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## HETEROGENOUS JAPAN

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Azuma Hiroki (2011a, p. 12) observed in September 2011 that 3.11 served to reveal the lack of solidarity in Japanese society. The disaster highlighted that, contrary to the popular *Nihonjinron* belief of Japan being a homogenous nation, significant economic and cultural differences existed between the disaster-hit areas and Tokyo. To give one oft-cited example, just as the disaster-hit areas began their long journey to recovery, television programs in Tokyo were already discussing what would happen if a disaster of such a scale were to occur in the nation's capital, which emphasised the Tokyo-centric nature of public discourse in Japan.<sup>1</sup>

Jake Adelstein, an American *Yomiuri Shimbun* journalist and author of *Tokyo Vice* (a chronicle of Adelstein's experiences in crime reporting in the city), highlighted this lack of solidarity in his work *Muenbotoke* (Adelstein, 2011a), which was first published in *Shambhala Sun* and rewritten for *2:46—Aftershocks: Stories from the Japan Earthquake*. *2:46* is a publication that contains essays, artworks and photographs by Japanese and non-Japanese authors, created within a week of the disaster through collaboration on Twitter. Among this collection of mostly non-fictional accounts of the disaster (by names such as William Gibson and Barry Eisler), Adelstein's (2011a) *Muenbotoke* is unique in its fictional and indirect approach. The story is about a middle-aged couple who commit double suicide and become *muenbotoke* (the dead who do not have any living relatives to look after their graves). Symbolically, the surname

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1 In April 2017, Reconstruction Minister Imamura Masahiro resigned after commenting that the earthquake 'was okay because it happened over there, in Tōhoku' ('Imamura Fukkōshō jinin', 2017).

of the couple is Akutagawa, which evokes Akutagawa Ryūnosuke who famously committed suicide due to a 'vague anxiety about his future'. However, unlike Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Mr Akutagawa's anxiety for his future is much more tangible: he had been recently laid off from his job as a temporary employee at a construction company and was simply too poor to carry on living.

Adelstein's account of the story is interspersed with the story of the self-sacrifice and imagined death of the nuclear power plant staff at Fukushima, which is in italics and written in a more journalistic and impersonal tone. This interspersing vividly portrays the paradox in Japanese society: that there appears to be cohesion and cooperation in the society as a whole, but on closer inspection, many individuals are excluded from this society. It is suggested that this self-sacrifice, going hand in hand with extreme isolation of certain individuals, are difficult for foreigners like Adelstein to comprehend. Adelstein (2011a) incredulously asks, 'Many of the staff at the nuclear power plant stayed on the job long after radiation levels had risen past even the laxest of safety standards, to prevent a full meltdown. Why?' (p. 56). He explains that 'they are willing to give their lives to save the lives of thousands of other people, people they know, people they don't know and people they will never meet' (p. 57), which evokes the notion of the Japanese group mentality, or *kizuna* (see Chapter 1), in the post-3.11 context.

However, members of Japanese society can also be cold towards people they know and people they have met—such as social outcasts like Mr and Mrs Akutagawa, 62 and 59 years old respectively, who were found dead in their apartment in Totsuka, Shinjuku. The use of Totsuka as a setting highlights the juxtaposition between the couple's real-life plight and Japan's perceived image as an altruistic group community. Totsuka is known as *fukushi no machi* [the welfare town], due to the presence of many non-government organisations, such as Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières and Peace Boat. Mr Akutagawa 'was practically invisible' (p. 57), except to the debt collectors who regularly threatened and harassed him. The few people that know something about him do not seem to be moved or surprised by his death at all, behaving as though it was inevitable. As Adelstein (2011a) argues, 'it's amazing to me that people can live in an apartment complex right next to each other for years and not know each other at all' (p. 57). Although Adelstein (2011a) admits

that ‘a lot of Japanese people hate to ask others for help’ (pp. 57–59), the statement leaves the readers questioning who the socially isolated couple could have possibly talked to, rather than finding reassurance in the possibility of help available on demand. Just like ‘the unseen radiation they were exposed to has probably already killed [the nuclear power plant staff]’ (p. 57), the Akutagawas had already ‘been dead for a long time’ (p. 57). Having no family, the Akutagawas do not receive any care even when they are truly and officially dead—the police only care about whether Mr Akutagawa killed his wife with her consent, so they can fill in the necessary paperwork, in case he needs to be prosecuted post-mortem. Only Adelstein goes to the effort of visiting the grave, from which they have ‘probably been evicted or displaced by the ashes of other *muenbotoke*’ (p. 59) by the time of writing because no one would have paid for the upkeep fees—in Adelstein’s (2011a) words, ‘even the dead can only rent in Tokyo’ (p. 60).

