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Seas of Sorrow, Lakes of Heaven: Community and Ishimure Michiko

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SEAS OF SORROW, LAKES OF HEAVEN:
COMMUNITY AND ISHIMURE MICHIKO

A Thesis Presented

by

BRETT KAUFMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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For Sammy

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ABSTRACT

SEAS OF SORROW, LAKES OF HEAVEN:

COMMUNITY AND ISHIMURE MICHIKO

MAY 2020

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The goal of this thesis is to examine the theme of community in two translated works, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* and *Lake of Heaven*, by Ishimure Michiko. I analyze how Ishimure defines a community, and I also look at the tension between insiders of the community with outsiders. Next, I look at Ishimure's use of genre in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*; she blends autofiction, autobiography, and illness narratives to give different perspectives to reflect on the Minamata disease health crisis. Through this analysis, I also look at the shift in Ishimure's tone toward outsiders, moving from anger to reconciliation between the texts in question. Lastly, I comment on the change in Ishimure's public image and discuss a story where she is the outsider experiencing Tokyo.

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INTRODUCTION

From the distant past until the present day, Japanese literature has had a strong relationship to nature. Poets from the Heian period composed *waka* while gazing at geese soaring overhead, and the writing of Matsuo Bashō has him reflecting on the nature of Japan as he travels by foot around the country. This close relationship to nature in writing has continued in Japanese literature, but as the world changes, the approach to environmental literature changes. Minamata represents one of the first major industrial disasters in Japan, and therefore, Ishimure's approach to environmental fiction is less about evoking seasons through poetry and more about trying to capture nature's beauty in a period where profit margins are a bigger priority. As the environment becomes more polluted, and the world climates change, there has been a recent trend in literary studies to look at texts through an ecocritical lens. The rapid post-war industrialization led to an economic boom without regard to the nature of Japan's archipelago. With this economic and ideological shift, there was also a shift in nature writing. Before this type of writing became as popular as it is today, Japan suffered from a disastrous example of industrial pollution. Ishimure Michiko who born in Kumamoto in 1927 and just recently died in February of 2018 was from the town most affected from this harmful pollution, and she became a prominent voice to levy concerns about the morality and horrors of this event. As one would expect, Ishimure's writing primarily began as a response to the pollution by the Chisso Corporation in Minamata. One of the greatest failures in public health gave rise to the activism and literary voice of one of Japan's premier environmental writers.

Ishimure is known for her ecocritical writing both inside and outside of Japan, but her career as a notable author began with the first text I will be analyzing, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Her literary canon is primarily concerned with critiquing Japan's rapid industrialization and fighting for compensation for victims of Minamata disease. She is also an established poet though who formed a poetry circle in Kumamoto city. Her classical education in poetry and literature is seen throughout her canon as she writes many *tanka* and *waka* poems. Furthermore, she wrote a modern Noh play that discusses the mercury poisoning of Minamata. While most of her texts solely focus on illness and nature, she does also have a fascination with the historical Shimabara rebellion. Despite the narrow focus in content, the scope of genres that Ishimure uses are broad. She writes poems, plays, historical novels, fiction, memoirs, and even children's books. The major themes that appear across her canon are environmentalism, Buddhism, industrialization, and as I intend to argue, community. Ishimure's texts frequently make use of Japanese history, folklore, and religion to establish place and tone. Ishimure spent most of her life living near Minamata where prior to the war she worked as a substitute teacher at a local elementary school. Her father was an inspiration to her because he was hardworking and religious. She often wrote about him in her autobiographical text *Story of the Sea of Camellias*. He was a construction laborer, and they lived close to the beach in Amazoko. After the war, she married and retired, devoting herself to writing. She became a key member of a poetry circle in Kumamoto, and she was inspired to write critically of the rapid urbanization of Japan while pursuing these interests.¹ She died of Parkinson's

¹ "Ishimure Michiko," Kumamoto Prefectural Board of Education, <http://kyouiku.higo.ed.jp/page2022/002/005/page2332.html>

disease in 2018, but her vast literary career spans dozens of works, only several of which have been translated into languages other than Japanese.

Much of Ishimure's writing centers around nature and the dangers facing ecosystems, but she is most famously known for her accounts of the victims of Minamata disease. Minamata disease is mercury poisoning that is primarily caused by the consumption of fish and shellfish that are contaminated by methylmercury.² This disease takes its name from the region most affected by this poisoning and where the disease was discovered. Minamata disease wreaks havoc on the body's nervous system. People afflicted with it experience loss of vision and speech, numbness, loss of motor control, and in extreme cases, insanity, coma, and death. Additionally, the mercury poisoning affects fetuses, and it is responsible for a variety of birth defects. The city of Minamata is a small town in Kumamoto prefecture facing the Shiranui Sea, which is also called the Yatsushiro Sea. The Chisso Corporation was involved in the heavy industrialization that occurred in the post-war period. Mercury used in the company's production of acetaldehyde was dumped into Minamata Bay and began the contamination of the environment that led to the disease.³ Despite knowing the cause of the mercury poisoning outbreak by as early as 1956, the dumping of mercury continued for several years afterwards. It is noted that "social circumstances in the 1950s and 1960s placed great emphasis on industrial development, perhaps encouraging discrimination against poor

² Harada, Masazumi. "Environmental Contamination and Human Rights — Case Of Minamata disease." *Industrial & Environmental Crisis Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1994): 141. No need to capitalize "And"

³ Harada, 143.

fishermen in South Kyushu.”⁴ This conflict between the disenfranchised fisherman and the harshness of corporations that valued economic growth will become central to my argument. Ishimure was born in this region and gained fame from her activism that demanded compensation for the victims and their families. As a firsthand witness to the horrors of unchecked corporate greed and industrialization, her texts are often harshly critical of capitalism and industrialization. The scholarship surrounding Ishimure’s literature stems from her ecocritical perspective and her portrayal of disease.

In this thesis, I want to move away from a strictly environmental reading of her works to discuss a larger discourse of community that appears in many texts written by Ishimure. Ishimure spends much of her career writing about her rural community in Kyūshū, but I think that she makes an argument about what Japan has lost due to environmental destruction and corporate greed. She argues for understanding and supporting rural communities, and she wants to explain how outsiders to these communities are misjudging the values of rural Japan. Outsiders are seen as a source of oppression and greed in that people coming to Minamata with industrial intentions are what ultimately brought about the outbreak of Minamata disease though she is not solely negative when discussing outsiders.

This thesis will examine two of her most famous texts in translation, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata disease*, published in Japan in 1969 and then translated into English by Livia Monet in 2003, and *Lake of Heaven*, published in 1997 in Japan and translated into English by Bruce Allen in 2008. These texts are separated by almost three

⁴ Tsuda, Toshihide, Takashi Yorifuji, Soshi Takao, Masaya Miryai, and Akira Babazono. "Minamata disease: Catastrophic Poisoning Due to a Failed Public Health Response." *Journal of Public Health Policy* 30, no. 1 (2009):61.

decades, but the themes of community-based living run throughout each text. However, they differ greatly in genre and intent. *Paradise* is semi-autobiographical and is politically motivated around the outbreak of mercury poisoning in Minamata. Ishimure writes about real people who died and the riots that occurred. She wants to show an accurate picture of how her community was wronged by uncaring capitalist and industrialist desire. It is a text tied closely to her own life and to her history of activism for environmental protection and reparations for victims. *Lake of Heaven* is a fictional text about an old town destroyed by the construction of a dam. It is less condemning of all people outside of her small community, and I think it argues instead for a return to more pastoral living. *Lake of Heaven* was released at a time when Ishimure's popularity in Japan was on the rise and after the collapse of the Bubble economy in 1990. After being shunned by the literary world for a long time, the collapse of the hyper industrial economy showed that maybe Ishimure had a point about the dangers and fragility of such reckless capitalist living. The number of times her name was mentioned in newspapers increased dramatically in the 1990s as shown by a chart in Shoko Yoneyama's article on the "Ishimure phenomenon."⁵ In this more hospitable literary climate, Ishimure's *Lake of Heaven* is a more hopeful take on the insiders and outsiders dichotomy that she establishes in her works.

My first chapter will address the cruelty of outsiders in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. I will begin with a discussion of genre because Ishimure occupies a unique

⁵ Shoko Yoneyama, "Animism: A Grassroots Response to Socioenvironmental Crisis in Japan," *New Worlds from Below: Informal Life Politics and Grassroots Action in Twenty-first-century Northeast Asia*, ed, Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Jeong Soh Eun (Australia: ANU Press, 2017), 113.

position in the world of illness narratives as she does write about her own life, but she is not the one suffering from mercury poisoning. I will give a brief theoretical background on discourse around illness narratives in the West and then specific examples of Japanese illness narratives. Then I will move into an analysis of the text itself with support from articles discussing Ishimure and the historical events that she emphasizes. The chapter is broken into two main areas of discussion: the way she gives a voice to the disenfranchised victims of Minamata disease and the community activism that she and others participated in to get justice for their community. Finally, I want to briefly look at the muted reception it initially received in Japan in light of the reevaluation of her works that occurred in both Japan and the West. Through this type of analysis, I will try to pinpoint the way that Ishimure divides insiders and outsiders in this text as well as how her experiences and the experiences of others justify the anger she has for Chisso's industrial recklessness and capitalism in general.

In chapter two, I will analyze *Lake of Heaven* through how it allows an outsider into a rural community that has been destroyed by industrialization. I want to look at the different arguments that Ishimure makes through what defines this local community. By using a fictional town, she zeroes in on how place and people make a rural community strong, important, and fundamentally different from the large cities of Japan. The protagonist Masahiko is from Tokyo and rediscovering the homeland of his grandfather, so his character is a way to establish the differences between people from the countryside and people from the city. Ishimure talks a great deal about the local *kami* and spirits and how they are still an important part of interacting with nature, and she also discusses the importance of food and taste to communal spaces. Finally, the sounds of nature and rural

life are examined as a way to understand the world. Masahiko is new to all of these things so first I will give the insider perspective, the villagers of the fictional Amazoko, and then I will look at Masahiko's various epiphanies as he adapts to a different way of life, the outsider perspective. I argue that after the harsh binary of insider versus outsider in *Paradise, Lake of Heaven* is a reconciliation for Ishimure. It highlights the distinct beauty and community of living in rural Japan without barring entry to those who wish to enter.

Ishimure Michiko is a powerful figure in the ecocritical literary circle, and her unique perspective of experiencing the pollution and health disaster of Minamata disease influences her idea of the importance of living with nature rather than in nature. The names of trees, flowers, and gods add to a real sense of place to the communities undone by the greed capitalism both fictional and real. The names of trees and plants play into two major recurring themes shared between the two texts, food and animism. Animism is central to Ishimure's philosophy in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Animism is the belief that all parts of the world have a soul or spiritual presence. Because she believes in the spiritual essence of places and plants, Ishimure's philosophy is firmly spiritual. This firm belief in the spiritual nature of the environment is argued to come from her childhood in the country rather than the city. I further this argument in my second chapter. Food is also a large part of how Ishimure creates place. The food of a place is part of community identity as shown in *Lake of Heaven*, but it is also poison as seen by the mercury tainted fish of Minamata. Food is both a source of life and death for Ishimure's texts, but the spiritual nature of the world is not different between the texts whether they are fictional or autobiographical. The spiritual is part of the reality for Ishimure, and therefore, I view many of the dreamlike passages in the autofictional text, *Paradise*, as part of her guiding

philosophy of animism. Additionally, the names of actual victims hold the outside world accountable for turning away from a place in need. In this chapter, I argue that Ishimure explore the dichotomy of insiders and outsiders in rural Japanese communities to critique rapid industrialization, negligent capitalism, and, to show how a more community-based style of living can leave a positive impact on nature and society.

CHAPTER 1

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS IN ISHIMURE MICHIKO'S *PARADISE IN THE SEA OF SORROW*

1.1 Introduction

Ishimure Michiko's 1969 semi-autobiographical activist text, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata disease*, tackles the human suffering and environmental disaster of the mercury poisoning incident on Kyushu. It is a personal story centered on the victims of Minamata disease, but it also recounts protests and early government intervention during the crisis that began with the first case of mercury poisoning in 1956 and continuing with the dumping of the toxic methyl mercury until 1968. By recounting deeply painful stories and juxtaposing them with the indifference of a bureaucratic government, Ishimure creates a moving story about industrial pollution, but she also establishes a clear divide between someone from Minamata and those she views as "cold" outsiders.

