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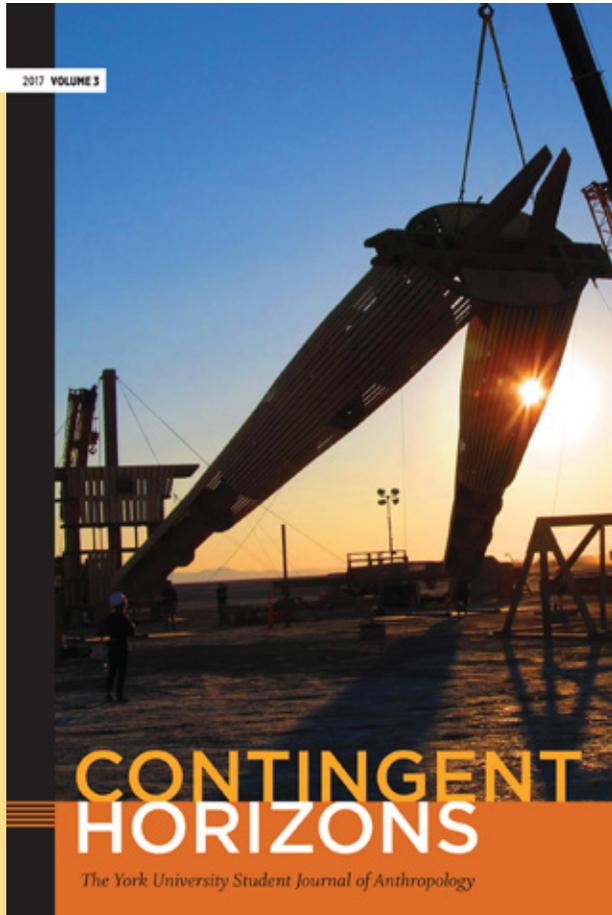
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From Nature to Nation

Shizen and the Japanese national imaginary

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This article critically examines the history of Japanese ideas and images of nature, particularly how those ideas and images relate to the production of the modern Japanese nation-state and Japanese national identity. Drawing crucially upon Julia Adeney Thomas's historical work on the politics of nature in Japan, while examining the lives and work of Shiga Shigetaka, Yanagita Kunio, and Watsuji Tetsurō, the link between nation and nature, and how those two concepts have been fashioned together throughout Japan's modern history, is explored. This article identifies the context in which the Japanese "love of nature" is constructed through these key figures, arguing that this understanding of nature took precedence precisely because it serves to inform the Japanese national imaginary, giving voice and distinction to the Japanese nation-state. Ultimately, it is argued that this close relationship between nation and nature is undeniably a modern one, and it exemplifies but one expression in a multitude of Japanese reactions to modernity and the concomitant threat of western influence and hegemony that began during the Meiji period.

KEY WORDS Japan, nature, national imaginary, cultural nationalism, Meiji

A number of scholars have remarked upon the persistence of the idea that Japanese culture reflects or embodies a certain harmony with, and appreciation for, "nature" (Asquith and Kalland 1997; Martinez 2005; Kirby 2011). This alleged cultural characteristic of Japan and its people is typically underscored by certain essentialized images of nature, be it cherry blossom viewing (*hanami*), flower arrangement (*ikebana*), Japanese gardening, *bonsai*, or mythologized natural-cultural sites such as Mt. Fuji or the Yakushima forest. At times, this supposedly distinctive relationship with nature has been argued as capable of motivating sustainable development or informing a robust environmental ethics; indeed, Julia Adeney Thomas lists a number of authors (both Japanese and non-Japanese) who have argued that a Japanese love for nature provides "not only aesthetic guideposts but also a foundation for careful environmental stewardship" (2001:9 n1). This idealized view of Japanese nature, with its implicit sense of harmony, however, inevitably conflicts with the reality of contemporary late capitalist, post-industrialized Japan. The accelerated economic growth in the postwar period, sometimes referred to as Japan's "economic miracle," has often resulted in an excess of polluted landscapes and

toxic bodies. This has been most notoriously exemplified by the “big four” major postwar pollution cases—Minamata disease, Niigata Minamata disease, Itai-Itai disease, and Yokkaichi air pollution (Miyamoto 2013)—and has again been emphasized more recently by the extensive social and environmental costs that followed the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.