Interestingly, Adelstein (2011a) does not ask his readers to pray for the Akutagawas, but ends the story with the last component of the Fukushima narrative in italics:

*May their memories last longer than the accident that took their lives.  
Because remembering them is all we can do for them now and for all  
those who lost their lives. And in that act of remembering, hopefully  
we will lead better lives and remember to care for all living things.  
We owe the dead that much* (p. 59).

By concluding his narrative with this praise for the (imagined) heroes of the disaster, Adelstein brings our attention to the lack of such a discourse for the thousands who silently passed away like Mr and Mrs Akutagawa, without any recognition for their contribution to society. Adelstein’s story is a reminder for the Japanese, especially in the cities, to remember these sacrifices that make their modern lifestyle possible, as well as a challenge to the discourse of *kizuna* and national unity, which was prevalent at the time of his writing. Similarly, the three authors that I explore below paint post-3.11 Japan as a heterogenous space (at least temporarily), despite the common perception of the country as being highly homogenous.

## Tradition versus Modernity: Richard Collasse and Shinkai Makoto

As I mentioned above, a way in which the Japanese ‘homogeneity myth’ was questioned in the cultural response to the disaster was to highlight the major economic and cultural differences that exist between the nation’s capital and countryside. Albeit very different in style, the 2016 blockbuster film *Kimi no na wa* [Your Name] by Shinkai Makoto and the French novel *L’océan dans la rizière* [The ocean in the rice paddy] by Richard Collasse both deal with a ‘culture shock’ that occurs as a result of these two sides of Japan being brought together after a disaster. While Shinkai presents a vision of post-disaster Japan in which homogeneity is restored, Collasse paints this heterogeneity as a positive and essential part of a reconstructed future Japan.

The universe of *Kimi no na wa* is split into two storylines that eventually merge. One of them is situated in Itomachi, which is a sleepy fictional town with a population of 1,500 in the Prefecture of Gifu, where Mitsuha, a girl born into a family of Shintō shrine maidens, wishes to escape her world of rituals and offerings. The other storyline, three years later, is inhabited by Taki, who is a privileged high school boy in Tokyo, with all the luxuries associated with living in the capital, including stylish cafe food, cinemas and Italian restaurants with chandeliers. The disaster that occurs in the film is an allusion to 3.11. Although in Itomachi the disaster is caused by a meteor fall, it is eerily reminiscent of 3.11 in its sudden and devastating nature. In Tōhoku, the giant tsunami waves started reaching residential areas half an hour after the earthquake, similar to how the beautiful meteor unexpectedly splits into two and starts falling onto the village, giving residents little time to escape. The recurring nature of this fictional disaster (it recurs every 1,200 years) is also reminiscent of the fact that the Tōhoku tsunami brought attention to the large tsunamis that previously occurred in the region, including in 869, 1611 and 1933.

In *Kimi no na wa*, the economic and cultural gap between Tokyo and the disaster-hit rural area is highlighted by means of strong juxtapositions. In the animated film version, this difference is manifested in the visual contrast between the beautiful scenery of the Hida mountains and the bustling technological cityscape of Tokyo. For example, in the Itomori scenes, the train station is mostly empty (the local train only passes by once every two hours), whereas in Tokyo trains are shown to arrive and depart

continuously in every direction. Most importantly, the difference in the lives of these two characters is underscored by the repeated representation of surprise as the characters experience each other's lives through frequent body swaps. In the book version, Taki repeatedly describes Mitsuha's universe as being similar to that of a folkloric tale (*mukashi banashi*), while Mitsuha feels as though the conversations of Taki's schoolmates are taken straight out of 'celebrity posts on Facebook'.

The portrayal of Mitsuha's life in Itomori is not just a portrayal of difference, but also an extremely exoticised portrayal—in this mountainous land, shrine maidens such as Mitsuha and her sister continue to perform divine dances in traditional costume, craft intricate *kumihimo* ropes by hand and produce sake by chewing rice and mixing it with their virginal saliva in their mouths. This exotic appeal of Itomori is perhaps best demonstrated by the sudden boom in real-life 'pilgrimage' or *seichi junrei* to the Gifu Prefecture, a phenomenon in which fans travel to find sites that may have inspired certain scenes in animated films. The exoticised and, to some extent, eroticised gaze of the city dwellers towards these sacred, virginal sites is also apparent in the merchandising related to the film, such as the local sake, Hōrai, which was made available for purchase in the 'saliva sake' bottles from the film. The film led some Japanese to rediscover parts of traditional Japanese culture, much like the 'discover Japan' or the 'exotic Japan' tourism campaigns by the Japanese National Railways in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>2</sup> and reminded them that many parts of Japan are still rural, even if they are not quite as exotic as the film portrays.

