Love in the Time of Corona: Heterosexual Romance, Space, and Society in Japanese Fiction on COVID-19

Mina Qiao

Introduction

COVID-19 has expanded our vocabulary while transforming our daily lives: lockdown (ロックダウン *rokkudaun*), self-restraint from traveling (外出自粛 *gaishutsu jishuku*), social distance (ソーシャルディスタンス *sōsharu disutansu*), three Cs (三密 *sanmitsu*), corona-divorce (コロナ離婚 *corona-rikon*), corona-domestic violence (コロナドメスティック・バイオレンス *corona-DV*), and so on.[1] The new expressions congeal on spatial practices and personal relationships—the two aspects of our lives that perhaps underwent the most changes and challenges during the pandemic. Recent research on Japanese society during the pandemic shows that isolation has taken a toll on our relationships and increased tension in the sphere of private living.[2] How does this public health crisis affect our intimate relationships in the private sector? Furthermore, how do we perceive our society during the global pandemic? I will examine representations of heterosexual romance in Japanese COVID-19 pandemic fiction *korona shōsetsu* コロナ小説, so as to scrutinize the employment of pandemic in the discussion of social issues and dynamics between the public and private interests. *Korona shōsetsu* is a new genre that has emerged under the impacts of COVID-19 and is set in the present global pandemic or in a future time-space of virus calamity. They either directly engage with the discourses of COVID-19 (or a fictional pandemic) or deploys the pandemic as a new element to adorn stories otherwise irrelevant to coronavirus.[3] Connecting with the existing scholarship of Japanese studies, this article is also an effort to contextualize and localize representations of COVID-19 experiences.

Michiko Suzuki's discussion of love in the history of Japan's modernization presents the heterosexual union as linked to public living

rather than a private emotion and underlines the social features of romance rather than its sensual side.[4] Being a Western loan concept that emerged in the early Meiji period, "love" (ラブ *rabu*) emphasizes spirituality instead of the sensuality and carnal desire of the Japanese phrases 色 *iro* and 恋 *koi*, and thus is a symbol of modernity tied to development and enlightenment.[5] Suzuki argues that the Meiji poet Kitamura Tōkoku's 北村透谷 (1868–1894) text "Ensei shika to josei" 厭世詩家と女性 (Disillusioned poets and women, 1892) "clearly establishes love as central to human identity and as enabling the individual to attain selfhood and place in society."[6] Tōkoku writes as follows:

> It is only after a man and a woman fall in love that they can know the truth about society. […] It is also after one experiences mutual love that they can learn that our society is made of and sustained by connections among people through co-dependency and affection. No one, by themselves alone, makes a part of society. But when two become one, the couple is a part of society and sees with clarity how they are related to society.[7]

According to Tōkoku, love is a modern experience essential to the formation of selfhood and the individual's subsequent development based on his/her knowledge of society.[8] It sees heterosexual couples as social units and love as the fuel that advances both individuals and societies.

In a more recent socio-cultural context, Sonia Ryang in *Love in Modern Japan* (2006) also approaches love as "a complex set of social function" and "a state apparatus."[9] The nation-state manufactures and promotes the narratives of love through the education system and media, dominating their social meanings.[10] By creating and controlling the notions of love, the nation-state disciplines the behaviors of individuals as national subjects. In the third chapter of her book, Ryang studies extensively the postwar "purity education" (純潔教育 *junketsu kyōiku*) to demonstrate how the state achieved its demographical goals by managing the public's understandings of sex, love, and marriage. This abstinence institution was raised as a countermeasure for the increasing youth delinquency and prostitution after the war and to produce pure lineages by marital sex.[11] Seeing through its regulation of female sexuality (e.g., warnings against female sexual self-gratification, methods for men to anatomically identify a virgin), Ryang points out that the purity education "was really about female virginity and not male sexual purity, about controlling female sexuality […], and about dividing sex into marital and extramarital components from men's point of view" in the name of love.[12]

Purity education is a prominent example of the state's reconfiguration of the practices of love and regulation of the body and mind of its subjects. Love is constantly under discipline of the state to reinforce its policies on reproduction.

Kazue Harada sees a "prevalence of 'reproductive futurism' in contemporary Japan's pro-natal policies."[13] Coined by Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004), reproductive futurism refers to a political ideology permeating culture and media that overstresses the significance of the "Child" (as an archetype) in a sustainable human future.[14] It reinforces a social order that advocates "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" and averts any "possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations."[15] Harada lists the Basic Act for Measures to Cope with a Society of Declining Birthrates (*Shōshika shakai taisaku kihon hō*, 2003) as a prominent example of how the Japanese government promotes childbirth through financial aid.[16] Besides legitimation, Japanese society also sees all kinds of activities that endorse heterosexual marriages, and Harada gives as some examples as "*konkatsu* or commercialization of marriage, *rankatsu* or egg freezing for women at early ages, *sankyū papa* project or paternal leave for childcare," all stemming from the belief that having children is the elixir to solve social problems and to secure the future of Japan.[17]

For the above reasons, non-reproductive sex and homosexuality have largely been omitted from the mainstream discourses of love. Despite hegemonizing heterosexuality, this exclusivist understanding of love is still the convention of contemporary Japanese society. In the patriarchal and heteronormative Japanese society, institutionalized heterosexuality serves as the norm and guides individuals' behaviors. Because of heterosexuality's connection to reproductivity, heterosexual romance is positively rendered in the culture of low-fertility Japan as the key to the nation's sustainability and the pillar of society, as opposed to the un-favored "parasite singles" (*parasaito shinguru* パラサイト・シングル) and LGBTQ communities.[18] Mark Driscoll suggests that mainstream press and politicians regard Japan's financial and demographic crises as apocalyptic and fault the youth for their non-reproductivity, especially in the post-bubble socio-economic recession.[19]