Where do these particular Japanese ideas and images of nature come from, and why are they maintained in the face of such contradiction? What is the relationship between these ideas and images of nature and the ideas and images that help constitute the imagined Japanese nation-state, in the vein of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) “imagined community”? Are such ideas and images of nature being mobilized, advertently or inadvertently, on behalf of the nation-state? To examine these questions fully, I will trace the modern history of Japanese ideas and images of nature alongside the modern history of what many observers have called Japan’s “cultural nationalism” (Yoshino 1992; Sakai 1997).¹ In delineating this history, I suggest that contemporary idealized Japanese ideas and images of nature are in fact modern productions, created through Japan’s encounters and dialogues with the West, ultimately working to signify the unity and homogeneity of the Japanese nation-state, suggesting the character of its national identity. The development of late Meiji writings and Kyoto school literature on Japanese ideas and images of nature, on the one hand, and its reproduction and reinforcement through *nihonjinron* discourses in the postwar period on the other, contributed to the intimate ties between nation and nature. This close relationship between nation and nature functioned as but one expression in a multitude of Japanese reactions to the anxieties of modernity and the threat of western influence. Ultimately, this reactionary process of “overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chōkoku*; Satsuka 2015:22) was characterized by essentialized Japanese national self-descriptions maintained in dialectical relationship with an ideal and normalized West, while inexorably using western language, logics, and epistemes. This condition of Japanese modernity exhibits what Sakai Naoki calls “transferential desire”: Japan’s modern desire to see itself as a distinctive cultural and national unity from an exterior perspective, recognizing its own complete otherness from the position of the western gaze (1997:59).

Nature’s Political History

As Raymond Williams famously remarked, nature “is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” (1976:219). William Cronon (1995) reminds us how nature—or “wilderness,” as he calls it—is culturally and historically constructed as a reified place outside of human activity, while Bruno Latour (2004) more recently cautions us on how politics is always imbricated in nature, and nature in politics. Thus problematizing this term in the Japanese context is crucial to my analysis. Indeed, tracing the development of Japanese discourses of nature and their relationship to the nation-state is significant because, as Thomas maintains, “whoever can define nature for a nation defines that nation’s polity on a fundamental level” (2001:2–3). Thomas argues that a nation’s understanding of nature ultimately signifies the limits of individual and collective action, structuring the cosmic place and weight of the human being. In her understanding, nature is always political, and whoever has the capacity to reconfigure conceptions of nature inevitably has the capacity to alter the political landscape to their advantage. Indeed, this understanding informs

Thomas's study, whose purpose is to therefore elucidate the history of the politics of nature in Japan in order to demonstrate its production. More precisely, she explores how nature was manipulated and redefined as an aspect of the political strategies utilized by the ruling political classes of Japan from the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), through the Meiji period (1868–1912), and the Taishō period (1912–1926), until the end of the Second World War.

Nature as it was understood in Tokugawa Japan was historically communicated by a wealth of vocabulary, frequently borrowed from Chinese by Japanese Neo-Confucian writers, suggesting the lack of a single concept. These various terms described different aspects of the nature concept, from “heaven and earth” (*tenchi*), to “the myriad objects” (*manbutsu*), to “heaven/nature’s law” (*tenri*); there was no comprehensive understanding of nature as a unified concept, object, place, or ontology (Thomas 2001:33). Because this diversity of meaning and signification indicates that Japan historically had no standardized conception of nature in the way that it is understood today—perhaps articulated through notions of “environment” or “ecology” in a scientific ecological sense—to retroactively identify any of these Tokugawa concepts as constituting *shizen* or nature (as some scholars have done) would be anachronistic. Shiho Satsuka argues similarly, maintaining that nature did not exist as a unified concept in Japan before the Meiji period, adding that the concept “nature,” as well as “subject” and “freedom,” when first introduced to Japan, “were the most enigmatic but important ones in transforming the country and its population” (2015:19). These novel concepts, fundamental to western epistemologies, were transformative because of the *simultaneous* scope and ambiguity of their meaning, and/yet they posed a challenge for translation, as they had no immediate commensurability in the Japanese language. Their adoption during the Meiji period of westernization, and the Japanese attempts at translating such complex notions, thrust the Japanese people into a process of deep intellectual and cultural change. As Satsuka reminds us, in the course of linguistic and cultural translation, this incommensurability inexorably remains at the heart of the adopted concept, resulting in “an irreconcilable tension between the foreign and host worldviews” (2015:24). This tension, as I will explore, epitomizes Japan’s encounters with otherness.

