

Reinterpretation and Rediscovery of Nature and Tradition in Ishimure Michiko's *Lake of Heaven*

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Abstract: Under the current climate of global environmental awareness, Ishimure Michiko's call for rediscovering past traditions through nature to understand the present and build the future gains a renewed impact. In *Lake of Heaven*, Ishimure brings together a multilayered narrative of myth and reality, old and new, modern and traditional, rural and urban. She does this to create a bridge that reconciles the people who have lived in the village of Amazoko their entire lives, and whose worldview is connected to nature and has had that connection severed as a result of direct damage done by the process of industrialization, with the memory of this place in the hopes to recapture it. The discovery of a world that has always been there gives a sense of renewed self and purpose, something that has become pivotal in the age of unprecedented digital connection and personal isolation.

Keywords: Ishimure Michiko, *Lake of Heaven*, environment, literature

Introduction

Ishimure Michiko's works heavily focus on the more-than-human living world and the human relationship with this world. They explore nature and the individual's place within this world, heightening awareness of the importance of these relationships and the responsibilities that come with being a part of the world. The increasing environmental concerns have enhanced the significance of Ishimure's novels. They chronicle past environmental crises and their consequences, as seen in her earlier work, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (苦界浄土わが水俣病 *Kugai jōdo waga Minamatabyō*, 1969). They are also a reminder that the individual is not separate from nature but part of it, as seen in her novel *Lake of Heaven* (天湖 *Tenko*, 1997). Through the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, myth and reality, and an understanding of the rural and urban, *Lake of Heaven* allows the contemporary reader to reinterpret and rediscover their relationship with nature and reflect on the importance of cultivating and strengthening this relationship, particularly in an age of increased personal isolation and urbanization.

This article examines the human relationship with the more-than-human living world in *Lake of Heaven* as read within the increasing global environmental awareness and the rising impact of man-made environmental crises on nature and the individual. I begin by situating *Lake of Heaven* within the oeuvre of Ishimure's work and the context of the new environmental awareness of today's post-covid world. I then define how space and place are perceived and understood within the context of a new awareness of ourselves as well as our thoughts, relationship with, and actions concerning the world we inhabit in relation to reading Ishimure's *Lake of Heaven*. Next, I look at how spirituality and the modern are presented within this work and what meaning they gain as they are read through the oculus of the reader of today under the re-defined normalcy. In conclusion, I contextualize Ishimure's message within the conflict between the industrial and commercial and the human bond with nature and life.

In light of increased awareness of environmental issues and the focus on literature with environmental concerns, Ishimure's writings, encompassing fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and Noh, are widely discussed in Japan and have gained international reception. However, due to the limited translation of her works from Japanese, international recognition remains limited and mostly focused on her best-known work, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*. Publications such as *Ishimure Michiko's Writing in Ecocritical Perspective: Between Sea and Sky*, edited by Bruce Allen and Yuki Masami (Lexington Books, 2016), and more recent translations of her works by the scholar and translator Bruce Allen are bringing attention to her body of work. Ishimure's name appears more frequently in lists of authors in world literature and environmentally-focused literature, requiring further discussion in today's environmentally aware society. This article contributes to these conversations to heighten awareness of Ishimure's works while exploring the human relationship with the more-than-human living world around us as read in today's context.

Ishimure Michiko's place of birth and childhood greatly influenced her motivation as a writer to chronicle and express feelings regarding nature, industrialization, and the individual's relationship with nature and its disruption by man-made environmental disasters. She was born on the island of Amakusa off the coast of Kyushu in 1927. When she was three months old, her family moved to Minamata Village (now a city). Ishimure grew up in a close-knit community founded upon customs, culture, and traditions emerging from a life of close relationships with nature and spirituality. The beauty of the village surroundings and the connection with the more-than-human living world also grounded her in the community's myths, storytelling modes, and ceremonies and festivals.¹ These factors cemented the core of Ishimure's

¹ "The concept of more-than-human refers to the worlds of the different beings co-dwelling on Earth, including and surpassing human societies" (Carlos 2021, 2).

worldview, namely, the belief that everyone and everything is connected and that there is power in the spirit of words, and informed her writing

However, she also grew up witnessing the devastation wrought upon this beautiful locale and its people by the Chisso Corporation's dumping of chemical waste into the Shiranui Sea, which was the locus of the village's culture. Ishimure was driven by witnessing the extremely harmful effects of pollution on the human and the more-than-human living world to write many of her works. She wrote a trilogy about Minamata, including *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease, Village of the Gods* (神々の村 *Kamigami no mura*, 1971), and *Fish of Heaven* (天の魚 *Ten no ou*, 1974). *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* is a literary work incorporating reports and recollections, both fictional and real, that reflect the stories of those involved in the narrative of Minamata Village and the disease.

Even though Ishimure Michiko described herself as “just a housewife,” she was a prolific writer and fierce activist. Her oeuvre covers a variety of genres, and her writing reflects how she viewed life and the relationship between the individual and the more-than-human living world. Her writing style also conjured up the spirit of words called *kotodama*. Through this spirit she sought to preserve and protect nature and the traditions, stories, modes of storytelling, and culture that emerge from being a part of nature within the modern world that displaces and disrupts nature and the human relationship with it.

