

6

EXOTIC JAPAN

Mirroring the high level of interest in the Fukushima disasters in the French media, French-language authors were quick to respond to the Japanese triple disaster and were focused on the nuclear aspect, like many of the English-language authors. Early cultural responses such as Daniel de Roulet's (2011) short book *Tu n'as rien vu à Fukushima* [You saw nothing in Fukushima], which takes the form of a letter addressed to a young Japanese woman living in Tokyo, or *Après Fukushima—recueil de haïkus du cercle Seegan* [After Fukushima—a collection of haiku by the Seegan group], edited by Seegan Mabesoone (2012), echoed the heightened attention towards nuclear power that dominated the media response to the disaster in France. Poet and Medievalist scholar Armelle Leclercq's (2014) poetry collection *Les équinoxiales* [Equinox writings] continued this exploration of nuclear power by juxtaposing her writings on arbitrary, man-made nuclear disaster exclusion zones and radiation exposure limits against her pre-3.11 exploration of natural beauty in everyday Japanese scenes. In a similar way to Kawakami Hiromi's *Kamisama 2011* (see Chapter 2), the invasion of nuclear radiation into the everyday life of the Japanese, in which people must now protect themselves against rain, air and even food, is captured in her verse, producing a melancholic effect combined with the beauty of her earlier writing. Christophe Fiat (2011) produced his *Retour d'Iwaki*, as well as the radio fiction series *Sur les traces de Godzilla* (2013) on *France Culture*, both of which recount an author's visit (Fiat in the former and a character called Guy Commerçon in the latter) to Tokyo and Tōhoku following the disaster, in which he is tormented by the cries of Godzilla and the history of Hiroshima. These responses demonstrate that Fukushima has become embedded in the French imagination of Japan in a similar way to Hiroshima. Fiat's Godzilla metaphor is particularly

apt because in much of the French literary imagination, Japan is now associated with an omnipresent and ominous shadow of the nuclear, despite its appearance of normalcy.

Many of the cultural responses to 3.11 in the French language are examples of insightful writing that attempt to challenge the mainstream discourse surrounding the disaster, including Richard Collasse's (2012a) *L'océan dans la rizière* (see Chapter 3), as well as Michael Ferrier's (2012) *Fukushima: Récit d'un désastre* [Fukushima: the tale of a disaster], Nadine and Thierry Ribault's (2012) *Les Sanctuaires de l'abîme: Chronique du désastre du Fukushima* [Snatched Away to Darkness: The Story of the Fukushima Disaster] and Philippe Nibelle's (2011) *Journal d'apocalypse* [Diary of the apocalypse]. Written by French residents of Japan, these three latter works carefully trace the everyday issues experienced by those living in Japan at the time, such as the lack of information on radiation levels following the disaster, inaccurate media portrayals of disaster-hit areas by outlets based in the capital or overseas and the complicated nature of the Japanese nuclear power industry, making it possible for French speakers to gain an insight into everyday life during and after the disaster in Japan.

However, it is clear that *japonisme* is present in many French literary works, which continue to portray Japan as being fundamentally Other to the West. Interestingly, recent works seem to be harking back to the original, aesthetic *japonisme* of the late nineteenth century, in that they tend to portray Japan as a dreamy land of exotic beauty, rather than the typical late twentieth-century techno-Orientalist portrayal of the Japanese 'as if they have no feeling, no emotion, no humanity' (Morley & Rovins, 1995, p. 172). Perhaps the perceived weakening of Japan's political and economic power following the triple disaster makes the country less threatening compared to the image of 'ants' working tirelessly for world domination, famously popularised in 1990s France by the then prime minister Edith Cresson. For example, Belgian French-language novelist Amélie Nothomb (1999) played a role in spreading exoticising portrayals of Japanese corporate life with her *Stupeurs et tremblements* [Fear and trembling]. This book traces the degrading experiences of Amélie as a young employee at a rigidly hierarchical Japanese company, filled with workaholic robot-like Japanese. However, Nothomb's post-3.11 writings retrieve some of the gentler aspects of her stereotypes of Japan, found in *Métaphysique des tubes* [The character of rain] (2000) and rebrands the country as a heart-warming and beautiful place of childhood and nostalgia. Nothomb published a special edition of *Stupeurs et tremblements* three

months after the earthquake, which was accompanied by the short story *Les myrtilles* [The blueberry trees], the proceeds of which were donated to the Japanese operation of the Doctors of the World organisation. Unlike the book cover of the previous *Livre de Poche* edition (2001), which features a terrified-looking Nothomb against a backdrop of three Japanese men bowing in their suits, the 2011 book cover presents a beautiful red kimono pattern with the title and the author's name in an Asian-style font. The disaster is markedly absent from *Les myrtilles*, a short and simple retelling of Nothomb's heart-warming encounter with a man on the Asama Mountain, where she goes to find blueberry trees, reinforcing this idea of an exotically beautiful Japan.

In this chapter, two more works in this category of *néo-japoniste* fiction are explored to answer two questions: What exactly about Japanese people is still perceived as different and exotic by these French authors? If such a trend exists post-3.11, is it any different to the *japonisme* of yore?

Exotic Precarity in Thomas Reverdy's *Les évaporés*

French author Thomas Reverdy's (2013) novel *Les évaporés* [The evaporated], shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt 2013, was written during his six-month stay at the Kujōyama Villa in Kyoto from January to August 2012, as part of an art residency program associated with the *Institut français du Japon-Kansai*.¹ The novel is the second of Reverdy's recent noir-style works, preceded by *L'Envers du monde* (2010), set in post-9/11 New York and followed by *Il était une ville* (2015), set in Detroit following the 2008 financial crisis. Although Reverdy had the idea to write a novel on the phenomenon of *jōhatsu* (evaporation; disappearances without known causes) prior to 3.11, the novel is based on this experience of living in post-3.11 Japan that the Kujōyama residence gave him. Reverdy's work is rare in that it focuses on the margins of Japanese society, such as the *jōhatsu*, the day labourers of San'ya and the homeless, who are not usually associated with the Western image of Japan as a wealthy and egalitarian country. However, Reverdy's novel is not a

¹ Renowned French author Eric Faye also took advantage of the program in 2012 and published *Malgré Fukushima* [Despite Fukushima] (2014), which was a personal journal and record of the beauty that remains in the country, despite the nuclear disaster.

work of social criticism. Reverdy does not attempt to invite his readers to pity these marginalised social groups, but portrays them in a dignified light, at times even giving them an exotic, noir-style allure. Rather than questioning the myth of a homogenous Japan through the portrayal of its margins, Reverdy displays that the margins of Japanese society contain the essence of Japanese culture. Although Reverdy is aware of the not-so-pretty side of living in the margins of post-3.11 Japanese society, he opts to portray them in this romanticised way as part of his defence of the dreams, imagination and fiction that fuels our lives, which runs like an undercurrent throughout the book. Reverdy presents a vision for post-3.11 Japan that continues to have an exotic appeal, despite the issues of social inequality that exist in the country.