Since I discuss the structure of the text below, I will begin by first outlining the plot of the text. *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* is an activist text about Minamata disease and the pollution of the sea by the Chisso corporation. It is told in a mixture of styles; it begins with a look at patients suffering from Minamata disease in a Kumamoto hospital. Ishimure is the presumed narrator, and she utilizes the "I" pronoun. When talking about specific patients, she removes herself from the narrative, and their stories are told directly from their perspective. During these looks at patients who are afflicted with the disease, Ishimure inserts actual excerpts from medical journals studying the mercury poisoning incident. The stories of the patients and the medical writing are frequently juxtaposed.

After these patient testimonies, Ishimure switches to the government and local reaction to the incident. She outlines the protests by the fishermen whose careers have been destroyed by the pollution, and once again she juxtaposes these firsthand accounts of herself and the fishermen against the media headlines covering these events. Finally, the text goes into detail on the Minamata activist group that Ishimure helped create in order to fight the government and Chisso for compensation for the suffering and destruction of livelihoods. The text carefully weaves stories from Ishimure's perspective, medical researches, news outlets, patients, and activists to give a full portrayal of the systematic erasure of the community's suffering and the corporate and bureaucratic greed that allowed this level of pollution to happen.

First, I would like to explore the basic outline of the outbreak of Minamata disease as well as look at the corporation to blame. Minamata disease is a neurological disease caused by poisoning from methyl mercury which was dumped in the sea by the factories of the Chisso corporation. The Chisso Corporation made rural Kumamoto a center for industrialization. This dangerous compound methylmercury, which was a by-product of acetaldehyde manufacturing, found its way into fish and other seafood that the local citizens and wildlife consumed. Notably, the local cat population was so strongly hit by this disease that scientists focused on them as a way to examine the effects of the disease, and I will discuss this in more depth further into the chapter. Even after the contamination came to light, the government response was muted, and the Chisso Corporation was never held fully responsible for their actions, despite paying meager reparations to the families affected. The pollution was overlooked as Japan's industrial post-war boom fully took off, and the price of human and natural life was a nonissue for

the bureaucrats who came and left without taking action. I would now like to move into a rough timeline of how this disaster disrupted the peace of Minamata and how the victims were ultimately dealt with in terms of compensation for their suffering.

Brett Walker's *Toxic Archipelago* tells of Japan's history of industrial caused diseases, and he devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of Minamata and the methylmercury poisoning. In his study, Ishimure is of course referenced in this chapter because of her advocacy and her book, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. The fishing trade of small Japanese villagers has existed for centuries, and as Walker puts it, "these preindustrial fishing villages also established ecological balances in their marine and littoral environs that sustained their way of life until Japan's industrial age."⁶ This belief of cohabitation with the environment is something Ishimure echoes throughout *Paradise*; however, Walker also admits that it was only possible up until the industrial age. Walker further drives home how much these small fishing villages were changed by industry through a discussion of the dumping in Minamata Bay. According to this chapter, "the amount of toxins dumped into the sea depend on who produces them, but between 1930 and the late 1960s, Chisso dumped somewhere between 224 and 600 tons of mercury in Minamata Bay."⁷ This staggering amount of toxins hints at how easily this by-product was able to get inside so many fish and humans. The change from manganese to nitric acid as the oxidizer in factory production helped create what Walker calls "a highly soluble type of organic mercury as a by-product... that moved so easily through the gills

⁶ Brett L. Walker, "Mercury's Offspring," in *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2010), 142.

⁷ Walker, "Mercury's Offspring," 174.

of shellfish and fish, as well as through the umbilical cords of mothers to their fetuses.”⁸

The ease at which the mercury got inside bodies is what led to the disaster that killed many of the area’s cats, many normally healthy adults, and caused extreme abnormalities in pregnant women. Despite the shocking scope of the suffering and the research beginning in the mid 1950s on what was believed to be the cause, Chisso resisted taking the blame for pollution and offered only a meager compensation for the victims. It was not until 1973 after many years of fighting with Chisso in court that the victims were able to gain victory and have the Kumamoto District Court accuse Chisso of corporate negligence.⁹ Unfortunately, when Ishimure Michiko was writing *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, there had been no major victory for the victims in court and the dumping of mercury in Minamata Bay had continued until right before the text was published in 1969. She is furious with the handling of the disaster. The Chisso corporation is allowed to continue dumping mercury into the water despite knowing the impact it is having, and she has been forced to watch family and friends succumb to the disease as local industries collapse around her; she is understandably angry at the situation she had no control over and has been mishandled or neglected by every body of power. The anger she feels at the lack of support from the legal systems, the government, and the corporation come through in a powerful testament about the horrors of Minamata disease and how the community must take ownership and come together to finally achieve justice over an uncaring bureaucratic response.

⁸ Walker, “Mercury’s Offspring,” 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

Even the title of the story creates that strong contrast between insider and outsider. She chooses to call the story “our” Minamata disease. With such focus on personal experiences, Ishimure writes from a place of deep personal experience. Many of the events in the text actually happened, and the text deliberately highlights the contrast between official medical records and testimonies from actual patients. The testimonies of the patients are dramatized portrayals of their suffering, but they are stories of real victims. Through this binary distinction of resident versus outsider, Ishimure comments on the rapid industrialization of post-war Japan and the rise of a materialist capitalist society even in rural areas. I will approach this discourse on community through a close reading of the text and a discussion of genre because the structure of the text is unusual. The parts discussing the patients are told from a first-person perspective by someone other than Ishimure, but when the book switches to community activism, Ishimure is the first-person narrator. To make sense of this, first, I will begin with a description of what autofiction is and why I think that Ishimure is using this technique to tell her story, but in order to do that, I will need to look at the studies around autofiction and autobiographies. Next, I will look at different patient stories and how Ishimure gives the victims voices even when they cannot speak. Then, I want to examine how she puts herself into these stories because she makes many interjections into the text despite focusing primarily on other people. Finally, I want to examine the more industrial side of the narrative. I will examine the protests and the media’s treatment of them. I argue that while Ishimure’s *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* is a powerful story of environmental disaster, it is primarily an indictment on capitalism that uses a distinct dichotomy of insiders against

outsider. Furthermore, this dichotomy comments on the state of communities and the importance of place in a rapidly industrializing Japan.

1.2 Autofiction and Ishimure's Illness Narratives

As we will see, patient stories are used prevalently to offset the medical discourse on the patients. Ishimure is upset by the lack of humanity in the hospitals that treat Minamata patients, and therefore, Ishimure wants to criticize and counteract this through employing first-person accounts of dying from Minamata disease. The method that Ishimure decided on to address her own anger and the patient's suffering was to employ autofiction. Autofiction is adding fiction to a personal narrative. Patient stories analyzed in the following section are introduced and concluded with Ishimure's fury at the government and Chisso, but the patient story occupies the bulk of the beginning chapters of the text. Using autofiction in parts and autobiography in others allows her anger to condemn without interrupting or undermining what she has gotten from speaking and visiting Minamata patients. Therefore, autofiction and autobiography are vital pieces of the text's structure as well as the idea of illness narratives having a long history in Japanese literature. To explain my analysis of the patient sections, the following paragraphs tackle the discourse around autofiction in the West and Japan and illness narratives. Through this genre mixing, Ishimure is able to keep her anger central to the cry for help and acknowledgement of the health and environmental crisis while also critiquing the outsiders for showing no empathy for the lived experience of dying from Minamata disease.

There are important distinctions between the Western scholarship and how Ishimure writes of illness. The Western autobiographical genre was heavily critiqued in the 1980s following the move of deconstructionists and postmodernists. These critics' "aim was to question the mimetic relation between textual representation and lived experience... [and] to treat the truth of the autobiographical "I" as discursively determined and therefore fictitious."¹⁰ While there is a lot of truth to this critique, I think that Ishimure avoids many of these criticisms through her careful explanation of others' stories of illness. Additionally, critics have reexamined these deconstructive critiques under the lens of theoretical approaches such as postcolonialism. Ishimure is not a Western author, and the autobiographical "I" in Japanese literature can be traced back all the way to the Heian period with the court journals of Sei Shōnagon and Murasaki Shikibu. These postcolonial critics acknowledge that writing about the self is fundamentally influenced by the social and political landscape of the author. I begin with a look at Western scholars looking at illness narratives before moving into Japanese examples, but ultimately I conclude that Ishimure's manner of writing falls somewhere in between. She uses the personal experiences of illness narratives when talking about patients, but she does this in a way that utilizes autofiction elements. The distinction is that autofiction is adding different fictional elements to a personal autobiographical narrative. The blending of these ideas plays out in the following distinctions brought up in Western and Japanese studies on illness narratives.

¹⁰ Einat Avrahami, *The Invading Body: Reading Illness Autobiographies* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 9.

According to Einat Avrahami, there is an attempt in the study of autobiography to foreground “the relationship between text and context insofar as identities produced in text... are agreed to be subjected to regulatory discursivity.”¹¹ This quote means the self is never inherently truthful because it is being acted on by the context of all other experiences. This distinction wants to center the fact that autobiography, like all other writing, is never devoid of context. The author of the text has an autobiographical “I” and an actual self that has been acted on by the discourse of the world around it. Ishimure’s writing is political, and she makes no attempt to mask the intent of her writing in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Instead of pretending to write in a vacuum, she leans into the autofiction style of writing through introducing more spiritual elements and poetic asides to autobiographical events even though the autobiographical “I” is not actually seeing into the suffering of the ocean or the patients personally. She blends narratives in order to produce a text that remarks on its Minamata’s community

A large section of Ishimure’s work deals with the illness narratives of several sufferers of mercury poisoning. That she included this genre in her larger work is significant because it allows for the reader to glimpse the suffering of these people. Avrahami talks about the importance of the subject in illness narratives, but in Japan, illness narratives have their own separate history of genre that grew differently from the West. I would like to give a brief explanation of illness narratives in the Japanese canon as well as some examples taken from research done by Amanda Seaman. She discusses Japanese illness narratives or *tōbyōki* literature. *Tōbyōki* can be translated as “accounts of

¹¹ Avrahami, *Invading Body*, 10.

struggling with illness.”¹² This style of literary production became more prevalent in post-war Japan, but authors’ focus on their illnesses or the illnesses of others had roots in the Meiji Japan as many authors or their family members died of tuberculosis.¹³ In subsequent years, the practice of writing about your own illness or the illness of others falls into the category of *tōbyōki*.¹⁴

Ishimure’s book falls into this category of literature, but she is not an actual victim of Minamata disease, nor does she not discuss her own battle with Parkinson’s disease. A section of her book deals with the victims’ illnesses when she gives the victims space to talk about their own experiences with Minamata disease. Like earlier authors and their struggle with tuberculosis, they are allowed to reflect on their life because the Minamata patients know they are going to die. This style of literature that was made common more recently by the publishing house *Bungei Shunjū*.¹⁵ Ishimure wrote this text before the popularity of illness narratives gained traction online and in journals, but she incorporates the history of illness narratives and *tōbyōki* that have existed since industrialization began in Japan, and her text comments extensively on how industrialization and urban living play into the spread of this new disease that impacts her town. I would now like to compare Ishimure’s illness narrative with a more contemporary example provided in this same speech by Amanda Seaman.

Seaman gives two in-depth examples of illness narratives discussing women who have been diagnosed with cancer. Although these stories differ greatly in the disease that

¹² Amanda Seaman, “Plotting Illness,” unpublished paper (2019), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Kadobayashi Michiko, “Gan tōbyōki ni miru itsusu no katari,” *Mita Shakaigaku* 8 (2013), 40-41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

is discussed as well as the time period, there are some similarities to the approach of explaining the experience of being ill that differs from Western examples and theory that I have discussed above. Consequently, there is a direct parallel that I would like to introduce here that will be expanded upon further into the chapter. Seaman discusses the novella *Gan damashii* by Yamauchi Reinan. This story follows a woman with esophageal cancer who would rather die from the cancer than give up her favorite activity, eating. Seaman poses many questions when discussing the story that reflect those that Ishimure has thought about deeply as well, such as, “is it permissible to die without pursuing every option to prolong one’s life? What is the point of fighting a disease if you cannot do what you want to do?”¹⁶ Ishimure’s sections about Minamata patients echo this desire to be dead rather than not be able to live their ordinary lives as they were previously used to doing. Yet Yamauchi’s text is a work of fiction drawing on personal experiences, and Ishimure’s writing is about real people. Still, the example of the protagonist in Yamauchi’s text, Mami who just wants to keep eating but cannot due to illness is mirrored almost exactly in Ishimure’s discussion of Sakagami Yuki who I will discuss later on in this thesis. Clearly, Japanese illness narratives have a history of over a century, and Ishimure’s approach to *tōbyōki* is similar in the way that it grapples with the loss of autonomy and the inevitability of death, but it is different because of her mixture of activism and illness narratives to drive home a point surrounding the rapid industrialization and corporate greed of the Chisso corporation.