Put another way, heterosexuality and reproduction are seen as social interests. The concept of social interest, *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* in German, proposed in 1933 by the psychologist Alfred Adler, articulates how humans as social beings are driven by a community spirit and have a need

to emotionally connect with others.[20] Adlerian scholar Heinz Ansbacher elucidates it as "the *interest* in the interest of mankind."[21] Love interest, in cultural narratives, is imagined as the metonym for social interest, especially at times of public crises. Motoko Tanaka observes that the male protagonist's romantic pursuit takes the center of contemporary apocalyptic narratives, while the crisis exists only to enhance the romance.[22] The romance is often between "the incompetent, almost infantile male protagonist and his heroic girlfriend/mother figure," and reflects "the difficulties younger Japanese males face in establishing their identities as mature and connected members of society."[23] In such adventures, the hero attains individual development and social approval by overcoming dual difficulties in both private (the romance) and public (the crisis) realms.

Reproductive futurism is prominent in Yoshikawa Eiji Prize winner science fiction writer Fujii Taiyō's 藤井太洋 (b.1971) representation of pandemic "Taki o nagareyuku" 滝を流れゆく (Life's flowing along a waterfall, 2020).[24] Amidst yet another virus outbreak, the protagonist meets a couple in his secret hide-out in the forest. The couple tells him their story: they fell in love during their gene rewriting treatments and were told that they were unable to have children, but they beat the odds and gave birth to a healthy boy. Hope returns to the protagonist's heart after years of living under the terror of pandemic. The story ends with the protagonist telling the couple that their surname 元 is pronounced "gen" in Japanese, which means an origin and beginning enabled by love.[25] Heterosexual romance, together with reproductivity, is elevated to signify the natural order of human society, the hope and grace of humanity, and the endurance of the entire human race.

Fujii's story was published in July 2020, alongside the two texts which I will examine in the following pages, in the Japanese version of the technology magazine *Wired.* They are part of a special sci-fi section "Subarashi shinsekai" すばらしい新世界 (Brave new world) inspired by the lockdown that imagines "a prototype for the future."[26] At such a time, what better genre than science fiction to depict, as Ernest Yanarella put it, "popular fears and hopes, mass cultural trends and possibilities and technological daydreams and technocratic nightmares" in response to COVID-19?[27] The stories included in this special issue collectively conjure up a future where human societies are modified by an escalated and lasting epidemic. These narratives pit humanity against a global pandemic. They detail the challenges of confined living space, redefined

boundaries, and diminished communication and community. They also describe how civil liberties are curtailed as our mobility grows limited, and human society shifts from the material world into cyberspace.

Japanese science fiction has the time-honored tradition of engaging socio-political dialectics, such as in *Tanin no kao* (*The Face of Another*, 1964) by Abe Kōbō 安部公房 (1924–1993) and Murakami Haruki's 村上春樹 (b.1945) *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1985).[28] Susan Napier suggests that both Abe and Murakami's texts are politically involved, the former expresses his left-wing ideologies and the latter an escapist politically dystopian view.[29] Especially speculative fiction which imagines a futuristic world often reflects on the discourses of reproduction and heteronormative society, for instance, recent works by women science fiction writers, Ono Miyuki's 小野美由紀 (b. 1985) "Pyua" (Pure, 2020), Ueda Sayuri's 上田早夕合 (b. 1964) *Karyū no miya* (The palace of flower dragons, 2010) and *Shinku no hibun* (Deep crimson epitaphs, 2013).[30]

For a discussion of relationships and society, it is significant to note that the pandemic has drastically changed our perceptions of space, highlighted by decentralization and confinement. The alteration in spatiality due to pandemic resonates with what Doug Slaymaker writes about the representation of space and nuclear radiation in post-3.11 fiction: "boundaries are meaningless; containment is meaningless; maps are useless; mappings and lines are ridiculous and ludicrous."[31] In his writings on post-3.11 film, Christophe Thouny notes that nuclear radiation "radically disturbs our usual understanding of space."[32] The virus outbreak in a similar way prevails over our spatial perceptions by overturning our surroundings and lifestyle. Streets vacated, railways emptied, facilities closed, workers dismissed; cities experience an absence of public space and decentralization during the lockdown. Travel is prohibited, rendering borders and maps useless and meaningless. Mobility restrictions and masks for COVID-19 are equivalent to duct tape and hazmat suits for nuclear radiation. The difference between the two calamities is one being global and the other domestic. Also, the coronavirus is highly transmittable, constantly in mutation, and therefore relatively a more mobile hazard that concerns more complex socio-spatial issues and challenges both private and public living. On the other hand, teleconferences and remote work bring public affairs into our homes, which were formerly of a private nature. We clock in to work in our homes, and some of us take care of our elders and infants in those same "offices." It is difficult to determine

whether it is work infiltrating private life or the other way around and to disengage one from the other. The boundaries between the public and the private are blurred.

The pandemic has redefined public/private in both spatial and social terms. By setting romantic pursuit of the private realm in conflict with public interest, the texts I will be discussing present three different outlooks on society in the pandemic. I will first examine the representations of heterosexual romance in two science fiction texts: "Ai ni tsuite" 愛について (Ai means love, 2020) by Ueda Takahiro 上田岳弘 (b. 1979) and "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi" 地下に吹く風、屋上の土 (Underground wind, rooftop's soil, 2020) by Tsukui Itsuki 津久井五月 (b. 1992).[33] Both works represent heterosexual romance as upholding society against the challenge of an imagined uncontainable pandemic. Then I will move on to a more realistic representation of the pandemic by Kanehara Hitomi's 金原ひとみ (b. 1983), the short story "Ansōsharu disutansu" アンソーシャル ディスタンス (Unsocial distance, 2020) published in the literature magazine *Shinchō*'s June, 2020 issue.[34] Named after an expression that taunts new social norms, the story portrays love as deconstructive to society and praises pandemic and isolation. Using their various approaches to heterosexual romance as a mirror, we will see how the authors across literary genres come to imagine their society during COVID-19.