In this novel, Richard B, a private detective based in San Francisco, spends his days pining for his Japanese ex-girlfriend Yukiko, who left him a year earlier. He is saved from his solitude by a phone call from none other than Yukiko, who asks him for help in looking for her father Kazehiro, who has ‘evaporated’—he has intentionally disappeared without a trace, for reasons unknown. Still very much in love with her, Richard B agrees to accompany Yukiko and search for her father in Japan, a country he only knows in relation to Yukiko and the snippets she introduced him to: Japanese cuisine, Zen meditation and Buddhist vegetarianism. Meanwhile, Kazehiro (now known as Kaze) finds Akainu, who is a lonesome 14-year-old boy in San’ya, Tokyo, where they establish a business specialising in removals of all types (mostly unpleasant ones that no one else wants to be involved in). Kaze had decided to evaporate after being fired from his job at an investment company and being threatened by the *yakuza*, for reasons he believes are related to knowing too much about their shady involvement in the post-3.11 reconstruction effort. Following an encounter with a pair of *yakuza* in San’ya, Kaze and Akainu flee to the disaster-hit areas, where Kaze finds employment at the nuclear power plant and later establishes a business specialising in aiding people to evaporate. Akainu, who fled from Tōhoku following the tsunami, believing his parents to be dead, is reunited with his father. Richard B also miraculously manages to arrange a meeting with Kaze, but he does not attempt to persuade Kaze to come back to Yukiko and her mother. In Reverdy’s words, ‘in a French novel, they would have never been able to find her father and in an American novel, they would have been able to bring him back home. But this was the end of a Japanese story’ (310)—hence the subtitle of the book, *Un roman japonais* [A Japanese novel].

The other inspiration for the novel that can be deduced from the subtitle is Richard Brautigan's *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel*. He quotes extensively from it (as well as Brautigan's other works), with extracts in italics throughout the novel. Brautigan's Yukiko is characterised by her 'long and Japanese' hair, which is described obsessively by her ex-lover, the 'American humorist'. Reverdy's 'Richard B' is a combination of the 'American humorist' and the real-life Brautigan. 'Richard B' is a private detective but also a socially awkward, whisky-drinking poet, much like Brautigan the author (many of Brautigan's poems are presented as being Richard's in the novel). This intertextuality is heightened by the fact that Brautigan's novel is inspired by another Japanese novel, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Sasameyuki* [*Makioka Sisters*]. Yukiko is the name of one of the main characters of *Sasameyuki*—an ostensibly quiet, typically Japanese and beautiful woman, who is unmarried at the age of 30. It is clear that Reverdy draws inspiration from Tanizaki's Yukiko as well as Brautigan's version. There are many parallels between the three texts, including the lack of a father figure (due to death in Tanizaki, suicide in Brautigan and *jōhatsu* in Reverdy) and her portrayal as the epitome of old and beautiful Japanese tradition, which is juxtaposed with the free and independent temperament of her younger sister Taeko in Tanizaki's novel. The result is the complex situation of a French author drawing inspiration from an American author who drew inspiration from a Japanese author, with all three writing about Japan.

The main undercurrent common to these three authors is their exotic portrayal of Japan, centred on the depiction of Yukiko as a desirable, beautiful Japanese female figure, who is lost in life, unmarried, unattached and waiting for the right man. Out of Tanizaki's *Makioka Sisters*, it is not the Westernised and individual Taeko but the frail-looking and typically Japanese Yukiko that Brautigan and, subsequently, Reverdy choose to portray. There is a strong desire to portray Japan in an exotic manner on the part of the two authors. In Brautigan's case, he chose to write about a Japanese woman despite the fact that the novel was inspired by a real-life break-up with his *Chinese* girlfriend, Siew-Hwa Beh. Reverdy, however, defends his decision in his endnote: 'what we call the imaginary—the Japanese imaginary of *nô* or genre films, but also the occidental imaginary of Japan—are part of the reality of things. They shape our world. Without it, a forest will only ever be the sum of its trees' (p. 314). In his view, both images and representations of Japan have value in themselves, regardless of how inaccurate they are, and he is not ashamed of contributing to this

exoticism. Reverdy also writes that ‘everything that is told here is true’, commenting on the truth of fiction and of imagination—once we think of something, it inevitably becomes part of our reality and starts to shape our view of the world. It is no surprise that Reverdy was inspired by Brautigan’s *Sombrero Fallout*, in which the American humourist’s imagined and absurd story starts to take a life of its own in his rubbish bin. Just like we can indulge in Brautigan’s tale of a below-freezing-point sombrero falling from the sky, there is nothing inherently wrong, in Reverdy’s view, in enjoying the exoticised portrayal of a beautiful, unchanging Japan that only exists in our imaginations.

Through the eyes of Richard B, who is visiting Japan for the first time, Reverdy explores Western stereotypes surrounding Japan as a country of contradictions. Within days of arriving in Japan, Richard manages to encounter ‘all the clichés’ from *geiko*, Japanese-style gardening and public baths to synthetic drugs sold freely and eating live icefish on his third day (a miraculous feat, considering that many Japanese people would not have seen these in a lifetime of living in Japan), as though Yukiko is determined to show him all that is strange about the country. Richard expected to see what he had seen in *manga*, films and literature on Japan and finds that ‘all the clichés about Japan are true, even those that contradict each other’ (p. 84). Japan is a blend of the modern and the traditional, Western and familiar in appearance but Other in many ways. Although Westernised and modern in many ways, Japan is also an island nation where things ‘do not change very quickly’ (p. 268). The men appear to be in control, but it is in fact the women who control their lives (p. 127) and so on.