Ishimure focuses on a group of insiders and outsiders, whose stories she switches between in the text. Through this setup, Ishimure can move between hard “truth” in

¹⁶ Seaman, “Plotting Illness,” unpublished paper (2019), 19.

modern medicine and the illness narratives of those who have been inflicted with Minamata disease. She does this strategically, and this decision emphasizes the difference between autofiction and illness writing. The difference between the two is primarily that illness writing focuses on the experience of the self in contrast to autofiction's changing of an actual experience to accomplish a different aim. In fact, Ishimure's writing seems to be a rebuke against the harsh, clinical truth as seen in medical writing. She wants the reader to identify with the suffering of the patients because the lived experience of their suffering contains as much fact as the scientific studies. Through these narratives, she separates herself and the members of the Minamata community from modern medicine. As Avrahami succinctly puts it, "surely, the meeting ground between writers and readers of illness autobiographies is better illuminated by approaches more attentive to social and historical discursive conditions than to the deconstructive vision of language as an impersonal and autonomous system."¹⁷ Ishimure was one of the most vocal activists for the victims of the pollution in Minamata, and this text functions primarily as activism for her call for reparations by the Chisso Corporation.

So, while certain elements of their stories may be fictional, Ishimure decenters her voice to highlight the voice of others. Autobiography can be critiqued for creating a false narrator, but Ishimure writes to show that removing bias and human voice from the writing creates a medical document that is removed from humanity. She writes about other's suffering to put the victims' lived experience first. Nina Schmidt characterizes what I think Ishimure is doing; "an explanation for the rise in illness narratives lies in our strong identification with our physical bodies and, linked to that a fundamental discontent

¹⁷ Avrahami, *Invading Body*, 11.

of the person-cum-patient with the way they are being treated in the context of modernist medicine.”¹⁸ The fundamental discontent is the point that Ishimure focuses on in the text; she understands is disturbed by the fact that the outsiders to her community are dismissing her community’s suffering. She wants to act as the mouthpiece for the insiders of Minamata. Community remains the central theme of her text in her depiction of an understanding that people from outside could never understand. Autofiction may contain fiction, but for Ishimure’s attack on uncaring capitalism and modern medicine, the truth lies in the people who suffer at the hands of pollution and cold medical practices.

1.3 Silent Accusations

Ishimure knowingly plays with autofiction by mixing together sources from both patient testimonies and medical documents concerning the patients she interviewed. The autofictional element comes from the way Ishimure mixes elements of fantasy and animism with the reality of human suffering. One of the most memorable examples of this strategy from the text is the discussion of Sakagami Yuki. Ishimure begins the chapter with an extract from the hospital patient log; it describes when Sakagami was born and makes observations such as, “apathetic facial expression” and “average build and nutrition.”¹⁹ The document even gives Sakagami a patient number. Ishimure comments on how the number strips away the humanity of the patient when she opens her section of writing with “I visited Sakagami Yuki (Minamata disease Patient No. 37,

¹⁸ Nina Schmidt, *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2018), 10.

¹⁹ Michiko Ishimure, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata disease* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 133.

Tsukinoura, Minamata City).”²⁰ This opening sentence seems to call awareness to the humanity of the patient in the first half of the sentence while addressing the dismissive nature of the hospital in the parenthesis. Sakagami is a real person, and Ishimure begins with the way she is dehumanized to build up to the chapter’s bleak conclusion in how Sakagami is preparing herself to die and be reincarnated. Ishimure went to visit Sakagami, not to make clinical judgments of her nutritional habits or the way her face moves.

In relation to Ishimure focusing on creating an in-group of the Minamata citizens, she concludes the first paragraph of this chapter with a brief comment on the agricultural condition of the land around her. She does this to make a statement of a once self-sufficient farming and fishing community brought down by outside interests of the industrial corporate elite. This extreme juxtaposition of tones is intentional, and through the dramatic shift of medical journal to Ishimure’s own poetic prose, the text emphasizes that medical journals may present less biased language than autobiographical illness narratives, but the truth of human suffering cannot be meaningfully conveyed via a list of symptoms. The calmness of nature and the “transient beauty of a mirage in a desert” that Ishimure writes of Minamata are then suddenly undercut by the suffering of her community members in the hospital.²¹ Additionally, her choice to use the word transient not only evokes a reference to Buddhism but also to make clear how the beauty of her hometown is fading under this pollution.

²⁰ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 133.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

Ishimure includes descriptions of Minamata patients that mark them as members of a community oppressed by the ever-present institutional nature of medicine and corporate interests. As Yuko Kurahashi writes of this text, “people with power (economic, political, institutional, and other kinds) possess the discursive authority to “articulate their voices, while people in powerless positions – in the margins—lack ways to express their ideas, feelings, and hopes, and are often under pressure to keep silent.”²² This idea is specifically addressed in Ishimure’s writing of illness narratives; her community is actively made silent both through illness and political pressuring. The ill cannot make their voices heard on their own, and Ishimure’s writing gives them an outlet to express anger at the situation. Her bias is made clear, but narratives focusing on suffering of the body defy deconstructionist reading as I earlier discussed. Upon walking through the hospital, Ishimure writes, “these emaciated, ghostly-transparent people clearly knew that they were going to die, but the puzzled expressions, the unnatural, contorted postures in which they were lying, the silent accusation in their eyes showed that they were not prepared to die.”²³ There are two main points I want to extract from this quote. First, Ishimure includes the word transparent to call back to her description of the nature of Minamata City. Not only does this show the patients are connected to the community, but also it highlights the degradation of the nature in Minamata as well as its people.

²² Yuko Kurahashi, “Creating a Tapestry of Voice and Silence in Michiko Ishimure’s *Kugai jōdo* (*Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*),” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 316.

²³ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 134.

Additionally, the “silent accusation” in their eyes has to be intended for someone, and Ishimure points to capitalism and the bureaucrats who visit Minamata yet change nothing for the better. In fact, she voices these accusatory stares in her writing, denouncing “society, because it either ignored or laughed at him; and with medical science, because of its inability to cure his disease.”²⁴ This explanation blurs the line between the autobiographical nature of the text and its inclination for including more personal statements. Furthermore, the distinction between the citizens of Minamata and the rest of the world are made clear; only people from the community care about their suffering, and the medical world and society has failed them. She acts as the voice for the community she creates in the text because the man who she is talking about in the quote above has lost his ability to speak. Therefore, Ishimure is acting as a mouthpiece for the accusations she interprets from the patients’ stares.

1.4 Ishimure in Relation to the Victims

I want to analyze several of these patients’ stories before moving into the insider-outsider dichotomy as it relates to the government officials and the fisherman. Not only does Ishimure weave together patient testimonies with comments made in medical journals, but she also includes her own commentary with these stories. She was actually physically present when these events happen, so she does not really make the reader guess where she stands on many of her prevalent themes. She mixes her anger toward capitalism in the same sentences as the patients’ stories. In fact, she even interprets their stories rather than letting them stand on their own sometimes. This act of adding a

²⁴ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 136.

postscript to a personal testimony makes a political statement out of the narratives focusing on the battle with Minamata disease. Ultimately, she makes these comments to reinforce her stance against an unknowing, uncaring, capitalist marketplace that she argues killed her friends and her city. Additionally, she employs animism as an element of her autofictional accounts. Animism is a way that Ishimure looks at the suffering of both the people and the place of her hometown. While animism manifests differently around the world, in short, it is the belief that parts of nature can possess a kind of “anima,” or soul. This belief of compassionately looking at everything in nature is in conflict with the medical community’s more pragmatic approach to studying Minamata disease. Ishimure does not see how human and animal suffering can be so coldly removed from the narrative of this environmental and public health disaster. Through her belief in the essential spirituality of all objects and nature, she writes from a viewpoint of both the patients, fish, and cats that are suffering from the disease.

Ishimure understands the situation as her city being under attack by outside forces. The situation gives rise to Ishimure’s anger, cursing outsiders for ignoring the town. Despite her anger, her strategy is to get the reality of the crisis to as much of Japan as possible, therefore, she also employs a sympathetic angle for insiders. She stirs up sympathy for an older man who is killed by the disease called Old Sensuke. She notes how he has lived a healthy and sickness-free life up until he was poisoned by mercury. Her language in this section captures his rage, but it also highlights her own. She once again points to the cold, calculating ways of medical care when describing his funeral. She writes,

Old Sensuke’s solitary death, the way his dead body was cut open and his insides torn out for analysis, and finally the hasty sending of his remains to the crematory

in a black hearse... may be attributed in part to the nearly total isolation he had imposed on himself after the death of his wife. However, it was primarily the result of the damage caused by methyl mercury which made the old man increasingly loathe to make a show of himself in public.²⁵

She describes the way his body was handled as though he were merely a science experiment. How could the people treating his disease look at him like a human being who had a wife and livelihood before becoming ill when they themselves are outsiders? Although the doctors and nurses were probably from Kumamoto, which is close to Minamata, Ishimure's view is that they are not being treated humanely. I think it is significant that she individualizes the victims of the disease while, at the same time, she casts the blame at increasingly large groups. First, she remarks that Chisso was responsible "for the old man's death [and] incalculably heavy load of karma he carried with him into the next world."²⁶ The blame she distributes makes a martyr of Old Sensuke, and she views her community as something no one outside of it could possibly understand regardless of good intentions.

She sets up this distinction between people from Minamata and the rest of the world before discussing his funeral. Ishimure says that she is one of the only people capable of recording this event in history. She poses the following question, "what kind of personality should a historian have or acquire in order to record this crime for posterity? As a native of Minamata..."²⁷ Ishimure is the native, and therefore, she argues that only she can truthfully recount these events as an embodied experience. The reason this text creates such a strong separation between her community and everyone else is

²⁵ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 61-62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

because people looking in on the situation would never understand Old Sensuke's challenges after the death of his wife. Ishimure explains why she is writing this text, and why only she can do it. She says,

In order to preserve for posterity this language in which the historic significance of the Mercury Poisoning Incident is crudely branded, I must drink an infusion of my animism and 'pre-animism' and become a sorceress cursing modern times forever.²⁸

By using the word animism, she casts a religious light on her beliefs about the community as well. She has nature and the community inside of her and her curse is aimed at capitalism and industrialization, the sources of what destroyed her friends and town. Her goal is to preserve what she experienced as a reaction against the other writing she has seen about the disease. In contrast to the cutting open of Old Sensuke's body and the curse she casts on society, she calls the "language of the victims" a form of "pristine poetry before our societies were divided into classes."²⁹ The insiders and outsiders she sets up in this first section of the text appear to be poetry for the patients and poison for the bureaucrats.

While the politicians and corporations were fine with manipulating the image of this grave example of pollution, Ishimure's twisting of the Old Sensuke's words are less malicious because she reframes much of the discussion with the use of an autobiographical "I" pronoun. Ishimure talks about how after his death she walks down to his house. This frames her discussion of insiders from a personal perspective, and she comments on how his house looks onto the part of ocean that was heavily polluted with the looming Chisso building in the distance. She uses literary language to analyze the

²⁸ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

pollution and greed that swallowed the town by describing his house “swallowed in the darkness... blotting out tree after tree and house after house.”³⁰ Darkness is the only image able to accurately describe the sight of the Chisso factory for Ishimure. It is an entity that swallows other things, and it is no coincidence that Ishimure makes the things swallowed in the darkness nature and humanity as Chisso’s pollution spreads and devours the trees and the homes of Minamata. To reinforce this, Ishimure also refers to the actual plant life of her town to create a sense of the place and its environment, but it is noticeably absent when talking about the encroaching corruption of industry. To end the section of her novel, she mixes the folksy appeal of Old Sensuke’s understanding of the world with the intricate hidden cruelty she sees hiding in the darkness following his death. She concludes, “Without realizing it, Old Sensuke had put his finger on the callousness, ruthlessness and cruelty of that vast, intricate machinery called capitalist society.”³¹ Finally, she points directly at capitalism as the cause for this disaster. The adjectives that she uses here are vastly different in tone from the light and poetic language used to describe the patients and nature. She creates strong imagery when talking about her community, but when corporations are depicted, they are mysterious and menacing. This man’s story is only one example of the stance Ishimure takes in this text.

