Yoneyama, Shoko. 2019. *Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan.* Abingdon: Routledge. xi + 250 pp. Hb.: £115.00. ISBN: 9781138228030; Ebook.: £20.00. ISBN: 9781315393902.

From the mid-1950s, people living in fishing villages around Minamata in western Japan began dying terrible deaths from mercury poisoning traced to wastewater from a factory in the town. Thousands of people remain affected by one of the world's worst criminal cases of industrial pollution. The Minamata incident provides the starting point for this new book by sociologist Shoko Yoneyama. Given that another awful case of pollution began at Fukushima in March 2011, how are we to understand and respond to such horrors? This book analyses four Japanese intellectuals, three of whom have been directly involved with Minamata. In all four cases, the author Yoneyama argues that "animism" has formed the basis of their responses to Minamata and other crises of modernity.

This volume is published in Routledge's *Contemporary Japan Series*, but the author insists that her aim is not to 'describe Japanese culture by using the notion of animism or anything else for that matter' (p. 24). Instead, Yoneyama aims to focus on what she terms the "grassroots animism" of four individuals who happen to be Japanese. We will discuss below whether Yoneyama succeeds in this objective of escaping the overdetermined space (aka ideology) of Japanese animism, but it will be useful to begin this review by attempting to explain the significance of her approach. For many readers in Japanese Studies, the term "animism" will immediately bring to mind the reactionary atavistic writings of philosopher Takeshi Umehara (1925-2019), the first director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (an institution known colloquially as the *Nichibunken*). From the 1980s, Umehara began to propound a vision of Japanese culture based on deep animist roots. This vision was taken up by several of Umehara's former associates at the Nichibunken, especially Yoshinori Yasuda. In her Introduction, Yoneyama (pp. 20-22) provides a short but incisive critique of the writings of this group, which we might call the *Alt-Nichibunken*. Umehara's animism was effectively an attempt at building a 'State Animism'. Even though Umehara himself was critical of the appropriation of Japan's cultural traditions by State Shinto in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, his response was to create the fantasy of a homogenous "forest civilisation" closely linked to the Japanese state and emperor. In this book, Yoneyama attempts to distance herself from this view of animism as nationalist discourse; in fact, she chooses to analyse the writings of four individuals who have taken "intellectual journeys" which have positioned themselves 'the furthest away one can get from presenting a national discourse' (p. 22).

The four substantive chapters of the volume discuss the work of Masato Ogata (b. 1953), a fisherman, activist and writer in Minamata; Michiko Ishimure (1927-2018), a writer best known for her *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*; sociologist Kazuko Tsurumi (1918-2006); and film director Hayao Miyazaki (b. 1941). These are all significant figures in post-war Japanese letters but do they, in fact, share an animist worldview? As discussed below, Ogata's view of the world could certainly be called *ecological*, but Yoneyama notes that he does not use the word "animism" (p. 54). Similarly, Ishimure rarely refers to animism, though Yoneyama stresses that 'an animistic theme runs

through her literary work' (p. 81). In contrast to Ogata and Ishimure, Miyazaki identifies his artistic philosophy as influenced by animism, although he denies its religious nature, saying 'I do like animism. I can understand the idea of ascribing character to stones and wind. But I don't want to laud it as a religion' (p. 180). Of the four individuals discussed here, it is the academic Tsurumi who was most explicit about her attempts to recover animism as a 'disappearing "*way of knowing*" that [she] discovered in Minamata' (p. 143) and to use that animism to build a new type of social science. The animism discussed in Yoneyama's book is, as the author herself admits (p. 223), *not* a religion (however one defines that) and rarely involves any rituals, although Ogata (p. 56) mentions several customs performed by fishermen in Minamata. Rather than "religion", Yoneyama offers the term "postmodern animism", defined as a 'philosophy of the life-world' (p. 224). Suddenly, "animism in contemporary Japan" looks more like an extension of phenomenology and the Romantic concern with the environment as a world of experience.

What, then, if not animism? My view is that analysing the four individuals in terms of *ecology* would have been more interesting and might have brought their ideas further away from the virally reproduced aura of Japanese Nature. The four individuals possess rather different views on nature and ecology, although all share the Romantic idea of the environment as a life-world that can transform self and society. Kazuko Tsurumi has by far the most academic take of the four, discovering animism in the beliefs of people in Minamata and being herself 'spiritually awakened' (p. 116) to its potential in developing a critique of modernity. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Tsurumi's work to appear in this volume is her discussion of the ecologist Kumagusu Minakata (1867-1941). Minakata's work on slime moulds has potential to link with recent debates in environmental philosophy—such as Timothy Morton's writings on queer ecology and the "strange stranger"—yet both Tsurumi and Yoneyama limit themselves to connections with esoteric Buddhism and animism.