In some ways, this phenomenon of contradiction is explained by the idea that ‘all of Japan today is but a weakened reflection of the tradition’ (pp. 102–103). The tradition exists as traces in a country that is modern and Westernised for the most part, giving the impression of contradiction. Just like Tanizaki’s Yukiko, Reverdy’s Yukiko represents the beautiful dying tradition. In Reverdy’s case, Yukiko’s traditionally Japanese elements are preserved in time due to her escape to the US. However, Reverdy makes it clear that this is a phenomenon not limited to Japan. Richard is also a specimen from a bygone era, from ‘the country of large spaces and trout-fishing’ (p. 267). Yukiko and Richard represent the stereotypical exoticised hetero-images of their respective countries and yet they are lost, even at home, as their ‘countries don’t exist anymore’ (p. 267). Nevertheless, unlike Tanizaki’s Yukiko or ‘the French who think France is a country of literature, even though they only make perfume and Bordeaux there

now and the Italians who would talk about opera for hours' (p. 267), Yukiko and Richard are painfully aware of their outdatedness, living in the modern world.

Reverdy also speaks to the impossibility of understanding the Other in a complete manner, through the relationship of Richard and Yukiko. Richard realises that 'during the whole year that they were together, sleeping together at her place—occasionally at first, then more and more frequently and finally virtually every night—he basically didn't know anything about her' (p. 52). Richard's feeling is also underscored by the fact that, although the two were sleeping at 'home', Yukiko only feels truly at home when she returns to Japan—what Richard thinks of as being Yukiko's home is not even her real home. If even lovers who spend all their time together cannot understand each other, then it seems like an impossible notion that one can come to an understanding of a cultural Other, with whom there is little interaction. Even Kaze, a Japanese-born Japanese, has an exoticised view of his own country. It is revealed that his image of Tōhoku is a highly romanticised one, involving rice, sake and solitary pines. Reverdy claims that all Japanese have a *furusato*—'an image tinged by nostalgia which inspires popular songs' (p. 288), involving some traditional and unchanging element, such as a festival, flowers or a bridge. If exoticism is to be defined as the allure of the Other, often involving reductive representations, then it is everywhere around us—we even exoticise our own childhood, selectively remembering what we can no longer experience easily as adults. It is difficult to blame Richard, who, even after his various experiences in Japan, reduces the Japanese to three characteristics: polite, delicate and beautiful (when it comes to women). Reverdy allows his readers to feel comfortable with this and to indulge in Richard's exotic experiences.

Japan is portrayed as a country that continues to have an exotic appeal to the West. This is contrasted with America, which gives people dreams but disappoints them when they get to know the country. Unlike Richard, whose real-life experiences in Japan do nothing to quell his exotic Japanese dream in the form of Yukiko, she cannot love Richard because her 'American dream' involved 'being an actress, marrying a young and handsome man that she meets by coincidence, who would come home at night to eat dinner with her and make love and take her to holidays in Europe' (p. 291). Her dream is irreconcilably different to the reality of the old, overweight and broke Richard. For Yukiko, her experience with Richard makes her realise that this 'American dream' was not for her and

she loses all hope for America. She can no longer maintain that dream because she has realised that her life with Richard would never be the American life she envisioned. Convinced that her real home is in Japan, she decides to not go back to San Francisco.

Richard is aware of the negative sides of Japanese society, such as 'the playacting, the misunderstandings, the solitude, the conformism' and insists that there is no need to accept the whole Japanese 'package', even if he appreciates other aspects of Japanese culture (p. 267). At the beginning of the novel, Richard defends his dying profession of private detective by criticising people who would rather set up webcams in their own home and carry out their own detective work than ask for professional help. In his view, private detectives exist for the purposes of shielding their clients from the harsh, bare reality of the images of adultery and to soften the blow of the news. In a similar way, there are many dreams in the novel that are maintained by the characters not knowing or opting to not chase the full reality. These include Richard's hope for another relationship with Yukiko, the dream of the Bubble economy or even the dream that the government protects its citizens. Despite his insistence, Richard, representing the West in this novel, is reluctant to face various truths regarding Japan, opting to turn a blind eye to the social problems in the country to keep his exotic images alive. For Richard, Japan continues to be a mysterious place of alternatives or escape, where anything is possible. Another interesting metaphor is the story of an old gentleman and art lover told by Yukiko, in which the gentleman created an artists' retreat and then went blind, becoming unable to view the beautiful art around him. However, according to Yukiko, the gentleman was able to obtain satisfaction and peace because he believed the art to be beautiful even though he could not see it. Reverdy implies that the West is like this blind man—Westerners are too far away (either by circumstance or will) to know the real Japan, but they believe the country to be beautiful and they derive enjoyment out of this game of imagination.

In keeping with his argument on the merits of constructed images, Reverdy does not explicitly criticise the Japanese way of not always disclosing the full reality, in both the public and private spheres, unlike other authors and intellectuals commenting on post-3.11 Japan. Kaze's evaporation, central to the plot, involves disappearing without telling his wife anything to protect her. Although Yukiko initially struggles with this, she eventually comes to accept that her father now lives a different life (it is unclear whether her mother comes to such an understanding). Yukiko

implicitly admits that her mother lying to her during their weekly calls, reassuring her that everything was fine following 3.11, helped her to focus on her own life in the US. In the earlier pages of the novel, Richard reflects on the seismologists who bravely explained that even if it were possible to predict an earthquake a few days in advance, the population would not be told because there is a higher probability of more people dying from the panic than the earthquake itself. Richard asks: ‘Why do politicians, experts and journalists depress us with the prospect of catastrophes for no reason, then?’ (p. 18). This inevitably brings to mind the delayed public response of the Japanese Government to the Fukushima nuclear disasters. Reverdy appears to be defending their decision to some extent. Similarly, when he meets Kaze at the end of the novel, Richard decides that there is no point in talking to him about his daughter who crossed the Pacific to find him or his wife’s sadness because he is now a different man and he cannot return to his former life. Richard simply calls this ‘tact’, or the ‘virtue of poets’ (p. 300), and gives logic and reason to what Japanese intellectuals criticised as ‘hide-ism’, or the ‘Japanese sickness’.