Love in Terminal Space

In the future imagined in "Ai ni tsuite" by Ueda Takahiro, human activities have shifted to the terminal space of virtual reality due to the constant threat of unknown virus outbreaks in the material world. Humans can go into a pod to have their consciousness interfaced with computers, as in the film *The Matrix* (1999). With terminal space comes terminal identity—a term first coined by William Burroughs in *Nova Express* (1964) and defined by sci-fi theorist Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Identity* (1993) as "an unmistakably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen."[35] This technology allows humans to function in a real-time and interactive manner in the computer-generated reality and synchronizes their actions in the material world in the minimal form. It is so advanced that one can hardly distinguish the two worlds. Humans enter the age of simulation and live in, as cultural critic Vivian Sobchack puts it,

"a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied state."[36]
        The protagonist is a young man who is working remotely during another lockdown and recently got engaged to his girlfriend named 愛 Ai, the Japanese word for "love." The protagonist is sentimental and old-fashioned and lingers on his lifestyle before the pandemic. The narrative begins with the protagonist discussing *nōkō sesshoku* 濃厚接触 (intimate contact) that allows the exchange of bodily fluids, how much he has been missing it since the lockdown, and his view of it as a substantial form of intimate relationship.[37] Ai asks him to stop saying *nōkō sesshoku,* which makes him sound like a grandpa.[38] Ai is a rational, almost mechanical, minimalist who appreciates the reconditioned spatiality. They have been unable to reach an agreement on the size of their new home—the protagonist wants a spacious place which, to Ai, is a waste since they do not spend much time in bodily reality. One day, while having dinner at a restaurant in the terminal space, the protagonist is approached by a stranger who claims to be an agent of the immaterial world and a figure of the public authority. The agent reveals to the protagonists that Ai is unsure about their future marriage because of their incompatible views on reality and their needs. In truth, Ai does not want to buy a home. All she needs is to lay by the protagonist's side in the same pod in the material world and accomplish everything else in the immaterial world. The agent then proposes that the protagonist abandons bodily reality together with Ai. "Our mission is to maximize love. […] If you can give up on the material world, your love can grow even bigger, infinite as the universe."[39] The story ends with the protagonist pondering Ai/love, what Ai is willing to give up, and what will be left of their love.
        The story inquires the following: can we sustain relationships in terminal space without being able to actually kiss or hold hands? When love can survive only by the means of technology, is it the human or the machine that is the subject of love? Will the public authority force individuals to compromise their private pursuits, prioritizing common good over personal needs? Love in this story transcends the sphere of a romantic relationship to symbolize a quintessential human experience heavily coded with socio-cultural meanings. Physical intimacy, banned and even stigmatized due to the wide spread of coronavirus, becomes a metaphor for the good old days before COVID-19. It carries the weight of the bodily and experiential reality that was our reality before the enforcement of social distancing and forced isolation. Love represents

experiences that are uniquely human and therefore cannot be calculated, programmed, or simulated by machines. Work-from-home, online meetings, video chats; we rely on technology to stay connected during the halt in public mobility. The pandemic has already precipitated a shift of human activities to cyberspace and accelerated our dependence on technology in reality. At the same time, we fear that the technology that is meant to extend our existences and enable our subjectivities will, instead, threaten to diminish them. Ueda uses the protagonist's love dilemma to question the postmodern condition, where the digital attempts to replace everything, disturb the master narratives, and transform our society.

As Bukatman suggests, "the decline of the master-narratives which structure our understanding of the social structure" often goes hand and hand with "the rise of simulation as a prevalent form."[40] Narratives are the conduits of how we write history, create collective memories, and hence form relationships and develop social identities; master narratives are the cultural scripts that help members of societies make sense of meaning, experience, and knowledge. [41] However, with computer imaging imperiling legitimation by its ability to easily construct (or deconstruct) reality, we witness what Jean-François Lyotard defines as postmodern, an "incredulity towards meta-narratives." [42] Omnipotent and omnipresent technology inspires a postmodern fear of not knowing what is real anymore. Such postmodern socio-cultural anxiety permeates "Ai ni tsuite": human subject disembodied, lived space displaced, history lost, metanarratives failed, and meanings dissolved.[43] The intentional pun on the name "Ai" and its meaning "love" aims at the irony of failure of meanings under the new reality/spatiality.

We find the same concern in Ishikawa Yoshiki's 石川善樹 (b. 1981) short-story "Tsunagarisugita jinrui" つながりすぎた人類 (The Over-Connected Generation), published in 2020. The story is about humans being over-connected during isolation via a network software called Soom.[44] Soom enables people to befriend strangers quickly in cyberspace. A report in Asayō Newspaper questions whether *hajimemashite* (nice to meet you) is a "dead phrase" now, because the majority of people have become friends before having met face to face.[45] With the wide use of Soom, its global users are able to feel one another's presence in silence via the software, despite physical distance. Nonverbal cybernetic communication becomes the new norm. The last human conversation in history is recorded to have taken place on March 20, 2061. Like "Ai ni tsuite," "Tsunagarisugita jinrui" warns of a cultural and linguistic

meltdown in an intensified technocratic and cybernetic society. Although set in the future, both stories explore relationships in cyberspace and present human societies menaced by our fast-growing need for technology in the age of COVID-19.

