

## BOOK REVIEW:

### ***Eco-Criticism in Japan,*** **Hisaaki WAKE, Keijiro SUGA,** **Yuki MASAMI, eds.**

by Stephanie A. Siehr, University of San Francisco

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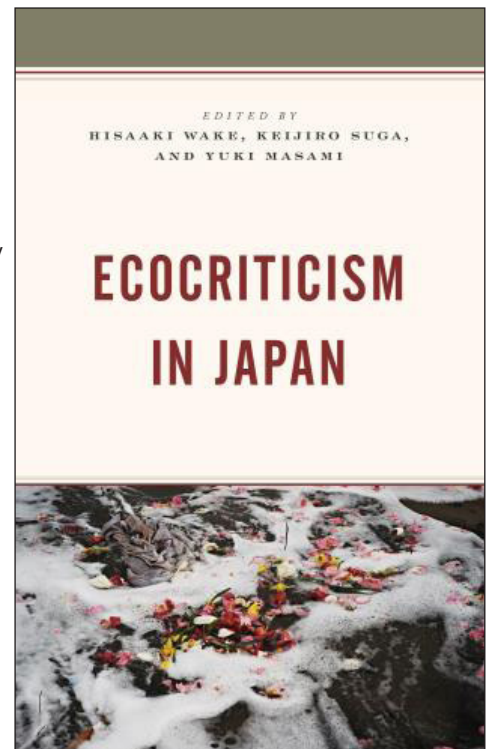
As reflected in traditional Japanese poetry and artwork, Japan is a place of beautiful yet fleeting cherry blossoms and waves so fearsome they are known worldwide by their native name of *tsunami*. From the onset of Western industrialization and world wars, Japan has also become known for man-made disasters inflicted on nature and society, and these disasters figure prominently in modern Japanese literature and film. The book, *Eco-criticism in Japan* (Wake, Suga, and Masami, eds. 2018), explores Japanese literature and film through the themes of environmental crisis, harmony with nature (or lack thereof), and the 'slow' injustice of long-term environmental damage.

Eco-criticism as "environmentally oriented literary study" was formed as a discipline in the US in the 1990s (Heise, Forward). Culturally contentious from the start, the discipline has evolved through international comparative analysis and by authors within a culture shaping their own critiques. A broader view of eco-criticism by Kerridge (in Loftus, Ch. 2), expands the definition across cultures and history, "to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear... in cultural spaces..."

The book follows the more expansive definition as it examines representation of nature in Japanese literature and film. The collection of essays spans a range of historical periods and cultural forms, from the 11th-century *Tale of Genji* and literary critiques of industrial modernity in the late 1800s by Reiun Taoka, to present day examination of environmental disasters in the *anime* work of Miyazaki and numerous artists exploring the aftermath of the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear disaster. Topically, the essays address environmental issues of radiation and toxic waste, deforestation and soil erosion, air pollution and species extinction.

The essays — and the cultural works they discuss — give varying degrees of attention to the environment. Nature is often noted as a nostalgic connection to the past, not the present. Visions of the future are mostly portrayed as dystopian, with human devastation of nature. Nature seeks to protect and revive itself by excluding or even battling humans, as in Miyazaki's anime *Princess Mononoke* where forest creatures battle human destruction of the forest (Wake, Ch. 12) or grasses and cows slowly reform the post-Fukushima radiation-laden landscape, as envisioned in Shinnami Kyosuke's non-fiction work *The Cattle and Soil* (Suga, Ch. 9).

Even more than nature, much of the literature and film examined in the book emphasizes social issues — from nuclear radiation to oppression of women, and the internal struggles of individual characters — such as the kamikaze pilot in *The Eternal Zero* and the warrior princess in Miyazaki's anime, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. This emphasis on the individual was noted by the writer and social critic Reiun Taoka nearly 100 years prior, in his critique of Western-style modernity and its dangers of industrialization and "a purely selfish and utilitarian spirit" (Loftus, Ch. 2). Reiun held



that every human being has a right to the essentials of water, air, and land, but access to those essentials was being restricted by the rising prices and pollution of capitalism and industrialization.

Reiun's early critique of the problems of individualism, echoes the observations of the Bengali novelist, Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). Ghosh argues that the failure of modern society to act on climate change is reflected in the failure to write literature about climate change; the modern emphasis on the individual dissuades writers from imagining the collective epic. Ursula Heise nods to Ghosh in her Foreword to *Ecocriticism in Japan*, noting that despite Japan's active participation in global climate agreements in the political and economic spheres, Japanese cultural output has focused on more localized and acute environmental problems.

Indeed, there is almost no attention to climate change in the entire book. Only in the eerily prescient novel *Inter Ice Age 4*, published by novelist Abe Kobo in 1959 (Ueno, Ch. 4), is climate change mentioned. In this dystopian story, sea-level rise motivates the clandestine genetic engineering of humans to live underwater as cyborg aquans. There is no notion of fending off climate change or of reconciling with nature; the aquans go underwater, leaving plants and creatures on land to adapt without interference from humans.

In perhaps the most skeptical essay, "On the Ideological Manipulation of Nature in Japanese Popular Culture" (Ch. 12), Hisaaki Wake asserts that "popular culture products" rather than artistic work itself, can manipulate audiences. Wake examines the anime of Miyazaki, the war-time novel *The Eternal Zero* by controversial author Hyakuta Naoki, and Ishimure Michiko's tale of mercury poisoning in Minamata Bay, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Wake views all the authors/artists as conflicted or "ambivalent" about the production of their work and their public statements about nature. He concludes that "environmental consciousness... employed in a popular culture product, is only likely to serve to increase the work's market value."

In contrast, Takazawa Shuji (translated by Caroline Wake) offers another interpretation of Ishimure in the essay "From <Passion> to <Compassion>: The World of Ishimure Michiko's Works" (Chapter 10). Takazawa highlights Ishimure's personal experience living near Minamata Bay and her spiritual connection to nature and outcasts there. Her writing portrays a young girl as a spiritual messenger, envisioning herself as a white fox transformed into a human, feeling that human words could never describe the vivid and nuanced world of nature and its spirits.

The work of artist Okabe Masao does not use words at all. Rather, the artist works solely in frottage, creating rubbings on paper of "surfaces charged with historical significance" such as buildings and trees in Hiroshima and Fukushima (Suga, Ch. 9). Suga eloquently explains that "trees are the living testimony of a place," and that Okabe, "...by his rapid steady motion of arms and hands ... gives voice to the surfaces" which "begin to emanate the buried memories."

*Ecocriticism in Japan* benefits from the varying perspectives of its Japanese and North American authors, who include a poet (Suga), a Japanese language professor (Wake), and a professor of socio-environmental studies (Masami). The richness of the book also comes from its broad sampling of Japanese literature and cultural media, giving us a glimpse of environmental aesthetics before industrialization, along with deep and detailed examination of current cultural interactions with nature.