bomb was fostering the growth of plants and flies while increasing the power that deters the essence of humanity. Flies and plants were raging unbelievably" (188).<sup>18</sup> But far from offering solace, or justification, these altered dynamics complicate evaluating patterns of nonhuman resilience.

In "Shinwa no umi e" [To the Sea of Myth], her prologue to Ogata Masato and Ōiwa Keibō's *Tokoyo no fune o kogite: Minamatabyō shishi* Rowing the Boat of the Eternal World: An Unauthorized History of Minamata Disease, 1996], Ishimure reminisces: "I think of that day [when Ogata launched his wooden boat Tokoyo (Eternal World)] even now. Having harbored unprecedented suffering, and taking on the physiognomy of myth, the Shiranui Sea is beginning to revive" (viii). Without question, the region has rebounded from its days as one of Japan's most polluted sites; Minamata has reinvented itself as an environmental model city, complete with an Eco Town (an industrial park with a focus on recycling) and Eco Park (on reclaimed land in Minamata Bay). But as Ogata and Ōiwa emphasize, many problems remain. The conflicts, as they have articulated them, are multiple. They exist between powerful outsiders intent on making a profit and impoverished local peoples who are easily manipulated. They exist between individuals afflicted by pollution diseases and people, both outsiders and locals, who do not see themselves as affected by the presence of these diseases, not to mention those benefiting financially from industries whose emissions cause these disorders. They also exist between individuals suffering from pollution maladies: different people with different hopes for themselves, their towns, and their ecosystems.

Most important, these conflicts exist—albeit often surreptitiously—within individuals. In the epilogue to *Rowing the Eternal Sea*, the English adaptation of *Rowing the Boat of the Eternal World*, Ōiwa notes that for Ogata the "solution"



is “a return to a spiritual world on Earth, in which everyone and everything has a place. It is a world in which life is respected, worshipped, and celebrated” (185). Yet despite Ogata’s and his colleagues’ deep attachments to the nonhuman, despite Ogata’s claim at the conclusion of *Rowing the Eternal Sea* that “Embraced by the mountains and sea/ Ego dissolves; self and landscape are one,” behaviors of local peoples do not conflict as drastically as might be supposed with the behaviors of outsiders that Ogata and Ōiwa criticize so harshly (175). To be sure, the actions of local fishers rarely have as concentrated an impact on human and nonhuman health as those of large polluters; the fishers do not exhibit anywhere near the same desire for wealth, technology, prestige, or power as do the Chisso Corporation, the Japanese government, and many of their neighbors (individuals particularly concerned with their financial futures). But even though they pride themselves on their humility, the fishers too are not without culpability.

In both *Rowing the Boat of the Eternal World* and *Rowing the Eternal Sea* Ogata comments, “For me, [the reclaimed land in Minamata Bay] is in a word a place to apologize. It is a place to apologize not for others but for myself. It is a time to think of my own crimes” (*Rowing the Boat* 156). *Rowing the Eternal Sea* elaborates on questions of individual and collective guilt. Ogata asserts that even though he completely opposes Chisso and its practices, he bears some responsibility for what happened in Minamata:

Before talking about the responsibility that should be borne by Chisso or the state for Minamata disease, I had taken it upon myself to consider my own sins, my own responsibility for this incident . . . I am forced to conclude that people bear the sin

for Minamata disease and that the fundamental responsibility for this incident lies in the nature of our collective existence . . . From the perspective of the movement, Chisso is the Other, the enemy, the assailant. For me, this viewpoint evolved until I could recognize “the Chisso within” (*Rowing the Eternal* 132, 146).

Ogata also comments that he is uncertain what he would have done had he worked for Chisso: it is easy to censure the corporation, but had he been employed by the company he might well have participated in destroying Minamata’s ecosystems. He calls attention to the ambivalence that pervades human understandings of actual and ideal relationships with both people and environments, ambivalence that in many cases accompanies the massive harm to both.

Even more significant, Ogata likens his own (potential) culpability to that of Japanese who supported the emperor system and Germans who supported the Nazis during World War Two: “We can degenerate before we know it. Human beings are weak. It was, after all, the average person who embraced Nazi ideology and worshipped Hitler. Can any of us say with certainty that this would never happen to us? It was the average person who betrayed family members and turned in friends” (132). Moved by his visit to concentration camps in Europe in the mid-1990s, he contrasts Germany’s determination to expose its war crimes with Japan’s struggle to repress discussion of them, just as the Japanese government has attempted to whitewash the Minamata disaster.<sup>19</sup> *Rowing the Eternal Sea* here situates in global context even more than does Ishimure’s *Sea of Suffering* the attitudes and behaviors that led to catastrophic and continued damage to Minamata. In Ishimure’s writing, the explicit focus is most frequently local, rural landscapes.