Combining science fiction elements with concerns raised by lifestyle changes, these narratives continue the Japanese tradition of problematizing technology in the pandemic. Susan Napier observes that as opposed to the techno-celebrating attitude shown in Western popular culture, the Japanese attitude towards technology is "ambivalent at best."[46] For instance, science fiction anime such as *Uchū senkan yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*, 1974), *Akira* (*Akira*, 1988), and *Shinseiki Evangelion* (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*, 1995) all exhibit a "dark vision of hapless humanity in the throes of technology."[47] Napier ascribes this to Japan's history of atomic bombings, economic recession, and the 1995 Subway Sarin Attack (and I will add now, the Fukushima nuclear leak in the 3.11 triple disasters) which embeds in its society a recognition of technology's destructive power.[48] Ueda and Ishikawa's texts on cyberspace thus carry on the social imagination of human-technology interface as a latent cause of identity alienation and cultural despair. The endangered love between the male protagonist and his fiancée in "Ai ni tsuite" manifests the socio-cultural anxiety resulting from the changes brought on by the pandemic.

A Lovers' Dispute

The narrative of Tsukui's "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi" also puts love to the test of distancing, but with a focus on the conflicts between the individual and the government enforcement. The story is set in 2038, when humans divide into two groups based on lifestyle, the Loggers (ログ派 *rogu-ha*) and the Scorers (スコア派 *sukoa-ha*), after years of outbreaks of coronavirus. The state accesses a log of citizens' geolocation data to contain the spread of the virus. The log system will send citizens warnings when they enter high-risk public places. The Loggers are relatively cautious about their movement in fear of possible exposure as well as peer pressure. The Scorers are those less willing to give up on public mobility and social gathering. Stickers attached to the skin that can measure and display an individual's immunity index allow those with high scores to enter regulated facilities and attend social events.

In the story, a new type of influenza is spreading during the winter. The protagonist, a Logger, is surprised to learn that his new girlfriend is a Scorer and a clubbing enthusiast. Although he thinks an outing in this

situation is "suicidal," he compromises for his girlfriend.[49] Trying the sticker for the first time, the protagonist has a score of only 504.65, while his girlfriend's is three times more. Fortunately, 500 marks the minimum requirement for the club's entry. Seeing how much his girlfriend enjoys clubbing, the protagonist makes her a promise that they will attend the club's New Year event together. The protagonist then starts a healthy diet and physical exercise in order to increase his score to 1500 for the special event. He has successfully raised his score to 1700 by December; however, the event is canceled due to the wide spread of influenza.

This narrative captures our need for third spaces and a community frustrated by regulations on spatial use. Urban anthologists Setha Low and Alan Smart define third spaces as "commercial establishments such as bars, restaurants, gyms, malls, barbershops and other places frequented between work and home" that are of a semi-private (or semi-public) nature.[50] Third spaces are essential to the formation and fortification of communities.[51] In the current COVID-19 pandemic, we are experiencing "a shrinking sense of the world" as our premises are narrowed and activities are suspended.[52] We are cut off from a "social world" in which we can associate with others "in a more open, democratic, inclusive and yet unpredictable way."[53] The club, more than just a place where one can enjoy drinks and music, is a symbol of a third space for communities. The protagonist points at this distinction when he realizes that:

> If the two of us just wanted to listen to some music, we could do so in a room anywhere; there was no need to go to a club. But what she enjoys is sharing the sense of space and time [場所・時間を共にする *bashō-jikan o tomoni-suru*] with a large group of strangers. As I began to go clubbing, I had come to understand her feelings.[54]

He, who was a Logger and content with doing everything in isolation, is now called to the importance of community by his girlfriend. In the meantime, the protagonist enjoys the freedom of movement enabled by the sticker. When he is moving on a vacant street, his extraordinary score of 1884.32 gives him freedom to mobility that can disregard the log system warnings, "the sense of emptiness beats the sense of liberation" nevertheless.[55] He now realizes that meaningful human interaction comes with the risk of being infected.[56] The protagonist then recalls what his girlfriend has said to him the first time they went clubbing: "the number of individuals that share a certain space is determined by the lowest score in the group. It's meaningless if you are the only one that's strong. You

won't have any friends here until everyone is stronger."[57] The protagonist comes up with the idea of distributing soil to every club in town to raise collective immunity because he has learned from his own experience that exposure to nutritious soil can boost one's immunity. The story wraps up with a happy ending: although the restrictions are not yet lifted, the New Year event is held eventually in late February and ends with zero infections, thanks to the high scores in the community. Spring is coming, and the protagonist's love is also blooming.

An interest in the conflicts between citizens' rights and government enforcements, as have been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, are represented not only in "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi," but also in "Odottebakari no kuni" (踊ってばかりの国 Revolution, and keep on dancing) by Higuchi Kyōsuke 樋口恭介 (b. 1989), two pieces published in the same issue.[58] Both narratives reflect the reality that social-civic living around the globe is now under unprecedented restrictions from governments. Cynical voices rule quarantine as interference with civic rights and tracking and tracing as a violation of personal privacy. Libertarian versus totalitarian, individuals versus the state, free will versus authority: the Scorers and the Loggers in "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi" represent distinctive socio-political ideologies. The story pitches love as the answer to all.