In addition to informing her writing, Ishimure's life experiences led to her environmental activism. She was involved in the chronicling and negotiations of the sufferers of Minamata; however, her activism was not limited to Minamata's environmental tragedy and loss. She was supportive of the Niigata Minamata Disease victims and critical of other causes of environmental structural and slow violence. One such case led to the writing of *Lake of Heaven*. It concerns Mizukami Village in Kyushu, submerged by the Ichifusa dam along the Kuma River, Kumamoto Prefecture. The narrative establishes a connection between the human and more-than-human living world of Amazoko, a village submerged to create a dam. The novel follows in Ishimure's signature style of multi-layered storytelling and genres. It is a narrative of memory, myth, and self-discovery that reconciles the rift between tradition and modernity, old and young, and myth and reality in the wake of the changes brought by industrialization.

Lake of Heaven

Ishimure Michiko's work is rooted in the human relationship with nature. Her works explore the effects of the industrial machine on the natural landscape and how that, in turn, affects both the individual and nature, myth, and tradition. Her best-known work, and also one of her earlier works, is *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. It is a collection of recollections based on fiction and reality following the plight of the village, now city, of Minamata as the effects of mercury poisoning ravaged it due to chemical dumping into the sea. The village was further ravaged by the ongoing bureaucracy of the medical world, companies, and committees in the clash between the people of the village and the officials, and the resulting clash of tradition and modernity in the face of slow environmental violence as it was unleashed onto the village over decades. *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* is a highly charged emotional and political work. Ishimure dedicates chapters to the people of the village and their stories, gives vivid descriptions of the nature surrounding the people, and includes reports about the village from the medical community and other committees. Interspersed between these stories is the journalist narrator, who is an avatar for Ishimure's own voice, strongly present in testimony and support for Minamata and its plight and condemnation of the processes, both industrial and bureaucratic, that have led to such a visceral crisis that has not only condemned the sea of the village, but it's people

through generations as the disease made its way into the water, affecting the sea creatures, land creatures, adults, children, and even the unborn.

In *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, the readers see Ishimure in direct confrontation and condemnation of the state of the village. Her narrator, after quoting the agenda for the newly formed Minamata Citizens' Association for Countering Minamata Disease, quickly follows with the observations of a journalist commenting on how the true colors of those involved are revealed by declaring,

“I must clothe my naked, bloody feelings in effective metaphors, sharpen them into weapons of vengeance ... The history of the Minamata Disease patients and their relatives – this wandering tribe of exhausted, half-dead outcasts carrying their ghosts like clay dolls with big holes instead of eyes, noses and mouths – is about to be shown and trumpeted everywhere. Their curse is gradually becoming audible. I won't rest content until my creations, my own dolls made of the stuff of words, speak, or rather, keep silent like these people.” (Ishimure 2003: 306)

This statement reveals an Ishimure who is testifying for and chronicling the plight of Minamata, focused on revealing these stories in detail and reflecting them in the world. Ishimure achieves this through the stories she conveys, but also through the way she conveys these stories. Her solid belief in the power of words and a strong connection to myth and tradition led her to write *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* as a multi-layered work containing old myths, poetry, traditional modes of storytelling, and cold, stark formal reports.

This unique way of writing continues in *Lake of Heaven*, published nearly thirty years after *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. However, there is a shift of focus in her writing: while *Lake of Heaven* is also very environmentally focused, it does not include the industrialization and bureaucracy heavily featured in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Instead, *Lake of Heaven* focuses on the people who live in the place and their efforts to reclaim the spiritual and traditional space that has been lost.

The locus of the storytelling in *Lake of Heaven* is Amazoko, a village flooded to create a dam. The village exists in a multidimensional space: under the waters it exists as skeletal remains, while above the waters it exists in the memories of those who lived there thirty years before it was flooded and now visit in their dreams. The village also lives on in the myths of old and the collective memory of the new as the younger generation find their own stories intertwined with those of old times. Ishimure's heavy use of myth and tradition allows the story of the village existing in memory to interweave with the present as it is summoned from the bottom of the lake to the space above and beyond to become grafted with that of the new generation.

Instead of focusing on what has been lost, Ishimure turns towards a rediscovery of what is already there, and maintaining a connection between these spaces. Through the collective connection, the individual can find the lessons of the past to forge those of the future. While the novel's main thread follows the story of Masahiko, a Tokyo man, who brings his grandfather's remains back to the homeland, the stories go beyond his story to that of the place, its history, and its myths. It is not only the story of Masahiko but also of his grandfather Masahito, who is heartbroken at leaving the village for Tokyo. It is also the story of Ohina, the elderly village woman who preserves the legacies of old and whose daughter, Omomo, becomes the next shrine girl of the village. It is also the stories of the gods and goddesses of water, sea, and earth who visit the villagers in their dreams, or perhaps the story of the villagers' daily lives, both above the waters and below them, in memory of a village submerged. In conclusion, what Ishimure presents here is the story of Amazoko, the village named Bottom of Heaven, existing

in both memory and reality, to be celebrated and rediscovered rather than a testimony and lament of loss.

Ishimure conjures the village of Amazoko in this work,
 “Somehow, tonight it seems the feeling has slipped away. It seems we can’t make it back to Amazoko, no matter how much we look for the entrance.”
 “Even at Utazaka?”
 “Even at Utazaka. I wonder why.”
 “If we can’t get there... why don’t we call it up – call Amazoko to come to us?”
 “Oh...”
 Surprised, Ohina let out a sigh. Then she replied,
 “You’re right. We need to summon it. Call it up from the bottom of the lake.”
 (Ishimure 2008: 61)

The narrator of *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* conjures the ghosts as witnesses, but when Amazoko is invoked, there is a sense of the spiritual and of relief that perhaps in finding Amazoko, the people will be able to find themselves.