Yet the dynamics she describes have been replicated around the globe, and across time; her relentless struggle on behalf of disenfranchised peoples and environments can inspire environmental critics, and citizens, worldwide.

Ishimure occupies a somewhat marginal position in world literature, as the field is conventionally conceived; her work has yet to be translated broadly, perhaps in part because of its extensive use of the Kumamoto dialect and perhaps also because it is not the type of writing generally associated with Japan. But the implications of Ishimure's ecocritical output are global, and there is much to be gained by examining how the phenomena her oeuvre brings to light relate to phenomena worldwide. *Sea of Suffering*, as is true of so many of Ishimure's works, alerts readers to the human inclination to obfuscate even the most obvious threats to health, both human and nonhuman, when addressing these perils would itself threaten to compromise short-term wellbeing; this novel illuminates the human reluctance to disturb the status quo, even when current destruction and future peril could not be more evident. And *Lake of Heaven* underscores the limits of ecological resilience, a sober reminder that even while for certain landscapes recovery, or at least transformation back to a habitable space is not unattainable, it never can be taken for granted.

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*Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*, trans. Livia Monnet, with New Introduction and Notes. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2003.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Sea of Suffering* was awarded the Kumamoto Nichinichi Cultural Prize (1969) and the Ōya Sōichi Prize for Nonfiction Literature (1970), both of which Ishimure declined, declaring that she could not accept awards while Minamata Disease victims remained uncompensated. Ishimure was also awarded the Asahi Prize (2002) "For her creative work that points to the crisis our ecosystem faces due to environmental destruction." The Asahi Prize honors "individuals and groups that have made outstanding accomplishments in the fields of academics and arts, and have greatly contributed to the development and progress of Japanese culture and society at large" (<http://www.asahi.com/shimbun/award/asahi/englishlist.html#winner2011>). But as Livia Monnet has noted, "This belated recognition has not, however, significantly changed the writer's marginal status and the fact that the bulk of her work is respectfully overlooked by critics and the public alike" (xxviii-xxix).

<sup>2</sup> The citation for Ishimure reads in part, "In electing Michiko Ishimure to receive the 1973 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts, the Board of Trustees recognizes her as the 'voice of her people' in their struggle against the industrial pollution that has been distorting and destroying their lives." <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/profile/183>.

<sup>3</sup> Titled “Ishimure Michiko: The Price of Pollution and the Presence of the Past,” the eighth chapter of Murphy’s book discusses *Sea of Suffering* as “decidedly environmental literature” and *Story of the Sea of Camellias* as “basically nature literature” (157). Murphy expresses surprise at the neglect of *Sea of Suffering* in the United States, given “what a terrific example it is of literary writing by an activist that is directly tied to changes in social awareness and environmental legislation” (147). Also noteworthy is Inna Sukhenko’s reference to Ishimure in the context of Ukrainian environmental literature, specifically Chernobyl narratives (119). Recently, attention has been drawn to Ishimure’s contributions to literature of the global South. See Tsutomu Takahashi, “Minamata and the Symbolic Discourse of the South.” Interestingly, in Japan, more on Ishimure has been written by scholars of American/English literature than by scholars of Japanese literature. Takahashi, for instance, is a professor of American Literature at Kyushu University, while Bruce Allen, translator of *Lake of Heaven* and author of “First there Were Stories,” is a professor of English at Seisen University, Tokyo. Likewise, Masami Yuki, a professor at Kanazawa University who has also published extensively on Ishimure, is an English Ph.D. Ishimure’s recently released autobiography, *Yoshi no nagisa: Ishimure Michiko jiden* [Shore of Reeds: Autobiography of Ishimure Michiko, 2014], reinforces the struggles, and the persistence, of this tenacious writer and environmental activist. Although hardly the first Japanese writer to draw attention to anthropogenically transformed ecosystems, she is certainly one of the most prominent. For an outline of Japanese literature’s engagement with the nonhuman since the *Man’yōshū* [Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, eighth c.] see Thornber, 61-74. See also Colligan-Taylor, Guo, Shirane.

<sup>4</sup> The introduction to the German translation speaks of Minamata as a household name not only in Japan but “all over the world” [Hijiya-Kirschner, 7].

