Shimao Toshio (1917–1986) once summed up his life as a failure to experience. Having left the Kanto region days before the 1923 earthquake, he escaped the horrific natural catastrophe that leveled Tokyo and Yokohama. Likewise, as a naval lieutenant in World War II in charge of a kamikaze squadron of “suicide boats,” Shimao was just one radio message away from oblivion when the emperor’s words of surrender on August 15, 1945, put an end to the conflict. ¹ Despite Shimao’s assessment, the reader of his fiction and essays is left with quite the opposite impression, of a writer whose life was amazingly rich. In many ways Shimao’s life and the writings based on it form a history in miniature of contemporary Japanese experience of the past half century. In a collage of images and scenes scattered throughout what is, in effect, a lifelong saga, his fiction addresses the traumatic experiences of the war and survival, of attempts to readjust to a “normal” postwar reality, of urban life and the fragility of the newly dominant social unit of postwar Japan—the nuclear family—and the stresses and strains of both the female and male roles within it.

Shimao’s fiction thus shares much with the contemporaries with whom he is often grouped, the early 1950s writers—Kojima Nobuo, Shōno Junzō, Yoshiyuki Junnosuke, and Yasuoka Shōtarō—collectively called the Daisan no shinjin (Third group of new writers). As Van Gessel deftly summarizes this group’s accomplishments in his study, The Sting of Life, these writers passed through the inferno of complete loss—the loss of spiritual home, the ravages of war, the humiliation of defeat, and the collapse of the familial order. ²
For Morikawa Tatsuya, too, Shimao is preeminently a representative of a single generation, the senchūha, the lost generation whose youth was spent in wartime. As I will argue in this book, however, Shimao’s work goes far beyond the boundaries staked out by these novelists and makes him one of the most fascinating and exciting of postwar Japanese writers. In dealing with war, recovery, and the family, Shimao’s work coalesces on larger questions of Japan’s modernity and its failures, and ultimately catches glimpses of salvation in a social—and personal—unconscious found on the margins of experience. Hidden behind the facade of a homogeneous nation marching in lockstep to economic dominance, Shimao reveals to us, is an unexpected diversity; the only healthy future is one that accepts—and embraces—this reality.

Perhaps surprisingly for a writer so caught up in narrating the war experience, there is much in Shimao’s work that makes him a very contemporary writer, one whose works should be read as proto-postmodern: the chaotic, fragmentary, and nonlinear nature of his fictional world, its “anti-structure” stance, its irrationality, its challenge to conventional literary genres, and the juxtaposition of two or multiple worlds—the way normality and abnormality are unstable, shifting concepts, the subtle overlap of dream and reality. If, as David Harvey notes, the “most liberative and therefore most appealing aspect of postmodern thought [is] its concern with ‘otherness,’” Shimao’s work is thoroughly postmodern, because its appeal and power are found precisely in its discovery of the Other. Speaking of Shimao’s masterpiece, Shi no toge (The sting of death), for instance, the feminist critic Ueno Chizuko notes that, although it appears on the surface a typical I-novel, it includes an element marking it as a decisive break from this major genre, namely the “Other” (tasha), who is crucial to the narrator’s salvation.

Shimao’s fiction is generally classified into three groups—stories about the war, dream stories, and writings on the madness of his wife—a system this book follows for its first three chapters. While Japanese critics tend to treat these groups more or less independently, I see them as bound together in their search for the Other of postwar Japan: that which has been suppressed, marginalized, and silenced in postwar society (and arguably in the creation of the modern Japanese state). Shimao confronts war responsibility and trauma, the displaced and marginalized of postwar Japan (including women and the insane), and cultural difference. Through his wartime experience, the madness of his southern-island wife, and his twenty-year residency on the small south-
ern island of Amami, Shimao discovered a suppressed diversity, a cultural unconscious antithetical to what he saw as the stagnation of Japanese modernity. His long-term study of Ryukyu culture and history, his so-called *Yaponesia* writings, placed him in the forefront of those debating the place of Okinawa and other peripheral areas on the margins. These writings, in turn, fed into his fiction, producing a series of “island stories” that explored the island and its people. And coloring all his fiction is a gradually developing style that subtly provides a meeting place for the conscious and unconscious, the rational and something else.

The war experience looms large in Shimao’s life and work and is the subject of chapter 1. Hurriedly graduated a year ahead of schedule in 1944, Shimao, like many college graduates of the time (particularly humanities graduates), was immediately conscripted into the military, in his case the navy. Given the choice of specialties to choose from in officer candidate school, Shimao listed kamikaze duty third, but soon found himself training to be commander of a squadron of *shinyó* boats. These little-known suicide weapons were the surface equivalent of the infamous kamikaze airplanes and proved a dismal failure in combat. Assigned to an inlet on the island of Kakeromajima, halfway to Okinawa, Shimao and his squadron were placed on standby alert three times from November 1944 to the end of the war. The war experience, particularly the final three-day wait for the mission of death, became the subject matter of nearly twenty short stories, including one of the high points of Japanese war literature, Shimao’s incomplete war novel, which begins with the 1949 story “Shutsu kotoki” (Departure from a lonely isle). From his earliest postwar stories down to the story he was writing at the time of his death, the war underscored Shimao’s career. While many Japanese wished—and continue to wish—to confine the war to the realm of a collective amnesia, for decades Shimao insistently and painfully dissected the traumas of the war. Arguably no other Japanese writer known for war literature has so intensely examined, through a variety of literary genres (the fairy tale, the romance, surrealist and realistic fiction), the personal and collective consequences of World War II, including the kamikaze experience. (To this day Shimao’s war stories remain the only major fictional study of this experience.) Despite his protestations, Shimao continues to be read as spokesman for both the kamikaze victims and the generation of “failed kamikaze” (*tokkōtai kuzure*). If, as Ōe Kenzaburō maintains, even today the war hangs like a dark cloud over the Japanese landscape, then Shimao’s literature,
with its ruthless focus on both the victimized and victimizing side of Japan’s wartime experience, does much to confront this shadow.