1.5 A Closer Look at Sakagami Yuki

I would like to return to another patient whom I previously mentioned and to focus on how the body of the patient is directly tied to her community. Not only is

³⁰ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

Sakagami Yuki's body inflicted with a crippling illness, but the community is also crippled because of corporate greed. Once again in this section Ishimure expands on this testimony with poetic language to emphasize the environment and capitalism. The mixture of physical suffering with a description of pollution equates the two in her mind and in her writing. As the patient's body dies it becomes a metaphor for the way of life in Ishimure's community as well as nature itself. Here the truth of the illness narrative about a lived experience moves into a poetic fictional account, but both sections point to the same conclusion--decay. I will begin this section with a description of the patient's stories and some discussion of the actual things she says about how this disease steals her humanity from her before she passes away, and then I will move into a broader analysis of Ishimure's political and poetic language.

As I mentioned before, Ishimure starts the chapter with a presentation of official medical documents. The actual story of Sakagami Yuki is tragic, and I think the most important point that the story makes is about how humanity is stripped from the victims. There is a particularly devastating moment where Ishimure describes how Yuki, who has lost control of her body movements, dances for a single cigarette. I do not think there is a more powerful description of how the hospital, the disease, and industrialization has stripped away the identity of the community or the individual. Ishimure includes the sections where Yuki has lost control of her body to show the humiliation that she has undergone, and I think the denial of cigarettes to her further emphasizes the lack of understanding between the outsiders, the hospital workers, and the insiders, her husband and family. Ishimure recounts, "everyone gaped in wonder. I prayed that the earth would open up under my feet, or that I might vanish into thin air... Gasping, I told my husband

that I wanted that cigarette butt. He answered, crying, that, if I wanted a smoke so badly, he could bring me a cigarette right away.”³² The show of helplessness she displays here is placed in opposition to her general vitality and health earlier in life. I think Ishimure uses this strategy because it fits with her narrative of how the poor are purposefully disenfranchised to strengthen capitalism. Sakagami does seem to care about her health, but the motivation to be healthy again comes solely from her desire to return to fishing and her husband. The doctors obviously do not want her to smoke because it could make her symptoms worse, but Sakagami is already preparing to die so more immediate comforts are of more concern to her. Timothy S. George notes how Ishimure frames the discussion of Minamata and the disaster with her period. He writes, “the mines of the Chikuhō area in Kyūshū, she [Ishimure] says were the ‘blood vessels of capitalism,’ where human beings were ‘burned as fuel.’ The poverty she knew in southern Kyūshū was also the rule for ‘people on the periphery’.”³³ The idea of people being used as fuel in the industrial economy fits metaphorically with the story of Sakagami Yuki. She was a fisherwoman with her husband, and her abilities were erased when she was struck down by illness.

For her testimony, Sakagami ties her existence to nature with a contrast to her present situation. She says and this is how the chapter ends, “I want to have two strong legs to stand firmly on the ground. I want to have two strong hands with which I can work. With these hands I want to row my own boat and go to gather fresh sea-lettuce. It

³² Ishimure, *Paradise*, 151.

³³ Timothy S. George, “Minamata and the Tragedy of Japan’s ‘Modernity’,” (single quote before the comma) in *Minamata*, (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 263.

makes me want to cry. I want so much to be out on the sea again... just one more time.”³⁴

Ishimure uses this quote to place Sakagami inside the fishing community and also as a victim of the disease. This strong desire to be on the ocean again is tragic because the polluted ocean and the fish that she caught in it are what made her contract the illness. Also, the natural imagery in her statement is juxtaposed with the bleak hospital scenes where she is struggling to walk. The struggles she has with walking are even used as a form of dark entertainment for patients in other wards. The sense of community found in the hospital is much darker and more despairing than the community Sakagami felt on the ocean with her husband. In this particularly shocking scene, the TB patients clap for Sakagami’s jokes as she staggers around walking and begging for cigarettes. Sakagami says, “I am going to dance the dance of the lunatic. You are kindly requested to reward the dancer with a cigarette. I laughed as I spoke, but inwardly I felt sad, as if I were really going to dance for money.”³⁵ It seems that Ishimure is emphasizing how Sakagami has lost her humanity in this scene. She lost the independence and freedom she felt on the sea, and this narrative of her dancing for cigarettes makes it so she is effectively selling her body for nothing more than cigarettes and the entertainment of other extremely ill patients. The stripping away of her humanity parallels another point that George makes about her writing. He explains that Ishimure looks at the advanced destruction of her community through poverty and debasement before industrialization, citing how poor families give away their children to work in brothels and labor jobs.³⁶ In this case, she has not been sold off, but she is destroyed and sent away from her home all the same. As she

³⁴ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁶ George, “Minamata and the Tragedy”, 262.

details her humiliation of dancing for cigarettes, Sakagami recounts all the changes that her body has undergone from the mercury poisoning.

The more the disease takes hold of Sakagami the more the descriptions of her body become tied to nature. It is almost like she is being prepared for reincarnation as she compares her body to the ocean and fish. For Ishimure, Sakagami may have been removed from the insiders of her community to be placed in a hospital, but she will return to the nature of her community after death. This return is a luxury that is never given to the bureaucrats and capitalists. In Ishimure's text, they are completely removed from the world of nature and occupy their own poisoned world. Another example equating Sakagami to the natural world occurs when she is trying to sleep at night. Sakagami says, "we were like fish cast ashore by the sea. If we fell out of bed during the night, we just had to lie on the floor, swallowing our tears and waiting for morning to come... at times like that I would think of the sea. It was great to be out on the sea."³⁷ She says this, and it equates her to the fish that she used to catch being made useless, but it also brings the pollution full circle. The fish were poisoned and therefore so was she. Additionally, Sakagami's plea echoes her desire to be put back into the ocean like the fish. At first this description makes her seem pitiful, but the more she compares her body to nature, the more it begins to take on a positive connotation. This quote makes it appear as though she needs the water to survive much like the sea life. This cry is emphasized in her final pleas for reincarnation. By making these pleas the last attempt to regain her humanity, the cruelty of her situation is emphasized. She says, "it would be wonderful if I could be reincarnated as a human being. I'd be able to work at sea again, together with my

³⁷ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 156.

husband.... I've spent all my life on the sea. Perhaps I'll come back as a fisherwoman. My heart is overflowing with love, so I'll surely come back as a human being."³⁸ Her desire to be reborn as a human reveal how much of her humanity she feels she has lost because of the disease. Also, her desire to become a fisherwoman in the next life creates a cycle where she is allowed back into her community. In other words, she may feel destroyed, but her final words in the text express hope rather than despair. The rural communities of Japan are seen through Sakagami's death because she represents the traditional way of life before industrialization and the freedom of nature before the onslaught of pollution and environmental destruction.

One final contrast between Sakagami and the faceless bureaucracy that has sickened and then ignored her occurs when Sakagami's story is compared with a scientific study done on the death of cats in Minamata. According to Walker, the cats act as the "canary in a coalmine" for the dangers of mercury poisoning. Since the cats eat only the poisoned fish and are smaller than humans, they are affected more quickly than the humans. Moreover, since they are animals, scientists can perform animal studies on them that they cannot ethically do on humans. Thus, the cats' symptoms are known to the medical profession before that of people. Ishimure incorporates the scientific studies of the animals with the medical community's observations of the patients. The full impact of the comparison is obscured in translation because of the clinical medical writing being primarily in *katakana*, but the stories of the cats and Sakagami are made parallel in other ways. Right after the story of Sakagami dancing for cigarettes is an interruption to her story where a medical journal is inserted into the chapter by Ishimure discussing the

³⁸ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 174.

death of the cats entirely in italics. The italicization is used to mirror a method that Ishimure uses in Japanese. Kurahashi states that this scientific journal about the cats was written entirely in *katakana*. Furthermore, she says, “generally, in Japanese literature, *katakana* is used to inscribe narratives about robots, aliens, animals, and sometimes foreigners, so that the language can convey a sense of soullessness, gruesomeness, and awkwardness.”³⁹ I think the most significant part of Kurahashi’s analysis is how *katakana* can be used to represent foreignness. Ishimure’s inclusion of the medical journal attacks the bureaucracy using their own language. She wants to make a comparison between how the actual patients are experiencing the disease against the scientists who write about the death and pollution as though they are completely unmoved by the suffering. She uses autofiction in the patient stories to criticize the way that science looks at patient suffering.

Through the comparison between Sakagami’s ailments and the cats’ symptoms, Ishimure notes that Sakagami’s painful spasms and dancing are treated like the cats who are coldly analyzed as they inevitably die. Additionally, the language of the medical journal comes across as cruel and disinterested. The journal states at one point, “it is interesting to note that olfactory stimuli with which the cat was familiar, such as the smell of fish, caused it to fall into fits of convulsions.”⁴⁰ The cats are part of nature and part of the place of Minamata. Ishimure’s earlier curse calling for animism is seen again in this quote as the scientists and doctors merely observe the cat suffering and dying with a detached gaze. Ishimure cannot detach from the cat as she seems to believe it has a soul

³⁹ Kurahashi, “Creating a Tapestry,” 322.

⁴⁰ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 152.

much like the humans suffering in hospitals. The choice of words here reveals the outsider perspective of this disease. While Ishimure writes about how it is tearing families apart and reducing healthy vibrant people to shadows of their previous selves, the writer of the medical journal finds the convulsions merely “interesting.” The language Ishimure uses to talk of the community members is startlingly different when she writes, “these convulsions are so cruel. Oh, these are cruel.”⁴¹ These differing viewpoints support my claim clear on the separation of insiders and outsiders. Ishimure constructs these sequences intentionally, and she exaggerates the gap between the people affected by the industrial pollution and those who are outsiders examining the disaster as it unfolds. These sections make it clear that the truth of the situations seems more believable on Ishimure’s side of the story rather than the outsiders. Ending the section talking about the cat, the journal makes death from Minamata disease insignificant by stating, “this cat, after being under observation for one day, accidentally drowned.”⁴² This almost nonchalant description of death is contrasted with Sakagami’s desperate pleas to be reincarnated as a human when she dies. Therefore, the lack of understanding is emphasized on how insiders and outsiders experience this disaster and disease. Sakagami longs to be returned to her community the entire chapter whereas the outsider seems mildly disappointed that the cat died only because they can no longer examine it. The theme of mere-curiosity in the face of suffering continues in Ishimure’s other sections of the text; she focuses on the activism of the fishermen and how the media and outsiders willingly misinterpret them.

⁴¹ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154.

1.6 The Fight for Accountability

The sections of the text that are unrelated to patient experiences focus on the battle to get Chisso to take responsibility for the pollution and to get the government involved in payments for the victims. Ishimure herself was closely involved in this process, and she played a key role in the discussion of reparations for those affected. Unfortunately, while there were some payments made to the victims, they were not nearly enough, and there has been debate around the payment to families of victims as recently as the past decade. The end of the narrative enters around a community group fighting to make Chisso accept accountability. Also, there was one major protest organized by the fisherman against the factory, and I think a lot of the tensions surrounding insiders and outsiders is seen in this dispute. The way the media covers the dispute against the account that Ishimure gives enforces the opposing viewpoints.

While the patient testimonies highlight the invasion of an outside toxin that enters the body through the town's nature and wildlife, the fishermen are in a different kind of fight for acknowledgement. The doctors and nurses in the city hospital seem distant and cold when examining the patients, and that coldness is mirrored in the treatment of the fishermen who are essentially losing their livelihood due to corporate negligence and greed. Activism works on two levels in this text in that Ishimure is acting more on behalf of the victims of Minamata disease, but as the following discussion will show, she remains sympathetic to the plight of the fishermen. The two levels are activism for the victims of the disease and activism regarding the destruction of local industry. The scope of the crisis for Minamata affects all of the people and the economy, so Ishimure works

within these two modes of activism to make a wider criticism of society. As I pointed out at the beginning this chapter, fishing was one of the primary industries for this small town, and the complete loss of the industry affected numerous families. Additionally, people who had always fished for their food were now afraid and relying on food brought in from elsewhere, which in itself feels like a blow to self-sustaining communities.