Seeing this shift from testimony to rediscovery through Ishimure’s works within the current world climate, we could see why there is a renewed interest in Ishimure’s works within the context of a new understanding and appreciation of the world around us. Interest in the person of Ishimure began with the publication of *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* for two reasons. First, it was the first to bring attention to one of the biggest man-made environmental crises to date—mercury poisoning and Minamata disease. Secondly, the work combined many different narrative elements and techniques to create a piece of writing that stands out in its voice and structure. Her death in 2018, occurring during a time of increasing environmental awareness, generated renewed interest in the appreciation of nature and the environment in her works.

This increased awareness has, in turn, led to a revival of interest in major environmental crises that have defined environmental man-made violence, such as Minamata disease, and the social, political, and environmental issues associated with such a crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic, two film projects have been produced on Minamata. One is a documentary titled *Minamata Mandala* by Kazuo Hara. The other is a film called *Minamata* starring the actor Johnny Depp as photojournalist Eugene Smith who made it his life’s work to chronicle the plight of the village of Minamata. This renewed interest shows increased awareness of the need to chronicle and study past instances of environmental crisis and their ongoing effects to understand our current relationship with the environment and how to move forward in our dealings and understanding of the environment. As scientists warned of rapid escalation to environmental damage unless swift and decisive action is taken, and with the renewed interest of various fields in environmental concerns, Ishimure Michiko’s name inevitably came up in regard to Minamata, both for her activism on the ground and her written oeuvre.

Ishimure’s call for rediscovering and reconciling with nature and its layers of meaning and existence from *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* to *Lake of Heaven* seems almost prophetic. It shows a recurring theme within our historical narrative of disaster when nature or our relationship with it is disrupted and how rebuilding that bridge enables us to reconcile our place within the world and evolve. Ishimure’s work might have been written in the 1990s; just as the characters and the collective memories cross time, her work is a time bridge to an unprecedented period.

Place and Space

Time and place have become very important in the context of an emerging and defining awareness of ourselves and our relationship with the more-than-human living world. Space is redefined as people realize the meaning of the spaces they live in and of nature. This realization comes once the connections are disrupted or severed. However, the response to this realization could either be in lament or in an attempt to reinterpret and rediscover what might have been taken for granted. After staying at home for what felt like an indefinite period, the solace of a walk outside, and the refuge found in a hike, have shifted the context of the environment for many.

We, as readers, travel with these characters through Tokyo, and the timeless Amazoko of the present and past. *Lake of Heaven* features the character of Masahiko leaving the city of Tokyo, with its stifling noise and atmosphere, to visit the village where his grandfather was raised. Within this natural space on the banks of the lake, Masahiko finds himself connecting with nature and feeling at ease with the world in an unprecedented way. Through this connection he learns about the village's past, its myths and traditions, and discovers that he belongs to a place he did not even know existed. His journey is paralleled by that of Omomo, who had lived on the banks of the lake with her mother. She begins the narrative as a recalcitrant character, hesitant and unwilling to indulge in the connection to nature and tradition, and then slowly begins to listen. By the novel's end, she has gained an understanding and acceptance of these traditions and the natural place where such things originated and becomes the new shrine maiden of the village. It is important to note the parallels between the city and the village, but also of the generations. Here, the readers see not only the juxtaposition of city and nature but also of past and present generations. Even though Omomo lived by the lake, she, too, needed to go through a sense of rediscovery to find herself in the present and build a bridge toward the future.

The scholar Andrew Thacker's (2009: 13) conceptual distinction that "*space* indicates a sense of movement—of history and becoming—while *place* is often thought to imply a static sense of location, of being, or of dwelling" illuminates the journey of both characters through place and space. Masahiko journeys from the city through the landscape of Japan into memory, while Omomo, in the same place, journeys through the landscape of memory. Amazoko and Tokyo are not only pivotal places where the narrative occurs but are also spaces of storytelling, history, tradition, and identity. As the narrative progresses, the layers become so enmeshed that it is sometimes difficult to untangle them. By bridging the gap, we can reintegrate into the world and gain a new understanding of the future by exploring the past as it exists to inform the present.

The juxtaposition between Tokyo and Amazoko is very clear. Masahiko's thoughts in relation to both and the description of the places and their sounds stand in clear contrast. The city is described as one with "clouds of exhaust" (Ishimure 2008: 103) and a "bloated, cracking city . . . a giant cancer cell" (Ishimure 2008: 76-77). The "screeching nightfall" (Ishimure 2008, 72) disturbs him and brings a sense of unease to Masahiko. However, in Amazoko he finds a sense of ease, the silence filled with the feeling of "the beginnings of human consciousness, and how they grow, and how they are nurtured along with countless other lives by the water." He is "captivated by the talk of shadows that flitted about in the mountain mists" (Ishimure 2008: 103). The stories of Tokyo weave through the narrative, occasionally jarring in their descriptions but also informing Masahiko's understanding of Amazoko in a reflection of how Masahiko experiences his world around him and his relationship with the places and spaces they represent.

The separation of modernity and tradition here is stark; Masahiko's quest to reconcile both in his existence and identity teaches the modern individual to be open to connections with

nature and listen to the lessons of the old to understand the present and build a path to the future. Ohina, mistaking Masahiko for his grandfather, laments that “the city has stolen your soul. And now you’ve even forgotten the way home” (Ishimure 2008: 38). Poignantly, Masahiko then remembers the time when his grandfather was lost in the city for three days, and that, upon finding him, he told the family, “My soul’s been stolen. I went looking for it but couldn’t find it anywhere” (Ishimure 2008: 38). In contrast, after spending three days in the village, Masahiko feels like “it seemed as if it had been years. Am I changing into a new person?” The place feels so familiar that he senses he belonged to it even before his birth; “This smell, it’s something I’ve known from ages back, from back before I was born. Yet, how could I have gone back?” This illustrates the importance of a balance between the individual and nature and the consequences of severing these connections.