At the end of the narrative, conflicts are resolved and goals are achieved through the male protagonist's romantic pursuits. His romantic aspirations motivate him to transform from a loner to an esteemed member of his community. Winning the heart of his new girlfriend, he has realized his own individual development. His heterosexual romantic pursuit parallels the process of his socialization. In contrast with "Ai ni tsuite," the character arc is more central to the storytelling in Tsukui's text, echoing with Kitamura's point of love's significance in individual development as well as in society building. The romance between a Logger and a Scorer represents the continued thriving of human communities and hence societies despite physical distancing and ideological diversities. The characters' successful romantic relationship offers hope that we can find a balance between private emotional needs and public health and order in the pandemic.

You and Me against the World

Although "Ai ni tsuite" takes a pessimistic view on love and society in the pandemic and "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi" an optimistic one,

both texts depict heterosexual romance as a constructive factor in sustaining society and strengthening community cohesion. In contrast, Kanehara Hitomi represents the heterosexual relationship between her characters as anti-social. Kanehara's characters often embody a resistance to mainstream culture and society, which has been noted in past research.[59] In her earlier works such as *Hebi ni piasu* (*Snakes and Earrings*, 2004) and *Asshu bēbii* (Ash baby, 2004), the protagonists are dropouts dissociated from social institutions (e. g., family, education, employment) who have abandoned conventional values (e. g., filial obligation, fidelity).[60] Alexander Russell sees a shifts from "youth and rebellion" to issues of familial structure and motherhood in Kanehara's later works, *Mazāzu* (Mothers, 2011) and *Mariāju mariāju* (Marriage marriage, 2012).[61] Her most recent work, "Ansōsharu disutansu," circles back to the theme of youth's resistance to society nonetheless. It is not surprising that Kanehara utilizes in her writing the element of pandemic, which terrorizes society and redefines normalcy.

The story is narrated from first-person perspectives switching between two protagonists, Sanan and Kōki, a college student couple prior to their graduations. Sanan is a girl with suicidal tendencies, eating disorders, drug problems, and *papa-katsu* (パパ活 sugar daddy business, a new form of *enjo kōsai* 援助交際) in her past. Her boyfriend Kōki, who had a traditional upbringing, connects with Sanan over their shared suicidal tendencies. Kōki's mother disapproves of their relationship because she thinks Sanan is a bad influence and has "brainwashed" Kōki into loving her. [62] The story leads with Sanan's abortion, which symbolically denies reproductivity from the very beginning. Although ambivalent about this decision, Sanan and Kōki have no confidence in themselves to keep the baby. Sanan worries that they are both "too weak" (弱々しすぎて *yowayowashisugite*) to shoulder this responsibility or to fit in society.[63] Kōki, who has never strayed away from the conventional path, has been forcing himself to do the right things—study, socialize, enter a college, and secure a job offer. Kōki is anxious about leaving school and entering the corporate world, which requires him to mature; and Sanan is concerned with how this will impact their relationship. COVID-19's spread discourages outings and adds to their distress. The cancellation of a live performance they plan to go to becomes the last straw. The couple decides to commit a love suicide on a trip to Kamakura (a town in Kanagawa Prefecture about one hour away from Tokyo). This double suicide turns out to be just another failed attempt. The ending hints that

they will return to Tokyo the following morning. This story falls in line with Kanehara's earlier works with its rebellious and lost young characters, graphic descriptions of sex scenes, and a superficial and incomplete resistance to society.[64] As a new feature, Kanehara weaves the element of pandemic into the representations of anti-sociability.

In the narrative, the pandemic heightens the female protagonist Sanan's precarity and hence her anti-social tendencies. Sanan goes into a depression because the cosmetics company which she has high hopes of entering canceled their recruiting session. She finds the online interview nerve-racking and bungles it due to a loss of confidence. Sanan speaks of her insecurity to Kōki, saying, "Fiora has canceled their recruiting session as well. I don't think I can get a job. When you start working, we can't meet like this anymore. When you enter a new environment, you'll dump me for some other woman for sure."[65] Unlike the protagonist Lui in Kanehara's story *Hebi ni piasu,* who chooses the status of a "freeter (*furītā* フリーター)" to resist being institutionalized in a traditional employment track, Sanan is vulnerable and passive in her unemployment.[66] The dual pressure of seeking employment and continuing an unblessed relationship weighs on her, and the pandemic complicates the situation. Sanan feels rejected and is further disconnected from society against her will and despite her efforts. Sanan compares coronavirus to the ruthless social environment:

> But things have always been this way. The coronavirus works just like the world does. It doesn't give a shit about how you feel. It will crush you with its monstrous power for its own agenda. It spares those with immunity and antibodies, and ruthlessly eradicates the ones unequipped.[67]

Kanehara engages with the reality that COVID-19 indicates not only illness and death, but also unemployment and psychological stress for vulnerable populations, who are too often marginalized and overlooked by the mainstream. Throughout the narrative, the characters describe themselves using phrases such as 弱い *yowai*, 弱々しい *yowayowashii*, and 弱気 *yowaki* (all variations of "weak") to convey their sense of powerlessness. Even if the characters can survive COVID-19 physically, they may not financially or psychologically.

On the other hand, Kōki and Sanan appreciate the pandemic because it legitimizes their distancing from mainstream society. As marginalized characters, they celebrate the decentralization caused by the pandemic. In the narrative, Kōki and Sanan seclude themselves in their room at the love

hotel or the inn in Kamakura, detaching themselves from community and society. The pandemic does not drive a wedge between the protagonists as in the previous two stories discussed, but between them and society. Driscoll suggests that the characters in *Hebi ni piasu* shut themselves in their own "tribe" and refuse further socialization.[68] Russell sees in the protagonist Lui a "self-imposed isolation in her flat" that serves her anti-social intentions.[69] In the pandemic narrative "Ansōsharu disutansu" where isolation is the norm, the couple no longer needs to seek physical disconnection from the rest of society. Hoping that the pandemic can prevent him from entering the workplace, Kōki distances himself from not only reproduction (i. e., Sanan's abortion) but also production.