In the film, these gaps are shown to be overcome by young love (or, at least, the strong will to not forget each other), as well as the bond of *musubi* (knot)—a key concept that is repeated many times in both the film and the novel and is highly reminiscent of *kizuna*. The concept is introduced in a key scene where Taki (in Mitsuha's body) goes to visit the shrine god's body in the mountains to make an offering of Mitsuha's saliva sake, with her grandmother Hitoha and younger sister Yotsuha. During their journey, Hitoha explains the many meanings of *musubi*:

The linking of threads is *musubi*. The linking of people is *musubi*.  
The passing of time is *musubi*. It's all the same. *Musubi* is *kamisama*,  
the gods and their power. The *kumihimo* ropes that we make

2 The 'discover Japan' campaign is explored in detail in Marilyn Ivy's (1995) *Discourse of the Vanishing*, which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

are also the work of *kamisama* and represents the flow of time itself. Gathering together to form shapes, twisting and tangling, sometimes going back, getting cut off and then linking up again. That is *kumihimo*. That is time. That is *musubi*.

With this awareness that time is not necessarily linear, Taki later succeeds in going back in time by drinking Mitsuha's sake and saves Mitsuha and the town from the disaster, despite the various challenges posed by the extremely fragmented nature of his memory of his time in Itomori.

Although it is tempting to view this as a simplistic tale of human bonds that are facilitated by the *kamisama*, overcoming differences and even disasters, it is important to remember that the final encounter between Mitsuha and Taki occurs as a result of a series of miraculous events, as well as strong romantic sentiments. While presenting a strong message of hope for these two main characters in the film, Shinkai does not clearly show how this translates to hope in real-life, post-disaster Japan. In particular, the bonds, or *musubi*, become much less important once the objective of the two characters has been achieved. In short, the ancient *musubi* traditions of the fictional town of Itomori, from the dances to the rope-making and the sake-making, which are so carefully passed down from generation to generation, function solely as a device for saving Mitsuha and thus lose much of their meaning once disaster has been averted by a successful evacuation of the town's residents.

The ending of the film takes place in Tokyo and indicates that all the main characters from Itomori end up moving to Tokyo after narrowly escaping the disaster, despite the fact that there are many bigger towns and cities around Gifu Prefecture, such as the city of Gifu, Nagoya or Kyoto. In this strangely Tokyo-centric ending, the film shows that Mitsuha and her friends, Tessie and Sayaka, have survived the disaster, but no information is given regarding what remains of Itomori or how its cultural traditions are being preserved. If anything, the disaster is presented as a liberating force that allowed these characters to escape the small town and its customs. For example, it is revealed in *Kimi no na wa: Another Side Earthbound* (2016), which is a prequel to the film written by Shinkai's collaborator, Kanoh Arata, that Tessie wanted to move out of Itomori after high school, but thought that he would be unable to do so due to his personal circumstances—his father owned a local building business that he was expected to inherit. Blood links are still considered to be of utmost importance when it comes to inheriting family businesses

in the community and it would cause confusion and inconvenience to the company's employees if he does not stay to continue on the business. Tessie describes these customs as the *shigarami* (a term that expresses these human ties in a negative way, unlike *musubi*) that keeps him tied to the small town. The disaster cuts these chains that bound him and is implicitly presented as a positive event that allowed these young characters to develop their potential in the nation's capital, away from restrictive small-town customs.

Overall, while Shinkai presents a kind of rural Other in the traditions of the fictional town of Itomori, the film also contributes to the 'homogenous Japan' myth in that this is presented as an anomalous case that needs to be corrected by means of integration into mainstream Japanese culture. Shinkai ultimately presents a future Japan in which heterogeneity has been erased and happiness is found in the homogeneity of urbanised Japan. In Shinkai's fictional universe, rural heterogeneity only remains as a source of nostalgia for 'old Japan', which is consumed for entertainment but is no longer part of contemporary Japanese identity.