In a dream, Masahiko is suddenly disturbed by the movement of the insects and creatures scurrying in nature that echoes the city’s. He has a crisis, wondering, “A city inside a tree in the valley? A swarming city of snails? What’s going on here?” (Ishimure 2008: 84). He resolves this by concluding if he remains in that city-like cave of insects, he may never “be able to return to himself, and he would have to spend the rest of his life in this cave” (Ishimure 2008: 85). His solution is bravely passing through this city-like cave and the thought that there was “something creepy about all this living stuff” (Ishimure 2008: 84), thus emerging from the cave as his new self. This self does not abandon the present to hide in the past, nor does it exist in the present while attempting blindly to forge a path to the future. It looks to the past to understand the present and build a path to the future. Masahiko wonders, “More than myself changing, is it that the world is entering into me and changing? Or, rather, is it that I’ve come to a place where the world my grandfather taught me about and this world are being mixed together?” (Ishimure 2008: 207). Here the readers can see how the thought of being trapped in nature and the past is disturbing to Masahiko, but so is the thought of the cold and jarring city unconnected to nature. However, he feels most at ease when his city self melds with the knowledge and consciousness brought to him by nature and the village traditions. A new identity appears from merging the two selves within Masahiko, revealing a new self. The renewed Masahiko finds himself in a much more balanced state of mind and existence, allowing him to think and see the world around him more clearly and forge ahead with his life and plans.

Omomo goes through a similar journey, albeit one rooted in the space of Amazoko. At the novel’s beginning, she knows Amazoko as a graveyard—the Amazoko of the present. This Amazoko is the submerged skeleton of the village whose outlines are still visible underneath the lake’s surface in a macabre imitation of a snow globe. The sky of the entombed village is at the bottom of Utazaka Valley, a stark reminder of what was lost. The villagers tell Masahiko about a tablet marker in the cemetery with the inscription “Memorial for the souls of the ten thousand beings” (Ishimure 2008: 116). They explain that “beings” did not mean “just the humans. That stone marker on the hill was dedicated to the souls of all beings—not just the birds nor insects; it was also for the souls of the things we can’t see with our eyes. Our ancestors put it there out of thanks for all the creatures and beings that helped protect their village” (Ishimure 2008: 116). The ghosts of the ten thousand beings haunt the space and memories of those who witnessed the drowning as images of the water’s surface roiled by the thousands of creatures drowning as the village was flooded to create the dam.

The readers first meet Omomo as a recalcitrant figure who is sullen and unresponsive to the stories of yore. She is cynical and irreverent; when her mother wants to celebrate Obon Omomo says, “We’re so deep in debt we can’t even celebrate O-bon or the New Year’s festival. You can send my regards to Father at his grave” (Ishimure 2008: 4). Her father’s grave exists only in memory as it, too, has been drowned with the rest of the village. Her clothing reflects her modern sensibilities; modern t-shirts designed to outline her breasts and accentuate her figure are far removed from the traditional robes and kimonos of older generations. Her

memories of the old songs are incomplete whenever she is urged to sing them, and there is a roughness to her character at the beginning. However, Omomo goes through her journey at her mother's urging and by accompanying Masahiko on his journey of rediscovery.

Omomo becomes more receptive to the stories, accompanying the villagers on the wake for Sayuri, the previous shrine maiden. She wears a white dress for the funeral rather than a t-shirt, signaling her openness towards the stories and traditions and her relation to them as a modern woman. Her voice gains an otherworldly quality as she becomes more attuned to the natural world and the traditions of the place; this reflects Ishimure's beliefs in the importance of sharing the stories and songs of traditions to become individuals as part of nature and the world. This is similar to Ohina and the villagers sharing stories of the village and its history; she gains strength in her song, and Masahiko wonders if she will invoke the old village in it. Ohina, who once despaired about the lost past and connection with nature, feels a sense of hope, not only with the homecoming of Masahiko and Masahito's spirit but with Omomo's awakening connection with the place where they live. Omomo begins remembering the songs' words and initiates a dance, just like their former shrine maiden.

Ohina thought, "Could it be? Is Omomo going to dance?" It had been ages since the two of them had performed the O-bon dance.

So Omomo may prove to be a true daughter of Amazoko after all . . . The people in town have been saying all kinds of things about her. I've had to put up with it, shutting my eyes and ears, knowing the time would come when her good nature would show through. And look, now she's telling us what none of those folks who stood up there on the dam's banks could have thought of — "Call up Amazoko."

I'll leave the best part of the song for you . . . And as Ohina was thinking these things, slowly, softly she summoned her daughter's voice with her song. Yes, thought Ohina, we'll call it up—the two of us. Let's call up the village of Amazoko, and take along the spirit of Masahito, even. (Ishimure 2008: 66)

This is a poignant scene of past and present, traditional and modern, urban and rural, all melding in the present hoping to conjure the bridge to the future of their dreams. Ishimure believed in the interconnectedness of the world, and these connections forged by the characters through place and space are pivotal to understanding the human relationship with the more-than-human living world. The fact that Omomo was the one who suggested calling up Amazoko enhances the power of the scene. The older villagers who yearn for the past despair at the loss of traditions and nature that have severed their connection to the present and the younger generation. Ohina tries to keep the connection alive, urging Omomo and Masahiko to remember the shared past of their people through storytelling and connecting with nature. Omomo, finally responsive and open to remembering, suggests conjuring up Amazoko. As she remembers the words and embraces the traditions, she brings Masahiko into the journey, their awakenings rippling against each other.