Reverdy explores what is usually hidden in Japanese society, as long as it fits in with his exotic hetero-image. The French journalist that Richard meets explains that ‘those on the margins ... are more reliable when it comes to knowing about a society ... If you want to know the country, study its basement’ (pp. 223–224). Throughout the novel, Reverdy emphasises the notion that it is in the margins of Japanese society that the essence of Japaneseness is found. Richard notices the way in which the homeless in Ueno Park prefer to take care of themselves by finding food in rubbish bins rather than begging and how they place their shoes outside of their tents, just like those Japanese living under a roof. In the way of living of the homeless, Richard sees the traces of an ancient code of individual and social honour, exemplified by *bushidō* (the way of the warrior). This symbolic centrality of the margins in Japan is also explained through the metaphor of *ukiyo* (the floating world), which is often used to refer to the worldly existence of prostitutes, actors and vagrants of the Edo period (as in *ukiyo-e*), but has its roots in the typically Japanese concept of impermanence—the idea is that because the world is impermanent, it made sense to Edo-era Japanese to spend their lives seeking pleasure and these marginal figures were necessary. It is important to note that this image of the ‘floating world’, exemplified by woodblock prints, was also a staple of the *japonisme* movement, which was how Japan was culturally introduced to many in Europe. Richard (and Reverdy) incorporate Japan’s

margins into their dream of an exotic Japan—the margins represent a typically Japanese space, which does not contradict all the stereotypical clichés about Japan, but rather exemplifies them.

Japan is often described as a wealthy nation, composed entirely of the middle class (*ichioku sō chūryū*)² and only in recent years has there been any attention paid to the country's poor or its social margins, especially in the Western media.³ One explanation for this lack of attention is philosopher Maruyama Masao's metaphor of Japanese society as being a collection of octopus pots, quoted by Richard (p. 123), which suggests that these marginal social groups are isolated from each other as well as from mainstream society, like the octopus in different pots, preventing their plight to be known to the world. For example, the *yakuza* traditionally take special care to distance themselves from mainstream society, which they call *katagi* (respectable, honest) and the average Japanese does not know much about them. However, Reverdy's portrayal of the margins does not aim to bring his reader's attention or awareness to their plight. Reverdy is, for the most part, happy for these marginal groups to stay in their respective octopus pots, each with their own social codes and is only interested in them as a source of exoticism within Japan. Reverdy's portrayal of the margins include the day labourers of San'ya, the homeless and the women of the 'lost generation', but his portrayal gives dignity to these groups and at times even romanticises them, rather than denouncing their situation.

The most notable marginal group that appears in the novel is the day labourers of the district, known as San'ya, in the Taitō ward of Tokyo, where they are given precarious and often dangerous jobs in construction or cleaning, if they are lucky. San'ya labourers are of particular interest in the post-3.11 context, when there was an influx of labourers from the disaster-hit areas, as Reverdy describes: 'those who had debts or who lost themselves in trauma came to Tokyo in the hopes of starting a new life' (p. 73). Ironically, in Reverdy's novel, they are then sent back to Tōhoku to work in the decontamination effort or at the nuclear power plant because 'these men were excluded from the statistics that allow normal people to

2 The term *ichioku sō chūryū* refers to the idea that all 100 million (*ichioku*) Japanese people believe that they are middle class (*chūryū*). The *Digital daijisen* dictionary (2015) explains that the term came about in the 1960s, when the majority of Japanese began to describe their standard of living as 'middle class' in national opinion polls.

3 In recent years, there has been increased attention on the issue of the working poor. Examples include articles by Fackler (2010) for the *New York Times* and by Kim (2014) for Reuters.

feel safe' (p. 74). It is implied that these men were originally the 'workers, fishermen, craftsmen and farmers' from the disaster-hit areas, forced to live closer and closer to the water (and, therefore, being in a more vulnerable situation in the case of a tsunami) due to their economic position relative to the landowners (p. 188). However, Reverdy remarks that an interesting aspect of San'ya is that the area does not look like a slum. It looks like an ordinary suburb like any other to an undiscerning eye. One really has to know what to look for, which makes it perfect for Reverdy's mysterious, noir-style setting. In the style of French crime fiction, even the urban landscape of San'ya is endowed with a dark, exotic beauty. For example, the recruiting of day labourers on the street is gracefully described as 'a ballet without music or poetry' (p. 71), with the men rolling up their sleeves to show they are not cold, taking off their hats and smiling to show their healthy hair and teeth.

A French ex-journalist in the novel explains that 70 per cent of those living in San'ya are *jōhatsu* (p. 274), which is unsurprising considering the tens of thousands that disappear every year in Japan. As Reverdy reminds us time and again, the police do not typically investigate these cases and the families do not like to discuss the issue either because it is considered dishonourable. Nevertheless, the notion of disappearing and starting a new life seems to hold a romantic appeal to the French, rather than repel them. Lena Mauger and Stephane Remael's (2014) reportage *Les évaporés du Japon* [Evaporations in Japan] was met with enthusiasm by French readers. The book has many factual similarities with Reverdy's work and includes the story of a man who runs a business helping people to evaporate, much like Kaze. The French fascination with the idea of evaporation is likely to be linked to domestic economic factors in France, where unemployment reached record levels in 2015. Perhaps this makes the idea attractive to French readers who dream of starting their life afresh, like the *jōhatsu*.⁴ Although Richard initially confesses that he does not understand why anyone would do this in Japan, he eventually comes to a certain understanding of the phenomenon. Introduced by the French journalist, Richard meets a real-life *jōhatsu*, the ex-pink film director Pinky, who was forced to evaporate due to some debt that he incurred from the *yakuza* for the budget of one of his ambitious films. Richard describes Pinky as having a 'certain allure ... of an old beauty which has

4 This contradicts the idea that Japan is a country in which you are given one chance for everything in life, as observed in Ozeki's work. Although evaporation is living *outside* of normal society and is not truly comparable, it is an indication that stereotypes of Japan tend to exist in contradictory pairs.

preserved its charms' (p. 244); preferring to meet in bars hidden in the upper levels of old buildings and armed with a bragging grin (p. 273), he is undoubtedly a likeable character, despite his past.