> Half of my classmates already got notifications that their training is canceled or expected to be canceled. My father, who is assigned to Osaka by his company, has also switched to telework. Will I go to work like that when things are normal? *It sucks*—I thought as I gazed upon the salarymen crossing one another's paths, wearing lame suits, carrying lame briefcases, doing lame work.[70]

Salarymen are corporate warriors that represent hegemonic masculinity and traditional values in Japanese society and are even a significant part of the national identity and imaginary.[71] However, in the post-bubble socio-economic recession, salarymen are confronted with a loss of authority and masculinity.[72] Both Rachel DiNitto and David Holloway suggest that Kanehara's identity as a post-bubble youth defines her writings, which feature the loss of values and resistance to the norm.[73] Kōki's contempt towards salarymen, including his own father, is symbolic of the post-bubble generation's disillusionment with the social order. Kōki's father being absent from the household and having an extramarital affair in Osaka also denotes the lack of role models for young people and their incredulity towards patriarchal authorities.

As the only parental figure that appears in the narrative, Kōki's mother is a staunch protector of the pre-established order, attempting to redirect Kōki to the orthodox path. This shows in her neurotic attitude towards the coronavirus, which reverberates with her abhorrence of Sanan. The mother relentlessly confirms whether Kōki has washed his hands, and in one scene she lectures him about the possible consequences of being infected.

> [Mother:] "You'd better refrain from going out. You'd make a bad impression if you were infected while fooling around before entering the

company. And if you became the origin of a cluster at your workplace, there's no telling what would become of your life as a corporate employee."

[Kōki:] "I won't when the lockdown begins."

[Mother:] "I guess Sanan couldn't twist you around her fingers anymore during the lockdown. I kind of look forward to it." […] "I'll absolutely forbid you from going out once the lockdown begins. Please take responsibility for your actions. This does not concern just you, but those around you." […]

[Kōki:] "It's not okay to meet with Sanan, but okay for me to go to work [during lockdown]? Isn't that your own preference?" […]

[Mother:] "No matter what kind of life they are living, everyone refrains from going out, determining what is unnecessary and non-urgent by social ethics."[74]

The mother is much more concerned with the consequences of infection in social terms than in medical terms. She prioritizes elements of public and social living such as "impression" (印象 *inshō*), "responsibility" (責任 *sekinin*) for others, and "social ethics" (社会的倫理 *shakai-teki rinri*) over the feelings and sentiments of individuals. The figure of Kōki's mother manifests the Japanese culture of collectivism that rises as a countermeasure to COVID-19's spread and neglects individuality and liberty nonetheless.

As the narrative approaches its end, Kōki wishes that his mother would die of coronavirus, and the pandemic is hence represented as a form of terrorist attack that jeopardizes the status quo. It begins with Sanan's envy of coronavirus for its destructive power when she says that "I wanna become someone unbeatable like coronavirus." [75] In their following conversations, Sanan and Kōki fantasize about using the power of coronavirus to realize their vigilante justice.

[Kōki:] "No, not just the cowards [like us], I wish [coronavirus] could be designed to kill my mother, owners of evil corporations, politicians who are all about their own interests, and those who oppress and exploit others!"

[Sanan:] "Wouldn't it be nice to become scientists, make that kind of virus, and start a bioterror attack!"[76]

The protagonists display a welcoming and desiring attitude towards coronavirus, which is yet unseen in other literary representations. Kanehara employs the pandemic as a novel idiom of anti-sociability. The

protagonists seemingly envision a better society because of the pandemic, but stop short at their self-destructive and socially destructive tendencies. They utter their discontent with society by listing their own "hit list," which includes the figures of parent, entrepreneur, politician, and capitalist—in other words, the foundation of Japanese society and an allegory of authority. Their anger and vindictiveness against authority determine that they are, and will remain, an ill fit to the rigidly hierarchical Japanese society, with or without the interruption of coronavirus.

Lastly, the heterosexual romance between Kōki and Sanan forms the basis for their rebellion. Their love resembles coronavirus because both pose threats to the public interest. In the narrative, they keep meeting up for sex and even take a trip across prefectures despite the government asking its residents to avoid outings. The title "Ansōsharu disutansu" (unsocial distance) hints that their behaviors are in conflict with the public interest and is also a reference to their sexual conduct as intimate contact. As in Kanehara's earlier works, this text contains several graphic sex scenes and one in which the protagonists shop for sex toys for enhancing pleasure. When Kōki fantasizes about a family life with Sanan alone, with his mother having died of coronavirus and his father having gone to live with his mistress, he pictures having sex with Sanan during office hours while working remotely and having her perform oral sex on him during a video conference. This renders their relationship, although heterosexual, non-reproductive and non-productive. Sex, more than a token of their passion, is a means to their rebellion. The couple uses sexual conduct to mock authorities and to disrupt order. In the ending scene, as Kōki inserts himself into Sanan, he thinks that "although I cannot imagine myself starting a terrorist attack or committing a murder, I do feel joy in this coronavirus-spreading world, because for the first time, I am able to picture such a happy life. This world of happiness was unthinkable before the pandemic."[77] As transgressive as his sex-at-work fantasies, the sexual activity in this scene aligns with the character's anti-sociability channeled through his view of the pandemic.