I will begin with an overview Ishimure's description of the protest before moving onto the way it was handled. Ishimure begins the chapter on the fishermen riots with harmful claims that newspapers and the Chisso organization directed at the fishermen before disagreeing with them and giving her own personal recollection of the events. Therefore, the facts are once again presented as an us-against-them scenario. She writes, "newspapers carrying accounts of the storming of the Chisso factory insisted that "drunk fishermen provoked their companions to acts of violence" or that "the angry fishermen behaved like barbarians."⁴³ These descriptions are less related to the cold facts of medical documents, but they instead introduce the problem of media propaganda shaping the portrayal of the victims. Ishimure points out how the outside newspapers sympathize with the large industries over the disenfranchised fishermen who lost their way of life and, in some cases, family members due to corporate greed and arrogance.

Ishimure describes her own experience as a witness of the protests at the Chisso factory. She refutes the claims made by outside media stated above saying, "the fishermen were slightly intoxicated, but they were far from having lost control of themselves. In Minamata, drinking an occasional cup of *shōchū* or sake is an ancient tradition... the storming of the Chisso factory on November 2 cannot be dismissed as the

⁴³ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 112.

irresponsible act of a group of drunken fishermen.”⁴⁴ Here, Ishimure shifts the narrative to focus on the traditions of the rural community so deeply affected by this tragedy. She focuses on a sense of place, and she uses historical elements mixed with personal accounts to shape what she considers to be the truth about the protests. I think this strategy again makes use of autofiction for conveying real events while politicizing the text and criticizing the outsiders. She focuses on the history of her community to react against attacks from the industrialized outside coverage. She frames the motivation for the protest in a much more positive light as well.

Ishimure claims that the fishermen were performing a regular demonstration against Chisso because of recent news of the Diet members agreeing to help them.⁴⁵ The optimism of the chapter’s opening is juxtaposed with the despair at the end of the chapter about how little help the Diet actually gave them. Additionally, Ishimure points the blame for the protest escalating on uncaring outsiders as well. The optimism at the start the protests turns into solitude and aggression at their abandonment. Ishimure writes of the disinterest of the Diet members. She recounts, “it is certainly no exaggeration to say that the indifference of both prefectural and central authorities led to the November 2 disturbances.”⁴⁶ She backs up this claim with an earlier description of the Diet members taking taxis through their demonstration without acknowledging them in a situation Ishimure compares to “an untimely visitor bursting in on a religious ceremony.”⁴⁷ The neglect to acknowledge them immediately after agreeing to help them supports

⁴⁴ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 112-113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

Ishimure's binary distinction between insiders and outsiders of how her community was abandoned by everyone outside of it.

To further appeal to the non-violent nature of the fishermen before the cameramen and police got involved, Ishimure's personal account makes it clear that it was only after the Diet members ignored them that the situation escalated to a more violent and angry approach. This situation plays into the depiction of capitalism and bureaucracy as evil and faceless. She never describes the politicians' reaction to the demonstration because she only sees them briefly as they are driving away, but she is sure to mention that "only solitude could be discerned in [the fishermen's] eyes."⁴⁸ Masazumi Hara reaches a similar conclusion about who is to blame for these riots in his article about the human rights failures surrounding Minamata disease. He writes, "the police arrested many fishermen who forcefully demanded suspension of waste-water discharge and indicted them. If at that time the waste water discharge by Chisso had been suspended, fish catching prohibited, the cause investigated and the measure taken, damages could have minimized."⁴⁹ Instead of taking action against the pollution that was killing an industry and a community, the government made public appearances in Minamata which did nothing and allowed Chisso to take the incident and create extremely misleading propaganda against the fishermen.

The propaganda I am referring to is how the media pushed the violent fishermen narrative in regard to the protest, which allowed Chisso to market their company as anti-

⁴⁸ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 119.

⁴⁹ Masazumi Harada, "Environmental Contamination And Human Rights – Case of Minamata disease," *Industrial & Environmental Crisis Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1994), 145.

violent despite their history of pollution—a different kind of violence-- that resulted in a far more harmful and deadly spread of disease.

As the fishermen's situation worsened, Ishimure addresses the injustice of how the corporation decided to make themselves the victims. Ishimure describes the propaganda distributed on leaflets. The Chisso propaganda declares, "we oppose violence! Let us defend the factory against violence! These leaflets were a clear indication of the workers' feeling that they [the industry] were innocent victims of the blind wrath of the fishermen."⁵⁰ By switching the narrative, the corporation with the resources to actually distribute materials and have company meetings controls the story while the head of the fishermen's association dies of Minamata disease within a month of the protests. Additionally, the company, in a misleading political and financial move, installed a device that they claimed made the wastewater safe, yet it was revealed that "all this much-praised system could do was separate the solid residue from the fluid in the wastewater."⁵¹ Once again the outsiders with resources enough to control public opinion triumphed over Ishimure's community, which is how they were able to continue dumping mercury into the ocean. The final insult to the victims is that the reparations that the Chisso corporation agreed to pay were laughably small as seen in the poem below. The juxtaposition that Ishimure draws between the misleading and deceitful corporate language is her use of a mocking prayer to Amida Buddha that criticizes how little the victims were paid. She creates the contrast between the members of her community and the outsiders. The corporation is praised for lying to the public about water safety for two

⁵⁰ Ishimure, *Paradise*, 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

decades whereas those who died receive Ishimure's pray of "one hundred thousand for an adult's life, thirty thousand for a deformed child, three hundred thousand to redeem the dead."⁵²

The poem above is an example of the way that Ishimure inserts her own criticism of the negligence on the part of the government and Chisso. She will at times be direct and directly criticize capitalism as she did earlier, but in this section of the text she is merely a bystander to the riots; she is a bystander with a very strong point of view. Her sympathetic viewpoint is highlighted in the way that she reframes the claim that the fishermen were a drunken mob, and the description of the bureaucrats driving by the protests without a second glance is purposefully put there to criticize the carelessness of the people supposed to represent the citizens.

1.7 Conclusion

The reception to Ishimure's novel in Japan was positive but muted. The critique of modern society in this text came at a time when Japan was having an economic miracle, and Ishimure's curse on modern society rang hollow to people who were suddenly in the middle of an economic boom. Therefore, she received no major awards in her own country until she was reevaluated in the 90s following the economic collapse when suddenly a return to communities and spiritual grounding seemed more reasonable. Still, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* received the Magsaysay award in 1973 for Journalism, Literature, and the Creative Communication Arts category. As Patrick Murphy in a review of Monet's translation put it, "although *Paradise in the Sea of*

⁵² Ishimure, *Paradise*, 127.

Sorrow became required reading for some years in Japanese high schools, her large body of work has been critically neglected in Japan.”⁵³ It received several reprints as recently as 2011, and it remains her most famous work. As my next chapter will show though, Ishimure’s name rarely appeared in the newspaper until the 1990s despite a prolific literary career. Much like the plight of the Minamata disaster, Ishimure’s reputation was reevaluated and reconciled with the royal family overall despite her strong stance on rural Japan’s and nature’s destruction.

Ishimure was aware of the different viewpoints that shaped the Minamata environmental and health disaster, and she used a mixture of patient testimonies, medical documents, personal accounts, and newspaper extracts to convey the injustices that her community faced at the hands of an indifferent industrial capitalist society. From her point of view, there were many chances for outsiders such as the Diet members and the scientists to help, but her rural community was considered less important than the Chisso’s profits to the point where mercury dumping continued well into the 1960s. The only way for her to convey these differences was to use an autofiction approach. She is a character in the text, but instead of relying on a voice that takes emotion out of the text, she infuses the text with religion and poetry to get closer to the real feelings of victims and protesters.

⁵³ Patrick Murphy, “The Writer as Activist, the Artist as Defender: The Work of Ishimure Michiko in Translation,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 21, no1, (Spring 2010/Summer 2010), 163.

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY AND PLACE IN ISHIMURE MICHIKO'S *LAKE OF HEAVEN*

2.1 Introduction

Ishimure Michiko's *Lake of Heaven* differs from *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* in that it does not overtly focus on Minamata disease and justice for the victims, yet the novel firmly remains inside the boundaries thematically of her writing. Namely, the novel explores community and nature through a rural Japanese location. It comments on environmental pollution and the destruction of ecosystems through careless industrialization, and Ishimure further cements her views on what she perceives is ailing modern society. Despite all of these similarities, *Lake of Heaven* is a fictional account of place and character which is unlike *Paradise*. Additionally, there are approximately forty years between when she wrote these texts, but many of her previous concerns are echoed here. The same issues are addressed but in a different manner. One of the issues I touched upon and would like to expand upon is her ideas of community and how insiders and outsiders of a community interact, but I want to contrast these depictions of community with the previous chapter's focus of Ishimure's anger. Her anger has lessened in these novel, and Japan's economy no longer supports rapid industrialization as it did in the 1960s.

Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow was written amidst the mercury poisoning done by the Chisso corporation, but *Lake of Heaven* was written after several attempts at getting compensation for the victims. The separation from the anger Ishimure felt in the first text comes through in this novel's calmer tone. Ishimure still wrote about rural communities in Kyūshū, but instead of forming the narrative around insiders from these communities

being oppressed by larger outside entities and ideas, the protagonist of this fictional story is a young Tokyo boy experiencing a rural lifestyle for the first time. In this novel, Ishimure makes the argument for why rural communities are important and how they are under attack by pollution and rapid industrial progress. Taking place after the economic boom of the 1980s, machinery and progress are still grimly depicted in her writing, but the capitalist influence is less overtly obvious here. Through an outsider's perspective, Ishimure comments on what she thinks city culture has lost and how the mass migration from the countryside to the city has impacted the environment, spirituality, and perceptions of Japanese people and culture.

Through examining the contrast between the protagonist Masahiko's understanding of traditional communities and culture and the older villagers, Ishimure's novel criticizes urban lifestyles. A central theme of the novel is the unique unity shared in a small community, and Masahiko's differing perspective as someone raised in a city. In this chapter, I want to examine different elements that Ishimure argues are central to understanding rural communities and what sets them apart from cities. First, I will look at the many religious aspects of the text and how local gods and customs shape the community's understanding of nature in a way that Masahiko does not fully grasp. Then I will analyze the importance of food and drink among the villagers followed by a discussion of the importance of nature to healing Masahiko and helping his individual growth. Furthermore, I will discuss how food is read differently here than in *Paradise* because food is healing for this community rather than the poison it was for Minamata.

Finally, using all of the previously discussed elements, I will argue that the rural community in Ishimure's text is defined by the physical characteristics and cultural

aspects of the place and while the community is welcoming to Masahiko, he is set firmly apart from the villagers until he starts to experience things on their terms rather than his. Ishimure does not vilify Masahiko's ignorance. She actually seems to make his character growth about moving past the strict binary of urban and rural as a way to heal himself, but I argue that she uses him to highlight what urban Japan has lost by abandoning its rural roots and the idea of community.

First, I will give a brief synopsis of the text's plot. *Lake of Heaven* is about a fictional rural community that seemingly takes place near Ishimure's real birthplace, Kumamoto. The fictional town Amazoko is sunk beneath a manmade lake that was made to facilitate a new dam. The novel is an exploration of traditional communities and spirituality in Japan as told through a young urban citizen's perspective. The older villagers are cut off from their old community, and the text explores what defines a community when rural Japan is slowly deconstructed and depopulated by outside capitalist forces. The protagonist of the story is a young boy from Tokyo named Masahiko who is visiting the town to spread his grandfather's ashes after his funeral. He is visiting the town during *obon*, *Obon* is a Japanese holiday in mid-August to honor one's ancestors, and Ishimure uses this time of reflection on the past as the setting for this story. His name is Masahiko, and he is completely unfamiliar with the customs of rural Japan, yet he has an interest in playing the *biwa*. His interest in traditional Japanese music is stunted by his inability to truly hear the sounds around him. He is able to better understand nature and sound and religion through his time with the older villagers, and through this spiritual healing, he is able to participate in a religious ceremony with new prowess on the *biwa*. He is taken in by Ohina, an old woman who is native to Amazoko,

and Ohina's daughter Omomo. She introduces him to the other villagers and helps him experience the spiritual side of *obon*. On his first night in Amazoko, he has a vivid dream of another Amazoko villager named Sayuri who is a mute shrine maiden and believed to be connected to the local gods. Upon waking, it is discovered that Sayuri has drowned in the lake where the flooded Amazoko lies. There are several wakes held, one for Masahiko's grandfather and one for Sayuri. During these communal events, the novel takes on a dream-like state where the villagers and eventually Masahiko are able to relive moments from their past. The story culminates in a religious ceremony to honor Sayuri. The novel mixes the past and the present and dream and reality as Masahiko, an aspiring musician, has his senses awakened by the local songs and customs of Amazoko. Unlike *Paradise, Lake of Heaven* is not about demonizing the entirety of outsiders. Instead, it is part of Ishimure's reconciliation with the imperial family following the Minamata disaster.