People in Japan do not always evaporate for financial reasons. It could be claimed that Yukiko is also a kind of *jōhatsu*. Reverdy seems to encourage this interpretation by calling his novel *Les évaporés*, when the singular *L'évaporé* would suffice to refer to Kaze's evaporation. Yukiko became an adult during the lost generation of the 1990s, when 'the youth never had so little future outlook' and 'there had never been more people committing suicides and running away' (p. 48). Yukiko runs away from home at the age of 18 and starts waitressing at a bar in Tokyo. Although Yukiko was not in debt like many of the other *jōhatsu* in the novel, she escapes from mainstream society and attempts to start a new life, first in the underworld and then in the US. Her Japanese friends are also shown to be precarious, marginal figures, but in a different way; having missed the 'right age' to marry at 25, now they are leftover 'Christmas cakes' that no one shows interest in after the 25th (Christmas Day). Without a stable job, they rely on part-time work and dates with older men to support themselves. However, Reverdy paints their existence in a romanticised light as being beautiful and seemingly without worry, such as snacking and drinking tomato *shōchū* and shiso *tantakatan* in an *izakaya* in Meguro.

Although most Japanese marginal figures are an object of Reverdy's romantic Western gaze, from the labourers of San'ya and the *jōhatsu* to the 'Christmas cake' girls of the lost generation, there is one exception: the *yakuza*, who are often portrayed in a positive manner and exoticised in the West, in a similar way to the Italian mafia. French readers would most likely associate the *yakuza* with Kitano Takeshi films such as *Zatōichi*, in which the chivalrous code of *ninkyō* is respected. Following 3.11, foreign media focused on *yakuza* disaster relief efforts, which were not reported on in Japan (e.g. Adelstein 2011b, 2012; Bouthier 2011). Similarly, in the novel, the *yakuza* are initially described as having had a role in re-establishing order in the disaster-hit areas before the police and reclaiming their 'historic role as the protector of the nation' (p. 177). Yukiko even takes the role of defending the *yakuza* by saying that they make society safer and describes it as 'a company for people who couldn't become salarymen' (p. 266). Reverdy also takes advantage of their seedy mystery on a superficial level, as evidenced by his depiction of the lavish traditional-style abode of a *yakuza* 'shōgun of the shadows', who lives with a 12-year-old girl dressed in elaborate *maiko* gear and blackened teeth.

However, just like this girl who appears beautiful at first glance but conceals a terrible secret, the *yakuza* is shown to be rotten at the core. Despite the traditional portrayal of the *yakuza* as a Robin Hood-style figure who helps the downtrodden in the spirit of *ninkyō*, Reverdy shows that the *yakuza* in post-3.11 Japan could not be further from this ideal. Kaze was fired from his job because he knew too much about the involvement of the *yakuza* in the reconstruction business in the Tōhoku region. These *yakuza*, as we find out, send the people who have borrowed money from them and the homeless to the disaster-hit areas, where the lucrative reconstruction contracts are, to take a cut. The *yakuza* take advantage of the indebted victims in Tōhoku, whose houses, still under loan, were washed away or devalued close to zero. The bleak and bare villages of temporary housing with plastic bathrooms are the only part of Japan exempt from Reverdy's exoticism, which highlights this contrast between the *ninkyō* ideal and reality.

There is no longer a strict demarcation between normal society and the *yakuza*, as supposedly dictated by their chivalrous code, with the *yakuza* posing as legitimate companies to secure these reconstruction contracts. The *yakuza* are described as being involved in petty crimes and violence from racketeering, beating up Koreans and selling Chinese prostitutes, to threatening people who cannot pay back their debt. They take advantage of those in the margins instead of helping them. Similar to when he describes the temporary housing in Tōhoku, Reverdy's language becomes raw and bare when it comes to these crimes committed by the *yakuza*, which makes his criticism clear. The French ex-journalist underscores this idea that the *yakuza* has lost touch with their chivalrous roots, when he describes their past activities: 'It was more human. It smelled of urine and bitter alcoholic sweat ... It was violent, brutal, unfair, tragic, if you will, but fun, noisy, colourful, sensual. It was life' (p. 226). Reverdy speaks through the voice of Kaze, who is disgusted by the world of the *yakuza* and creates his own system of escaping them—*jōhatsu* and *yonige* (skipping town, especially when one is indebted to the *yakuza*), which are undoubtedly precarious forms of living, but at least ones in which you can be in control of your own destiny. This provides justification for the motivation of Kaze's clients, who do not wish to 'be victims for their whole lives' (p. 257). When Richard finally meets Kaze, he does not criticise him for his choice, accepting that this is a suitable way of living for some Japanese.

In Reverdy's novel, almost everything about Japan continues to be exotic, beautiful and different to the West following 3.11, even the indebted, the homeless, the day labourers from Tōhoku and unmarried women in precarious situations. While Reverdy is generally a fan of the exoticised Japanese hetero-image and its artistic value, this does not make him blind to Japanese social issues, which he demonstrates in his condemnation of the kind of petty and unchivalrous crimes against the weak committed by the *yakuza*. Nevertheless, Reverdy returns to exoticism at the end of the novel by romantically portraying the evaporated in Japan as a form of escape from this unpleasant reality. Reverdy's imagination of an exotic and mysterious Japan, as exemplified by Yukiko and her 'long and Japanese hair' is protected, in a demonstration of the strong hold this image continues to have on the French in the post-3.11 world.