In Thomas’s account of the history of the nature concept in Japanese political ideology, she characterizes nature’s change over time as “nature as place, nature as time, and nature as nation” (2001:30). In the Tokugawa period, although initially signified by a range of terminology and meaning, nature was eventually reoriented primarily into spatial terms; hence, Thomas designates nature as place. She argues that although nature as place still maintained some variation in application, Tokugawa thinkers generally held that nature ought to be understood in terms of its vertical and horizontal expansiveness, centred on a single point of highest value, that place most unified with nature: the Japanese Imperial centre. This altogether constituted what she describes as the “topographic political imagination” of Tokugawa Japan (38). The centre of this topography was thus thought of as the apex of naturalness, the site of heaven and earth, as well as the seat of political virtue, while peripheral and exterior space was characterized by increasing unnaturalness and disorder.

During the early Meiji period, as Japan expanded both territorially and intellectually, Thomas argues that the concept of nature expanded and diversified into “nature defined as the world’s fundamental structure or law, as the natural forces governing the future, and as the primary political body of the national government” (73). With increasing

exposure to non-Japanese ideas, histories, and epistemologies, nature eventually became politically attached to notions of temporality—nature as time. Thomas maintains that an imported social Darwinism in particular played an influential role in the construction of the Japanese worldview. She argues that during a period of considerable political debate between the years 1881 and 1883, the Meiji politician Katō Hiroyuki and his detractors sparred over matters of governance, with Katō claiming “that oligarchic rule was the correct form of government for Meiji Japan according to the dictates of natural evolution” (84). According to Thomas, this understanding, which became hegemonic for a time, held that nature fundamentally had a *telos*, a trajectory of improvement and progression, in turn implying a temporality, a history. Nature was the Imperial centre, and the Imperial centre was the pinnacle of development.

In the late Meiji period, as Japan increasingly modernized its government, its education system, and its economy, while making efforts to increase its international standing with the defeat of China in 1895 and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, the use of the nature concept became less conspicuously political. Instead, Thomas suggests, “the social Darwinism concept of nature, stressing universal evolutionary stages, proved so detrimental to nationalistic aspirations that it was discarded during the 1890s while another, more nationalistic and useful concept of nature was developed.” This new concept of nature found salience in what she terms Japanese “cultural discourses” (2001:158–159). Effectively, as the Japanese began to conceive of themselves through this imported evolutionary model of the world, they inevitably ran the risk of self-identifying as “less developed” *vis-à-vis* the modern West: that ideal, homogenized grouping of advanced foreign nations, cultures, and philosophies that Japan sought to emulate and ultimately contend with on its own terms. Thomas argues that it was during this moment of modernization as a mimetic procedure of westernization, where emulation was seen as sociopolitical equivalence, that Japan “acculturated” nature. This understanding of nature, as embedded in cultural aesthetics and practices, comes to dominate Japanese discourses of nature, forming the basis for “Japan’s twentieth-century ‘love of nature,’ a love simultaneously cultural and political” (178). This new kind of nature concept remains political precisely because of its identification with Japanese national culture, a national culture that can thus stand on its own. In this way, the Japanese nature concept as constructed from the late Meiji on, expressed now as the term *shizen* almost exclusively, comes to be identified with the national-cultural identity of the Japanese. It functions as an essential discursive tool of the “imagined community” that constitutes national consciousness (Anderson 1983), demonstrating what Ernest Gellner calls the merging of the political and the cultural into the singular unit of the nation (1983:1, 35).

Nature as Nation

Before identifying how nature as nation, as Thomas calls it, comes to be, it is necessary to explore the radical changes that occurred in Japan during the late Meiji, Taishō, and postwar periods more systematically, particularly as these changes and the anxieties they provoke are embodied in the writings of Shiga Shigetaka, Yamagita Kunio, and Watsuji Tetsurō. This will be crucial, as these three influential Japanese authors strove to define

a unique Japanese national perspective through a particular approach to and relationship with nature.