2.2 Local *Kami* and the Recovery of Folk Beliefs

Ishimure's oeuvre is replete with religious references to Buddhism and Shintoism, and *Lake of Heaven* is no different. The local gods play an important role in the narrative, and much like rural communities themselves, they are destroyed by industrialization in the novel. The villagers bemoan the dam that flooded their town because it severed them from their gods. It separated them from the gods by disturbing the natural environment and swallowing whole all of their homes and communities. The trees that looked over their ancestors are now drowning under many feet of water. This separation between the remaining villagers and their ancestors is one of the main concerns. As they are further

and further removed from their homeland, the characters feel isolated from their local *kami*. Additionally, *kami* interact with the older villagers and the text questions people experiencing spirituality in a different way due to the more advanced technology of modern society. I will begin this section describing the relationship between the gods in the text and the villagers as well as Masahiko's lack of understanding as a contrast.

The first mention of gods occurs almost immediately in the text as Ohina meets Masahiko and tells him of the god in a particular tree who watches over graves. Masahiko who is visiting the village for the first time could not possibly know about this specific tree god, and therefore, from the very beginning, Masahiko is clearly an outsider regardless of the fact that his grandfather was a local. She is confused because she is seeing Masahiko as his grandfather, frequently calling him by his grandfather's name instead of his own. Despite this lineage, he would view the tree as any other rather than that of importance and history. Ishimure cements this point with references to the tree as sacred. In fact, Ishimure references the destruction of rural Japan from the moment the gods are introduced when Ohina says, "there's a ginkgo tree. Over there. It was the tree of the gods. The ginkgo tree is still there, watching over the graves. Can you see the graves of your family beneath it? I haven't been able to see them since they were flooded by the lake."⁵⁴ With this introduction to local lore, Ohina establishes a firm belief in nature and spirituality rather than modern progress. Her belief lies in the traditions of the town that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the gods and nature. Furthermore, she points to the destruction of her birthplace as the reason why she has been separated from

⁵⁴ Michiko Ishimure, *Lake of Heaven*, trans. Bruce Allen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 18.

the graves of her loved ones. The town is flooded to create a dam, but Ohina understands this as a loss rather than a benefit. She makes a connection between the tree being covered with water and her own aging, referring to how it is “all bent over.”⁵⁵ The sacred tree not only connects Ohina to her deceased relatives, but it also serves as a vehicle that transports Ohina to memories of the past, making her reflect on how she learned of the gods in the trees.

This connection to the past is shown to be unique to smaller communities in the text. Unlike Tokyo, which is constantly in a cycle of the destruction of older buildings and the construction of newer buildings, Ohina’s childhood home is brushed aside in the name of progress, separating her from generations of her family and community. The city and the countryside are revealed to be distinctly different. The single ginkgo tree connects Ohina to her ancestors, but for Masahiko, it is one of many trees at the bottom of the dam. Additionally, she is still able to see the town’s remains, but it lies at the bottom of a manmade lake. Much like the title hints, the lake that houses the villagers’ old community is strongly tied to their sense of place and spirituality. The ginkgo tree that has perished underwater is a reminder of old gods drowned in the pursuit of progress. She also uses the trees as a distinct marker of place when she comments, “these were the trees of the gods, and the trees that were the markers of Amazoko village... you won’t find a ginkgo like that anywhere else.”⁵⁶ It is a specific type of tree that is special to the villagers, and they served as a way to understand the village and its beliefs. The melancholy remembering that Ohina is practicing also emphasizes how much they have

⁵⁵ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

lost. Additionally, Masahiko is connected to Ohina through these trees even though he doesn't fully understand their significance. Simply his presence is enough to remind Ohina of time spent with his grandfather.⁵⁷ Remembering her youth spent with Masahiko, the grandfather of Masahiko, she suddenly longs for her younger days protected by the tree gods and connected fully to nature. Masahiko does want to enter this world, but Ohina shows a far deeper understanding of the town and traditional culture despite Masahiko being drawn to stories that his grandfather told him about Amazoko.

Masahiko's lack of understanding of how these tree gods are important continues to be a theme the novel. His acknowledgement of the beauty of the area and his understanding of natural sounds slowly increase as he leaves his Tokyo mindset behind. Masahiko is struck by the sounds of trees blowing on the mountains around him after Ohina mentions the ginkgo tree god. I think the wind blowing through the trees is the novel communicating that the spiritual side of nature is still there, but unlike Ohina, Masahiko the outsider is unable to understand what they are saying. I argue that it frames the wind in the trees as a spiritual experience for Masahiko even though he does not fully understand it as one. Masahiko comments, "this was his first time to see mountains sway in such a manner. From time to time the surface of the water heaved and rose up like a living being as the feet of the wind buffeted the wide expanse of the lake."⁵⁸ His description of the wind mimics Ohina's treatment of the trees as gods, but he, as an outsider to the community and rural Japan, cannot recognize them as such. He does comment on how alive they look though, and in a comment afterwards, he notices that

⁵⁷ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

they have affected him in a way that he could never experience in the city. Before moving into a broader discussion of how Ishimure invokes nature and spirituality as being innately connected, I think it is important to notice how she writes about the way nature moves Masahiko who is unfamiliar with this lifestyle, a lifestyle that Ishimure advocates as an ideal way to live. Masahiko feels,

“All the frenzied noises of the city had ceased in him—all the frantic grating sounds of automobiles, the screeching of brakes and the jarring noises of the opening and slamming of shutters that had been so deeply imbedded in the marrow of his bones... could it be I’ve somehow been carried away like a rocket, using the energy from the clamor of the giant city, and given a soft landing here?”⁵⁹

There is something about existing away from the loud sounds of nature that brings calm and clarity to Masahiko in this passage, and the language that Ishimure uses establishes a clear bias for the “soft landing” of rural Japan. The idea of humans abandoning urban life to return to the countryside is vital to this novel, and so I will address Ishimure’s idea of spirituality as it is tied to animism.

Animism is defined by Shoko Yoneyama as an approach to life that “presupposes the presence of a soul or spirit in animate and inanimate things in nature, covering all life.”⁶⁰ Yoneyama’s definition is strongly reflected in the writing of Ishimure in this text as well as *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. In a separate article, Yoneyama writes, “environmental ethics should be drawn from a spiritual tradition, an animistic culture might be as appropriate in the East as Christian tradition and European culture is in the West. This cultural heritage, however, has not been part of Japan’s intensive

⁵⁹ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 22.

⁶⁰ Shoko Yoneyama, “Animism: A Grassroots Response to Socioenvironmental Crisis in Japan,” *New Worlds from Below: Informal Life Politics and Grassroots Action in Twenty-first-century Northeast Asia*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Jeong Soh Eun (Australia: ANU Press, 2017), 100.

modernization.”⁶¹ Cultural heritage being rediscovered is fiercely advocated for in *Lake of Heaven* through Masahiko’s new experiences with the sounds found in nature. His learning and growth mirror the growth that Ishimure imagines for society. Less antagonistically than *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, Ishimure discusses the differences between rural communities and the outsiders who enter them. This is a recurring theme; how she uses the spirituality of nature to comment on environmental issues in this text. Despite her own strong belief in animism, she uses Masahiko to comment on what someone separate from and not *of* rural community life can find through seeing the spirits in nature.

As this novel is far more recent than *Paradise*, Ishimure had gained a public spotlight, and her belief that “Japanese society has been in need of ‘spiritual medicine’ as an antidote to modernity” resonated with people.⁶² I think that given her rise to popularity in the 1990s, Masahiko’s character is representative of people coming around to her idea of spirituality being connected to nature even in large cities, though they remain distinct outsiders to Ishimure’s Minamata community. The constant destruction and construction that Masahiko talks about in his life in Tokyo is contrasted in this section with the importance of a single tree emphasized by Ohina. Ishimure’s critique of modern communities is less harsh than the one in *Paradise* because Masahiko’s character arc ends with him better understanding how that tree can be important to the older villagers. A strict binary of insiders and outsiders is deconstructed in this novel, but Ishimure establishes that if Masahiko is willing to understand local customs and spirits, he can join

⁶¹ Shoko Yoneyama, “‘Life-World’: Beyond Fushima and Minamata,” *Asian Perspective* 37, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2013), 578.

⁶² Yoneyama, “Animism,” 119.

the community. However, Masahiko has to change the way he views the world. There are several more examples of this form of animism affecting Masahiko in the text that I would like to touch on before moving on.

An important factor in Ishimure's animism is the way the gods are not only tied to nature, but they are also closely linked to the superstitions of a specific place. In this case, the place is the fictional village of Amazoko. The mythic quality of these gods and spirits mirror the way that the older villagers talk about nature, and the feeling of communal belief is so strong that it also impacts Masahiko. Upon talking about the old cave where a guardian spirit must live according to the villagers, Masahiko is discomfited by the thought of something living in a cave far below the lake. Ishimure defines his uneasiness as something inherent in city dwellers saying, "...but for Masahiko, born and raised in the city, this thought gave an uneasy feeling."⁶³ He is naturally uneasy around the idea of ancient life because of his previous experience is only with the new. Additionally, though he seems skeptical and uncomfortable of the villagers' deep beliefs at first, he is moved and curious about the gods and superstitions.

The gods are not only present in Ishimure's rural community, but they also interact and impact the daily lives of those who live there. When discussing the "protective God of Amazoko Village," the villagers "spoke of how, from time to time, it would emerge from its dwelling place, change its body into the shape of a wisteria vine bridge and come down into the village and place the mark of plum blossom petals on the backs of the villagers' necks as a birthmark."⁶⁴ The idea of understanding a natural

⁶³ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 177.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

phenomenon such as a birthmark with a spiritual explanation hints at deeply rooted traditions tied to specific gods and spaces in the town. This situation is a good example of the animism that Yoneyama describes, but it also displays how only insiders to the community would understand. Masahiko, an outsider, is left feeling skeptical but nonetheless curious as the text says, “Masahiko could hardly believe it, but he found himself wanting to touch the back of his own neck with his hand.”⁶⁵ Gods, superstitions, and place are all closely tied in this text, and Masahiko’s is unconvinced at this initial meeting with Ohina but curious.

Masahiko is unconvinced in the animism that the villagers adhere to is addressed frequently, and he begins to learn about the spirits and gods in nature. Rather than the villagers pressuring him into a seeing things from their perspective, Ishimure posits that Masahiko, and therefore city dwellers in general, would come to understand local gods if they were given the chance to experience animistic nature for themselves rather than the concrete of the city. The dam destroys local spirits to comment on how a drowning of spirituality for progress is an affliction on humanity. Ishimure suggests that understanding the connectedness of nature and the spirit could provide people with a more positive attitude toward preserving nature. His learning and growth mirror the change that Ishimure imagines for society. Less aggressively than *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, Ishimure discusses the differences between rural communities and the outsiders who enter them.

For the final part of this discussion, I want to use an example of Masahiko accepting a spiritual experience with the *kami* of nature. Masahiko has a long dream-like

⁶⁵ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 178.

experience at the end of the novel. Through music and the sounds of water, he thinks that he is being cleansed of bad spirits, and he finally understands how much his connection to nature has grown from spending time with Ohina and the other villagers. The spiritual moment has him imagine that he is actually part of nature rather than separate from it. The ritual the villagers perform transports him to a different sensory realm that I will discuss more in depth later. More importantly, his inner cleansing shows that he is now convinced of Ohina's way of hearing nature. His own thinking is that "the sounds were drawing out and expelling the bad spirits that had been accumulating deep within himself.. I'm nothing more than a tiny silkworm wrapped in a translucent cocoon, keeping my heart low and listening with my neck lifted up."⁶⁶ The healing sounds in this case are the sounds of nature and the religious singing that accompanies those sounds. His transformative experience is achieved after he accepts the ideas and gods of Amazoko on their terms rather than his own, and he is able to contemplate all the vibrant parts of nature until he feels like a silkworm looking up. This sound is contrasted with the cacophonous sounds of the city, and mirroring the beginning of the text, the bad spirits, representations of city pollution, are cleansed by the local gods and traditions. The experience seems to transcend time itself when Masahiko comments, "this string was a sigh that had emerged millions of years ago when the rocks were released near the equator from a volcanic island held within a lagoon."⁶⁷ The connection to nature and the past support the animism that Ishimure emphasizes, and the constant construction in the city are placed in contrast with the centuries old traditions shown by the villagers.