They call up Amazoko, not to replace the present but to conjure the Amazoko of the past into the present. The Amazoko of the past is the village in their dreams. The villagers constantly yearn for it, fearing it might disappear from memory as it did under the waters. They vow to build bridges towards it, both physical and metaphorical, but often do not know how to. Then, as they guide the younger generations through these journeys of memories and learned tradition, they become more hopeful and confident.

Both Omomo and Masahiko no longer need the guiding voices of the elders and begin to connect with nature and hear its songs by themselves, creating songs in which the timeless Amazoko can be seen. This is the Amazoko that both Masahiko and Omomo travel to from

their respective starting points, the Amazoko of myth and nature. This Amazoko is where the gods and goddesses dwell, where the thousand beings live, and where the entire soul of the world exists. They can begin building bridges to travel to this Amazoko of memory by listening to the stories told them by people and the surrounding nature. Here, Ishimure Michiko reminds the contemporary individual of the world's beauty beyond the modern and of the importance of remembering and reconciling with the past to gain a better future. The disconnect from the past creates a sense of loss and despair among the villagers remaining near the lake, while the grandfather Masahito becomes insane through displacement to the city. However, all is not lost if people such as Omomo and Masahiko remember and bring that past into the present to inform their future.

It is important to note that neither Omomo nor Masahiko abandons the modern to learn the past. They allow the past and the awareness it brings to become a part of them as they, in turn, become part of the world. Masahiko wants to create and play music both as a tribute to the nature he hears and for contemporary people. He reflects, "In Tokyo I dreamed of writing a piece of music for Japanese traditional instruments and doing a performance. I couldn't put on anything like the big concerts of pop singers, but that's not what I'm aiming for anyhow. If only I could make a sound that the people and the grass and trees at the bottom of the water would listen to" (Ishimure 2008: 220). Here the readers see the importance of all forms of storytelling—music, singing, traditions—as the strength of the spirit of words and storytelling that Ishimure valued to become a part of life.

The introduction to *Ishimure Michiko's Writing in Ecocritical Perspective: Between Sea and Sky* quotes the final words of the documentary about Ishimure released in 2013, *Towards the Paradise of Flowers*, in which Ishimure presents a metaphor for her image of a possible better future.²

We hear that today, if we look down on the earth from out in the universe, we can see the area around Tokyo lit up with bright lights showing that these are the Japanese islands. But that's not the sort of Japan I'm hoping for. A grassy pathway to a new world will be lit up by flower lights, and it will emerge faintly, like one flower. A flower, or a star; that's the world I'm hoping for. A light that is like a symbol of all humans' troubles. Or rather than saying "humans," let me use the word "life." The life that lies at the center of all life has become a light. Each life, with its own light, is carrying a heavy load, or rather I should say that a load has been placed on each back, and each is walking on a wild pathway to a place far away in the darkness. It is not completely dark. To see that—that is my hope. (DVD 1 hr. 45 min, quoted in Allen and Masami 2016: 7)

In Ishimure's works, the journey of life is connected by intersecting and overlapping pathways. This is evident in the older generation's yearning to journey to the past; however, it is the younger generation's journey and subsequent bridge to the future that allows them all to recapture the sense of belonging within the world, and particularly nature that finally emerges as a sign of hope for those flowers or stars.

Lake of Heaven features places as much as characters in Ishimure's signature style of mixed genres. She creates a tale of life by melding modern and traditional modes of writing into the narrative that manifests her beliefs that she is both in the world of humans and in nature. Her presentation of the place and the space it represents depicts an image of its history and life

² *Towards the Paradise of Flowers (Hana no okudo e)*. Directed by Kim Tai (2013) and subtitled into English by Bruce Allen (2014).

in terms of human history and nature. Readers learn the stories of the gods and goddesses and the trees, birds, and souls of the one thousand beings. The stories are presented in multidimensional storytelling alongside those of people, such as Ohina, Omomo, Masahiko, and Masahito, who have shared the history of the place and learned its stories of nature.

Reading *Lake of Heaven* in a world where connections to nature have been literally and metaphorically disrupted provides a new context for their importance and the sense of renewal to be gained by slowing down and appreciating nature to enable the world to right itself, spiritually and literally. Ishimure's writing clearly depicts that acts of storytelling and an awareness of the more-than-human world can rebuild and rediscover these connections, leading to a more grounded sense of the individual in both space and place.

Spirituality and Storytelling

Ishimure uses stories and storytelling to bridge the gaps between the worlds of reality and myth, modernity and tradition, the industrial and the natural. The stories are narratives of lyrical history, spirituality, people, and the more-than-human living world that create a nuanced and multi-layered image of the history of the place with nature at its center. The stories are not only multi-layered and multidimensional, but they are also generational. There are spiritual conversations with the dead grandfather yearning for the place he left after moving to Tokyo and his city-dwelling grandson, who travels back to this place to reclaim a connection, and a generational memory by looking through the mirror surface of the lake to the drowned village. The memories seamlessly overlap with the skeletal remains of days gone by at the bottom of the lake. By taking the journey to bring his grandfather's ashes to a place that no longer exists, Masahiko discovers his belonging to a place he did not previously realize existed outside his grandfather's stories.

