

Photography and Activism: The Story of Minamata

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *I wrote this piece for my UWP 101 class with Pamela Demory. The assignment was about choosing a well-known photograph and delving into its potential meanings. After intensive research on historical photographs, I decided to write about William Eugene Smith's work "Tomoko in Her Bath." This photograph is an example of extraordinary photojournalism and documentary work; the vulnerable image of the bathing mother and disabled child speaks volumes about the horrific consequences of industrial pollution. The photo's emotional shock value also helped usher in the international environmental movement. As I researched deeper into the background details of the photographer and his photography, I became captivated by Smith's efforts to publicize the effects and causes of Minamata's Disease. This paper is my personal interpretation and storytelling of "Tomoko in Her Bath."*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *I organize my Advanced Composition classes around the idea of "documentary work," as defined by psychologist Robert Coles in his book *Doing Documentary Work*. Coles argues that anyone doing documentary work—whether they be writers, filmmakers, musicologists, psychologists, sociologists, or photographers—has to make choices about the subjects they represent. In their quest to faithfully represent "human actuality," they have to decide what to include, how to arrange, whether to add commentary, etc. And those choices tell us something about the documentarian's beliefs and values, and also about the values of the world that documentarian inhabits. In my class, students write a series of "documentary" papers; for their second major assignment (which I adapted from an assignment created by my colleague, Ken Andersen), students focus their attention on the documentary work that photographers do, choosing a historically significant, published photograph and then writing an essay in which they explore and reveal some of the layers of meaning that photograph contains. To accomplish this, students must analyze the compositional qualities of the photograph itself and research the history of the photograph's*

publication and of the photographer. And then they must figure out how to organize all this information in a coherent, readable way. Jacqueline Su's superb essay fulfills all of the goals of this challenging assignment. The photograph Jacqueline chose to write about is extraordinarily moving, all on its own—but through her research and analysis she reveals additional layers of meaning that make the photograph even more significant. In doing so, not only does she help us to understand the importance of this photographer's documentary work, she has herself created a piece of documentary work that attests to the "human actuality" of both the photographer and his subjects.

—Pamela Demory, *University Writing Program*

“Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes—just sometimes—one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses into awareness...” (Smith qtd. in Morris 279).

According to John G. Morris, in his book *Get the Picture: A Personal History of Photojournalism*, Photographer William Eugene Smith published these words in his book *Minamata*. Smith believed in the power of photography. He believed that it could provoke reactions and bring about a wave of reform and activism. Thus, when Smith learned about the atrocities of Minamata's Disease, he tried his best to raise awareness of the disease by publishing a photo-essay of victims in *Life Magazine* in 1972 (Smith and Smith 74-84). One of the photographs in particular, “Tomoko in Her Bath,” succeeded in capturing global attention and became a significant symbol of environmental health and justice issues.

At first glance, the community of Minamata in Kyushu, Japan, may not seem interesting or unique. However, Minamata has had a tumultuous history in industrial pollution and environmental health problems. According to Andrew L. Jenks, in “Perils of Progress: Environmental Disasters in the 20th Century,” Minamata is traditionally a fishing village, but Japanese modernization has introduced newer industries in the area— notably the Chisso Corporation's chemical factories. In 1932, the Chisso factories began producing chemical fertilizers with a process that yielded mercury methyl as a waste by-product. To dispose of the mercury methyl waste, the factories dumped the toxic effluent directly into Minamata Bay. Chisso Corporation changed their waste disposal method in 1968, but by then it was too late (Jenks 14).

