

CONCLUSION

Birmingham and McNeill (2012) summarised the confusion that the Japanese had regarding their identity following the triple disaster:

Can Tohoku recover? Inevitably, the question leads to an even more fundamental one: What sort of country does Japan want to be? The nation's epic industrialization drive seems to have run out of steam. Its dream of energy self-sufficiency lies in ruins. Its population is aging and declining. Japan's squabbling political leadership seems powerless to stop the nation's slide down the economic league tables (p. 180).

This self-perception took an interesting turn as images of the cool, calm and collected response of the Japanese to the 3.11 disaster impressed the world. These images, which were imported back to Japan along with reactions of non-Japanese viewers, inspired many Japanese to live up to this ideal and restored their pride in a country that had been dwindling in global economic and technological influence during the 'lost two decades'.

Combined with the prospect of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the renewed direction and hope brought by Abenomics, Japan has experienced a surge in patriotism and nationalism, which has manifested itself in some cases through extreme xenophobia and hate speech against those considered to be 'anti-Japanese'. Both traditional values as well as modern economic and technological progress were restored as a source of pride for the country. Further, Prime Minister Abe (2013) claimed to have brought the unprecedented nuclear disasters 'under control' and aimed to use the opportunity to build an international reputation for the Japanese as producers and exporters of nuclear reactors and know-how (Kingston, 2013).

At the same time, criticisms against the ‘typically Japanese’ lack of transparency on the part of authorities in dealing with the Fukushima nuclear disasters and their attempt to suppress dissenting voices through a unifying official discourse (most notably under the slogan of *kizuna*) were what characterised other Japanese images in non-fiction discourses. Some felt that the various habits and attitudes of post-war Japanese society, such as blind trust towards authority and the safety myth of nuclear power, came crumbling down in the aftermath following the disaster. Public intellectuals emphasised that the Fukushima incident represented the end of an era that had lasted 66 years—the time was now *saigo* [post-disaster], as opposed to *senjo* [post-war]—and that Japan should step down from its position as an economic superpower and steer itself into a more sustainable future, appropriate for its ageing society. Authors such as Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Haruki, while condemning the response of the authorities, stressed the continuity of Japan from the legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and called for Japan to live up to its identity as a ‘no-nuclear’ nation.

In many cases, it was this context of conflict between contradictory visions for society that Japanese authors addressed in their writing, rather than the tragedy of the disaster itself. Although cultural responses to disasters such as war literature often attempt to record personal and individual experiences to counteract the dehumanising and generalising effect of the cold facts and numbers of mainstream media, in the case of 3.11, the internet allowed ordinary Japanese citizens to fulfil this role by expressing their first-hand experiences through channels such as Twitter and personal blogs. Instead, what was required from authors was to describe and make sense of the invisible—the nuclear radiation or the general mood in post-3.11 society (*kūki*, to borrow Shiriagari’s word)—to help guide their readers, especially those who were not directly affected by the disaster but felt indirectly responsible for the events at Fukushima, to mentally reconstruct themselves and their identity as Japanese citizens. Recognising the need to help resolve tensions between contradictory visions for their society, Japanese authors offered imaginative alternatives in their fictional responses to the disaster.

What Japanese-language authors such as Wagō Ryōichi, Kawakami Hiromi and Shiriagari Kotobuki proposed in their responses was for Japan to proceed by focusing on regaining the traditional, Shintoistic and harmonious relationship that the Japanese have with nature by making use of their resilience, which some public intellectuals had also

recommended. While the degrowth theory of economic decline voiced by intellectuals was not commonly accepted in mainstream media, fictional texts, in which these ideas were represented in terms of positive and heart-warming everyday changes, were more approachable and better able to connect with the Japanese public. Other Japanese-language authors, such as Takahashi Gen'ichirō, and the authors of dystopian responses, such as Tawada Yōko, encouraged multiplicity and dialogue by directly portraying the pressure to conform and the lack of discussion in Japanese society. In their own ways, these Japanese-language responses helped to reconcile the ideological polarisation that was observed in Japanese critical discourse following the disaster and aimed to create a future path for Japan somewhere between the two extremes of radical pro-nuclear nationalism and strong criticism of the entire Japanese post-war system. *Shin Godzilla* also embodied a reconciliation of these two camps, in that the work could be viewed both as nationalistic propaganda and a parody of it. The general feeling that one gets from these responses is that the Japanese are a people who will overcome their current state of confusion and domestic squabbling to eventually distinguish themselves from the rest of their world through their philosophy of impermanence and harmonious coexistence with nature, which will lead them to become pioneers in sustainable living. This is because, despite their critical attitudes towards Japanese society, most authors left off their works with a glimmer of hope, be it in the power of words and open discussion, the new generation, a stronger regional Japan, technology or Japanese resilience.