Shiga Shigetaka (1863–1927) was a journalist and editor of the *Nihonjin* magazine (*The Japanese*), whose book *Nihon fūkeiron* (*Japanese Landscape*) sought to see in Japan a new kind of landscape. This landscape corresponded with images of a spatialized nature, an understanding inspired by the then-burgeoning mountaineering tradition of western nations. Shiga, along with alpinist Kojima Usui, was particularly instrumental in popularizing the Meiji neologism *Nippon Arupusu* (Japanese Alps); a term originally taken from Walter Weston’s influential *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps* (1896), and one that typifies the encroachment of western ideas into Japanese understandings of space (Wigen 2005). Indeed, these novel conceptions of space coincided with the introduction and advancement of geography as an academic discipline, while also tellingly coinciding with Japan’s imperialist colonial movements abroad. These two developments were of course closely linked; as Kären Wigen (2005) argues, Japanese modernizers understood geography as “an indispensable tool of statecraft” (3), and alpinism as the “adoption of a Western optic that linked climbing with claiming” (5). In this way, geography functioned to inform the national imaginary by means of the notion of a bounded space to know and master, and thus constituting the imagined “body” of the nation. This is akin to Anderson’s analysis of the map in the late colonial state as a “totalizing classificatory grid,” identifying all that existed under the control of the state, and that which functioned as a precursor to national consciousness (1983:184). While Shiga’s writings about the virtues of alpinism certainly encouraged the exploration and appreciation of landscape and nature in a cosmopolitan, globetrotting fashion—Satsuka, in her recent ethnography (2015), writes about Maki Yūkō’s climb up Mount Alberta in 1925 and the influence it had on Japanese tour guides working in Banff—Shiga’s writings primarily encouraged the exploration and appreciation of a *Japanese* nature and geography, a chartable space unique to the Japanese nation-state.

Coinciding with the making of space as the body of the nation through the introduction of geography, the Meiji development of categorizing sites and artefacts of national-cultural importance, otherwise known as cultural properties management, signified the filling of that national body with its constituent parts. The institution of cultural properties management in Japan, along with the introduction and promotion of the academic discipline of archaeology (then still relatively new in western countries), was exemplified through the establishment of the Tokyo Imperial Museum in 1872, and later the Old Shrines and Temples Preservation Law of 1897. The subsequent development of two bourgeois preservation societies, the Imperial Ancient Sites Survey Society and the Society for the Investigation and Preservation of Historic Sites and Aged Trees, and their success in petitioning for the creation of more extensive cultural properties legislation (the Law for the Preservation of Historic Sites, Places of Scenic Beauty, and Natural Monuments of 1919) further denotes Japan’s commitment to documenting its nature and culture through a western optic (Edwards 2005). Indeed, similar kinds of practices are discussed at length in Richard Handler’s ethnographic work on Quebecois nationalism, wherein he argues that the Quebec notion of *patrimoine* (heritage) envisioned “national culture as property, and the nation as a property-owning ‘collective individual’” (1988:141). As he describes it,

this kind of objectifying logic understands the possession of a heritage, directly equated with the possession of a culture, as providing the crucial proof for national existence: “We are a nation because we have a culture” (142). Moreover, Handler argues that this understanding is integral to any modern nationalist project, stating, “a self-conscious national or ethnic group will claim possession of cultural properties as both representative and constitutive of cultural identity” (154). This belief is ultimately reflected in the dual development of geography and archaeology in Meiji Japan, both of which functioned as techniques for charting the space of the nation-state and identifying legitimate cultural and national markers to populate such space, ultimately serving to inform the Japanese nationalist project.

The next figure in our discussion is Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), a Japanese native ethnographer and author of the widely popular *Tōno monogatari* (*The Legends of Tono*), credited for first establishing and promoting folklore studies in Japan, and for being a highly significant actor in the production of modern Japanese national identity. It was during the 1920s, halfway through his career, when he “turned from an interest in fantastic tales and regional peculiarities” towards attempting to discover a “unifying essence for the Japanese people” (Schnell 2005:209). In his concern for unearthing the basic or primordial character of Japaneseness, he articulated the importance of the concept *jōmin* (ordinary folk) to the traditional Japanese experience. For Yanagita, stereotyped customs of ancestor and *kami* worship, as well as a predominantly sedentary and agricultural lifestyle, characterize *jōmin*. In fact, these traits demonstrated the core qualities of the Japanese national identity for Yanagita, and it is not difficult to imagine how readily these beliefs would be practised in Japanese nationalist discourses (Schnell 2005). Marilyn Ivy notes the enduring power of Yanagita’s folklore studies to support an increasingly popular nostalgia-driven domestic tourism in contemporary Japan: “In citing Yanagita, late-twentieth-century Japanese explicitly locate themselves in a lineage, sequentially reiterating his theoretical attempts to journey back to the national-cultural home” (1995:63).