⁶⁶ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 292.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Masahiko's religious experience with the *kami* and nature show a more hopeful interpretation of how outsiders can come to see rural communities if they meet them on their terms.

2.3 Food as Spiritual and Communal

Food is a vital part of any community. Much like regional dishes in the United States, Japan's cities and towns have various culinary staples. In her work, Ishimure Michiko seems less concerned with the specific specialties of small towns and more interested in the way that nature and beliefs influence the meaning of food. She highlights types of local cuisines to illustrate the different types of plants and animals that are specific to the place, but she also argues that food is consumed differently for the insiders of the community. Rather than the modern convenience stores that are spread across Japan, food in this text is something to be shared and celebrated rather than the simple satisfaction of hunger. Food is tied to the way the community spends time with each other, and this concept is highlighted by the many village gatherings in the text that Masahiko experiences. Since this is a fictional account, the meals are more a statement on the broader importance of community and spirituality.

First, I will lay out how the insiders, the villagers, talk about the food that they eat focusing on the spiritual and cultural elements of it and how it has changed since the implementation of the dam, and then I will move into a discussion of Masahiko's reaction to food as well as the way his reaction to alcohol and local food changes as he adjusts to his new environment. I think the function of food in this text in comparison to *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* is significant. In the previous chapter, food was a source of poison

and death when touched by capitalism. It brought despair onto a community, but in this novel, food is something that heals, yet industrialization is still felt and tasted by the community in the way that the water is changed. Once again, there is a strict binary of insider and outsider in this scene, but as this novel makes clear, Ishimure holds country practices to a much higher standard. She thinks that the spiritual nature of food and community are linked across Japan, the urban citizens have simply forgotten what being connected to a specific place means.

One of the first references to place and taste is when Ohina drinks from the titular lake of heaven. Before she meets Masahiko, she is reminiscing about the past and bends down to take a drink of water. Her sense of taste is strong, and her understanding of nature is unparalleled so when she drinks the water, she can taste the impurities. This ability to taste the manmade disruption is another contrast to the water from the first chapter. Minamata residents were eating fish without tasting the mercury, and they suffered from the industrialized water, however, in this novel, the text says, “the water had a hard taste. You couldn’t call it the taste of fresh water. Neither the land of the mountains, nor the roots of the trees, nor the water, nor the sunken village had been properly mixed yet.”⁶⁸ Not only is Ohina observant enough to notice the taste of the water being different from fresh water, but also she is able to explain why it tastes that way. The water is not mixed properly because of the heavy-handed man-made quality of the water. The dam fundamentally changed the way the water and soil mixed, and Ohina can sense that things have not yet returned to normal. It is implied here by her analysis of the mixing of nature that Ohina has an impressively perceptive sense of taste. Moreover,

⁶⁸ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 7.

despite the hard taste of the water, Ohina is still able to feel revived from it through a physical connection to the water and how she uses it not only to sustain herself, but she also uses it again to connect to the past when cleaning a gravestone. The mixture of taste with spirituality is a central theme in her understanding of communities. The hard taste and the way that Ohina looks into the water trying to see the town she knew underneath the dam echo what the translator Bruce Allen said of this text in an article. He writes, “the dam and the new reservoir-lake it created have also threatened to seal off the stories, traditions, and dreams that have connected the local people to their village.”⁶⁹ This sense of separation is felt immediately after Ohina drinks the water. She stares at her reflection in the water thinking of the life she used to know below the new water’s surface. This complex range of emotions from nostalgia to sadness evoked simply from the taste of hard water establishes that for the insiders of Ishimure’s community, taste is an important way to understand the natural world. This idea is a revelation that Masahiko only begins to understand after spending time with the elderly villagers at community gatherings where food and drink are key elements of the experience.

Some of the most memorable scenes in the text are about the funeral for Sayuri. She is the shrine maiden whose death Masahiko dreams of at the beginning of the novel. When he awakens, the townspeople discover that she has actually died. Rather than being a sad affair, they are there to celebrate her life. A lot of emphasis is put on how her role as shrine maiden needs to be passed on to another person. Masahiko is shocked at the

⁶⁹ Bruce Allen, “Facing the True Costs of Living: Arundhati Roy and Ishimure Michiko on Dams and Writing,” in *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Annie Merrill Ingram, Ian Marshall, Daniel J. Philippon, Adam W. Sweeting (University of Georgia Press, 2007), 160.

liveliness of the gathering. Additionally, there is a great deal of *shochu* being shared that Masahiko has not consumed living in Tokyo. The communal nature of the event is shocking to him and his night drinking with villagers helps him enter a dream-like state where he is more connected to the villagers and his own sense of taste. Bruce Allen also comments on the importance of dreams at these communal food and drink gatherings stating, “Thus, for Ishimure, authentic individual being is incomplete, even inconceivable, without participation in a greater community. Moreover, this community must be widely defined by the entire network of dreams, stories, places, and culture that the community has inherited and to which it must also continually contribute.”⁷⁰ Masahiko is an incomplete individual when compared to Ohina’s connection to the land, but he compares this happy celebration of a person’s life to the bleak affair of his grandfather’s funeral in Tokyo. Alcohol is a fundamental part of the community atmosphere. The narrator notes, “*shochu* liquor was passed around and gradually things got under way in the living quarters of the temple and the mood grew livelier. Women came in carrying saké glasses and asked, soliciting agreement, ‘Isn’t this a fine wake -- so festive and all?’”⁷¹ The *shochu* is tied to the spiritual world in this text, which explains how it is not simply the intoxication is making Masahiko feel closer to those around him. Earlier in the novel before the wake, Ohina comments on how drinking alcohol together was a way to reach the spiritual world while also lamenting that this type of belief has been disappearing from the world slowly. The text says, “those are wines for the deceased so drink it little by little. And so, drinking like that was as if the body had

⁷⁰ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

slipped away from itself and become spirit, and as if this world and the world beyond had become one.... Where has all of this gone now?”⁷² Drinking *shochu* as a way to connect to deceased loved ones and to transcend the spiritual world is completely new to Masahiko, and the wake changes his perception of what a community gathering can do in the face of tragedy.

The night of drinking and eating together is so communal in comparison to the depressing funeral for his grandfather in Tokyo that he thinks, “the stewed vegetables known as *otoki* that were served at the wake tasted particularly good. In Tokyo, there wasn’t anything like this. Having been initiated into drinking *shochu* the night before, he had accepted the drinks poured for him.”⁷³ The binary differences between these older villagers and Masahiko is made clear here as a city/rural divide. Despite this, the villagers treat Masahiko well, and they make him feel like part of the community. The divide between community and outsider is far weaker in these dream-like scenes where everyone is sharing food and drink together. It is both a spiritual and communal time. Additionally, the more superstitious side of rural food is introduced to Masahiko around this time as well.

Upon waking up from a night of heavy drinking with the villagers and experiencing another vivid dream of the lake, Masahiko is hungover. In this moment, the idea of local foods being used to heal ailments and provide relief are introduced along with the common idea of conflicting natural cures. The holistic health aids of food play into the deeper understanding of food that Ishimure shows of the Amazoko villagers.

⁷² Ishimure, *Heaven*, 9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 120.

When he wakes up, “on a tray, some salted *umeboshi* plums, a cup of green tea, and a peeled persimmon had been placed.”⁷⁴ The traditional foods he wakes up to are meant to cure his hangover, and persimmons in particular are a fruit strongly connected to the land and seasons. Ohina even further comments on this by mentioning that “they’re the first of the season.”⁷⁵ The persimmon was grown by Ohina and Omomo, her daughter, which further adds to the sense of place in this part of the text. Masahiko being treated and fed so well shows a kind of hospitality and openness to outsiders that he would not experience in the city. Ishimure is flipping the closed off binary of the previous chapter’s text to show how welcoming rural Japan can be if people would leave the urban centers. The food is fresh and vibrant, and the servings are generous. The scene of the wake is immediately followed by holistic cures for hangovers and a group of people looking out for Masahiko. Food is important in creating the identity of a community and the dream-like events brought on by drinking *shochu* have liquor bring a cohesion to a community and to Masahiko. The connection they share while celebrating and remembering the life of Sayuri bleeds into the next day and the mystical moment with the villagers remains. The way the people of the village eat and drink are closely connected to the surrounding nature.

Food, nature, and humanity do not exist separately from each other in Ishimure’s world. Everything is closely linked, and I think it is important how food is medicine and a community builder in this novel whereas in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* food was a source of death. A vital part of the balance in this relationship was poisoned by the

⁷⁴ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 133.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

methyl mercury of the Chisso organization. The insider and outsider differences here are noted, but Masahiko is learning about how food can be more than a convenience store meal or a way to sustain the body. The food and drinks that he shares with the villagers at the wake for Sayuri serve a different function. The *shochu* is a spiritual act that connects the villagers to each other but also to their past. The intoxication in this text is represented as a dream-like space where memories of the past and loved ones come more easily. Connections also come more easily, as Masahiko has several drinks given to him by the elderly villagers out of good will. Furthermore, food is used as a form of natural healing and superstition. The villagers eat certain foods to cure hangovers or certain wines to connect with deceased loved ones. I think this quote from the beginning of the text highlights the balance of food, nature, and humanity that the insiders of the community try to introduce to the world outside of rural Japan,

Masahiko noticed how the motions of his body-whether munching on a rice ball, or stooping over to drink water, or sitting down on the grass- all harmonized completely with the feeling of the mountains. It felt as if the lingering traces of the tormenting sounds that had been lodged so deeply in his brain were being summoned, one by one, and taken in ever so carefully by the murmurings of the trees.⁷⁶

The community is not the only thing that is taking in Masahiko; nature itself is creating a calm in him, and the harmony he feels while eating and drinking the food of Amazoko gives him the balance and peace that the city had taken from him.

2.4 Pollution of Land and Health Shown Through a Character Masahiko

⁷⁶ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 28.

The pollution of land and water are themes that connect all of Ishimure Michiko's fiction. The pollution of the Shiranui sea, the construction of the fictional dam that sinks Amazoko, and the concrete that covers the earth in Tokyo are all major sources of harm to nature and people in Ishimure's texts, but I think that this story in particular addresses a different type of pollution, a muddying of the soul. One of the major character arcs in this text is how Masahiko's musical writer's block is finally unlocked after spending time outside of Tokyo. The sounds and lifestyle of Tokyo are presented as their own source of pollution for someone on the individual level. It is a pollution of the ear in Masahiko's case, but also more generally, Tokyo ruins one's ability to connect with nature, spirituality, and other people. After gaining recognition in the nineties, Ishimure moves to forgive the many decades of silence on the government's part and instead shifts the blame to the greater ailment of modern society. The entire text acts as a way to address the hard dichotomy of the insiders of rural Japan versus the outsiders like Masahiko, and therefore, Masahiko's character growth is centered around a type of healing of the soul that can only occur in a place like Amazoko. In this final section of the chapter, I will go through the instance where Masahiko is shedding the noise and chaos of the city and how in the end, he is able to come out as a stronger artist and more complete person from Ishimure's perspective. Masahiko's growth and view as an outsider really are what emphasize the shortcomings of Tokyo society when compared to the natural world of Ishimure's fictional Amazoko. The way that he is made whole is by discovering how to be a part of the community rather than merely a guest. He has to actively take part. I will focus on a scene where there is an actual discussion on how Masahiko can dispel the bad spirits from Tokyo and fully join the community.