*L'océan dans la rizière* [The ocean in the rice paddy] by Richard Collasse (2012a), author and CEO of the Japanese subsidiary of the French brand Chanel, is also a story of a young man from Tokyo who saves a youth from the disaster-hit areas, although Collasse manages to portray the countryside around Fukushima in a much more positive light than Shinkai does. *L'océan*, which has been translated into Japanese as *Nami: Sōsuke, 17sai no ano hi kara no monogatari* [The wave: the story of Sosuke since that day when he was 17] (2012), tells the story of Sakai Sosuke, a 17-year-old boy who lives in a traditional household in a fishing village, until the tsunami comes and takes away almost all his known family members and loved ones, friends and belongings. Although the story's main characters are fictional, more than a few scenes and peripheral anecdotes are based on true testimonies given by survivors of the disaster. For example, Sosuke and his friends are part of a student jazz band in Kesenuma, the 'Swinging Dolphins', which exists in real life (although it is called the 'Swing Dolphins') and his sister's character is based on the young woman who was employed by the council of Minamisanriku and was tragically swept away while issuing an evacuation warning on the radio.

Through his experience of working as a volunteer in the region, giving makeovers and massages to female disaster victims in temporary housing and shelters, Collasse felt that Japan had split into two: those who are going on with their everyday lives in Tokyo and those who are still in a difficult living situation in the disaster-hit areas (2012b). Further, Collasse expressed his discomfort with the issue of municipalities across Japan rejecting the plea to incinerate and bury debris from the disaster-hit areas (as it was perceived to be radioactive, even when it was scientifically proven to not be), observing that ‘it’s sad that a foreigner like me has to point out that the Japanese are no longer helping each other’ (2012b).

To portray this gap between the disaster-hit areas and the rest of Japan, Collasse also split his novel into two, between the story of Sosuke and his traditional background and his 23-year-old uncle Eita, an *otaku*, *freeter* and semi-*hikikomori*<sup>3</sup> from Tokyo, who spends most of his days locked up in a room in his parents’ house. Eita, who arrives in Kesenuma with his Ray Ban sunglasses and Harley Davidson bike, is the epitome of the materialistic and spoiled Tokyo youth. However, Eita is also Collasse, or the French reader in general, who is reading about the experiences of the victims in their comfortable armchairs. Collasse confesses, ‘In a way Eita represents me. Seeing the devastation in Tohoku made me realize how blessed a life I was living’ (Kunisue and Hirata, 2013, n.p.). In many ways, this division also plays on the stereotype of Japan as the country where old Japanese traditions coexist with new Western influences: Collasse demonstrates that while this stereotype is true to some extent, these two sides of Japan are so separated geographically and culturally that it can produce a culture shock between them when they meet.

Although there is an initial culture shock when Eita and Sosuke meet, with Sosuke maintaining a strong demarcation between ‘you’ (the people from outside of the disaster-hit areas) and ‘us’ (people strongly affected by the disaster), the two young men eventually become as close as real brothers and work together towards reconstruction, in what is perhaps Collasse’s expression of hope for the young generation. Unlike Taki, Eita is not a hero who came to save Tōhoku. His motivation is much more banal—curiosity, as well as the fact that he was ordered by his father to go. Unlike *Kimi no na wa*, in which all characters end up in the capital, in *L’océan dans la rizière*, Eita discovers his *raison d’être* in Kesenuma

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3 The term *freeter* refers to Japanese youths who are not in full-time employment. *Hikikomori* refers to Japanese youths who cut themselves off entirely from society.

and decides not to return to Tokyo. Tōhoku is a location of healing, both for Eita and Sosuke. Eita remarks that it was ‘not the ideal solution’ to catapult Sosuke into the urban jungle of Tokyo so he can build a new life, as his father had intended (p. 283). For Eita as well, who was ‘sinking deeper and deeper into a bottomless pit’ (p. 329) in his life as a *hikikomori* in Tokyo, Kesenuma represents a land of new opportunity, where he will take up his new responsibility as young Sosuke’s caregiver and ‘reconstruct himself’ (p. 319). In contrast to the exoticised portrayal of rural Japan in *Kimi no na wa*, Collasse portrays a more reciprocal relationship between the capital and Tōhoku, in which Tokyo is helped by Tōhoku just as much as it helps Tōhoku.