Ishimure portrays many stories within this narrative, and it is interesting to see how they depict an image of life. The myths intersect with those of the village, which in turn intersects those of the city. The stories of the people are overlaid with those of the creatures and happen to intersect those of trees. This combines to create the images of the "flower lights" of life that Ishimure mentions in the documentary that she wants to perceive in the world. Her often dark, almost dystopic depiction of environmental violence is overlaid with a sense of cleansing and reconciliation in *Lake of Heaven* as the stories take center stage. Ishimure is a staunch believer in the power of *kotodama*—the spirit of words—and how to use words in storytelling to narrate history. *Lake of Heaven* does not allow the bureaucracy or governance that created the dam and drowned the village and its one thousand beings to take center stage; other than the settlement offer, they barely figure in the narrative. Ishimure makes it a point to focus on nature, the people living within it, and those changed by their connection or loss. The storytelling in *Lake of Heaven* comes in many forms, including telling stories, singing songs, playing music, and sounds emanating from nature and the city. These modes of storytelling share Ishimure's use of sounds to fill space and gaps, bringing the disparate parts together and enabling the generations, timelines, myths, and realities to overlap and create the path of "flower lights" of her metaphor.

Ishimure's signature style uses *kotodama* to create a bridge to the spiritual world that reconciles the modern and traditional, bringing the reader into the world of *Lake of Heaven*. The first bridge is seen through the work itself. Ishimure uses the spirit of words, both as herself and as the characters, to cross to the spiritual realm; this brings into focus the spirits of those who were lost by remembering them and those in the present finding peace in nature and their relationship to it. Additionally, the power of sounds is revealed in this work, revealing not only

the power of *kotodama* but *otodama*—the spirit of sounds.³ Both are powerful tools of memory and cleansing.

The second bridge is that, by focusing on *kotodama*, Ishimure allows the novel to act as a bridge to Noh theatre; it lets the storytelling and the readers pass through the layers of storytelling, place, and space.⁴ In Ishimure's multi-layered storytelling style, this journey is mirrored within the characters as they travel into the spiritual realm through the power of words by hearing the stories of the past. As the myths, gods, and goddesses emerge from the caves in vignettes interspersed in the narrative, the lines between old and new, myth and reality, and past and present blur to create a sense of cohesion among a cacophony of confusing stories spanning realities, dreams, generations, and imaginations. Masahiko recalls a conversation with his father, Kiyohiko, regarding his grandfather Masahito in which he ponders about the "honeymoon lake" (Ishimure 2008: 269) that the nurses at the hospital reported was the grandfather's obsession. Kiyohiko, who has no connection with the village or nature, dismisses these stories, saying he did not hear them. But with the awakened sense of being in the village and listening to Omomo's song, Masahiko understands in hindsight what his grandfather meant by his words. Omomo had sung of "one stalk of the thousand-year pampas grasses"; in fact, there was a place called "Susuki Bara," meaning the "plain of pampas grass." "Perhaps," Grandfather had said, "it was the remains of the mouth of a volcano. There was a plain called 'Susuki Bara.' The old folks used to say that below it was Amazoko Lake, where the goddess of Oki no Miya and the Lord of the Mountains met. It was the lake of the divine wedding."

Here the readers witness the layering of the stories and realities that settle within Masahiko, becoming part of who he is. By hearing Omomo's song, Masahiko understands his grandfather, and the old myths become a part of his reality by gaining their knowledge. Listening to the surrounding world becomes part of his journey; as its sounds enter him, he can eventually create his own sounds. "Masahiko was drawn into the depths of his inner being . . . It seemed that the essential meaning of the world must be held in something like the flowering of moss on a rock somewhere in this sunken village. It must be something like the way human thought overflowed and became voice for the first time" (Ishimure 2008: 77). This is the essence of the mythopoetic work that Ishimure presents through her *kotodama*. She creates a sense of harmony by portraying a world that seems broken into pieces and then set right through the medium of nature where these stories happen and move. Almost as if a wound had been drained and aired to heal, Masahiko feels "as if he had shed the supposedly rational patchwork covering of the civilization of concrete and had been left as a soft, naked nerve, lying quivering and nestled among the blades of grass about his feet, dissolved amidst the evening dew" (Ishimure 2008: 77). He needed to be severed from Tokyo and immersed in Amazoko's space and nature to understand his place in the world and reconcile his existence in it and beyond the village and city.

Omomo also undergoes an awakening amidst nature, presented as if in the role of a *waki*—a priest actor in a Noh play who facilitates storytelling). As she becomes the next shrine maiden, Omomo's character settles into a more solid presence in the novel. Initially, she barricades herself in the hut she shares with her mother, throwing out from the window only that requested by Ohina. As the novel progresses, Omomo emerges to guide Masahiko through the natural space and help her mother set up for Obon; in the process, Omomo is guided to a more settled spiritual place. Instead of refusing to place lanterns for Obon and making irreverent

³ Purification of the spirit of sounds (*otodama*) means purification through the use of music (Yamakage 2007: 115).

⁴ The bridge in the tradition of Noh theatre connects two parts of the stage. The actors crossing this bridge symbolize crossing into the spiritual realm. There are many instances of characters crossing bridges or space, metaphorically and literally, in *Lake of Heaven* and into another space of memory or myth, or another place of significance.

remarks about her father, she suggests conjuring up Amazoko if they cannot travel to it. When she starts to sing with Ohina, she forgets words, so her mother finishes the songs. However, as she deepens her connection with the submerged village and crosses over the lake bank into a realm of spirituality with the villagers, she assumes the role of *tsure*—companion to the main role in Noh play—as she takes on the mantle of a shrine maiden. She is *tsure* to herself, to the villagers, now hopeful as the younger generation finds a connection with the village, and to Masahiko, entangled with her as she guides him in this new world.

The futures of both Omomo and Masahiko seem to be tied with the timeless Amazoko; finding themselves in nature enabled them to cross to that place where they melded into versions of themselves, brought the past into the present, and made them feel transformed and ready for their future. Alongside their transformed selves, Ishimure cleverly brings in such traditional elements as the songs and myths while reminding readers of other traditions, including singing and clothing for Omomo and the *biwa* for Masahiko.⁵ Crucially, these illustrate the melding of layers reflected in these characters.