Perfectionist *shokunin* in Hubert Haddad's *Le peintre d'éventail*

An important aspect of the exoticised image of Japan in the Western world is that of the Japanese craftsman (*shokunin*). The *shokunin* dedicates his life to the perfection of his technique, in such a way that his dedication, well-practised motions and way of life move the viewer. The *Dajirin* (2006) defines *shokunin katagi*, the 'character of the *shokunin*', as 'a characteristic that is common among the *shokunin*. The tendency to have confidence in one's skills and only completing tasks in a way that one can be happy with, without compromising easily or departing from one's principles for money'. In the West, this *shokunin* work ethic has partly been captured in the term *kaizen*, especially in the context of the automobile industry. Although the term simply means 'improvement' in everyday usage, *kaizen* in a company management context refers to the philosophy of continuous improvement most famously adopted by Toyota and introduced to the West by Imai Masaaki's (1986) book, *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success*. Imai (1986) explained that 'the Kaizen philosophy assumes that our way of life—be it our working life, our social life, or our home life—deserves to be constantly improved' (p. 3). The tradition of the *shokunin*, which is typified by hard work and constant innovation, has been applied to all employed Japanese in Nihonjinron discourse, rather than being limited to those occupations that are involved in manufacturing, as explained by cultural anthropologist Funabiki Takeo (2003, p. 190).

Another derivation of the *shokunin* philosophy is the term *monozukuri*, which is perhaps better known than *kaizen* in France because Renault incorporated the concept into their strategic plan at the time of their alliance with Nissan in 1999. *Monozukuri* literally means ‘making things’ in Japanese and is used to refer to the spirit of the Japanese manufacturing industry—the realm of the modern *shokunin*. As observed in the Japanese Government’s continuing positioning of the country as a *monozukuri taikoku* (the great country of *monozukuri*) through various schemes such as the database of *monozukuri* masters or the *monozukuri hojokin* (*monozukuri* assistance grant), these ideas of continuous improvement and a strong manufacturing industry (as opposed to service-based economies in the rest of the developed world, such as the UK, Australia and the US) remain an important part of Nihonjinron. Referring to the establishment of the Monotsukuri University/Institute of Technologists in 2001,⁵ which is an institution centred on practical skills rather than abstract knowledge, Funabiki observed that this was Japan’s challenge to the imported Western concept of the university (pp. 179–180). The ideal of the *shokunin* has even become a source of pride and point of difference for the Japanese, vis-à-vis Western civilisation. As Kita Yasutoshi (2008) wrote in his *Takumi no kuni Nippon* [Japan, a country of artisans]:

The social influence of the ‘shokunin spirit’ on the culture of our country cannot be overstated. The mentality of ‘making things laboriously’, ‘learning without giving up’ and ‘not compromising on quality’ has been transmitted among the Japanese as though it is written in their DNA. It is also a generator of the country’s power and wealth (p. 70).

This image of the Japanese as being a people who are especially adept at creating practical products, due to their strong work ethic, philosophy of continuous improvement and manual dexterity, is especially interesting to examine in the post-3.11 context because the reconstruction efforts revealed a serious decline in the *shokunin* population (especially those involved in carpentry and construction) that had been occurring prior to the disaster and, due to this, many felt the urgency to preserve and promote this part of Japanese culture. One example of this kind of effort in France was the plan to create a building called ‘Takumi Project’ in Alsace by the end of 2016, to ‘spread the techniques and crafts of the *shokunin* overseas’ (‘Takumi no waza’, 2016). The 2012 documentary film

5 *Monotsukuri* is another way to say *monozukuri*.

Jiro Dreams of Sushi by American director David Gelb (also distributed with French subtitles as *Jiro rêve de sushi* by Les Films Séville) was effective at popularising the *shokunin* philosophy overseas, by telling the story of the never complacent 85-year-old sushi master Ono Jirō, who spends every second of his day thinking about how to improve his sushi. For example, he always wears gloves outdoors to protect his hands and experiments with massaging an octopus for 45 minutes instead of 30 minutes. In the following section, I explore Hubert Haddad's (2013a) novel, *Le peintre d'éventail* [The fan-painter], which presents a vision of the *shokunin* spirit rebuilding cultural traditions in post-3.11 Japan.

Tunisian-born French-language author Hubert Haddad is a recognised master of making Other figures accessible to French-speaking readers through his ornate and poetic prose. A prolific author, Haddad has produced more than 70 publications in his career, but he is best known for his 'dictionary-novel', *L'Univers* [The universe] (1999), *Palestine* (2009) and, most recently, *Le peintre d'éventail* (2013a; *Le peintre* hereafter), following which, Haddad received the *Prix Louis Guilloux* and the *Grand Prix SGDL de littérature*.⁶ *L'Univers* explored the reconstruction of the memory of an Eastern European man whose family died in the concentration camps, whereas *Palestine* is the story of an Israeli soldier becoming the Other, a Palestinian, after losing his memory and being adopted by a Palestinian family. In a similar way, Haddad brings the post-3.11 story of fictional gardener and painter Matabei Reien to his French readers in *Le peintre*. *Le peintre* was published simultaneously with *Les haïkus du peintre de l'éventail* [The haikus of the fan-painter] (2013), which is a collection of *haïku* poems that belong to the novelistic universe of *Le peintre*. Following the success of these books, Haddad also wrote another Japan-inspired novel, *Ma* (2015), which is a story of lovers linked together by the real-life early twentieth-century *haïku* master Santōka.

Haddad's ability to put himself in the shoes of such a varying range of protagonists from different cultures and places is partly due to his erudition and extensive research, but he also fills in the gaps using his imagination. At the time of writing, Haddad had never visited Japan, but was 'fascinated from a distance ... by the extraordinary refinement of a civilisation that has based its fragile reality on an awareness of impermanence between

6 The *Grand Prix SGDL de littérature* was also awarded in 2015 to Laurent Mauvignier for his *Autour du monde* [Around the world], a collection of individual stories in various parts of the world, linked together by the events of 3.11. This demonstrates the high level of cultural interest in 3.11 in France.

destructive typhoons, or during the long wait until the next earthquake' (2013b). The names of the characters in *Le peintre d'éventail*, such as Lady 'Hison', 'Osue' and 'Enjo', are not names typically considered Japanese within Japan, but rather names that sound Japanese in French. The novel is set in the imaginary Atōra region near the Fukushima power plants, by the Jimura Mountain and close to a village called Katsuario in the Fubata district (although this is inspired by a village called Katsurao in the Futaba district, Fukushima Prefecture).