Hayao Miyazaki's interest in nature began with him reading Sasuke Nakao's "broadleaf evergreen forest hypothesis", first published in 1966. This theory, which links western Japan with south China and Southeast Asia in an Austrian ethnology-inspired *Kulturkreis*, provided Miyazaki with a liberating means to understand that Japan 'was actually connected to the wider world beyond borders and ethnic groups' (p. 177). As well as an escape from nationalism, the theory also stimulated Miyazaki to 'believe that greenery was beautiful', in stark contrast to his younger days when he 'thought that greenery was nothing but a symbol of poverty' (p. 179). As a result, Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli attempts to incorporate aspects of the landscape including 'weather, time, rays of light, plants, water, and wind' in its films (p. 176). Miyazaki's comment that, 'Human relationships are not the only thing that is interesting' checks one of Lawrence Buell's boxes for classification as an environmental text, but his overall approach seems to limit the environment to "greenery", implying that, say, the depicted urban landscapes or the *un*-depicted train journeys in Yasujirō's Ozu's film *Tokyo Story* do not equally constitute environment. One critic has said that 'Miyazaki has "baptized a whole generation" with an animistic imagination' (p. 159), but in what way is Totoro more animistic than Winnie the Pooh—except that the former is portrayed within a Japanese context that invites

cultural readings associated with animism and folk Shinto?

Michiko Ishimure is well known as one of Japan's foremost environmental writers, and her work has been much discussed within ecocriticism. Ishimure's writings sometimes assign "personhood to nonhumans" including "crow-women" and *yamawaros* mountain spirits (pp. 82-84). The discussion here in Chapter 2 is unclear as to how Ishimure perceived the relations between human and nonhuman persons. Certain passages from her writings reproduced here suggest that nonhuman persons inhabited another world deep in the mountains and dark forests. Elsewhere, Ishimure claims that in the 'pre-pollution era of the Shiranui Sea, people, nature (including animals), and *kami* coexisted closely and intermingled with each other' (p. 83). The trajectory is from *living in* the world to *thinking about* the world (p. 93), the implication being that ecological relations only existed in a stage prior to modernity.

With his anxieties over consumerism, Masato Ogata is perhaps the most ecological of the four thinkers discussed here. Throwing his television out of his door into the front garden ('You beast! How dare you break into my house and order us around. Go there! Buy this!' [p. 49]), Ogata understands the close link between consumerism and ecology. Ogata's book *Chisso wa watashi de atta* ['I was Chisso'] should be an essential text for the Anthropocene, encapsulating so beautifully as it does the irony of the sudden realisation that it is we who have been destroying the world all along.

Other readers will no doubt have different takes on the ecology of the four people discussed in this volume, but my point is that thinking about their differences tell us a great deal about views of the environment in post-war Japan. By contrast, forcing all four into a box labelled 'animism' misses much that is interesting. *Animism in Contemporary Japan* succeeds in breaking and entering the 'State Animism' of the Alt-Nichibunken, but in my view, it is unable to achieve two of its objectives: escaping the dark star pull of Japanese culture and changing the world.

Let us take Japanese culture first. Yoneyama insists that her aim is not to critique the West or to develop binary East/West oppositions of the type found in the works of Umehara and Yasuda. The book indeed adopts a very different tone from the virulently anti-Western/anti-Christian tracts of Yasuda in particular (cf. the quote on p. 21 of this volume). However, 'the West' is primarily noticeable here by its absence; there is almost no discussion of how the animism of the four individuals might resonate with spiritual ideas beyond Japan. A rare exception is a brief mention of Saint Francis of Assisi who Yoneyama mistakenly describes as a 'medieval heretic' (p. 24)—although his ideas may have been unusual for his time, he would hardly have been canonised had he been a heretic! In assuming that the diverse writings and ideas analysed here can be glossed as 'animism in Japan', Yoneyama plays down the political functions of that phenomenon. Grassroots animism, like folk Shinto, is assumed to be egalitarian and apolitical. For example, in Table 3.2 (p. 130), the "Ideological function" of folk Shinto is listed as "Irrelevant". Such characterisations seem to me to overlook the agency of individuals participating in the social lives of local communities and local spirits. The work of anthropologist Rane Willerslev, for example, shows how Yukaghir hunters in Siberia regard animism as an ideology to be argued with and negotiated within.

What, then, about changing the world? Like many before her, Yoneyama seems to believe that Japan's unusual place within modernity gives the country a unique role in responding to the crises of that same modern system. Yoneyama claims that, 'the extent to which Japan has "never been modern" is greater than that of the advanced societies in the West' (p. 4). Similarly, for Antonio Negri, 'Japan's powerful cultural traditions which manage to co-exist with super-modernity have the potential to solve [the] conundrum' of 'finding a new way to coexist with nature' (p. 205). That Japan's amalgam of old and new provides a privileged position from which to build a new world order was exactly the point made by Umehara. Changing the world has always been the holy grail of what Timothy Morton calls the "religious style" of being ecological, but the grassroots animism of Japan—*however important to those people at the level of the grassroots*—is unlikely to find a broader resonance without a fundamental reframing of its terms of reference.

By now, it will be clear that I find this book's use of animism as a way of encapsulating the diverse and fascinating ideas discussed here as rather unconvincing. A sociological analysis of animism as a response to power or a focus on ecology (or environmental philosophy) would, in my view, have given the book a wider appeal. Despite this reservation, however, I found *Animism in Contemporary Japan* to be a stimulating and well-written work which provides a wonderful way to think through many important issues about ecology, society and contemporary Japan. The arguments of the volume resonate strongly with several key Anthropocene debates, especially those about responsibility, poetics, and civil society. I hope this book will be widely read and debated, both within Japanese Studies and beyond.

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