As Omomo becomes a storyteller and experiences spiritual awakening, her clothing reflects this transformation. The provocative modern t-shirt is then replaced with a respectful dress for Sayuri's funeral, the former shrine maiden. She was wearing a silver obi when she fell or jumped into the lake. The obi, thus, is the symbolic mantle of the shrine maiden role passed from Sayuri to Omomo. She receives the obi along with the stories and responsibilities of the place it represents. There is a sense of gravitas and tradition in the scene where Omomo dons the white robes by the lake for the cleansing rituals, the final step to officially becoming the next shrine maiden. The fact that Sayuri's death and Omomo's donning the obi occur at the lake in sight of the reflections of the drowned village's skeleton has a sense of cleansing. This accords with the *chinkon* spirit pacification and meditation tradition in which awareness of the other world is achieved not by meditation and Buddhism but through nature; the mediator of pacification in this scene is the lake. Omomo's reflection in the lake, which is the sky of the drowned village, shows her wearing robes and cleansing herself with its waters. This provides a bridge and a gateway for the thousand beings to settle and reconcile with the world through purification and with the people and their spirits.

Masahiko's journey of storytelling occurs alongside Omomo's transformation. He arrives with his grandfather's *biwa* made from the village's wood. In hindsight, Masahiko understands that his grandfather's distress at the broken *biwa* string stems from his conviction that it severed the last connection with his old world. Masahiko takes the *biwa* with him, hoping to restring it and find inspiration for his next traditionally inspired piece. Before creating his own piece, he recognizes the need to "listen again carefully to Ohina and Omomo's singing—that's what I've been wanting to ask them all along" (Ishimure 2008: 220).

At first, Masahiko hears nothing of the sounds of the surrounding world; he feels a "quivering of a chord" (Ishimure 2008: 29) but cannot perceive it yet. Then, listening to nature and the singing of Omomo and Ohina resonates in his soul. As he journeys deeper into the natural world and the space it represents, more of the world enters his body, and he proclaims, "his entire body became an ear" (Ishimure 2008: 79). This marks his crossing into the space of the timeless Amazoko; though unaware, he had always been there. Masahiko realizes that he has "entered the story" when he starts to listen. "Despite the fact that in the old times the pathways to the world beyond had all been open, it seemed that until now, for him, they had all been closed" (Ishimure 2008: 81). When Masahiko declares that remembering everything he had learned is necessary to play the *biwa* properly, readers recognize this as more than the memories of his experiences. Rather, the memory of the place and the stories of nature are now morphing into his own being. Reflecting Ishimure's belief in the intrinsic link between humans

⁵ A *biwa* is short necked traditional Japanese lute often used as accompaniment to narrative storytelling.

and nature, Masahiko feels as if “his blood had been assimilated into the sap of the tree and it was flowing through the tree from the trunk to the tips of its leaves. He could feel its roots searching out the little trickles of water. The smell of the rocks and stones filled his nose” (Ishimure 2008: 132). Masahiko has a revelation that the entrance is within him; “the storyteller within Masahiko” (Ishimure 2008: 87) was sharing the story of everything that he sees, both in the real and spiritual world.

Near the story’s end, when Masahiko and Omomo settle into storyteller roles and have built bridges to tradition by connections with the past via nature, Masahiko slowly hears four strings of the *biwa* of the world in the wind, with each string revealing a slightly wider image of the world within him. “It seemed that the meanings of his grandfather’s words, along with the things he’d heard from the villagers, had all become mixed together to create a new story in which the village at the bottom of the lake took form and created a hitherto unknown world” (Ishimure 2008: 222). Here, the readers get a sense of nature finally harmonizing with the city in Masahiko. This engenders a sense of purification and peace and a hopeful tune to offset the dystopic image of the souls of the thousand beings as they are drowned along with the village to create the lake. Masahiko’s journey as a storyteller culminates in a scene reminiscent of birth when he “felt as if warm hands were softly touching his back and his blood was starting to circulate. Feeling his entire body coming alive, he was plunged into thought” (Ishimure 2008: 331). The power of *kotodama* and *otodama* working as words and sounds create this sense of pacification, purification, and completion within individuals rediscovering and reinterpreting their place in the surrounding more-than-human living world.

In the context of new understandings of how we perceive and interact with the environment and a world seemingly out of alignment, we can read *Lake of Heaven* to understand how people turned to introspection to read their own stories and the world’s stories. Similar to the storytellers in its narrative, *Lake of Heaven* is a medium for the storytellers within us. In particular, the transformations experienced by Omomo and Masahiko are as relevant now as they were at the time of publication. There is a collective sense of the need to find the “other side” in a world that is simultaneously pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic. Readers can easily recognize the perceptions of Masahiko and Omomo at the beginning as those of a disconnected individual who feels forgotten by the world (Omomo) or restless and uncomfortable (Masahiko). It is also easy to relate to their sense of relief when they find the means to connect with the world around them and with their inner selves.

The refuge offered to the individual in nature, and their sense of pacification that comes from reconciling themselves with the world around them and the space offered by nature remains a relevant insight. The characters in the story find introspection and spirituality in many different personal ways, including through religion, crafts, nature, others, and within themselves. When Ishimure Michiko speaks of the power of *kotodama*, she is speaking of the power of storytelling that comes with these sounds and, therefore, the sense of *otodama*. The modern individual can begin to build a bridge to the future by perceiving and rediscovering the stories of earlier generations, assimilating them in their being by reinterpreting them through hindsight and the mirror of the present. This is the spirituality Omomo finds in song and Masahiko finds in the *biwa*; both had to allow the space of the past to melt into them before they could appease the souls of the past and themselves.