This longing for a purported national-cultural home, partly instigated by Yanagita, is probably best exemplified by the notion of *furusato* (literally “old village,” but often rendered as hometown), a nostalgic agrarian ideal that remains a common trope in the Japanese national imaginary today, as Marilyn Ivy’s *Discourses of the Vanishing* vividly demonstrates. In her endeavour to ethnographically translate the modern Japanese anxiety over a supposedly “vanishing” culture—characteristically posited as something traditional, situated in the countryside (*inaka*), on the margins of urban centres and capitalist production—Ivy identifies these peripheral practices and discourses as “continuously repositioned at the core of the national-cultural imaginary” and central to a national narrative of cultural loss and recovery (1995:20). For Ivy, these “phantasmatic” discourses of nostalgia appeals to a premodernity, particularly one that is always in need of recovery and one that is repeatedly commodified and consumed through domestic *furusato* tourism, are closely tied to dominant discourses on cultural purity and internal homogeneity, which together help to build the impression of a tightly bound community, the *kyōdōtai* of the nation-state. In turn, as *furusato* comes to signify less an actual hometown located in the Japanese countryside, it becomes largely an idealized and deterritorialized construction, residing primarily in memory but alluded to by a number of material markers. Indeed, as Jennifer Robertson notes, “the ubiquity of *furusato* as a signifier of a wide range of cultural

productions effectively imbues those productions with unifying—and ultimately nativist and national—political meaning and value” (1988:494). *Furusato* is thus an idealized love for rural village life endorsed by the nation (Gill 2013). Peter Wynn Kirby (2011), in his recent ethnography on waste and pollution in Japan, demonstrates how *furusato* and rural nostalgia are consumed regularly by Japanese seeking to renew their proximity with nature, from participation in rural harvest festivals (*shūkaku no matsuri*) and flower viewing (*hanami*), to the patronage of rural bars and restaurants thought of as culturally rich and healing.

Furusato, as a figurative lost home central to the *communitas* of modern Japan, also resonates with Daphne Berdahl’s work on postsocialist East Germany, wherein the distinctive cultural nostalgia of East Germany *vis-à-vis* West Germany is incessantly invoked through mass-mediated cultural representations, and exemplified by the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* This nostalgia, she argues, reflects not a longing for a return to an actual past (characterized by a brutal regime), but rather “a sense of lost possibilities and critiques of the present” (2010). In this same way, *furusato* also involves a critique of the present, as it was popularized at a time when “state-sponsored industrialization and processes of bureaucratic rationalism” had denoted rural Japan as an afterthought, as impeding progress (Ivy 1995:107). Indeed, *furusato* acts as a rejection of overt westernization and modernization, despite “prewestern Japanese authenticity” being “inescapably a *modern* endeavour” (241). Ultimately, it embodies the desire to return to the primordial origins of the Japanese nation-state and its people, to find a culturally distinctive sense of an agrarian Japaneseness, one in proximity and harmony with nature.

This rejection of westernization, paired with the search for the quintessentially Japanese, is one of the defining features of Watsuji Tetsurō’s thought as well. Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), a Japanese intellectual and cultural historian associated with the Kyoto school of early-twentieth-century Japan, was celebrated for his influential 1935 philosophical work *Fūdo* (*Climate*), in which he argued that the distinctiveness in culture and behaviour of the various peoples of the world are determined in large part by distinctive differences in geography and climate. Watsuji claims that we can “discover climatic phenomena in all the expressions of human activity,” from diet, food preparation, and manners, to architecture, literature, art, and religion (1961:7–8). In effect, nature defines and determines culture. Describing the three broad types of climate—“monsoon,” “desert,” and “meadow”—he argues that Japan, a monsoon climate, is in fact the most distinctive kind of monsoon climate, exhibiting a “dual nature” that fluctuates between the subtropical and the subarctic, that has four distinct seasons, and that is characterized by abrupt changes in rhythm. Crucially, he links this wild and changeable climate to the innate emotive nature of the Japanese:

This, then, is the distinctive Japanese way of life—a copious outflow of emotion, constantly changing, yet concealing perseverance beneath this change; at every moment in this alternation of mutability and endurance, there is abruptness. This activity of emotions sinks to resigned acquiescence in resistance, and underneath the exaltation of activity there lies a quiet and suddenly apparent abandonment. This is a quiet savagery of emotion, a fighting disinterest. Here we discover the national spirit of Japan. (1961:137–138)

Here, the dual nature of Japan's environmental situatedness precipitates the dual nature of the Japanese character, and therefore in Watsuji's thought, nature is identified with nation. Ultimately, this presentation of the dual nature of the Japanese becomes a popular trope in postwar discourses on the uniqueness of the Japanese, perpetuated by Japanese and non-Japanese alike (c.f., Benedict 1946:2–3).

While searching for the essence of the Japanese spirit, Watsuji's notion of geographic determinism actually reflects a strong engagement with western philosophy, particularly German existentialism and phenomenology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Citing the influence of Martin Heidegger in particular, Graham Mayeda argues that Watsuji's *Fūdo* was in part inspired by a desire to respond to the perceived failings of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, particularly its prioritization of the temporal over the spatial, while nonetheless employing a Heideggerian understanding of "both space and the historical" in his analysis (2006:37). In this engagement with western thought, Watsuji can be situated in a trend amongst Japanese intellectuals during the early part of the twentieth century in which western logics and epistemologies were utilized in the identification and explication of the Japanese "intellectual tradition," which until the radical modernization of the Meiji Reformation, had not been conceived of as such. The most prominent and influential Japanese intellectuals in this trend belonged loosely to the "Kyoto school," an early-twentieth-century collection of individuals working out of Kyoto University, who were united in their commitment to espousing a specifically Japanese philosophical tradition through engagement with the most prominent western philosophers of the time. The core members of the Kyoto school included Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), and later Watsuji Tetsurō (Carter 2013). As Ueda Shizuteru argues, the Kyoto school philosophers, with Nishida at the helm, supposed that, "by learning from Western culture the spirit of giving scholarly form to theory, Japanese culture will be able to overcome itself and step out into the world" (1994:101).

Zen and Nihonjinron

Indeed, the Japanese intellectual climate of the time facilitated the Japanese effort to demonstrate to the West (and therefore to themselves) that Japanese thought could be described using western vocabularies and frameworks ultimately commensurate and consequently competitive with the philosophies of the West. Perhaps most notably this is seen in the life and work of Zen apologist Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō (popularly known as D. T. Suzuki). As Robert H. Sharf aptly demonstrates in his analysis of Zen Buddhism and Japanese nationalism, Suzuki reframed Zen as a "direct experience," the universal basis for all religious belief and practice, and yet as a tradition undeniably Japanese in character (1993:26). For Suzuki, Zen was both the highest form of religious practice as well as a religious tradition that was best cultivated and perfected by the Japanese. Suzuki, who became a renowned international authority on Zen, was but another historically contingent actor in the development of a number of rhetorical strategies that sought to guard Japanese specificity against "Western universalizing discourse" (36). This rather constructed presentation of Zen as a universal religion, emphasizing direct experience and deinstitutionalization, was certainly one that appealed to western practitioners and

intellectuals. Ironically, these universal aspects were in fact inspired by Suzuki's (conspicuously deemphasized) engagement with western philosophers of religion such as William James and Friedrich Schleiermacher, again demonstrating how Japanese national self-presentation was adopted readily by both Japanese and non-Japanese alike. As Sharf remarks: "Like Narcissus, Western enthusiasts failed to recognize their own reflection in the mirror being held out to them" (39).