By 1953, the effects of bioaccumulation had set in. The continual consumption of mercury methyl-contaminated seafood caused the

buildup of lethal mercury concentrations in consumers' bodies. Minamata residents began noticing that the animals in the area were behaving strangely. Cats and dogs that were fed seafood scraps at the dock began "dancing wildly, tearing at themselves, foaming at the mouth, and flinging themselves into the ocean to die" (Jenks 16). Not long afterwards, Minamata residents themselves began experiencing strange symptoms such as "uncontrollable tremors and convulsions, loss of speech, [sight,] and hearing, and numbness" (Jenks 16). Babies were born physically and mentally disabled, with defining characteristics of frail, spindly limbs and deformed hands. People began suspecting that the Chisso factory was involved in the increasing numbers of bizarre and unexplainable medical problems (Jenks 17). Eventually, information was leaked concerning the factory's long history of dumping dangerous amounts of toxic waste effluent into the Bay (Jenks 19). The Chisso Corporation denied all responsibility and insisted that there was no connection between the residents' disease and their mercury waste (Jenks 25-26).

When Smith and his wife moved to the fishing village in 1971, they were shocked by the prevalence of the disease and by the fact that victims were not getting any compensation from Chisso or any governmental aid. In the biographic article "American Masters: W. Eugene Smith," PBS describes Smith as a humanitarian photographer who focused his work on issues such as racism and social justice. He had a history of taking powerful photographs that revealed the raw essence of his subjects. After choosing subjects for his photo essays, Smith would spend obsessive amounts of time studying their lives to gain an intimately deeper understanding of their characters and circumstances (PBS). Smith's habit of forging close relationships with his photography subjects served him especially well in the creation of "Tomoko in Her Bath."

As Smith agonized on how best to present the disease in his work, he realized that the most effective and impressionable image would be of a mother caring for her child. Thus, he sought the help of Ryoko and Tomoko Uemura. The article "Minamata: The Story of the Poisoning of a City," by Duke Innovation Program, states that Tomoko Uemura had inherited all of her mother's mercury methyl poison in the womb. As a result, she was born blind, deaf, and paralyzed from the waist down (Duke). When Smith requested a photo shoot with Ryoko Uemura and her teenage daughter, Tomoko Uemura, Ryoko Uemura agreed. In

fact, according to Jim Hughes, in his article “Tomoko Uemura, R.I.P.” Ryoko was very cooperative. She shared Smith’s vision to use the impact of the photo for raising awareness and for recruiting support for victims of Minamata’s Disease. Ryoko even participated in the planning by suggesting that the bath chamber be used as the background setting for the photo (Hughes).

When the photo was finally taken, the result was breathtaking and powerful. Ryoko and Tomoko seemed to glow in the photograph because the photo was published in black and white to focus the viewers’ eyes on the bathing mother and child. In the photo, Ryoko is cradling Tomoko in her arms and gazing into her daughter’s eyes with a tender expression on her face. Tomoko, on the other hand, is lying on her back and is staring blankly into space. Her facial expression seems to imply that she is enjoying both the bath and her mother’s attention. Ryoko keeps her daughter’s body afloat in the bath water to allow the viewers a clear view of Tomoko’s long and disturbingly thin legs, short torso, claw-like hands, and overall shrunken appearance.



“Tomoko in Her Bath” was published on June 2, 1972 in *Life* Magazine along with other relevant photos that Smith took for his Minamata photo essay (Smith). Smith’s accompanying article, “Death-Flow from a Pipe,” in *Life* received international attention and helped raise awareness of Minamata’s Disease (Smith). His work triggered a

wave of activism and support from viewers around the world. Tomoko's photo possessed a sense of tragedy and love that immediately appealed to viewers and raised questions about the heartbreaking circumstances surrounding Minamata's disease.

Many people viewed "Tomoko in Her Bath" as an eye-opener; it allowed people to learn about a rare disease and to witness the tender love between a mother and her disabled child. The photo may have snapped a moment of the Uemuras' everyday lives, but the same scenes displaying unconditional love between caretaker and victim occur in numerous households in the Minamata community. Between Tomoko's photo and the other photos in Smith's article, viewers can understand the perilous situation in Minamata. Smith's perspective as a documentary photographer was transparent in the *Life* photo essay. He blamed the chemical factories for the suffering of the Minamata residents, and he wanted everyone to help bring the Chisso Corporation to justice. By portraying the diseased residents as a community of victims, Smith hoped to raise the issue of irresponsible industrial pollution to the political agenda to bring help to Minamata.