"Ansōsharu disutansu" shares with *Hebi ni piasu*, in DiNitto's words, "a literary legacy of using the body as a form of protest" and "a return to the immediacy of the physical, something lacking in the artificial, virtual reality of late capital Japan" and especially during the pandemic.[78] In this respect, Kanehara's works are akin to the postwar *nikutai bungaku* (肉体文学 literature of the body) in their resistance to norms through the flesh.[79] Back to Tōkoku's point, if the individuals measure their relationships with

society as couples, then the protagonists' liaison is a sharp blade of self-assertion and rebellion that cuts through the hypocrisy of postmodern life. It is even more so because of "the dangerous proximity of sex and death."[80] In *Hebi ni piasu*, Lui's physical body is menaced by Shiba's sadistic and murderous nature, and the threat in "Ansōsharu disutansu" is the fatal coronavirus. Associating sex with death (twice, if you count in the abortion) rather than with (new) life is Kōki and Sanan's ultimate way of terrorizing the pro-natal Japanese society and diminishing the state's authority as a biopower.[81] Their self-exposure to the hazard of coronavirus, as Lui seeking physical pain, is a manifestation of social malaises in the body.

Conclusion

Through representations of heterosexual romance in the heat of the pandemic, Ueda, Tsukui, and Kanehara discuss social orders and spatial practices, as well as the dynamics between the two, amidst this public health crisis. Ueda is concerned about the prospects of humanity because the pandemic has modified our spatiality and social behaviors. Tsukui offers hope for humanity by substantiating the human autonomy and cohesiveness of human communities. Kanehara focuses on precarity exacerbated by the pandemic. In their narratives, love faces obstructions in spatial terms at first glance, but a deeper look reveals more fundamental complications: techno-induced postmodern crisis, ideological disputes, and socio-economic stagnation. The element of the pandemic enriches the depictions of anxieties and issues of contemporary Japanese society from before the emergence of COVID-19.

NOTES

[1] The three Cs refers to high-risk environments characterized by closed spaces (密閉空間 *mippei kūkan*), crowded places (密集場所 *misshū basho*), and close-contact settings (密接場面 *missetsu bamen*). It is a slogan promoted by the Japanese government authorities for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

[2] See Allen J. Kim and Johanna O. Zulueta, "Japanese Families and COVID-19: 'Self-Restraint', Confined Living Spaces, and Enhanced Interactions," *Journal of Comparative Family Study* 51.3–4 (2020): 360–368. Masafumi Mizuno, Chiyo Fujii, and Tsutomu Sakuta, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social

Psychiatry: Lessons Shared, Lessons Learned—A Japanese Perspective," *World Social Psychiatry* 2 (2020):134–136. Rei Ando, "Domestic Violence and Japan's COVID-19 pandemic," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 18.18 (2020): n. p.

[3] In her book review column "Yo no naka rabo 世の中ラボ" on Chikuma Web, literary critic Saito Minako 斎藤美奈子 criticizes Tsuji Hitonari's 辻仁成 romance fiction set against the pandemic *Jūnen go no koi* 十年後の恋 (Love after ten years, Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2021) for being juvenile in its way of using coronavirus as a metaphor of love. Saito also suggests that the story's connection with the element of pandemic is not convincing. "Daigonami no naka de futatabi saishin no korona shōsetsu o yomu," *Chikuma Web*, August 25, 2021, accessed on September 1, 2021, http://www.webchikuma.jp/articles/-/2504.

[4] Michiko Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women: Love and Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[5] Ibid., 8–9.

[6] Ibid., 9. Kitamura Tōkoku, "Ensei shika to josei," *Jogaku zasshi* 303/305 (1892), accessed on January 29, 2021, https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000157/files/45237_19755.html.

[7] Kitamura, "Ensei shika to josei," n. p. The translation is mine.

[8] Suzuki, *Becoming Modern Women*, 9.

[9] Sonia Ryang, *Love in Modern Japan: Its Estrangement from Self, Sex, and Society* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

[10] Ibid., 6.

[11] Ibid., 68.

[12] Ibid., 69.

[13] Kazue Harada, "A Challenge to Reproductive Futurism: Queer Families and Nonhuman Companionships in Ueda Sayuri's *The Ocean Chronicles*," *U. S.–Japan Women's Journal* 52 (2017): 46–66, 51.

[14] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theories and the Death Drives* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Harada, "A Challenge to Reproductive Futurism," 51. The Basic Act for Measures to Cope with a Society of Declining Birthrates is designed to create a more friendly and supportive environment for new parents and working parents, thus to encourage childbirth.

¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁸ The expression *parasaito shinguru* first appeared in Yamada Masahiro's book *Parasaito shinguru no jidai* (Tokyo: Chikuma shinsho, 1999). It refers to single adults who are living off their parents and not making any contributions to society in terms of production or reproduction.

¹⁹ Mark Driscoll, "Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan: On the Two Freeters," *Cultural Critique* 65.1 (2007): 164–187.

²⁰ Alfred Adler, *Social interest: A Challenge to Mankind,* trans. John Linton and Richard Vaughn (New York, N. Y.: Capricorn Book, 1964 [1933]).

²¹ Heinz Ansbacher, "The Concept of Social Interest,*" Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice* 47.1 (1991): 28–46, 43.

²² Motoko Tanaka, *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 4.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ Fujii Taiyō, "Taki o nagareyuku," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 22–39. The short stories in *Wired* all appear with English titles. I will refer to all in this article using their Japanese original titles, as they are untranslated works.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

²⁶ Matsushima Michiaki, "Editor's Letter," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 6. This section title is a tribute to the 1932 dystopian sci-fi classic *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932) by English author Aldous Huxley.

²⁷ Ernest J. Yanarella, *The Cross, the Plow and the Skyline: Contemporary Science Fiction and the Ecological Imagination* (Irvine, California: Brown Walker Press, 2001), 4.