## **Towards a Tōhoku Identity: Gretel Ehrlich’s *Facing the Wave***

Based on Gretel Ehrlich’s (2013a) journeys to the Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, *Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami* takes these regional differences one step further, towards a future vision of a strong and unique Tōhoku identity. To explain this, it is necessary to establish the history of how the region has been constructed in the Japanese popular imagination. The history of the Tōhoku region is marked by struggles with Japan’s central government. After a string of defeats in various civil wars, Tōhoku was eventually forced into replacing their successful mix of hunting, gathering and farming with rice farming (for which the land was not suited). This provided the capital with food and kept the region dependent on the resulting income, which caused extended periods of famine in times of cold weather. In the early twentieth century, Tōhoku-born scholar Yanagita Kunio attempted to bring a positive image to his homeland, which had become associated with poverty and backwardness. As a producer of rice, Tōhoku was reconstructed as the core of Japan’s homogenous rice-eating culture, where Japan’s *genfūkei* or old Japan could be found (the term *genfūkei* usually refers to scenes from childhood memories, but is also often used in this meaning of ‘scenery that evokes collective nostalgia’, regardless of whether you actually spent your childhood there). This can be observed in Yanagita’s (1940) *Yukiguni no haru* [Spring in snow country], in which he refers to Japan as *mizuho no kuni* (a country abundant with rice). Tōhoku was symbolically pushed towards the centre and away from its Other roots (which includes Ainu influences) by Yanagita and his ideas remain influential in Tōhoku’s image

construction. One can observe the continued influence of Yanagita's scholarship in the work of Umehara Takeshi (1994), who also argued in his *Nihon no shinsō—Jōmon/Ezo bunka wo saguru* [The depths of Japan: exploring the Jōmon Ezo culture] that pre-industrial Tōhoku culture was at the heart of Japanese identity, although he focused on the prehistoric *Jōmon* (cord-marked, referring to the pottery style characteristic of the period) culture that was developed in the region, instead of rice farming.

However, Tōhoku is still not completely free from Othering representations vis-à-vis central Japan. For example, Marilyn Ivy (1995) analysed the twenty-first-century exoticisation and commercialisation of certain Tōhoku destinations such as Tōno and Osorezan, which were marketed as being so different from the rest of Japan that the average Japanese must discover them as tourists, as in the 'Discover Japan' campaign of the Japanese National Railways. Today, Tōhoku occupies a complex position in the Japanese consciousness, in which Yanagita's legacy as well as the Nihonjinron myth of the Japanese *tan'itsu minzoku* (homogenous people) coexists with this Othering, exoticising force.

The question of Tōhoku's place in Japan has been brought to the fore following the Fukushima disasters, which highlighted the fact that the capital lives on power supplied by its surrounding regional areas. Akasaka Norio (2014), a member of the government's Reconstruction Design Council in Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, controversially declared on *Asahi Shimbun* that Tōhoku remains Japan's internal colony. Akasaka's (2014) argument was that the underlying power structure between the region and the central government has not changed. The Tōhoku region now supplies nuclear power, machinery parts (produced by low-waged labour) and rice to central Japan, instead of the 'soldiers, prostitutes and rice' of the pre-WWII period.

Ehrlich's work is important because it addresses both this ingrained image of Tōhoku as an exotic Other, as well as its more recent assimilation into the hegemony, through portrayals of various residents in the disaster-hit areas and their journey of recovery following the tsunami. Ehrlich constructs a unique and positive image of Tōhoku culture, complicating the one-dimensional negative image of an irradiated zone now universally evoked by the toponyms of 'Fukushima' and 'Tōhoku', or 'Northern Japan'. Ehrlich's Tōhoku differs to the rest of Japan in their resilient fishermen, a unique and respectful relationship with the dead and a culture of coexisting with different groups.

*Facing the Wave* portrays a distinct difference in culture between the fishermen and the rice farmers of the areas Ehrlich visits. Fishermen are demonstrated to be full of survival know-how, courageously riding out to the sea towards the tsunami to save their expensive boats. Fishermen are also shown to be working independently to restore their lifestyles as soon as possible, such as the man in North Miyako Bay who survived to tell his tale: ‘There was a big hole in the hull. Now I’ve fixed it. The government is busy. There’s no use waiting for them’ (p. 79). By December 2011, fisherman Hirayama and his son were selling their catches of saury and had ‘already rebuilt their tool and storage shed and [were] making buoys for clam season’ (p. 178) in the lively Miyako harbour. The presence of these strong fishermen in the book, who identified themselves as ‘men of the sea’, living ‘according to our instincts and needs’ (p. 80), directly challenges the myth of a rice-based Tōhoku, constructing it as a place that is Other to central Japan. The areas that Ehrlich visits are also shown to have a rich cultural heritage based on fishing, such as the *hamauta* of the last geisha of Kamaishi, a song that ‘always brought fish into the nets’ (p. 82). Residents of the small outer island Ehrlich visits in Matsushima Bay, where the main industry is fishing, are portrayed to be carrying on with their festivals and celebrations despite the disaster damage.