In *Le peintre*, Haddad creates an ephemeral and elusive wooden *ryokan* (inn), owned by the retired *geisha* Lady Hison,⁷ which attracts 'deserters of everyday life' (p. 60). At this inn is an ever-changing garden of unimaginable beauty, meticulously maintained by the frail master gardener and fan-painter Osaki Tanako. Burmese-Japanese Matabei Reien, Lady Hison's lover and guest, receives some of Osaki's teachings before his death and becomes his successor, devoting his time to Osaki's art of maintaining the garden according to the seasons, then capturing its ephemeral beauty in brushstrokes on a paper fan, using a combination of painting and *haiku*. Matabei eventually creates his own disciple out of Xu Hi-han, Lady Hison's new Taiwanese-Japanese kitchen boy. Following a complicated love triangle involving Lady Hison's beautiful new female guest Enjo, Hi-han flees the inn to attend university in Tokyo. The 3.11-inspired tsunami arrives shortly after, as though to echo this human drama, razing virtually everything to the ground and killing everyone except Matabei, who happens to be taking a walk around the hills at the time. Matabei manages to overcome extraordinary circumstances in the following year to restore Osaki's washed-away drawings and writings on his fans, staying alive just long enough to pass them onto Hi-han, now a professor at the University of Tokyo.

Haddad's Japan is a *japonisme*-style portrait, exotic and beautiful, full of vibrant, colourful flowers that change constantly with the seasons and is studded with beautiful pale women with ink-black hair. The cover of the first edition of the novel features the words *Sublime Japon* (Sublime Japan) in capitals across a bright red border, on the simple black-and-white leaf pattern of the background. It is clear that the publisher, Zulma, felt that

7 Lady Hison is only described as an 'ex-prostitute' or 'ex-courtesan' in the text, but French readers are likely to associate this with the word *geisha* (and this was probably Haddad's intention). Putting aside the question of whether *geisha* provided sexual services, Lady Hison's appearance—always wearing a *yukata*, with her hair up high in a bun—indicates that she is a courtesan in the traditional style, rather than a modern prostitute.

this theme of sublime Japan was an essential piece of meta-information for potential readers because they typically use this red banner to display the name of a prize won by the book (rather than information about the book's content). In the early pages of the book, the reader is presented with this description of the sublime nature around the inn, as Matabei recounts his arrival there:

There were Chinese cedars on the hills, a magnificent ginkgo that attracted pilgrims, blue oaks and beautiful chestnut trees, red maples up to the wooden bridge—not a reliable means to cross the indecisive river—between the Duji lake and the forest of giant bamboo trees covering the southern slope of the first mountain with green shadows. There was also this ash-coloured light that I loved, on foggy mornings, the harmony of the tea plantations off the little paths and the snow that took up residence on our heads from the end of autumn (p. 14).

The *shokunin* in this novel, Osaki and Matabei, dedicate their lives to capturing the essence of this beauty in their art, both in the garden as well as on the fans, relentlessly pursuing a form of perfection that they know cannot be obtained and are never complacent with their level of achievement. As Matabei tells Hi-han, 'the ideal garden is only but a dream', but 'imperfection leads to perfection' (p. 99).

While the *shokunin* philosophy came under the global spotlight following 3.11, there has also been a debate within Japan on whether this kind of elaborate training process is necessary. Livedoor founder Horie Takafumi (2015) started this debate by commenting on his Twitter account that 'only idiots need to train for years' as a sushi chef and that it was possible to learn the essential skills in three months at a 'sushi academy' designed to quickly train chefs, instead of the traditional requirement of *meshitaki san nen, nigiri hachi nen* (three years cooking rice, eight years shaping sushi), or even *shari taki san nen, awase go nen, nigiri issō* (three years cooking rice, five years adding vinegar and your whole life shaping sushi). Horie argued that this lengthy training developed as a way to decrease competition in the industry, by keeping the number of trained sushi chefs low, rather than out of necessity.⁸ Horie criticised the Nihonjinron idea that the Japanese tend to reward effort (*doryoku*) rather than talent—

8 'Sushi shokunin no "meshitaki 3 nen nigiri 8 nen" wa jidai okure? Horiemon no zanshin na kangae to wa' [Is the 'three years cooking rice, eight years making sushi' tradition behind the times? Horiemon's unconventional views] (2015).

‘not only *doryoku* (“strenuous effort”) but *kurō* (“suffering”) is expected of a young person who has ambition’, as argued by Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1976, p. 75) in *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour*. An example that is often given for this in *Nihonjinron* is the Japanese examination system, which is designed so that the candidate who does the greatest amount of memorisation and studying is the most successful, rather than those who can think on their feet.

The *shokunin* that we encounter in Haddad’s novel, namely Osaki, is a romanticised image of the traditional system that Horie so despises—the dedication and endless quest for perfection in the most extreme circumstances. Osaki and Matabei are prepared to put in all the sweat, blood and tears necessary, prioritising their art over their lives. By the time Matabei meets Osaki at the start of the novel, he already ‘seemed to be on the verge of death’, ‘his hair so whitened and his body so thin that he gave the impression of not belonging to the human race’, although Matabei also observes that he was raking the gravel of the paths and climbing trees the previous night (p. 30). Osaki carries himself with his will rather than physical strength because he feels that he cannot depart from this world until his fans are in safe hands. Even at such a dire time he refuses to see a doctor, preferring to spend his last bit of remaining energy teaching Matabei. Osaki’s selfless dedication to his art at this last stage of his life leads Matabei to conclude that he was ‘without doubt an unrivalled artist, who, reaching the height of artistic achievement, prioritized his watering cans and rakes, hidden behind his paper fans’ (p. 71). Osaki’s ashes are scattered around the garden as he wished for, ‘dispersed throughout the flowerbeds, on the moss and the arrangements of autumnal flowers, chrysanthemums and thriving roses, on the tree roots, through the channels of water and on the boulders, in a gesture similar to the offering of incense’ (p. 61). Osaki ends his life by becoming part of his own art, fertilising the flowers and trees that he cherished.