²⁸ Abe Kōbō, *Tanin no kao* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1964); Abe Kōbō, *The Face of Another*, trans. E. Dale Saunders (North Clarendon, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1970); Murakami Haruki, *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1985); Murakami Haruki, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1991).

²⁹ Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996),104–107; 126–128.

³⁰ Ono Miyuki, *Pyua* (Tokyo: Hayakawa shobō, 2020); Ueda Sayuri, *Karyū no miya* (Tokyo, Hayakawa shobō, 2010); Ueda Sayuri, *Shinku no hibun* (Tokyo: Hayakawa shobō, 2013).

³¹ Doug Slaymaker, "Pregnant Violence in Post-3.11 Fiction," *Japanese Language and Literature* 54.2 (2020): 482.

[32] Christophe Thouny, "The Land of Hope: Planetary Cartographies of Fukushima, 2012," *Mechademia: Second Arc* 10 (2015): 27.

[33] Ueda Takahiro, "Ai nitsuite," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 54–63; Tsukui Itsuki, "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 78–87. Ueda has won Mishima Yukio Prize in 2015 and Akutagawa Prize in 2019. Tsukui is a budding writer who made his debut with the Hayakawa SF Contest winning novella *Corunutopia* コルヌトピア (Tokyo: Hayakawa shobō, 2017). All translations of the works are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[34] Kanehara Hitomi, "Ansōsharu disutansu," *Shinchō* (June 2020), 7–36. All translations of the work are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[35] William Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 19; Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 9.

[36] Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Towards a Phenomenology of Cinematic and Electronic Presence," *Post-Script* 10 (1990): 56.

[37] Ueda, "Ai nitsuite," 55.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 63.

[40] Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 106.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 106–107; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brain Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

[43] Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 106.

[44] Ishikawa Yoshiki, "Tsunagarisugita jinrui," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 100–105.

[45] Ibid., 103.

[46] Susan J. Napier, "When the Machines Stop: Fantasy, Reality, and Terminal Identity in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Serial Experiments Lain*," *Science Fiction Studies* 29.3 (2002): n.p.

[47] Ibid. Matsumoto Leiji, *Uchū Senkan Yamato* (Academy Productions/Group TAC, 1974–1975); Ōtomo Katsuhiro, *Akira* (Akira Production Committee, et al., 1988); Anno Hideaki, *Shinseiki evangerion* (Gainax/NAS/TV Tokyo/Tatsunoko Productions, 1995–1996).

[48] Ibid.

[49] Tsukui, "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi," 79.

50 Setha Low and Alan Smart, "Thoughts about Public Space During Covid-19 Pandemic," *City & Society* 32.1 (2020): 1–2.

51 Ibid., 2.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Tsukui, "Chika ni fuku kaze, okujō no tsuchi," 86.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Higuchi Kyōsuke, "Odottebakari no kuni," *Wired* 37 (July 2020): 66–75. The story is about how people who love dancing form a virtual state independent from Japan. In this state, people can overlook the restriction on social gatherings and keep dancing.

59 Rachel DiNitto, "Between Literature and Subculture: Kanehara Hitomi, Media Commodification and the Desire for Agency in Post-Bubble Japan," *Japan Forum* 23.4 (2011): 453–470; David Holloway, "Gender, Body, and Disappointment in Kanehara Hitomi's Fiction," *Japanese Language and Literature* 50.1 (2016): 75–103; Alexander Russell, "Kanehara Hitomi: L'enfant Terrible of Japanese Literature," *Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese Femininities at Cambridge*, ed. by Brigitte Steger, Angelika Koch, and Christopher Tso (Münster: LIT, 2020), 115–156.

60 DiNitto, "Between Literature and Subculture," 462; Russell, "Kanehara Hitomi," 117.

61 Russell, "Kanehara Hitomi," 118; Kanehara Hitomi, *Mazāzu* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2011); Kanehara Hitomi, *Mariāju mariāju* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2012).

62 Kanehara, "Ansōsharu disutansu," 11.

63 Ibid., 9.

64 Holloway, "Gender, Body, and Disappointment in Kanehara Hitomi's Fiction," 93; Russell, "Kanehara Hitomi," 117.

65 Kanehara, "Ansōsharu disutansu," 17.

66 DiNitto, "Between Literature and Subculture," 462. Kanehara's magnum opus *Snakes and Earrings* is centered to the transgressive lifestyle of the young Tokyo girl Lui in post-bubble Japan, that revolves around irregular employment, consumption, body modification, and sadomasochistic sex. The ending suggests that Lui intends to marry the tattoo artist Shiba, with the

knowledge that he might be responsible for the violent death of her boyfriend Ama.

[67] Ibid., 16.

[68] Driscoll, "Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan," 183.

[69] Russell, "Kanehara Hitomi," 117.

[70] Kanehara, "Ansōsharu disutansu," 20–21.

[71] Romit Dasgupta, "Articulations of Salaryman Masculinity in Shōwa and Post-Shōwa Japan," *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 15.1 (2017): 36–54.

[72] Ibid., 46.

[73] DiNitto, "Between Literature and Subculture," 456; Holloway, "Gender, Body, and Disappointment in Kanehara Hitomi's Fiction," 87.

[74] Kanehara, "Ansōsharu disutansu," 22.

[75] Ibid., 32.

[76] Ibid., 34.

[77] Kanehara, "Ansōsharu disutansu," 36.

[78] DiNitto, "Between Literature and Subculture," 465.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., 467.

[81] Ryang identifies "the efficacy of the modern Japanese state as a biopower, a form of power that aggressively concerns itself with the life and death of the population" (Ryang, *Love in Modern Japan*, 2). As a biopower, the state exercises control over its population in accordance with its economic planning and dictates the social meanings of life and death in the process (45–46).