These developments in Zen and Japanese philosophy of the early twentieth century are part of a wider national-cultural discussion in Japan known as *nihonjinron* (theories of the Japanese), a genre of writings that emerged in reaction to modernization, maturing during the postwar period and reaching their peak in the 1970s (Yoshino 1992). According to Sharf, *nihonjinron* is "a popular discursive enterprise devoted to the delineation and explication of the unique qualities of the Japanese, which invariably touts the cultural homogeneity as well as the moral and spiritual superiority of the Japanese vis-à-vis other peoples" (1993:34–35). *Nihonjinron* was but another expression of Japan's reaction against westernization processes, and to the processes of national self-assertion that began in the Meiji period. In a way, the concerns of the *nihonjinron* authors, articulated within western epistemologies, constitute what Sakai calls "transferential desire," or the desire to see one's position from the position of another. In another way, they indicate what Roger Goodman, drawing up Said's work on Orientalism, calls a self-imposed "reverse Orientalism" born out of an "Occidentalism," or rather an elevation of the East through the discursive subjugation of the West (2005:69). Kosaku Yoshino, in his discussion of Japanese cultural nationalism, argues that it is through *nihonjinron* literature that the fundamentals of the Japanese nationalist project are explored most explicitly. In particular, he places *nihonjinron* in a history of Japanese engagement with a universalized otherness, first as a reaction to the threat of Chinese influence and hegemony, and more recently with that of the West: "The *nihonjinron* or discussions of Japanese uniqueness are, therefore, discussions of 'particularistic' cultural differences of Japan from the 'universal' civilisation" (1992:9). *Nihonjinron* of the postwar period, along with the writings of Shiga, Yanagita, and Watsuji in the late Meiji and Taishō periods before that, help to frame the nationalistic context in which a "love for nature" is configured as a defining characteristic of the Japanese.

Conclusion

Although I have spoken of Japanese ideas and images of nature as playing a key role in the promulgation of the Japanese national imaginary, this understanding of nature is not ubiquitous in Japan; nature in Japan is not a singular experience. As D. P. Martinez (2005) argues in her ethnographic work on Japanese fishing villages, differences in attitudes and ideas surrounding nature were found to exist on the basis of class differences, with rural fishermen being more observant of environmental issues and urban dwellers engaging in nature much more indifferently. Nancy Rosenberger (1997) argues that nature is understood differently on the basis of gender and can in many ways legitimize gender difference itself, as demonstrated through her analysis of the role of nature tropes in Japanese women's magazines. Moreover, it is not hard to imagine that conceptions of nature may yet again undergo a shift in meaning, as evidenced by Satsuka's Japanese tour guides' search

for a “magnificent nature” outside of Japan. In her ethnography, Japanese youth sought nature elsewhere (along with new freedoms and new subjectivities) in part due to the precariousness of labour and livelihood in contemporary neoliberal Japan. Anne Allison argues that this precariousness has become an almost existential state, in which “one’s human condition has become precarious as well” (2013:9). After the triple disasters of 2011, this precarious state has again been exacerbated; many in Tōhoku still remain displaced on account of both the tsunami and the ongoing Fukushima exclusion zone. As help from the government and urban residents falters, what becomes of rural Japanese living in Tōhoku? How does this affect the *furusato* ideal?

In placing my discussion of contemporary understandings of the Japanese nature concept (*shizen*) within the context of *nihonjinron* in the postwar period, as well as in the writings of Shiga, Yanagita, and Watsuji in the late Meiji and Taishō periods before that, I argue that it was largely the *idea* of nature that has been mobilized discursively in the construction of modern Japanese nation-state. As we have seen, this idea of nature is one that has been steadfastly coupled with images of an essentialized Japan, in turn proving to be highly significant to Japanese national myth making. Shiga’s new landscape coupled spatialized nature for the nation with geography and archaeology, Yanagita’s *jōmin* mythologized the agrarian lifestyle and the *furusato* ideal, Watsuji linked nature with climate and temperament, and *nihonjinron* and other postwar discourses focused and solidified the essentialization of the Japanese national identity, drawing upon these Meiji figures and their notions of nature. Contrary to the nationalist arguments made by these figures and *nihonjinron* writers, such powerful and essentialized ideas and images of nature did not come out some murky, prewestern, and premodern Japanese “tradition,” as if such a unified and singular thing ever existed. Rather, nature is very much a modern development, becoming so pervasive precisely because of its national-cultural potency, as well as on account of its direct applicability to nation-building and national identity-making. Japanese ideas and images of nature, as they are discursively practised in the everyday, are ultimately crafted in the service of the modern nation.

Notes

- 1 By “modern,” I refer to Japan from the development of the Meiji period on (1868–1912), as it was within this timeframe that Japan deliberately entered into a rapid phase of self-described “modernization,” as well as an intense process of “westernization.”

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