Conversely, Tōhoku farmers, who depend on their land, are shown to be more vulnerable and dependent on government support. For example, Kazuyoshi, who is the uncle of Masumi, a woman Ehrlich stays with, loses everything and is forced to take up a short-term government job involving debris cleaning. Masumi’s great uncle Satoru also has difficulty recovering due to his attachment to the land—his happiness depends on whether the government will let him rebuild the house that he grew up in, where his family grew their own rice, vegetables and flowers. Satoru attempts to plant a vegetable patch at his temporary home while he waits for permission, but this is also destroyed shortly by a typhoon and his ‘hope darkens, as if hope itself was tenebrific, the cause of night’ (p. 166). Although we are told in the epilogue that Satoru was able to rebuild his house and start living there, no one in the book returns to rice farming within the timeframe of the book. As Kazuyoshi explains, ‘all our machines and everything was covered in four feet of mud’ and ‘no matter how deeply we dug in the old rice field, we still found debris’ (p. 151).

This contrast is particularly interesting in light of the aforementioned debate surrounding Tōhoku as being the rice capital of Japan. Akasaka (2009), who believes that Tōhoku derives much of its culture from the

times before rice-growing was forcefully instituted in the region, has torn Yanagita's thesis apart even further following the disaster (2014) by claiming that it is better to not replant rice in the rice-farming communities that were inundated by the tsunami. According to his research, these rice fields were located on land that was reclaimed from the sea in a process called '*kasaage*' in the Edo period, when the population was rapidly growing and are naturally at high risk of tsunami damage. Now that Tōhoku's population is ageing and shrinking, it does not make sense for these saltwater-inundated areas to continue producing rice, in Akasaka's view. Although Ehrlich does not go as far as to object to the idea of rice farmers going back to their pre-disaster lifestyles, her work does contest the notion of Tōhoku people being not much more than rice producers for the capital and hints that rice farming may become less important in the region's future.

Another way in which Ehrlich explores the unique traditions of Tōhoku is through her portrayal of how the living relate to the dead—a specialty of Yanagita's, as demonstrated by his *Tōno monogatari* [Legends of Tono], an anthology of folk legends from Tōno, in Iwate Prefecture. Ehrlich explains that the dead 'continue to be a "living" presence in the household' even after death: 'They are demigods, guarding the house and instructing young and old in matters of moral rectitude' (p. 141). There are also many ways of interacting with the dead in Tōhoku. Even the Western-educated Masumi pays Jin the 'apprentice shaman' to take a ghost off her and follows with enthusiasm the latest earthquake predictions of an Iwate blogger whom she calls a *kamisama* and *uranaishi* (fortune-teller). The Tōhoku region is also known for their *itako*, who are 'blind mediums who communicate with the dead' (p. 121), whom Ehrlich spent many weeks talking to when she was in Japan 23 years earlier.

These kinds of superstitious beliefs are still widespread in the Tōhoku region. As Marie Mutsuki Mockett (2015, p. 27) remarked in her post-3.11 memoir:

It may seem odd to a Westerner to learn that Tōhoku is awash with ghosts; we associate ghosts with superstition and Japan has the image of being a highly modernized country. But the soul of Japan is still very much connected to her twelve-hundred-year-old history and within that belief system, ghosts are a powerful and meaningful presence.

Ghost sightings were the subject of a 2013 *NHK Special* program entitled *Naki hito tonō saikai* [‘Encounters’ with those who passed], which was a rare involvement for a TV channel known for its objective and factual reporting.<sup>4</sup> Ehrlich’s serious treatment of ghosts echoes this recent acceptance of the supernatural as a form of healing in mainstream Japanese media, but also presents this omnipresence of the dead as being an important part of Tōhoku’s culture. Ehrlich (2013a, p. 46) remains open-minded and respectful throughout her journey towards this idea of the dead coexisting with the living, asking herself whether the dead are ‘also alive’ if ‘the cosmos is constantly splitting into a multiverse in which quantum objects are broken and unbroken at the same time’.<sup>5</sup> When walking through the former site of Kannonji, ‘the temple behind Ookawa Elementary School that was washed away’, she comments that ‘no boundaries exist’ in this space (between the dead and the alive) and attempts to imagine herself interacting with the ghosts there, giving them ‘a pair of legs to walk on’ (p. 137). Ehrlich seems to be following in the footsteps of Lafcadio Hearn, whose work she mentions in her bibliography:<sup>6</sup> while not being a complete believer of these ghosts, Hearn (1897) admits in his *Living God* (which, coincidentally, introduced the term *tsunami* to the West) that he finds himself ‘for a moment forced into the attitude of respect towards possibilities’ (p. 4).