Conclusion

The presence of nature is at the core of Ishimure’s work. The relationship with the world beyond that of humans, from the natural to the spiritual, is consistent. In the quest to preserve the legacies of highly traditional spaces and rebuild the bridges that have informed those spaces,

such as the relationship with nature, Ishimure illuminates important questions of our ethical responsibility to our fellow human beings and others in the world—the thousand souls—and to the nature and spaces beyond of life. Works such as *Sea of Cameliars* (樁の海の気 *Tsubaki no umi no ki*, 1974) and *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* highlight how the individual is shaped by their surrounding natural scape and that its disruption and loss must not be forgotten. This sense of responsibility is echoed in literary works on our relationship and responsibility towards natural spaces; we do not own these spaces, but rather share them, and therefore, have a shared responsibility to not damage and strive to repair them.

In *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* and *Lake of Heaven*, we see two sides of a weighty conversation of accountability concerning the causes and aftermath of environmental disasters erupting through the industrial machine with natural space. Ishimure Michiko leans into her background as someone whose worldview is heavily informed by living in a spiritual and natural landscape. She vows to highlight the injustices of industrialization, particularly those experienced by human or more-than-human victims, declaring that when she runs out of words, she will burn herself as *goma* (wooden sticks burned in prayer fire rituals) to appease the affected souls (Saishu 2018, 61). This dedication allows her to present to the world a testimony of the history of these places, as well as challenge moral and ethical concepts and issues regarding the consequences of environmental violence.

The conflict and the need to create a self of preservation reflects a legacy of such writings as Rachel Carson's classic *Silent Spring*, which shows that the history of environmental crises has elicited growing responses, literary and otherwise. The scholar Masami Yuki describes the human relationship with the environment as the "individual and societal treatments of others – both human and nonhuman- [which] are subject to our relationship with them" (Masami 2013: 18). She attributes this relationship and the human attitude to the environment as the "ecological identity," defined as a "concept that attempts to disentangle utilitarian viewpoints from modern attitudes on the environment. Unlike the modern, conventional, self-sufficient, and self-contained sense of identity, an ecological identity stands for that which is (re)created in a process of negotiations between an individual and the environment in which that person exists" (Masami 2013: 19). We see this negotiation clearly in *Lake of Heaven*, as Omomo and Masahiko navigate this rediscovered reality in a world they did not realize they belonged to until they learned to listen to it.

A global pandemic led to a paradigm shift in how we perceive many core issues that identify us as humans and our surrounding more-than-human living space, including nature, spirituality, and tradition. For solace, people turned to traditional crafts and the past to relearn how to exist in this new reality of the present. Headlines and articles have depicted multiple images this relearning: people creating music to find solace; shortages as people discover the traditional art of bread making; a boom in yarn kits; a rise in self-publishing; and growing numbers of digital nomads and nature lovers.⁶ Nature has become a place of refuge and escape from the pressures of the new worldview shaped by a global pandemic. From within the confines of personal spaces and homes, people have marveled at nature and its beauty. They have been made to pause, slow down, and reflect, stimulating awareness of and interest in the spirit of nature and old traditions. Their longing to be out in nature fills a need to connect with nature and appease the inner self many did not know. Traditional crafts have been rediscovered,

⁶ See such articles as: "DIY décor: Pandemic prompt big boom in homemade crafts," *Mercury News*; "Traditional Crafts are Reinventing Themselves," *The Daily Guardian*; "Getting Through a Pandemic with Old-Fashioned Crafts," *The Atlantic*; "Draft has seen a surge during the pandemic, but turning to art amid turmoil is not new says UNT art historian," University of North Texas; "*Uses and Perceptions of Music in Times of COVID-19*," *National Library of Medicine*; "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected outdoor recreation in America?," Pennsylvania State University website.

languages learned, and new conversations about our surrounding “world” engaged. These conversations included how to define ourselves within the paradigm of a “new normal” where the world seems “out of joint,” and questions of collective responsibility to both ourselves and the environment are at the forefront.

In the context of this new world’s collective responsibility, the boundaries of morality and the effects of industrialization and globalization on the human and more-than-human living world further our appreciation of the work of Ishimure. Her work is prophetic in guiding the reader to reconcile in the present what happened to a world upended in both the literal and metaphorical senses. It poses questions regarding our role in a space that seems to have become a graveyard of the past by offering hope that it might not have been a graveyard after all if we remember its lessons and bring them forward. Perhaps the world can be made whole after a jarring imbalance and environmental abuse. By making us aware of the effects of reduced human impact on nature, the pandemic generated new ways of thinking reflected in the prevalence of such slogans as “together alone” and “nature is healing,” which point to a sense of preservation for the greater good. This has forced uncomfortable conversations between individuals and societies about why and how we arrived at this point and that answers may lie in the past. Answers lie in works such as Ishimure Michiko’s *Lake of Heaven*, which remind us we are not apart from but rather in the world; if we learn to listen, we can bring the world and the past into us, carrying it through as a bridge towards a better and more balanced future world view.

Works by such authors as Ishimure Michiko play an integral part in facilitating these conversations, raising awareness, and chronicling the present and future as stories highlighting the importance of paying attention to man-made environmental crises and the relationship of humans with nature. The works provide readers contextual reference through space and time for the importance and need of environmental awareness and the personal impact and need for the individual to not only exist within their own sphere but also in the sphere of the more-than-human living world.

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