<sup>5</sup> In general, texts labeled “world literature” have been translated into more than just one or two languages.

<sup>6</sup> Damrosch continues, “[World literature helps us] appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away from its point of origin” (300).

<sup>7</sup> Carson is best known for *Silent Spring* (1962), which was quickly translated into a number of languages and was one of several works that sparked environmental movements worldwide.

<sup>8</sup> Ishimure’s own sustained fight for the rights of Minamata patients and their families has also inspired environmental activism.

<sup>9</sup> For other of Ishimure’s global contributions see Allen 2013, 51-55. Allen concludes, “Ishimure’s work holds the radical promise that in stories – living stories rooted in living communities and cultures – there is hope for positively redirecting our course through the modern, increasingly globalized and environmentally challenged world. Her voice . . . provides a particularly strong imagination that may help us to better consider our task and our direction as we chart and enact our way forward – individually and collectively, locally and globally” (55).

<sup>10</sup> Cumings discusses Chisso’s involvement in Korea, arguing that the company “provided the starting point for North Korea’s postwar chemicals industry (which was integral to its self-reliant industrial policy).”

<sup>11</sup> Also noteworthy in this regard is Kuwabara Shisei’s (1936–) *Minamatabyō* [Minamata Disease, 1965] and work by Shiota Takeshi and Akutagawa Jin. Films too have provided

graphic evidence of the terrors of Minamata Disease, especially Tsuchimoto Noriaki's (1928-2008) *Minamata: kanjasan to sono sekai* [Minamata: The Victims and Their World, 1971] and the three-part documentary *Igaku toshite no Minamatabyō* [Medical Report on Minamata Disease, 1974-75], *Minamatabyō: sono 20nen* [Minamata Disease: The Past Twenty Years, 1976], and *Minamatabyō: sono 30nen* [Minamata Disease: The Past Thirty Years, 1987] (Monnet xi).

<sup>12</sup> For additional examples of this phenomenon in global perspective, see Thornber.

<sup>13</sup> Among the best-known East Asian texts contrasting nonhuman resilience with human ephemerality is the Tang poet Du Fu's (712-770) "Chun wang" [Spring View], known for its claim, "The kingdom is destroyed, hills and rivers remain/ In the city in spring, grasses grow green." Other examples from premodern East Asia include the Korean writer Kwōn Taeun's (1612-1699) poem "Passing the Old Capital," which claims, "The mountains are blue as of old,/ but how many brave men have come and gone." One of the many twentieth-century East Asian creative works highlighting nonhuman revivability in the face of human suffering is the Chinese writer Yip Wai-lim's (Ye Weilian, 1937-) poem "Yehua de gushi" [Story of Wildflowers, 1974], which begins, "Wildflowers/ after the raging artillery fire subsides/ enthusiastically come into bloom" and continues by juxtaposing society in mourning with thriving flowers and crops (82). Also from the 1970s but contradicting the paradigm of resilient nonhuman and ephemeral human are texts such as the Korean writer Yi Sōngbu's (1942-) poem "Chayōn" (Nature, 1974), which claims that the earth "gives off the smell of being unable to being again," that "although the world's valiant people keep coming/ the earth lags behind, far, far too late."

<sup>14</sup> For more on the Arase Dam see Hoyano.

<sup>15</sup> Early Japanese believed that words harbor great powers, powers that can be released by recitation. In the *Kojiki* [Record of Ancient Matters, 712] words are described as having the power to do harm, but by the time of the *Man'yōshū* [Collection of Ten Thousand Years, eighth c.] words were idealistically believed to have only the power to do good (Miner, 285).

<sup>16</sup> During the drought, when the lake's water level decreases, this monument becomes visible (309). Near the conclusion of *Lake of Heaven*, the narrator further discusses the changes to the landscape made by the region's first farmers (312-13).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ishimure's *Story of the Sea of Camellias*, which describes the 1931 drought that devastated Minamata.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ibuse's short story "Kakitsubata" [Crazy Iris, 1951], where the narrator notes that ten months after the bombing of Hiroshima only the palms are putting forth new buds. See also the Ukrainian American writer Irene Zabytko's (1954-) novel *The Sky Unwashed* (2000), which describes the slow regeneration of plants in spaces close to Chernobyl.

<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, as Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit suggests in the introduction to the German translation of *Sea of Suffering*, narratives on the Holocaust share characteristics with those on Minamata (8).