True Japanese *shokunin* are shown to live discreetly in their quest for perfection, unlike some of their flamboyant and eccentric European counterparts, such as Mozart, Picasso and Salvador Dalí. Since they are never satisfied with their art, they are not boastful. Osaki does not seek money or fame in exchange for his art and, in his lifetime, he only ever sells a few paintings to a distant relative. The descriptions of his few material possessions underscore this idea of austerity: in the living room of his hut where he serves Matabei plain boiled water, ‘the only furniture there was a rolled-up mattress and a chest, a portable stove next to the sink

and a low table with a heater' (p. 37). Living in his humble, hidden-away hut, which was 'caulked like the hull of a boat', Osaki was so invisible that it took Matabei a year to notice his presence (p. 15). Osaki is a hermit, who does not travel outside the confines of the inn because he feels that there is already enough for him to do there. Despite his dedication and achievement, Osaki remains his modest self at his deathbed, expressing regret for not having been able to paint all the fallen leaves. He claims that he painted 'just a few, from one year to another, a few sheets' (p. 43). After witnessing his quiet death, Matabei comes to the conclusion that 'true masters live and die unknown' (p. 54). Osaki becomes the image of the discreet Japanese *shokunin* ideal. Matabei seems to approach Osaki's artistic heights eventually, but only when he sacrifices his health by living alone in the reconstructed hut in the exclusion zone to resuscitate his master's work.

The relationship between Osaki and Matabei and, subsequently, Matabei and Hi-han, is that of master–apprentice, which is typical of Japanese *shokunin*. This tradition is shown to be key to maintaining Japanese cultural traditions in the face of natural disasters and the resultant state of physical impermanence, with Matabei sacrificing his life following the tsunami to revive his master's work, which Hi-han then dedicates his academic career to analysing. This relationship is usually commenced by the apprentice approaching a potential master and undergoing many years of difficult training, before becoming a *shokunin*. However, in the novel it is Osaki who approaches Matabei in search of a successor, due to his failing health. In a style typical of the apprentice system, Matabei does not receive much guidance—exemplified in the Japanese idiom of *mite nusumu* (to see and steal), disciples are expected to 'learn using their bodies', by observing and doing. As Hi-han observes when he is getting started as a kitchen boy:

A dictionary of season words does not produce the right emotions for a haiku poet and neither do recipe books give inspiration to an apprentice cook. But observing an ancient woman with deformed hands cutting up some raw fish will make you a master in knife skills (p. 67).

When Osaki first invites Matabei to his humble abode, he suggests that Matabei helps him and that he would show him some 'little things' (p. 38). Matabei 'learned customs through his voice and techniques from

his hands, by simply walking by his side and helping him more and more as he became weaker' (p. 78), but he mainly learns his art indirectly from the works and the garden that Osaki left.

However, Haddad's idea of a *shokunin* revival in post-3.11 Japan is subversive compared to the aforementioned Nihonjinron conventions, in that he portrays a wide range of characters with this *shokunin* spirit. Although he does not draw much attention to this, Matabei is a foreigner. His father was a rich Burmese who seduced and married a young woman from Kyoto, whose last name he adopted as necessitated by the customs at that time in Japan. Hi-Han, Matabei's apprentice, is also a foreigner, whose parents were among the Taiwanese who were sent to Japan after the war. However, foreigners are not the only atypical *shokunin* in Haddad's novel. Although Haddad's three main characters are male, there are a few female characters who display *shokunin* qualities, such as manual dexterity, hard work and persistence. This is particularly interesting in light of the difficulty for women to be *shokunin* in most fields in Japan.⁹ For example, Aé-cha, who is Korean as well as being female, creates various Japanese-style dolls from carved and round-shaped *gosho* to hollow paper-mâché *daruma* for good luck and lacquered wooden *kokeshi*, which are kept in a dollhouse in her room. Although never given a name, the mute and ancient ex-rice farmer maid of the inn expertly carries out her cooking and cleaning duties and moves about with a smile despite her age and fragility. Lady Hison proves herself to be an able *okami* (a female proprietor and manager of a traditional inn) with the spirit of *omotenashi*,¹⁰ and a master of 'the art of presentation', according to Hi-han (p. 68). Although not placed on the same level as Osaki or Matabei, these female characters with strong dedication and work ethic reinforce the idea that the *shokunin* spirit resides in all Japanese.

In *Le peintre*, Haddad portrays post-3.11 Japan as a country in which beauty continues to be found everywhere, created and maintained by humble old masters, who stubbornly chase their unattainable ideal

9 Takeuchi (2004) contended that 'the very body of the creator is a corollary to the sanctity of the product. Thus women were automatically banned from certain trades where the notion of pollution by blood would have been sacrilegious' (p. 9). For example, there are very few female sushi chefs, with commonly cited reasons ranging from elevated body temperatures making the sushi too warm to menstrual cycles affecting their sense of taste.

10 *Omotenashi* refers to the Japanese spirit of hospitality, which has gained popularity since TV presenter Takigawa Christel used the term in her speech in 2013, in the successful bid campaign to bring the Olympics to Tokyo in 2020.

of perfection through a lifetime of training. Despite the frequency of natural disasters, manual skills are securely transmitted from generation to generation through a demanding apprentice system. Haddad expands the range of possible *shokunin* considerably from the standard Nihonjiron concept. Even those who are only partially Japanese or women are shown to carry the *shokunin* spirit within them.

In contrast to the recurring stereotype of Bashō, Zen Buddhism and suicide, which were apparent in the English-language texts that portrayed Japan's uniqueness, the two selected French authors focused more on post-3.11 Japan as a source of aesthetic and artistic inspiration, as well as a faraway place of escape and mystery, which appears to be a revival of the *japonisme* of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In these texts, there is limited portrayal of social issues and the literary events occur in traditional settings in Kyoto or Tōhoku, which are considered suitable for the depiction of old Japan. Perhaps the Fukushima nuclear disasters prompted these authors to reflect on what could be at stake if such events were to happen again in Japan and that this encouraged them to focus on what makes Japan exotic and different from the rest of the world. More broadly, parallels can be drawn between the exoticism of these works and the post-3.11 self-Orientalising discourse in Japan, as observed in the promotion of Japanese traditional culture through government initiatives, such as the 'Takumi project' or setting up 'Japan Houses' in overseas cities. Japan's continued exotic appeal in the post-3.11 world perhaps did not grow organically in France, but rather had some of its seeds planted by the Japanese, who wished to draw on Nihonjinron concepts to market Japanese culture overseas.

This text is taken from *Re-imagining Japan after Fukushima*,
by Tamaki Mihic, published 2020 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/RJF.2020.06