Masahiko's personal growth and understanding of the city is the cause of his internal pollution, but his various senses are being unlocked the more time that he spends in the village. I want to look at the conversation around him actually becoming a member of the community. Omomo explains that Masahiko's bad spirits that he brought from Tokyo are what keep him from joining the community. She says, "I thought something was strange. You're so different from us... maybe it's because of those bad spirits from Tokyo."⁷⁷ She points out that she can also see that he is being haunted, and despite not thinking poorly of him, she points out that he is still not a member of the community even though he seems to think he is joining. Masahiko is relying heavily on the kindness of the villagers without giving anything in exchange. Omomo suggests that in order to fully commit to the community, he should play the *biwa* because "it was made of the mulberry tree from the old estate," and if he plays it, "the voices of Amazoko will come out again."⁷⁸ The way to becoming a part of the city is finally taking part in the spiritual traditions and sounds of nature rather than observing and partaking on the fringes of the community as a guest. She points out how he is staying for free at the temple and did not bring the traditional *shochu* as a gift for the people of the town. Finally, Ishimure points out that the people from the city can learn a great deal from rural Japan, but they can only truly become insiders through active participation and giving back to the community. The idea of active participation and cooperation is the ideal that Ishimure finally decides is the fundamental part of communal relationships.

⁷⁷ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 219.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

I think that the larger point that is made about Masahiko being involved in the religious event is that to be a community means making an effort for those around you. Masahiko has been blindly taking advantage of villagers without thinking about it. The growth that Masahiko experiences in his senses extends to him understanding being a part of something larger. He has to take an active part in nature and community through giving something back to the villagers and trying to communicate with nature the way that he had only observed the villagers doing. Rather than listen to the songs of Omomo and Ohina speak with the trees and water, he has to provide the music. Masahiko's turning point is when he realizes that he has been welcomed but is still on the edge of the community. He realizes, "he felt ashamed of his behavior. In spite of my coming here intending to get away from the world of city people, who always just ask for things and expect to get things in return, in coming to this village haven't I acted as the worst one of all?"⁷⁹ This sentence brings up the binary of insider versus outsider, but the text doesn't judge Masahiko too harshly because he is able to reach this conclusion on his own and reflect on his selfishness. Additionally, he is given the ability to transcend this definition of an urban citizen. This type of revelation is not given to the real-world characters than Ishimure shows in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, but the more optimistic tone of the text and her personal victories in reaching a wide audience seem to have lightened the condemning tone in this text. Yet, she still has criticisms of Tokyo mixed into this revelation. Masahiko can join the community through participation, but through Masahiko, she points out a difference in work habits as well. Masahiko notices that "an uncomfortable feeling came over him – here's someone with work to do – he realized he

⁷⁹ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 221.

was just an idle traveler.”⁸⁰ Masahiko is burdening the villagers, but they are still treating him well. Ishimure is still strongly condemning urban life in this text, and these criticisms echo her sentiments of cursing capitalism in the previous chapter, but Masahiko is allowed to move past these boundaries through an awakening of his senses and spiritualism.

The music that Masahiko has to find in Amazoko is found primarily in the mountains and the water, and the text suggests that it is a kind of music that only people trying to understand nature can comprehend. Christine Marran touches on this idea of musical nature in a chapter of her book saying, “When placed on a windowsill, the harp vibrates to air currents, and it is for him a “beautifully elegant” example of “aesthetics as causality” because we never hear the wind itself yet the harp vibrates with music.”⁸¹ The theme of nature having its own music without human involvement plays into the way that scenes of nature are described in the text. Masahiko is finally starting to see these hidden musical moments in the wind like Ohina did at the start of the text. This realization is the moment he feels he can make the traditional song he wanted on the *biwa*. Masahiko thinks,

...from the buds of the quince and magnolia to the faint gurgling sounds of running water. All these trees, grasses and flowers, whose names I hardly know-why have I never thought of their significance for the human world until now? I’ve just thought of these things as existing in picture books of plants. But now it seems that here is where the world begins. Even a lump of dirt-you can’t look at it as something trivial.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ishimure, *Heaven*, 224.

⁸¹ Christine Marran, “Obligate Storytelling,” in *Ecology Without Culture*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 49.

⁸² Ishimure, *Heaven*, 222.

This moment is when his perspective on nature truly changes, and it is what allows him to perform a song that reaches the memories of Amazoko at the end of the text. He breaks from the outsider barrier and enters into a fuller understanding of what the villagers think and feel. The revelation that nature is significant for simply being around humans rather than being something to cover with manmade dams and factories.

2.5 Conclusion

Ishimure's discussion of community is noticeably kinder to outsiders of the fictional Amazoko than her previous texts were to the bureaucrats that came to Minamata during the methyl mercury poisonings, but Masahiko is not a political figure or a doctor studying the dying cats of the fictional town with a cold clerical eye. He is merely visiting from Tokyo, and his discovery of a hidden place beauty mirrors the public's discovery and reevaluation of Ishimure during the post-bubble economy. She shows the people finally listening to her what has been lost in the concrete metropolises of modern Japanese society. Through the dream-like imagery of the text and the use of specific tree names and food names she makes the fictional town a physical space and argues that it isn't merely the people that make up a community. The trees and plants are gods of their own and have the power to communicate memories despite the industrialization represented by the dam. Additionally, the superstitions around food and plants play into the type of socialization that Ishimure sees as lost in the cities. A funeral is a chance for a celebration of life and through sharing traditional foods and drinks, the wake is a spiritual experience that unites the villagers and introduces to outsiders the strength of these beliefs. Finally, Ishimure lays bare what she thinks keeps someone like Masahiko from

truly entering the community and putting the pollution of Tokyo out of his body. She says that by taking rather than giving and not hearing the music of the trees and water Masahiko and other city people have closed themselves off from a form of understanding the world that can heal rather than destroy found in rural communities. Iwaoka Nakamasa writes of this reconciliation as symbolic of the turnaround in awareness of Minamata disease. The reevaluation of Ishimure in the nineties helped change the mindset in Ishimure's texts as well Iwaoka points out.⁸³ This book symbolizes the reconciliation Ishimure has with Japanese society as the capitalist world and rapid progress of post-war Japan are burst in the early nineties, yet Ishimure's vision is hopeful that people can recapture what still exists in small communities across Japan.

⁸³ Nakamasa Iwaoka 岩岡 中正, "Ishimure michiko ni okeru sonzai no kaifuku -- tairitsu kara wakai e" 石牟礼道子における存在の回復--対立から和解へ [Revitalization of 'being' in Michiko Ishimure's thought: from antagonism to reconciliation], *Kumamoto Law Review* 115 (2008): 1-3.

CONCLUSION

Community is at the center of Ishimure's writing because her hometown occupies a dark part of Japan's history of industrialization. Minamata was under attack by outside interests, and Ishimure depicts the suffering of nature and people inside of a specific place. In all her works, she discusses the people, the food, the customs, the religions, and the suffering of rural Japan that reveals it as a place of both great loss in recent years but also of great beauty and strength. Ishimure's anger and fight for acknowledgement and compensation for the people suffering from the loss of Japan's rural community is passionate and righteous, but in all of her anger, I think it significant that she never makes guilt individual in that she never blames a bureaucrat or person by name. Her anger comes across in her earlier writing, but while remaining critical of modern society in her later works, she alludes to a form of reconciliation in *Lake of Heaven*. Instead, she takes her fight to the source of suffering that permitted the pollution of the Shiranui Sea: capitalism and industrialization. The systemic destruction of small communities is not the fault of an individual but the system that allows corporations like the Chisso Corporation to dump mercury in the ocean for over a decade despite medical science being aware of the illness that it was causing. Therefore, the dichotomy of insider versus outsider is more about the systemic oppression of the disenfranchised at the hands of faceless entities and clinical science than blaming one person. Still, Ishimure's outlook changes along with the economy and the opinion of the Japanese public by the time *Lake of Heaven* is released.

I think that the more hopeful stance that Ishimure takes in *Lake of Heaven* is tied to the more positive reception she received on her message of accountability and sustainability. As we have seen, Masahiko has an epiphany about hearing and

understanding nature when sitting quietly in the mountains around Amazoko. This epiphany about the value of untouched natural landscapes is Ishimure's plea for natural conservation. She wants people to experience and protect Japan's natural beauty, and that idea requires people taking time to go out into nature. I think Masahiko is able to be healed and hear nature in the text because Ishimure's message begins to resonate in Japan around the publication of *Lake of Heaven*. Masahiko's character is a sympathetic protagonist rather than a villain, and he changes as a person through interaction with a traditional community and nature. Yoneyama writes of the publication of Ishimure's works and the media recognition for her themes finally led to her reconciliation with Japanese society. She was able to meet with the Empress, and for the first time since the outbreak, the Heisei emperor went to visit Minamata and talk to the patients who survived but suffered from lifelong complications of Minamata disease.⁸⁴ These victories came after several decades of being ignored by the government. Ishimure's anger felt in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* conveyed the message of a community who only could look out for each other, and I think that her belief that only insiders can truly understand the nature of the community and the loss of industry and loved ones at the hand of such a tragedy. *Lake of Heaven*, however, allows an outsider into Ishimure's world to show the things that make a community more than just the people. Individual stories are still present, but they are not aimed at explaining pollution. Alternatively, they are about a

⁸⁴ Shoko Yoneyama, "Animism: A Grassroots Response to Socioenvironmental Crisis in Japan," *New Worlds from Below: Informal Life Politics and Grassroots Action in Twenty-first-century Northeast Asia*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Jeong Soh Eun (Australia: ANU Press, 2017), 114-115.

place healing from the destruction of their community. Amazoko remains alive in the spirits, the food, and the people that remember the village.

While an outsider like Masahiko cannot make sense of all of the local *kami*, Ishimure shows that meeting on an individual level can lead to a healing for the village as well as the individual. Masahiko comments on all the positive changes he experiences after moving to the countryside briefly. The sounds of Tokyo are gone, and his inability to make music is healed. He gains an understanding of the spirits and participates in community functions. His senses are forever altered as he comes to understand the harm that Tokyo did to them. The healing is for both Masahiko and Ishimure. For Ishimure, the binary between insiders and outsiders has reached a kind of understanding. Her Noh play is performed in Tokyo about the beauty of her hometown, and the plight of the people close to her and the fishing industry that was destroyed are finally reevaluated along with her literary works and poetry. Dams are put up over towns, and mercury is allowed to be dumped into the ocean when capitalism and industry are left unchecked, and these evils are never given a form of reconciliation for Ishimure. Pollution is the real outsider in the texts, infecting people, places, and killing nature and communities. It is a thing outside to the natural world like bureaucracy and capitalism, purely manmade evils. These texts are far from the only ones where she makes this stance on urbanization as a known form of pollution. She spends most of these two texts showing outsiders in her community, but there are times where Ishimure acts as the outsider.

In one of her more recent short story collections she recounts a time when she visited Tokyo to lobby for Minamata victim compensation, and her stance on Tokyo remains firm in calling it corruption. The story is about Ishimure sleeping on the streets

over Shinjuku waiting for the offices to open. In a short story from her 2009 *Shibun korekushon* called “*Tokai no neko to hikari nagi*”(A City Cat and the Glittering Calm of Early Morning), Ishimure herself is an outsider. Unlike Masahiko’s newfound sense of freedom, Ishimure feels completely disconnected from the natural world until she meets a stray cat also sleeping on the concrete. Reflecting on her time as an outsider in the city, she says,” wildness or the senses and intuition of living things is something that has roots in the origin of the earth. The road sadly seals away this connection to soil as the modern people’s smoothing away of everything continues. “⁸⁵ The natural world is trapped under the concrete of Tokyo, and she feels the same way under the bureaucracy of Tokyo that denied victims compensation. This quote also reaffirms her commitment to an animistic outlook lamenting the soil sealed away by the concrete of Tokyo. In this way, Ishimure continued to be an environmental activist, and authors writing about the Fukushima triple disaster that occurred in Japan could look to her about recovering from a disaster both natural and manmade.

Unfortunately, Ishimure Michiko passed away recently. She died of Parkinson’s disease in early February of 2018. Her work is now studied across the world as a critique of environmental destruction and an attack on corporate pollution that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people from Minamata. Through her activism and active literary career, Ishimure’s message reached many outsiders of her community, shedding light on industrialization being a source of harm in a time when the Japanese economic boom had many people supporting the rapid progress. The themes of place in nature through

⁸⁵ Michiko Ishimure, “*Tokai no neko to hikari nagi*,” *Ishimure Michiko shibun korekushon*, (Tōkyō: Fujiwara Shoten, 2009) 10. All translations my own.

specific names of plants and animals, local *kami* as a way to understand community customs, giving a voice to the victims who cannot stand up for themselves, and the fight for compensation from a company who knowingly killed hundreds show what Ishimure thinks the insiders of a community in rural Japan can do and makes a plea to reconsider the communities abandoned in a sea of poison or underwater.

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