While some Japanese-language authors were backward-looking in their assessment of post-3.11 Japanese society, in many cases evoking nostalgia for 'the good times past', English-language authors were generally more forward-looking in that they focused on valuable cultural, spiritual and philosophical elements found within Japanese culture and how these continued to be relevant in post-3.11 reconstruction, as well as for social issues such as suicide and bullying. There was a particular focus on Zen philosophy, as opposed to the Shintō focus of the Japanese authors, which demonstrated the continued popularity of Japanese-style Buddhism, meditation practices and lifestyle concepts in the English-speaking world. The two chosen English-language texts by Ruth Ozeki and Gretel Ehrlich built on and updated the one-sided post-3.11 media portrayals of *kizuna* and *gaman*, with their nuanced exploration of concepts such as Zen interconnectedness and *wa*, which, in their view, inform the Japanese psyche. At the same time, their elaborate exposition of Japanese

ways of thinking helped English-speaking readers to understand how the Japanese deal with devastating disasters and continue rebuilding and also challenged Western conceptions of life and death. The English-speaking world has much to learn from these intangible assets of the Japanese, even though the country has become physically damaged and polluted by nuclear radiation.

Although there were many French-language authors who took similar approaches to the Japanese-language and English-language authors summarised above, Thomas Reverdy and Hubert Haddad (see Chapter 6) focused on the more exotic elements of Japanese culture, such as raven-haired women, the *yakuza*, *shokunin* philosophy or the sublime nature. This reflected the primarily cultural interest many French readers have for Japan and their continued perception of the country, at least in some literary texts, as being a place of beauty, mystery and escape rather than a complex real-life entity with its contemporary social issues. Although the French media showed a strong interest in the Fukushima nuclear disasters, this element of a 'polluted Japan' was not strongly present in the two chosen works of book-length fiction. It seems that nuclear radiation does not hinder French willingness to seek escape and inspiration in Japanese culture, an attitude that may conceal the unwillingness of the French themselves to face up to the issue of nuclear power, upon which their country is heavily reliant.

Many of the Japanese-, English- and French-language responses that were examined can be placed on a spectrum ranging from social criticism to entertainment, in which the Japanese-language responses tended to be the most focused on Japanese social issues, whereas English-language responses dealt with social issues but treated them in an entertaining or educational way for the readers and French-language responses tended more heavily towards exoticism and entertainment, even when they dealt with social issues. This makes sense given that foreign-language authors were not expected to respond to the aforementioned need of Japanese readers to rediscover their identity in the face of increasingly polarised ways in which their country was being represented, as well as to come to terms with their sense of involvement and responsibility for the nuclear disaster. As the examples analysed in this book demonstrate, in a situation in which information came in the form of one-sided views from mainstream media or a vast expanse of self-published individual experiences, Japanese fiction was valued over other media due to its ability to provide imaginative alternatives.

However, reality is never so simple and there are some works that do not comfortably fit on this spectrum, especially when it comes to portraying differences between Tokyo and Tōhoku. In one case (see Chapter 4), the spectrum was completely reversed, with the Japanese-language response *Kimi no na wa* displaying some serious self-exoticisation by the Japanese, whereas the English-language response by Gretel Ehrlich and the French-language response by Richard Collasse were much more socially critical. Both these authors had spent a significant amount of time researching, travelling and living in Japan and possessed more knowledge about the disaster than many Japanese authors. These exceptions go to the very heart of my project—the hypothesis that, in this age of globalisation, when studying events that have an impact on a global scale, such as 3.11, it makes sense to study the responses to the event in a global manner. These two examples, as well as the works of French authors, such as Michaël Ferrier or Nadine and Thierry Ribault, demonstrate the importance of looking beyond national and linguistic borders in the analysis of literary and cultural responses to events. Further, based on this evidence, I expect to see a growing tendency for self-images and hetero-images of nations to converge in the future. As more people travel and live in different parts of the world, differences between what a country's citizens and residents perceive as their national character and what foreigners perceive should become minimal. As authors move freely between countries, with some of them (e.g. Richard Collasse) spending more time in Japan and having more on-the-ground knowledge than an ethnically Japanese author born overseas, it becomes increasingly difficult to label an image as being a self-image or a hetero-image.

However, as shown by the references made to the divine punishment theory by various intellectuals and authors following 3.11, it was mostly Japanese authors who viewed disasters as change agents and an opportunity to reflect on Japanese society, as well as addressing the question of 'who are the Japanese?' As such, Japanese cultural responses to disaster are often critical of their own country, which motivates readers to act in certain ways. Conversely, foreign-language authors are perhaps prompted by Japanese disasters to reflect on what could have been lost and express their solidarity through positive portrayals of the country. The differences may also be simply explained by the fact that it becomes morally difficult for outsiders to criticise a country and its citizens following a disaster, which fosters more positive hetero-images. This could be understood as 'a paradise built in the imagination', which is similar to

Rebecca Solnit's 'paradise built in hell'—the outpouring of sympathy and grief towards victims usually translates to a desire to see the best in these people and to temporarily put aside political differences. To understand the social and cultural construct of Japan's post-3.11 future, it is essential to study hetero-images from a variety of sources, to contrast them against self-images and to determine how they influence each other.

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