Ehrlich portrays this coexistence between the living and the dead in a positive light and questions the negative, fearful relationship that some Tōhoku residents have with their ghosts. Ehrlich explains that ‘even after Buddhism merged with Shinto, old Shinto beliefs’, according to which ‘death is an unseemly corruption; ghosts are ubiquitous and to be feared ... prevail in Tohoku to this day’ (p. 16). Masumi’s mother, Kazuko, packs garlic and salt in her lunches and places salt on her garden shrine ‘to scare the bad spirits away’ (p. 12). When Ehrlich visits the ‘river where the dead were pulled by grieving relatives out of the mud’ in Ishinomaki, Masumi becomes scared after feeling a ghost on her back, throwing salt in the air

4 See Parry (2014) for detailed summary of ghost sightings in post-3.11 Tōhoku, and Kudō (2016) for the reporting of ‘ghost customers’ by taxi drivers in Ishinomaki.

5 This sentence is particularly interesting because ideas from quantum physics are also explored by Ruth Ozeki, another North America-based writer whose post-3.11 work is analysed in Chapter 5.

6 Lafcadio Hearn, aka Koizumi Yakumo, spent his later life in Japan and wrote extensively on the spiritual traditions in the country. One of the very few sources of information on Japan in the Western world at the time of publication, in the late nineteenth century his writings were greatly influential in the creation of Japanese hetero-images. Following their translation into Japanese, these texts became an important source of self-images for the Japanese.

to scare it away (p. 136). Ehrlich asks: ‘Do ghosts need to be scary? ... Shouldn’t we, instead, try to make them feel at home?’ (p. 138). Ehrlich points out the strangeness of the fact that certain ghosts are revered as demigods, whereas others are feared as a form of corruption (*kegare*).<sup>7</sup> However, whether they are liked or disliked, Ehrlich demonstrates that such spiritual beliefs are a part of what makes Tōhoku culture unique.

If Ehrlich’s Tōhoku is a place where (at least some of) the dead and the living come together, it is also a place where the living live in collective harmony. As Ehrlich explains:

Japanese ideas about religion, architecture, theater and literature are based on *wa* and *shunyata*—concepts of plenitude and uncertainty, of togetherness framed by impermanence (p. 12).

This concept of *wa* (togetherness) is like the concept of *kizuna* (see Chapter 1). Although it could be said that *wa* refers to collective harmony, whereas *kizuna* refers to individual bonds, they are both used in very much the same way in discourses on Japan. In Nihonjinron discourse, *wa no kokoro* (spirit of *wa*), which comes from Confucianism, is often described as being the foundation of the Japanese spirit.<sup>8</sup> The basis for this argument is usually Shōtoku Taishi’s 17-article constitution, which sets it out as an ideal. Ehrlich (2013b) describes it as the Shintō idea of ‘together living’, but it is a concept also influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, like Shintō itself. This can be observed in the kind of altruistic sharing behaviour mentioned by Ehrlich, such as the young woman who continues her routine gift of farm vegetables after the tsunami, ‘apologiz[ing] that she had only one orange to give’ (2013a, p. 45) and the fisherman who ‘trolled up a bag with 10 million yen inside’ and donated it to aid relief (p. 182).<sup>9</sup>

Although Ehrlich repeats the age-old stereotype of Japanese collective harmony portrayed in both the domestic and international media, she shows that the disaster also had the effect of forming unexpected *wa* in Tōhoku. Ehrlich observes that, traditionally, ‘to be a hippie in northern Honshu means taking a political stand’ (p. 63) and that any deviation from the hegemony is seen to be undesirable for the collective *wa*. Wakao-san,

7 This kind of shunning inevitably brings to mind the other fear of unknown ‘corruption’ in post-3.11 Tōhoku: the prejudice against the ‘new *hibakusha*’, as Ehrlich calls them (p. 202).