The lingering traumas of war find no better expression than in Shimao’s stories of the late 1940s–early 1950s, which I examine in chapter 2. In a series of surreal stories based on the narrative logic of dreams, the best known being “Yume no naka de no nichijō,” (1948; trans. 1985, Everyday Life in a Dream), Shimao propelled himself to the forefront of postwar avant-garde writers. Writing, language, experience, authority—the very fabric of contemporary Japanese life and its expression—are called into question in Shimao’s dream stories. The chaotic and fragmentary, an undercurrent of repressed memories of wartime victimization, and the concern for those who lie on the social margins all belie the standard postwar linear narrative of stable progress of a nation of homogeneous wartime victims. Hovering on the horizon in Shimao’s fiction of this period is an ominous note of impending doom, a vision of both a continued decay of Japan’s modernity and an apocalyptic view of a future destruction that, in our nuclear age, makes his work extraordinarily contemporary. Shimao visualizes modern Japan as corrupt, stifling, and deathly. With its overwhelming desire to seek out the margins of experience and of society, to move centrifugally toward the excluded, Shimao’s fiction of this period moves in unfocused, faltering steps, toward an alternative to what we know as modern Japan.

The mental illness of Shimao’s wife, Miho, descended on his family in 1954, and his fiction now focused exclusively on his domestic troubles. Some critics saw this as an unfortunate “literary retreat” into the established parameters of the I-novel. On the surface this view has some merit, because Shimao’s fiction at this point does seem to join that of writers of the time—Shōno and Yasuoka in particular—in focusing primarily on the fragile nature of the postwar nuclear family through examining the details of the writer’s daily life. Through the mid-1950s stories of his and his wife’s experiences in a mental ward, however, and especially through his sixteen-year composition of Shi no toge (The sting of death, 1960–1976), Shimao clearly moved beyond the narrow boundaries of the I-novel. Fiction of this experience—collectively called his byōsaimono (stories of a sick wife)—reflects a stylistic maturity that brings together the surreal and the real, the unconscious and conscious, in sophisticated and meaningful ways. That which has been left on the unconscious level now bubbles to the surface of consciousness: the suppressed aspirations of women, the lingering traumas of war, and
most important for Shimao’s work, the discovery of Otherness. As I examine in chapter 3, the byōsaimono are searing, haunting depictions of one woman’s descent into madness and her battle to claim a self in the midst of her torment. Shimao carefully depicts the strains and inequalities inherent in the position of women in postwar Japan in ways no other male writer had done before, opening up the claims of women to a heretofore unseen legitimacy. At the same time, Shi no toge reinvigorates Shimao’s focus on the war and its legacy. As I argue, the novel, part of what one critic calls Shimao’s “literature of the victimizer,” not only overturns the stance of the standard I-novel with its focus on the protagonist as victim, but shatters the postwar “victim mentality” that, as Oda Makoto sees it, stifles the possibility of real selfhood and growth for postwar Japanese. To borrow from Shimao’s well-used image, his literature points toward a way out of the “abyss.” A third element of Shi no toge indicates directions Shimao’s career was to take for its final two decades. Here, the sufferings of the character Miho are intimately linked to the marginalized area from which she comes. As one Okinawan critic puts it, Shi no toge depicts the discovery of place and its importance in Miho’s cure. Difference and diversity—and the tragic consequences of their suppression—became for Shimao lifelong concerns.

In his fiction and essays beginning in the late 1950s, what had been an unfocused narrative desire to uncover the marginalized now became focused on a real place and a real people—the islanders of the Ryukyu Islands. Shimao’s literature of the islands—his numerous Yaponesia essays, his short stories set in the islands, and his last major piece of fiction, the two-part diary-like Hi no utsuroi—all involve the struggle to deal with the islands as Other. As I discuss in chapter 4, Yaponesia became both a powerful concept for those in Okinawa seeking to define their identity and a way of recovering a lost cultural diversity within the confines of all of Japan. In the words of Tanigawa Ken’ichi, in the creation of the modern Japanese state, a “multi-layered, heterogeneous” time and space were “twisted together” into a “single strand,” and Shimao’s Yaponesia points the way toward its unraveling. The broader sweep of the essays is balanced by the highly personal focus of Shimao’s island fiction. Here, through the mediation of the wife (now revealed in her guise as guide and healer), the male protagonist is drawn into a variety of confrontations with the island and its people. Over a series of stories his shattered and disjointed sense of time and space are gradually restored, the discovery of the Other of the islands proving to be the
impetus for him finally to shake free from the baleful influence of a
stagnant and alienating modern mainland.

On a personal note, throughout the seven years I have been working
on this study I have been heartened by the remarks of the critic Karatani
Kōjin, who judges Shimao as one of the major figures of Japanese litera-
ture since the war. Shimao’s dream stories, Karatani writes, succeed in
capturing a nightmarish quality of postwar Japan in ways no other
writer has done. Further, for his war literature and other work, Karatani
told me, literary history will view Shimao ultimately as more important,
his works more lasting, than that of his more illustrious contemporary,
Mishima Yukio. This book extends the argument to include Shimao’s
importance on a number of other levels, including that of cultural critic.
As with any writer, only the passage of time will determine Shimao’s
place in Japanese literary history; in the meantime, I hope readers in the
West will search out and discover for themselves not only the work of
Shimao Toshio, but that of the myriad exciting and important Japanese
writers who—as far as our collective consciousness of Japanese litera-
ture is concerned—still lie on the margins.