Professional photographers and journalists were also entranced by Tomoko's photograph. According to Morris, "Gene Smith's photograph of Tomoko being bathed in her mother's arms became the symbol of Minamata and has been described as the *pietà* of our industrial age" (Morris 276).

Many comparisons can indeed be drawn between Smith's work and Michelangelo's *Pietà* (Jenks 28-29). Although Michelangelo and Smith use different mediums to express their art, both of their works focus on the strong bonds between mother and child. In terms of the sculpture *Pietà*, Michelangelo brings a Christianity-inspired scene to life: the Virgin Mary mourning the loss of her son after the Crucifixion. She is depicted as cradling the body of Jesus Christ on her lap. In the photograph "Tomoko in Her Bath," a mother is also shown cradling the limp body of her child in a similar pose. In both works, the lifeless or incapacitated bodies of Jesus and Tomoko convey a sense of tragedy. At the same time, there is an undeniable element of love in both works. The mothers in Smith's and Michelangelo's works gaze lovingly at their children, and, in response, the children's faces express a peaceful and innocent serenity. The subtle allusion to the well-known Michelangelo sculpture may have assisted in garnering attention to Minamata's Disease.



While most people had positive reactions to Smith's efforts to publicize the disease, there were also people who did not agree with his actions (Jenks 37-39). These people consisted mainly of Chisso Corporation executives and employees (Jenks 18-20). The Chisso executives were wary of the increasing publicity of the disease. Although they knew that their toxic effluent was the direct cause of Minamata's Disease, Chisso executives wanted to avoid the responsibility of compensating victims. The Minamata employees at the Chisso factories also did not approve of Smith's photography because they were afraid that knowledge of Minamata's Disease would force the Japanese government to shut down the factories. They were afraid of losing their jobs. Smith's activism led the Chisso Corporation and their employees to believe that an intervention was needed (Jenks 37-39).

On January 7, 1972, Smith joined a group of protesters at a demonstration located at one of the Chisso plants (Jenks 37-39). After Chisso company officials lured the photographer into a building, Chisso employees attacked Smith and several protesters. Chisso Corporation

had used violence to prevent the publication of Smith's work and to discourage the photographer from continuing his mission to document the disease. Ironically, however, Chisso's attack made headlines in Japan and led to increased publicity of Minamata's Disease (Morris 276). Smith was so severely injured from this attack that he lost most of his vision in one eye (Duke). In addition, he never fully recovered from a head injury, which ultimately led to his death in 1978 (Hughes 276-278). The incident also led the Overseas Press Club of America to award Smith the Robert Capa Gold Medal in 1974 to formally recognize his "exceptional courage and enterprise" in his work documenting victims of the disease (OPC).

"Tomoko in Her Bath" is an extraordinary photograph because of its role in creating ripple effects of change and awareness concerning industrial pollution, environmental health, and environmental justice. In a small fishing community like Minamata, there is often a David and Goliath type of dialogue between victims and corporations. Without the support from outside groups, it is often too difficult for environmental victims to enact change themselves and force companies to take responsibility for their own actions. In the case of Minamata, Chisso Corporation tried to limit the publicity of their involvement by attacking activists such as photographer William Eugene Smith (Jenks 37-39).

When "Tomoko in Her Bath" was finally published in the June 1972 issue of *Life*, the world burst into action to help the Minamata community (Smith and Smith 74-84). This international reaction to Tomoko's photo reaffirmed Smith's belief in the power of photography to enact positive change. As global awareness of the disease grew, governments began creating policies and standards to increase seafood quality and to protect consumers from the consequences of mercurial poisoning and Minamata's Disease (Jenks 28). Tomoko's photo also helped usher in an era of heightened environmental consciousness as citizens worldwide began realizing the connection between pollution prevention and human health (Jenks 30).

As Susan Sontag states, in her *New Yorker* article "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," photographs have a critical role in "shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and ultimately what evaluations are placed on these conflicts" (Sontag 21-22). A photograph may only express the small voice

of one photographer, but, given the right conditions, that photograph can change the world.

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