8 An English-language example of this is Robert Whiting’s *You Gotta Have Wa* (1990, p. 113).

9 Ehrlich balances this with mentions of looting (pp. 17, 78) and of ‘people who are trying to get more than they deserve from the government’ (p. 151).

an oceans campaigner for Greenpeace, feels the need to confirm that 'I'm Japanese. Maybe not as much, but yes' (p. 69), showing that activists are indeed on the fringe of the definition of what it is to be Japanese. However, the disaster had the effect of bringing these people together in Tōhoku. For example, members of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, who were opposing the capture and killing of Dall's porpoises in the town of Ōtsuchi, turned into volunteers following the tsunami. Ehrlich also observes that 'many of the local fishermen in the Fukushima area now welcome the Greenpeace campaigners—the very people they've been fighting in southern whaling waters' (p. 68). In short, 'the March disaster changed protocol and erased territorial boundaries' (p. 186). This brings the Japanese closer to the true meaning of Shōtoku Taishi's ideal of *wa wo motte tōtoshi to nasu*, which is often interpreted as 'harmony at all cost (by suppressing differences, if necessary)', but was originally intended to mean 'harmony despite differences'. In this sense, Ehrlich's Tōhoku *wa* is a broader concept than *kizuna*, which is unlikely to form between people who disagree, but *wa* can refer to a coexistence despite differences in opinion. Ehrlich hints at a continuation of this trend as she documents that a geisha from Tokyo learned the *hamauta* from the 84-year-old Miyagi geisha Ito-san, which was a rare occurrence because geisha acts are 'never passed from one region to another, much less from one province to another' (p. 187). Ito-san, who in many ways represents the longstanding tradition, appears excited about the fact that she saw Caucasian and male geishas in Tokyo, where she went to perform her song. It is suggested that the tsunami will continue to be a catalyst for this acceptance of minority views and lifestyles to spread from Tōhoku to the rest of Japan.

Ehrlich also reveals that the concept of *wa* is no longer synonymous with unquestioning passivity and obedience in Tōhoku, especially when faced with inept authorities. Great uncle Satoru represents this attitude with his words: 'We Japanese tend to be too polite, so the government doesn't do anything ... We have to change how the country is ruled' (p. 147). Ehrlich observes how the post-3.11 behaviour of the authorities has had an impact on the Tōhoku people's trust in the government: 'When the government tests, they wave a dosimeter over the top of the fish as they come off the boats, but that doesn't work' (p. 69), reports one fisherman; whereas Jin the shaman observes that the authorities do not hesitate to cover-up the extent of radiation damage because the effects will only be felt when they are long gone. In some cases, the Tōhoku people even wilfully disobeyed the authorities, ignoring the order of the police to leave bodies as they found them (p. 58). Further, this kind of resistance

is shown to have influenced the authorities in turn. For example, in the cordoned-off areas, the police had sympathy for the abandoned animals and encouraged the animal rescuers who were there ‘illegally’ (p. 90). Perhaps most importantly, plant manager of Fukushima Daiichi Masao Yoshida began pumping seawater into the reactor core, against the wishes of the TEPCO officials, in an attempt to cool it down (p. 26). Ehrlich thus portrays Tōhoku as the centre of civic engagement and change, which is driven by the disaster. Despite the stereotype of *gaman* (persevering in the face of adversity, often by putting others before yourself), Ehrlich demonstrates that the Tōhoku people are not the meek and obedient rice farmers that they are portrayed to be today. Her portrayal evokes their warring Emishi ancestors from pre-rice growing times, who refused to be subjugated by the central government for many centuries.

The strength and uniqueness of Ehrlich’s work lies in her literary and symbolic reconstruction of Tōhoku as a place, as well as the objective evaluation of traditions allowed by her status as a semi-outsider. Ehrlich’s portrayal of post-3.11 Japan is not radically different from the media portrayals of a Japan that is calmly and collectively responding to the disaster, but she situates these characteristics carefully in a Tōhoku context, which, surprisingly, was not a common feature of Japanese-language cultural responses—mainly written by mainstream authors based in Tokyo, many of whom had not even visited the areas affected by the tsunami. Further, Ehrlich paints post-3.11 Tōhoku as a fertile ground for new ideas and collaborations, which also retains the positive aspects of traditional culture. Ehrlich’s work, filled with personal stories from the disaster-hit areas, is a powerful antidote for the one-dimensional association of Tōhoku with nuclear disaster in the English-language media.

The traditional lifestyles of the Sanriku fishermen and farmers that were brought to the fore in the aftermath of the earthquake sparked an interest from both Japanese city dwellers and non-Japanese alike in various areas of rural Japan, where ‘the core of Japanese identity’ is thought to be found. The future visions for rural Japan that I have explored in this chapter ranged from portraying rural Japan as the exoticised Other that must eventually be assimilated into a modern and Westernised Japan, to an attempt to explore the idea of a distinct Tōhoku identity. The two non-Japanese authors (Collasse and Ehrlich) presented a more nuanced and positive view of the region’s future as a place of healing and resilience, whereas the Japanese response (*Kimi no na wa*) was to paint its assimilation into Tokyo culture.

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